

Ballot dispute erupts as Erdogan declares a “Yes” victory in Turkish constitutional referendum

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According to results posted last night, the constitutional referendum of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan won 51.4 percent of the vote. With 99 percent of ballots counted, the “No” campaign, supported by the opposition Kemalist Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), stood at 48.6 percent. Erdogan, who heads the Justice and Development Party (AKP), declared victory for the sweeping constitutional changes he had promoted.

The referendum was marked by large-scale voting irregularities, however, which immediately raised suspicions of electoral fraud. The High Electoral Board (YSK) ruled that it would count ballots that “had not been stamped” by its officials “as valid unless they could be proved fraudulent,” citing “a high number of complaints that YSK officials at polling stations had failed to stamp them.”

The CHP declared that it would demand a recount of about 6 percent—some 2.5 million—of the votes or about 37 percent of ballot boxes. The HDP, for its part, said the result of the referendum would remain unclear until its appeal to the YSK over voting irregularities had been decided.

The YSK’s decision led CHP’s chairperson Kemal Kilicdaroglu to declare that the legitimacy of the referendum was open to question. In a short speech to reporters last night, Kilicdaroglu stated that constitutions should be the result of social consensus. He said he was ready to develop the Turkish constitution on a consensus basis.

Though the referendum was supported by the AKP and the fascistic National Movement Party (MHP), the initial results show that the absolute size of the “Yes”

vote was some 10—in some cities 20—percent smaller than the AKP and MHP vote in the November 2015 general election. The HDP also lost part of its vote in some of its majority-Kurdish electoral strongholds, where hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to flee fighting between the Turkish army and Kurdish nationalist groups.

In Turkey’s largest cities—Istanbul, Izmir, Ankara, Adana, Diyarbakir—the “no” vote carried, while large sections of the population voted “no” in major industrial cities such as Bursa, Kocaeli and Manisa.

As it became clear that the official result would be a “yes” victory, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim told a crowd of AKP supporters that the referendum had opened a new page in Turkey’s history. Erdogan then spoke to celebrate his razor-thin victory. “There are people who belittle the results,” he said, referring to his opponents. “Do not beat the air. It is too late now.”

Speaking at Huber Palace in Istanbul, Erdogan claimed that by approving the referendum, which effectively grants him dictatorial powers, Turkey had resolved a 200-year-old contradiction in its administration. “Today is the day when a change, a decision to shift to a truly serious administrative system was made,” he said.

Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the pro-“yes” Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), called the result a “a significant success,” ignoring the fact that some 50 percent of MHP voters voted “no.” Dismissing the issue of vote fraud, he declared, “The great Turkish nation, the sole owner of sovereignty, has given the final word about the future of its country, clinging to its independence and future.”

The constitutional amendment is a reactionary

measure replacing Turkey's parliamentary system with an all-powerful presidency exercising total control of the legislature and the judiciary. It allows the president to issue legislative decrees, draw up the budget, appoint the judiciary, dissolve parliament and nominate the ruling party's candidates for parliamentary elections. The parliament would become a rubber stamp.

If the "yes" vote is confirmed, the referendum will reshape Turkey's relations with NATO and the European Union. Erdogan previously vowed to review his refugee deal with the EU after the referendum.

Even though large-scale irregularities are hanging over the vote, the pro-EU Turkish Industry and Business Association (TUSIAD) called on the electorate to support the "yes" result. It called for the population to stand "in solidarity for a stronger Turkey and look to the future without delay." It also urged "the government and parliament to prioritize the reform agenda that is before our country," adding, "It is time to progress by preserving freedoms, pluralism and solidarity."

Though the referendum unmistakably grants the Turkish president dictatorial powers, TUSIAD asked Erdogan to "strengthen the independence of the judiciary" and end the state of emergency imposed after last year's July 15 failed coup, which was backed by Washington and Berlin.

TUSIAD's statement also called for closer relations with the EU on issues such as customs duties, media and Internet freedom, security cooperation on refugee policy, visa-free travel, a political solution in Cyprus, and a resolution to the war in Syria.

The Council of Europe made similar remarks, calling on the Turkish government to proceed carefully after its victory. In a written statement, Council of Europe Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland said, "It is of utmost importance to secure the independence of the judiciary in line with the principle of rule of law enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights. The Council of Europe, of which Turkey is a full member, stands ready to support the country in this process."

In Germany, Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel urged the Turkish government to proceed in a "level-headed way." Axel Schaefer of the Social Democratic Party treated the referendum outcome as a disaster, comparing it to the coming to power of Hitler in 1933.

"The Brexit vote is pushing Britain onto the sidelines, the presidential election of Trump is taking the USA on an adventure, the Erdogan referendum is leading Turkey into absolutism like the 1933 German parliamentary election led Germany into the abyss," he said.

Erdogan's closest allies were more supportive in their statements on the referendum. Azeri President Ilham Aliyev congratulated Erdogan, saying, "This referendum will undoubtedly mark the dawn of a new era in the history of our sister country and will strengthen the role and place of a stable, strong Turkey in the international arena."

Qatar's emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, together with leaders from Pakistan, Hungary, Macedonia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Kenya, telephoned Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu to congratulate him on the result.



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