

## FIVE WAYS THE REFERENDUM COULD CHANGE TURKEY

**ISTANBUL:** Turkey votes tomorrow in a referendum on expanding the powers of the presidency under Recep Tayyip Erdogan. But the outcome could more broadly influence all aspects of the country's future. Coming 94 years after the foundation of modern Turkey by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the referendum is a landmark vote that may affect relations with the West, a peace process with Kurds and dynamics inside society. Here are five ways the referendum could shape Turkey:

### Enhanced or weakened powers?

If he wins the referendum, Erdogan will enjoy enhanced powers, be able to appoint ministers and have an entire bureaucracy centralized within his presidential palace. Opponents worry that the new system will lack the "checks and balances" that mark the US system, moving the presidency toward one man rule. The new system would be implemented from November

2019 when presidential and legislative elections would be held simultaneously. With the clock wound back under the new system Erdogan, who became president in 2014, could take two more terms, allowing him to stay in power until 2029 rather than 2024, currently.

The executive presidency system "amasses unprecedented power in the hands of one man," said Alan Makovsky, senior fellow at the Center for American Progress. Erdogan in combative speeches has not countenanced the prospect of a 'No' vote and not given the slightest indication he would consider his future. But given the advantages of the 'Yes' campaign a 'No' would be a massive blow to his status as Turkey's all-powerful leader.

### EU integration or disintegration?

Relations between Turkey, a longstanding candidate to join the European Union, and its EU partners plunged

to bitter lows during the referendum campaign as the president lashed out at Europe for what he said was behavior reminiscent of Nazi Germany. Erdogan has said Turkey's membership bid would be "on the table" after the referendum and in every single campaign speech said he would sign any bill restoring capital punishment, a move that would automatically end its bid to join the bloc.

"The tactics of constantly bullying the EU... for domestic political purposes have now reached their limits," said Marc Pierini, visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe. In the event of an easy 'Yes' victory, Erdogan could have the confidence to take a decisive move away from EU integration and show Turkey can forge alternative strategic alliances, including with Russia. One alternative to full membership could be a strengthened customs union, but it is unclear if that would be palatable for Erdogan. —AFP

## AFGHANISTAN WOMEN EMBRACE A NEW EMPOWERMENT: DIVORCE

**JALALABAD:** When Nadia's heroin addict husband began assaulting her with a metal rod, she did something unthinkable for many women in Afghanistan—she left him. Domestic abuse is endemic in the deeply patriarchal country, but for the first time a growing number of Afghan women are embracing divorce as a new kind of empowerment. Divorce is Islamically deemed as halal (a permissible act) - but the worst sort, still a greater taboo than the abuse itself in a culture that remains unforgiving to women who part with their husbands. "He is a drug addict and an alcoholic. I cannot live with him anymore,"

Nadia said of her husband of two years as she sobbed quietly behind the billowing folds of her burqa. Her father, sat next to her, also welled up with tears. Tribal elders from Nadia's community attempted to intervene, cajoling her to go back to her abuser. Instead, she became the first woman in her family to ask for divorce. "God has given rights to women—divorce is one of them," said Nadia, who is seeking legal separation with the help of Legal Aid Grant Facility (LAGF), part of a UNDP project established in 2014.

Her husband has since left home, his whereabouts are unclear. National statistics are hard to come by, but in a sign of the upward trend LAGF says it has handled a 12 percent increase in divorce cases across Afghanistan over a period of three years. "Divorced Afghan women who have the chance to start a new life are becoming models for other women, showing that an unhappy or abusive marriage does not have to be a life sentence," Heather Barr, a Human Rights Watch researcher said.

### Great shame

Afghanistan has been a battleground for women's rights since the misogynistic Taliban were ousted from power in 2001, but divorce cases illustrate how gender parity remains a distant dream. It is relatively easy for men to initiate divorce, often just by verbally relaying the decision to their wives. But women must go to court, and can only seek separation based on specific complaints such as abuse or abandonment. Retaining a lawyer is no easy task even for those who can afford one: death threats against those representing women in divorce cases are not uncommon. "Divorce is one of the clearest examples of discrimination still written into law in Afghanistan," Barr said. "Given the difficulty in finding a lawyer, corruption and misogyny in the courts, and the low rate of literacy among women, the result is that for many women divorce is all but impossible." Some like 22-year-old Nafisa are stuck in limbo as her husband refuses to divorce her. After being engaged for 11 years, he married her in absentia. Based in London, he authorized an Islamic guardian to solemnize their marriage ceremony in Jalalabad. But he has since refused to return to Afghanistan or take her with him, prompting Nafisa to leave her father-in-law's house and demand divorce. Nafisa's male relatives refused to let her talk to AFP, with her uncle only saying that the acrimonious divorce proceedings in court had brought great shame to the family and made her remarriage prospects difficult.

### Compromise

It is partly for this reason that divorce is strongly discouraged. Divorced women living independently are rare in Afghan society, and are often viewed with suspicion and become targets of abuse. Mediation is often the last hope to prevent the split—and women are almost always encouraged to compromise. AFP sat through one mediation session in Kabul at the organization Women for Afghan Women, where 24-year-old Zahra met with her estranged husband and mother-in-law. —AFP



**ISTANBUL:** Supporters of the 'NO' vote wave flags and sing songs during campaigning in Istanbul, ahead of the upcoming referendum. —AP

## STABILITY OR AUTOCRACY?

### TURKEY DIVIDED OVER KEY REFERENDUM

**ANKARA:** Turkey is heading toward a historic referendum on a new political system that could change the course of its history - and it has the country divided right down the middle. For supporters, change will bring much-needed stability. Others fear it could lead Turkey down the path of an autocratic, one-man rule by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Voters will decide on Sunday whether to approve constitutional changes that would replace the parliamentary system with a presidential one, scrapping the office of the prime minister and handing over its powers to the president.

Erdogan, who has fronted the campaign for a "yes" vote, says the proposed "Turkish style" presidential system will banish weak governments, establish an efficient state and bring prosperity to the country. A "yes" vote would allow a set of 18 constitutional reforms that grants the president the power to appoint government ministers and senior officials, appoint half of the members in the country's highest judicial body, declare states of emergency and issue decrees.

Critics argue that will allow Erdogan - who has been in power either as prime minister or president since 2003 - to rule at least until 2029 with few checks and balances in a system where the separation of powers will be less clear-cut. "The 18 articles foresee a very loose separation of powers," said Ahmet Kasim Han, an associate professor of international relations at Kadir Has University in Istanbul. That "unduly invests the weight of the decisions and the power of the executive on the president," he said. Polls suggest a neck-and-neck race for Sunday's vote.

"It's going to be a very close call and both 'yes' and 'no' are equally probable as outcomes," Han said. The referendum comes amid troubled times for Turkey, which has been plagued by a string of bombings, renewed violence between the government forces and Kurdish rebels and a failed coup attempt in July that resulted in a state of emergency that remains in place. The emergency powers have permitted a wide-

spread government crackdown that has targeted the followers of US-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen - whom Turkey blames for the coup and other government opponents.

Some 100,000 people - including judges and teachers - have been dismissed, and more than 40,000 people, including journalists and opposition pro-Kurdish legislators, have been arrested. Hundreds of news outlets and non-governmental organizations have been shut down. The country is also dealing with the war in neighboring Syria which led to an influx of some 3 million refugees. Turkey has sent troops into Syria to help opposition Syrian forces clear a border area from the threat posed by Islamic State militants.

Meanwhile, Turkey is drifting further apart from Europe, following Erdogan's recent outbursts slamming the governments in the Netherlands and Germany as "Nazis" over their restrictions on Turkish ministers' attempts to court Turkish expatriate votes. For Erdogan, 63, a presidential system has been a long-time dream. A prime minister for 11 years since 2003, he was elected president in 2014 for a five-year term and took a far more active role in politics than his predecessors, ruling behind the scenes despite the current constitution that requires him to be neutral. Erdogan argues that as Turkey's first president to be directly elected by the people - instead of the parliament - he has a wider mandate than previous presidents. If approved, the reforms would in effect legalize his de facto rule.

The amendments were approved by parliament in January, but fell short of the majority required to directly come into effect without a national vote. Erdogan remains popular in Turkey's conservative and religious heartlands, where he is seen as a strong leader who stands up against Europe, terror threats and coup-plotters. Many believe he has improved services and health care, and given a voice to pious Muslims who at times felt marginalized by more secular governments. —AP