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Turkey Referendum: New Phase in Turkish-European Relations

By Saleena Saleem

Synopsis

The recent referendum indicates that Europe can no longer expect to use the long-held Turkish bid for membership in the European Union (EU) as a political tool to influence Turkey and its people. This marks a new phase in Turkish-European relations as both sides readjust their priorities.

Commentary

IN THE 16 April 2017 referendum, the Turkish electorate approved 18 constitutional amendments, the most significant one being new executive powers for the president, which will shift Turkey's parliamentary political system to a presidential one.

Supporters of the changes proposed by the ruling party, Justice and Development Party (AKP), and backed by the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), argued that Turkey's dysfunctional domestic parliamentary politics and foreign threats, which have affected the country's progress and stability in recent years, require the strong leadership that a presidential system would provide. Opponents, on the other hand, cited concerns about authoritarianism and the erosion of Turkish secular democracy. It is this latter argument that featured prominently in Europe in the months before the referendum, and even today after it.

Europe's Implicit 'Red-Line'

Europe was decidedly against the proposed constitutional amendments and this message was unambiguously communicated to the Turkish electorate in various ways prior to the referendum. The European Union (EU) warned Ankara that the

proposed constitutional amendments “might” be detrimental to Turkey’s long-standing bid for membership to the bloc.

In early March, Germany and the Netherlands banned Turkish ministers from participating in pro-amendment rallies organised by Turkish expatriates. Planned pro-amendment rallies in several German cities were cancelled, with officials citing crowd and fire safety concerns. Rallies were similarly cancelled in Austria and Switzerland. During this period, a pro-Kurdish rally in Frankfurt attended by 30,000 people, and where opposition to the amendments were voiced, went ahead without official interference.

While Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had vested interests in heightening nationalist sentiments to win the Turkish expatriate vote, the collective message from Europe ahead of the referendum that it favoured the “no” camp and seemingly taking a stance in a national referendum on internal matters, may have been a miscalculation that helped tilt the expatriate vote to the “yes” camp.

In contrast to the Turkish diaspora in non-European countries that predominantly voted “no”, more than (or almost) two-thirds voted “yes” in the European countries with the largest number of Turkish voters in Germany, France and the Netherlands.

Within some Turkish cities, Europe’s implicit ‘red-line’ message may have had a different effect – the AKP lost the vote in the two major cities, Istanbul and Ankara, where it held majorities in previous elections. This indicates a level of mistrust amongst some AKP urbanite voters, who stand to lose economically over any potential deterioration in relations with the EU.

Whether won over by nationalist sentiments or buoyed by the economic and religious freedom benefits over the past decade, 51.4% of the Turkish electorate decided to cross Europe’s implicit ‘red-line’, at the risk of ending the EU membership talks.

New Phase in Turkish-European Relations

There is mounting pressure from certain European quarters to end membership negotiations on the basis that Turks have voted in favour of autocracy, which is irreconcilable with EU principles. However, such a move can only be symbolic, given that the EU membership negotiations has been moribund for some time already. President Erdogan’s barbed suggestion to reinstate the death penalty, which Turkey had abolished in 2004 under his leadership as part of pre-conditions to EU membership, is in effect highlighting the hollowness of such rhetoric.

Europe cannot afford to stop working with Turkey for various reasons: First, Turkey has the second largest standing army in NATO. Second Turkey, being situated near major conflict zones in the Middle East, will have to be involved in the diplomatic and military efforts at resolutions. Third, as the Syrian ceasefire agreement brokered in January demonstrates, Turkey is not averse to working with Russia, which increases its strategic importance for a US presidency that is not opposed to Russia and instead appears to favour a partnership approach to tackling international issues.

Europe, which regards Russia warily as its main adversary, loses out if it is bypassed

in decisions. Fourth, Turkey's young middle class population, and its high birth and fertility rates compared to rates in Western Europe, will drive future economic expansion. Fifth, Europe stands to gain economic benefits given Turkey's geographical location that positions itself as a natural bridge to economies in Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East.

Since the 1960s, Europe has effectively used the membership card to shape the trajectory of Turkey's development, or at the very least, to edge Turkey closer to Europe in various respects. Although Turkey did not attain membership, the long process has helped it modernise its institutions, economy and laws, and anchored these in a culture that has grown to appreciate and respect the rule of law and democratic practices. This is reflected in the high turnout at the referendum, which shows that Turks want to have a say in how their country is governed. This attitude is unlikely to change, presidential system or not.

Today, the phase where Turkey needed (and gained more from) Europe than vice versa appears to have reached an end; a new phase is developing instead in which Turkey could have the same, if not more leverage than Europe. This means a readjustment of priorities for both countries.

Turkey's Dualistic Self-Image

While some argue that the referendum results show a divided (and hence unstable) Turkey, the results in fact reaffirm the East-West dualistic nature of Turkey. This dualistic Turkish self-image, with nationalist sentiments in tow, will likely pull Turkey toward the East, but it can also move in parallel with Europe as Turkey ideally wants to maximise the benefits from the role it sees itself playing – as a bridge between Europe and Asia, and Europe and the Middle East. However, this entails Europe recognising that Turkey is interested in deepening its economic ties with Europe and wants to maintain close relations with it.

If the EU does not act on its 'red line', it would be indicative of the new phase of Turkish-European engagement settling in. This new phase could likely play out in the migrant agreement, where Turkey continues to press for visa-free travel in Europe. If Turkey does get what it wants, it should not come as a surprise.

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