What’s Next for Turkey: Authoritarian Stability or Chaos?

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**Staff**

**Blaise Misztal**  
Director of National Security

**Nicholas Danforth**  
Senior Policy Analyst

**Jessica Michek**  
Policy Analyst

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**Introduction**

On April 16, a bitterly contested referendum—carried out under unfair, undemocratic conditions and marred by accusations of fraud—transformed Turkey’s political system to give Recep Tayyip Erdoğan enhanced presidential powers. Erdoğan repeatedly promised voters that a presidential system would finally bring Turkey the level of mature democracy and lasting stability that had previously eluded it. Unfortunately, the destruction of Turkish democracy and an increasingly violent and tumultuous era seems more likely.

To envision what comes next for Turkish politics, electoral and otherwise, the referendum results can serve as a road map. Despite the impact of electoral irregularities, examining the referendum numbers will nonetheless shed light on the current state of Turkey’s main political movements and the choices they now face.

The most striking fact is that there has been little fundamental change to Turkey’s political landscape: Half the country supports Erdoğan, and half opposes him. Amid mounting instability and economic uncertainty, Erdoğan has preserved the support of his base and even secured a slight increase in support from both Kurds and Turkish nationalists. But at the same time, even his increasingly authoritarian measures have failed to co-opt or silence a vocal and varied opposition. This suggests that Erdoğan will have little reason to soften his current approach to politics—but it also means he will have little hope of peacefully managing the country’s divides.

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**Allegations of Fraud**

The Turkish referendum resulted in a “yes” campaign victory, but claims of fraud mar the result.\(^1\) Concerns and accusations of voting fraud from both opposition groups and international monitors include:

- Obstructions and limitations on campaign activities were rampant before the referendum; the “no” campaign faced campaign bans, police interventions, arrests, and violent fights at their events.

- The High Election Board announced during the vote that unstamped ballots would be counted, removing a key protection against vote stuffing.

- The District Election Board decided to relocate polling stations in the southeast provinces, allegedly for security.

- Statistical irregularities suggest vote stuffing: There were a suspiciously high number of districts with only “yes” votes and a striking correlation between these districts and those with no invalid votes. In opposition strongholds there was also a dramatic decrease in districts with only “no” votes.

- Over 170 members of the opposition were barred from participating in election observation, and a number of election observers were temporarily detained.

- There are reports of officials threatening or harassing voters at polling stations across the country.
Key Takeaways and Questions for Each Party

• Despite reports of widespread concern within the Justice and Development Party (AKP) over Erdoğan’s personalization of power, traditional AKP voters still turned out to support the referendum. How will Erdoğan deal with those in the party who initially withheld their support for the referendum?

• After staid pre-referendum campaigning and a restrained response to allegations of fraud, support for the Republican People’s Party (CHP) is stagnant at best. Will its inability or unwillingness to more forcefully challenge Erdoğan frustrate CHP supporters and cause new sources of opposition to emerge from within the party?

• Within the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), it appears that Erdoğan’s success in co-opting party leader Devlet Bahçeli won him only limited support from the party’s voters. While this leaves the future of the MHP itself uncertain, it suggests that the nationalist constituency will remain a live force within Turkish politics rather than being subsumed into the AKP. How does Erdoğan deal with the possibility of revived nationalist opposition? If he cannot co-opt them, can he crack down on them without provoking violence?

• Following reports of fraud and widespread voter disenfranchisement, Erdoğan received an increased but not unprecedented level of support in the predominantly Kurdish southeast. Yet the region as a whole still opposed him by a significant margin. If the HDP is marginalized but its constituency remains strong, the future of the Kurdish movement will increasingly be in the hands of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) leadership. Will Erdoğan try to reach an arrangement with the PKK, tacit or otherwise? Will the PKK, for its part, try to come to terms with Erdoğan or lead violent resistance against him?

Given that Turkey remains almost evenly divided and increasingly polarized, Erdoğan’s approach to his opposition, as well as the internal dynamics within and between opposition parties, will be a key determinant of what comes next. For Turkey to avoid serious instability, Erdoğan will have to walk a narrow path between his Turkish and Kurdish nationalist opponents. If he can succeed in somehow accommodating both, a reasonable approximation of parliamentary politics may endure, perhaps providing the groundwork for real democracy to reemerge at some future point. If, however, Erdoğan fails, and resorts to even more draconian means to deal with his opposition, it would be yet another blow to Turkey’s stability and long-term hopes for democracy—and would have dangerous implications for U.S. interests.
The Landscape: More Continuity Than Change

Over the last 15 years of rule by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party, according to a now almost universally accepted narrative in Washington, Turkey’s trajectory has been one of great potential squandered. Though he entered office with the promise of liberalization, EU membership, and economic growth, Erdoğan now represents authoritarianism, abandonment of the West, and civil conflict. Crucially, however, the AKP’s political trajectory at home is seen very differently. While outside observers view AKP’s rule as a failure, electorally, at least, it trends toward success. Erdoğan and the AKP have maintained, and even slightly increased, their base of support even as conditions in Turkey have worsened, a trend capped off by the April 16 constitutional referendum.

To understand the referendum result and see where Erdoğan might have picked up votes, many have compared the referendum to Turkey’s last parliamentary election. But there are inherent difficulties in comparing one parliamentary election—with many competing parties and policy considerations—to the binary choice of the referendum. Further complicating the comparison is that, in the referendum, the “no” campaign was made up of a coalition of political parties, unlike in a parliamentary election. Additionally, the comparison is flawed because the November 2015 parliamentary election occurred at a unique time in Turkish domestic politics: It was a snap election that followed an election in which the AKP’s support had dropped precipitously, denying the party a parliamentary majority for the first time since it came to power in 2002.

Thus, while comparing the referendum result to the November parliamentary election result may help illustrate the short-term shifts in Turkey’s electorate, it does not provide the whole picture. To better explore Turkey’s evolving politics, the BPC analysis looks at every national vote since 2007—before Erdoğan was even popularly perceived to have taken an authoritarian turn. This includes:

- **2007 Parliamentary Election**: The AKP came to power in 2002 with just 34.3 percent of the vote. But in 2007, after a confrontation with the military about whether AKP co-founder Abdullah Gül could become president, the AKP took 46.6 percent of the vote—hinting at its future political dominance

- **2011 Parliamentary Election**: Following rising concerns over Erdoğan’s authoritarian tendencies, as well as the CHP’s effort to rebrand itself along slightly more liberal lines, the AKP once again increased its electoral margin, this time winning 49.8 percent of the vote.

- **2014 Presidential Election**: Under constitutional reforms that allowed for the direct election of the president, Erdoğan (backed by the AKP) ran against Ekmeleddin Ihsanoğlu (backed by the MHP and CHP) and Selahattin Demirtaş (backed by the HDP) and won with 51.79 percent of the vote.

- **June 2015 Parliamentary Election**: Taking place against a backdrop of increasing domestic tensions and an empowered Kurdish political movement, the AKP saw a dramatic loss of support, earning only 40.87 percent of the national vote and failing to secure a parliamentary majority.
• **November 2015 Parliamentary Election:** After failing to form a coalition government following the June election, snap elections were held in November. Pursuing a dual strategy of delegitimizing the Kurdish HDP and courting nationalist MHP voters—both in the context of renewed fighting with the PKK—the AKP was able to increase its vote share to 49.50 percent of the national vote, regaining its parliamentary majority.

• **April 2017 Referendum:** In a narrow victory, the “yes” campaign was able to secure 51.41 percent of the vote, ushering in an executive presidency.

Figure 1 shows that while the referendum was not strictly a vote on Erdoğan, the percentage of “yes” votes was remarkably close to the level of support Erdoğan received when he initially ran for president in 2014. Also striking is how close it is to the support for the AKP as a whole in November 2015. Among other things, this suggests both a limited number of AKP defections and a limited ability to co-opt the MHP. Perhaps in some cases, increased MHP support compensated for a decrease in AKP “yes” voters, but these numbers suggest that at best, MHP defections only gave Erdoğan a few extra percentage points. Indeed, the fact that Erdoğan received a similar amount of support when the MHP leadership backed a rival presidential candidate in 2014 and when they called on their members to support him in the referendum suggests the possibility of a consistent split within the MHP ranks. Likely, some portion of the party’s base is sympathetic to Erdoğan and some oppose him—but the views of the party leadership have little bearing on those votes.

Looking back further, this data reveals the broad and consistent support Erdoğan enjoys. It suggests that the results of June 2015 were an anomaly and that concerns over Erdoğan’s authoritarianism, as well as the risks it brings to Turkey’s stability and economic prosperity, have had little impact on voters. To the contrary, from 2007 on, Erdoğan’s increasingly divisive rhetoric has been consistently rewarded at the polls.
Figure 1. AKP- Erdoğan Electoral Performance by Region

Source: Supreme Election Council. Available at: http://www.ysk.gov.tr

Key:
- **Central Anatolia and the Black Sea Region:** Rural, conservative provinces in the Anatolian countryside and the Black Sea region that are heavily composed of MHP and AKP supporters.
- **Western and Southern Coasts:** Left-leaning coastal provinces in the west and south of the country and overall CHP strongholds.
- **Urban Provinces:** Turkey’s largest cities and core peripheries with a mixed Turkish-Kurdish population.
- **Southeast:** Rural provinces with a significant Kurdish population.
Anatolia and the Black Sea Region:

In April, the referendum picked up a modest amount of votes in this region, with most provinces showing gains over the AKP’s November 2015 vote total between 1.5 and 5.5 percentage points. Yet even in these regions, this moderate increase suggests that fewer than half of the individuals who voted for the MHP in 2015 backed the referendum, revealing Erdoğan’s effort to co-opt the party was incomplete.

The Western and Southern Coasts:

In the coastal regions, where the AKP has always been less popular, the referendum received almost the same percentage of votes, plus or minus 1.5 percent, as the AKP received in November 2015, and in only six provinces did the “yes” vote fall more than a percentage point below the AKP’s November 2015 total. Broadly, this suggests that Erdoğan succeeded in mobilizing his traditional voters to support the referendum, and to the extent there were defections, he succeeded in compensating for them with votes won from the MHP.

Urban Provinces:

In Turkey’s cities, Erdoğan’s support seems largely constant. For the most part, results in these provinces stayed largely the same in the April referendum, within 1.5 percent plus or minus the AKP’s November 2015 vote. Only in Adana did the “yes” vote’s increase reach above 1.5 percent while it fell incrementally in Istanbul and Ankara.

Kurdish-Majority Provinces:

The most striking, or most perplexing, part of the referendum outcome is the relative increase in support for Erdoğan from the predominantly Kurdish southeast. Almost every province in this region saw an increase in his favor of at least 5.5 percentage points, with increases reaching as high as 18.6 percent in Hakkari. The rise in AKP support in the southeast included those provinces that have seen some of the most intense fighting over the past two years, but it also includes other provinces that have been spared the same level of direct violence. This introduces a note of caution to any overly reductive explanation of the Kurdish vote rooted solely in the military conflict of the past two years.

Though this region only represents about 10 percent of Turkey’s total population, its political trajectory has important implications for Turkey’s future. If the official results are reliable—and there is good reason to believe they are not—the “yes” vote in southeastern Turkey shows a considerable increase over the vote obtained by the AKP in 2015, giving rise to suggestions that the Kurdish vote tipped the scales in Erdoğan’s favor. Indeed, Kurdish anger at the PKK’s role in the region’s return to war, or perhaps the hope that Erdoğan, once empowered by the referendum, might finally be able to reach a deal with the group, might have helped drive up support for the referendum.

Yet, seen in a longer context, Erdoğan’s performance in the region is not unprecedented. Indeed, accounting for irregularities, the percentage of “yes” votes in the region may well be closer to the pre-conflict division between pro-government and nationalist voters in the region.
Comparing the provincial results of the referendum and the November 2015 election demonstrates the broad base of support enjoyed by the AKP. After losing votes in June, the AKP was able to recoup votes from both nationalist and Kurdish populations—votes that the AKP was then able to largely retain for the referendum. Overall, in only six provinces did the “yes” vote fall more than a percentage point below the AKP’s November 2015 vote total, and nowhere in the country was the loss more than 1.5 percent.

**Figure 2. Support for Erdoğan-AKP in Comparison with 2015**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes within 1.5 percent plus or minus of the November 2015 AKP vote</th>
<th>Yes between 1.5 and 5.5 points higher than the November 2015 AKP vote</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes between 5.5 and 10 points higher than the November 2015 AKP vote</td>
<td>Yes over 10 points higher</td>
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Finally, it is important to also read Erdoğan’s electoral gains against a map that weights each region by population (see Figure 3). The map below shows the number of total “yes” votes that came from each of Turkey’s provinces. Echoing the chart above, it reveals the extent to which urban areas drive Turkey’s electoral dynamics. Istanbul alone has more votes than all of southeastern Turkey. İzmir, meanwhile, despite voting heavily against Erdoğan, still provided almost a million “yes” votes, as many as several of the country’s larger central Anatolian provinces put together.

Given the consistency in voting patterns across the past decade, perhaps the best map to conclude with is one showing the intensity of support and opposition to the referendum across Turkey (see Figure 4). Opposition remains strongest—as it long has—in the country’s western traditionally secular fringe and in the Kurdish southeast, with İzmir and Diyarbakır both registering a similarly high proportion of “no” votes. Moving forward, the question remains: How will this enduring opposition manifest itself in a tightly constrained political environment, and how will Erdoğan, and the wide swaths of the country that still support him, respond?
Figure 3. Yes Votes by Province (out of 24.4 million total)

Source: Supreme Election Council. Available at: http://www.ysk.gov.tr

Figure 4. Support and Opposition by Province

Source: Supreme Election Council. Available at: http://www.ysk.gov.tr
Trends: Dramatic Divisions, Dangerous Choices

Justice and Development Party

The lead-up to last month’s referendum brought renewed attention to the divisions within the AKP, and the concerns of many party members over Erdoğan’s personalization of power. Former party leaders like Bülent Arınç and Abdullah Gül declined to campaign for the referendum, even as they never explicitly spoke out against it. Yet despite this, the referendum results show little evidence of defection from AKP voters.

Among other things, Erdoğan’s ability to maintain party unity suggests that he has succeeded in his attempts to present both the party and the country as being under siege by a sinister cabal of foreign and domestic forces: ISIS, the PKK, and Fetullah Gülen (not to mention the EU and Washington). Going forward, Erdoğan will almost certainly double down on his confrontational approach, continuing to treat Turkey’s domestic and foreign politics as part of an existential battle in defense of Turkey’s soul. This framing will likely continue to resonate with Erdoğan’s base. And, for any dissenters who are vocally unconvinced, it will also serve as pretext for repression.

Key Questions: Will new sources of opposition emerge from within the AKP, perhaps in response to an economic downturn? How will Erdoğan deal with those in the party who withheld their support before the referendum?

Erdoğan is undoubtedly concerned over dissent within the party, and he may well make moves to force out members whose loyalty he feels is suspect. But if these individuals accept their fate as gracefully as Ahmet Davutoğlu did when he was removed from the position of prime minister, party unity could endure. Genuine loyalty combined with the implicit but ever-present threat of retaliation has kept the AKP’s diverse factions in line so far and likely will continue to do so.

Of course, this is by no means guaranteed. In the immediate wake of the referendum, a public spat broke out among a number of leading AKP media figures, pitting the party’s more resolutely Islamist wing against a cadre known for its closeness to Erdoğan. Though the split was quickly papered over, it hinted at the depth of the divides within the AKP itself—and the speed with which these splits can lead to reciprocal accusations of treason. With purges of supposed Gülenists continuing apace after Erdoğan’s referendum win, it remains possible that the AKP could turn on itself in a way it has so far avoided—with serious consequences for Turkey’s stability. Such a self-consuming purge would compromise every branch of the government, undermining the effectiveness of the bureaucracy and public administration. Without competent and willing loyalists, the government would be unable to perform basic tasks, from fighting the PKK to managing the country’s economy.

Republican People’s Party

The CHP appears committed to maintaining the tone of restrained opposition that it has struck ever since the July 2016 coup. The party is still struggling to find a consistent and effective oppositional voice that allows it to expand its base, long stagnant at roughly 25 percent of the voting population. While CHP voters are almost universally opposed to Erdoğan, its supporters remain divided roughly between nationalists and liberals. As a result, the party’s leadership faces the challenge of opposing the AKP without inviting a backlash by running afoul of Turkey’s nationalist consensus on any explosive issues.
Unsurprisingly, then, following the April 16 referendum, the CHP’s response came off as confused: Initially, CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu seemed to accept the results when they were announced. But, the next morning, another member of the party declared that the CHP refused to recognize the result and would challenge the outcome through legal means. Now, with that challenge dismissed by courts, the question of how the CHP will follow through remains to be seen. So far, the response continues to be inconsistent: When the Council of Europe Assembly voted to reopen monitoring of Turkey’s democracy, the CHP representatives to the council—unwilling to be seen as siding with outside powers against Turkey—voted against the measure. Most recently, Selin Sayek Böke, a rising member of the party, resigned in protest of CHP leadership’s failure to more actively challenge the referendum results.

**Key Questions:** How vocal will the CHP be in opposing Erdoğan and dismissing the referendum result as illegitimate? How critical will Erdoğan allow the party to be?

Were the CHP to maintain its current approach to opposition, no one would likely be happier than Erdoğan. At a certain point though, anger within the CHP ranks could make the current wavering posture untenable, at which point the party as a whole would have to adopt a more assertively oppositional stance or potentially risk further internal fissures. The extent to which Erdoğan cracks down on the CHP with the same methods he has already used against other opponents depends on how forceful and effective the CHP proves to be. For Kılıçdaroğlu, the choice may well be between remaining indecisive and ending up in jail.

**Nationalist Action Party**

Since the fall of 2014, Erdoğan has competed with the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) for conservative nationalist voters by taking an increasingly aggressive stance toward the country’s rival Kurdish nationalist movement. Between June and November 2015, the resumption of conflict with the PKK enabled Erdoğan to win back nationalist voters who had previously drifted toward the MHP.

Subsequently, Erdoğan sought to further co-opt the party, using his influence over the courts to help defend party leader Devlet Bahçeli’s position from a leadership challenge by by former Interior Minister Meral Aksener, probably Turkey’s most popular female politician. In return, Bahçeli endorsed Erdoğan’s effort to create an executive presidency, giving Erdoğan the extra parliamentary votes he needed to bring his proposed constitutional changes to referendum. Bahçeli also urged MHP voters to support the referendum itself, but the results suggest that the majority of MHP voters ignored their leader. The AKP picked up a percentage of MHP votes, perhaps enough to provide the winning margin, but party members largely sided with Aksener in her opposition to Bahçeli and Erdoğan alike.

**Key Questions:** How does Erdoğan deal with revived nationalist opposition, or a new party created by Aksener? If he cannot co-opt them, can he crack down on them without provoking violence?

After the referendum, rumors emerged that Aksener would start her own party, a move that could not only consolidate the anti-Erdoğan MHP vote but also win conservative voters away from the AKP. With Aksener already accused of being in league
with the Gülenists, however, the question is whether such a challenge would be allowed to gain traction, or if it would be brought to an undemocratic end by a government prosecutor. This might leave MHP voters angry, but with nowhere else to turn, and no deep ideological objection to much of Erdoğan’s current political program, they may just let it go. Yet if nationalist anger were to mount, perhaps in response to increased PKK attacks or evidence that the government intends to renew negotiations with the PKK, MHP anger might become harder to manage.

Peoples’ Democratic Party

The HDP has been under sustained assault for over a year—two co-leaders are in prison on terror-related charges, 12 other members are currently behind bars, and still others are either pending trial or were recently released. Fighting, as discussed above, has also upended the region, killing thousands and driving far more from their homes. Yet the referendum reveals that for all that has happened over the past several years, both the government and the Kurdish nationalist movement have maintained their primary constituencies in the Kurdish region.

Throughout almost two years of fighting, both the government and the HDP have argued that the ongoing violence will only increase their electoral support among ordinary Kurdish voters. These results challenge both sides’ certainty, suggesting that prolonging the current military conflict will not create transformative costs or benefits in public opinion for either one. The AKP has not been able to eat into the HDP’s base of support, but it is equally striking that its crackdown on Kurdish politicians has not produced a groundswell of Kurdish support for the HDP. If HDP voters, as a whole, are not eager to provoke a new and destructive fight against the government, the HDP could also endure as a powerless party representing an ethnically-conscious Kurdish population that was not inclined to seek other alternatives.

Key Questions: Does Erdoğan try to reach an arrangement with the PKK, tacit or otherwise? Does the PKK, for its part, try to come to terms with Erdoğan or lead violent resistance against him?

The forced marginalization of the HDP means that, when it comes to the Kurdish nationalist movement, the question of escalation will remain in the hands of the PKK’s military leadership. For strategic reasons unrelated to their electoral base, both the Turkish government and the PKK might decide their interests are best served by avoiding further escalation. In this case, Turkey’s Kurdish conflict might continue as a low-level insurgency without further consuming the country. The PKK and its affiliates have not carried out any high-profile terrorist attacks with civilian casualties in western Turkey since December 2016, while the Turkish government, despite more and more saber-rattling, has not yet launched a full-scale war against the PKK’s affiliates in Syria. Within these potentially game-changing parameters, Turkey has proved that it can endure an ongoing guerilla conflict, with PKK attacks against military bases and with often-repressive government counterinsurgency operations in the southeast, without the stability of Turkey as a whole being fatally compromised.

Alternatively, the referendum results could leave both sides convinced that they cannot hope to win over rival constituencies through political means and thus may try to secure further advantages through military means, relying on the support of the constituencies they already have. Were Turkey to carry through with its threats of a cross-border attack against the PKK’s Syrian affiliate, for example, the dimensions of the conflict would quickly expand. In addition to intensified fighting across
southeastern Turkey, the PKK could well respond with a renewed campaign of terrorist attacks in western Turkey. This in turn could provoke a rising wave of nationalist anger that, if it spilled into the streets, could lead to direct fighting between ordinary Turkish and Kurdish citizens. At the same time, violence in Turkey’s main cities would drive away tourists and foreign businesses alike, taking a rapid toll on the country’s economy.
What’s Next?

The vitality of the opposition that Erdoğan faces, as well as his ability to manage it without resorting to draconian tactics, will determine the future of Turkey’s domestic politics. The best foreseeable case for Turkey would be some kind of illiberal stasis, functional but by no means democratic. Under a system like this, many of the country’s problems would fester. Institutions would remain weak, and enduring stability would be elusive, but outright chaos and crisis would be avoided, perhaps preserving the possibility of a gradual return to real democracy down the road in a post-Erdoğan era. Yet many of the trends observed in the lead-up and aftermath of the presidential referendum point to the possibility of a much darker future, one in which Erdoğan does in fact resort to draconian tactics to block opposition from rival fronts and, in doing so, pushes the country into chaos.

The referendum reveals that in dealing with any future opposition, Erdoğan will have to navigate between the opposition he faces from Turkish and Kurdish nationalists. In the face of an escalating conflict with the PKK, Erdoğan might have a hard time pivoting, as he has in the past, toward a more conciliatory policy without alienating nationalist voters and, perhaps more crucially, his nationalist allies within the military. In this context, any discussion of negotiating with the PKK, or even trying to establish a cease-fire, could create an equally destabilizing backlash. Growing dissent within the military would only fuel Erdoğan’s post-coup paranoia, while a nationalist backlash would undermine Erdoğan’s already tenuous efforts to neutralize MHP opposition by co-opting its leadership.

Similarly, the stakes are high if discontent cannot be channeled and contained within the political system. Popular protests in the wake of the referendum remained small, but a widespread economic downturn could bring a new wave of protestors, both longtime CHP opponents and previous AKP supporters, out on the streets. Since the 2013 Gezi Park protests, the AKP has transformed the Turkish police into a much more loyal and better-armed force, while also encouraging popular mobilization among supporters. The result is that future protests, especially if they were more prolonged and threatening than Gezi, could be met with a more violent response from the police as well as from groups that would essentially function as pro-AKP militias. Moreover, following the purges in the Turkish military, and Erdoğan’s own efforts to create separate factions within the security services that would remain loyal to him in case of a future coup, there is no longer any unified force in the country that could act as a check to widespread fighting.
Implications for the United States

At one point, the question in Washington was whether Turkey could serve as an effective partner in support of U.S. policy in the Middle East. Then, as U.S.-Turkish differences over anti-ISIS strategy in Syria deepened, the question became whether Turkey could be convinced to stay out of the way while Washington pursued its preferred policy. Looking forward, however, the question may become whether Turkey itself will remain a point of stability in a chaotic region or whether political instability in Turkey will itself become a strategic concern for U.S. policy.

As the analysis above suggests, liberal democracy will take a long time to recover in Turkey. But there is still an important difference, from the perspective of U.S. interests, between a system of moderate and competitive authoritarianism, in which some degree of parliamentary politics survives, and a scenario where a more dramatic repression of the opposition spills over into violence. For Washington, trying to mitigate the damage done to the Turkish political system will help prevent its destabilizing collapse and increase the possibility that Turkey can eventually reemerge as a democratic partner.

The key for American policymakers, therefore, is to remain critical of Erdoğan’s intensified efforts to crack down on his opponents through increasingly draconian means. Specifically, the U.S. government can and should:

- Call for a reputable and impartial international review of the referendum, and continue to treat the results as illegitimate until such a point as Turkey has a free press and independent judiciary capable of investigating all evidence of fraud.
- Remain firm in a commitment to the rule of law and declare publicly that the U.S. government can only comply with extradition requests from the Turkish government to the extent that the Turkish judiciary is deemed impartial and independent.
- Reiterate America’s commitment to freedom of speech, and call on the Turkish government to release those journalists who are currently imprisoned.
- Call for the release of Turkey’s imprisoned members of parliament and restate America’s support for a peaceful resolution to Turkey’s Kurdish conflict.

Protecting the future of the strategically vital U.S. alliance with Turkey will require the United States to speak out firmly and publicly about the Turkey’s slide into an unstable authoritarianism—which the results of the recent referendum would seem to predict.
Endnotes

1. On election irregularities, see:


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1225 Eye Street NW, Suite 1000 | Washington, D.C. 20005