

# Turkey to vote on constitutional referendum Sunday

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On Sunday, more than 55 million Turkish citizens will participate in a referendum on the constitutional amendments proposed by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Should it succeed it would hand control of the executive, the legislature and the judiciary to the president, establishing a dictatorship in all but name.

The referendum is taking place under ever-increasing national and international tensions that reached a new climax after the US missile strike at the Shayrat air base in Syria on April 7. The US missile attack not only further undermined US-Russian relations, but also upset the fragile balances in the Middle East, calling into question the Astana talks on peace in Syria.

Ankara has declared its “full support” for the Trump administration's decision to escalate the war for regime change in Syria, while Russia and Iran, Turkey's partners in the Astana talks, condemned the strike against the Syrian government.

The militarist and authoritarian “yes” campaign led by the ruling AKP and the fascistic Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), however, meets with no real opposition inside the Turkish bourgeois establishment. This has led to rising poll figures for the “yes” camp in recent days, though the results remain too close to call. The latest opinion polls show Erdogan's “yes” campaign winning by a slim margin.

According to leading Turkish polling firm Konda, 51.5 percent of voters will vote “yes” and 48.5 percent “no,” with a margin of error of 2.4 percent. On April 13, Gezici Research announced similar results: 51.3 percent “yes” and 48.7 percent “no.”

As neither side has secured a lead but claims its certain victory, tension between the two sides have increased, especially after Kemal Kilicdaroglu of the

opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) called the 15 July 2016 putsch a “controlled coup.”

In response, Erdogan accused Kilicdaroglu of communicating with the putschists: “Explain whom you talked to on the phone for 12 minutes? It seems the radars of the coup plotters didn't detect Kilicdaroglu. Instead of apologizing to the Turkish people over what he did, he shamelessly said, ‘the July 15 is a controlled coup.’ A man should have shame and decency.”

In response, Kilicdaroglu vowed to “quit politics” if this claim is proven: “If they prove that I spoke with [the coup plotters] for a minute, or even half-a-second, be assured that I will quit politics.”

The official “no” campaign, led by the CHP and the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), is even more closely aligned than the AKP with the major imperialist powers. This allows Erdogan to fraudulently portray the referendum as a continuation of the mass popular mobilization that halted the July 15 coup, which was backed by Washington and Berlin.

On April 12, addressing families of those killed fighting the July 15 coup, Erdogan said: “God willing, April 16 will also be the day of the defeat of all terror organizations, as it will herald a bright day shining on Turkey.”

The bourgeois “no” campaign, for its part, is neither anti-war nor fundamentally opposed to the AKP's drive to dictatorship. Both the CHP and the HDP previously agreed in talks with Erdogan on the need for constitutional changes to the Turkish state, in which the HDP proposed a presidential and federalist system.

Last October, the CHP voted for a resolution in the Turkish parliament extending the government's authority to launch cross-border military operations for a year. The HDP enthusiastically welcomed the US-led regime-change operation in Syria. Its objection to

Turkish military operations in Syria and Iraq is based solely on the interests of the Kurdish bourgeoisie and has no progressive character.

Amidst growing international tensions and the escalating war drive in the Middle East, the Turkish referendum is assuming an ever more openly anti-democratic character. Already, 110,000 people have been jailed and at least 152 people, including HDP and DBP (Democratic Regions Party) leaders, have been taken into custody in recent days.

A hunger strike of 219 largely Kurdish political inmates in 27 Turkish prisons has reached its second month, with no response from the government, the political establishment or the media.

Thirteen HDP MP's, including its co-chairs Selahattin Demirtas and Figen Yuksekdag, have been in jail for months on charges of "helping the propaganda" of the outlawed Kurdistan's Workers Party (PKK). Thousands of local HDP officials have been removed from office or jailed on similar charges. The HDP's "No" campaign was thus drowned out in the media, which are all but a mouthpiece of Erdogan's "yes" campaign, while local authorities covered the streets with "yes" banners and pictures of Erdogan.

The AKP has put relentless pressure on the "no" campaign, accompanied by military operations and fighting in Kurdish regions of Turkey. To the extent that the imperialist powers reacted by stepping up their criticisms of Ankara, however, this has largely played into Erdogan's hands.

In a statement on Thursday, UN rights experts declared that Turkey's security crackdown after the failed coup attempt of July 15 had "undermined the chance for informed debate on the referendum."

Previously, almost all European Union authorities had sharply criticized Erdogan for his crackdown on and purges of opponents. The governments of Austria, the Netherlands and Germany even banned Turkish government officials from making pro-"yes" speeches to Turkish citizens in these countries. Erdogan reacted by posturing as a victim of the imperialist powers and trying to exploit anti-imperialist sentiment among Turkish workers and youth.

Speaking live on television in Istanbul, Erdogan said a "yes" victory would "break the shackles on Turkey's hands," adding, "My people's answer on Sunday will not only be national but at the same time will be

international."

This only underscores that Erdogan's strongest suit in the referendum is not his own position, but the hypocrisy of Ankara's US and European imperialist allies. Indeed, there are growing signs that they would not have the slightest problem backing an Erdogan dictatorship created by a "yes" vote as long as Erdogan does their bidding.

*The Economist*, while acknowledging that "Turkey is sliding into dictatorship" and "Erdogan is carrying out the harshest crackdown in decades," warns in its current issue that "as a NATO member and a regional power, Turkey is too important to cut adrift." It concludes, "If Mr Erdogan loses, Turkey will be a difficult ally with a difficult future. But if he wins, he will be able to govern as an elected dictator."

While the imperialist powers may back Erdogan's dictatorship, they are also quite capable of instigating another coup against him, depending of Erdogan's foreign policy orientation. Both scenarios would be a catastrophe for working people.

As Toplumsal Esitlik (Social Equality) warned in its statement, "rejecting the AKP's proposed constitutional changes will not by itself halt the international drive to dictatorship and war." It is necessary to "unify workers and youth of Turkish, Kurdish, Arabic and other origins in Turkey and across the Middle East in a struggle against imperialism and the capitalist class in the Middle East, as part of an international struggle for world socialist revolution."



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