

ERDOĞAN'S MONTHS OF LONG KNIVES ON THE WAY TO THE TURKISH CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM

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In the last months the Turkish regime has carried out a strategy of silencing the “No” referendum campaigners **axed on five targets (political opposition, Kurds, media, intellectuals and security agencies) to pave the way towards a strengthened authoritarian rule.**

The ranks are tightening few days ahead of the referendum on the proposed constitutional changes in Turkey, which will be held on Sunday April 16, 2017 and in which more than 55 million Turkish citizens and 2 million Turkish living abroad will be called to the polls to decide on the country's form of government. Thus, Turkish electorate is assisting to the last spurs of an electoral campaign characterized by an extremely unequal representation of the two opposing sides.

Put under pressure since last July's coup attempt, the regime of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan pushed to consolidate its leadership by passing this constitutional referendum. The stakes are very high for Erdoğan and his fellows, who have struggled in the last months to silence the “No” opposition without spraying blood on his hands. The chosen strategy is the one of silencing and hindering the opposition's electoral campaign and is focused on five pillars: the political opposition, the Kurds, and the non-aligned media, intellectuals and national security agencies. **The current events give a glimpse of what is likely to happen after the referendum if the “Yes” wins: the soft killing the liberal democracy and pluralism in the civil society.**

The competition for the votes is fought between two sides: on one side President Erdoğan's conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP), owning parliamentary majority and supported by the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and on the other side the “No” galaxy formed by nationalist dissidents of the MHP, the secular Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). **The Turkish Army, which traditionally stands to protect the country from any attempt to dismantle Atatürk's heritage, does not figure as a major opponent as it has been weakened by repeated purges since July's putsch.**

The first target is the Republican People's Party (CHP), maintaining that as constitutions are the product of compromise, the fact that such a critical referendum on constitution amendments should not be held during the state of emergency and

that the measures envisaged by the leadership will worsen the polarization in the country. Nevertheless, since CHP was the once predominant party and does not embody a major threat, the repression was not particularly harsh. The second target was the nationalist fringe of the MHP, gathered around Meral Akşener, a veteran of Turkish politics who affirmed that on Sunday “[the country will vote whether to continue the republic’s values or to hand over the fate of the republic to a single person](#)”, and around former MP Sinan Ogan. Throughout the campaign, Akşener and her aides had to struggle against electricity cut-offs and government-friendly bans while holding the electoral rallies, whereas Ogan was attacked on March 5, 2017 while he delivered a speech against the adoption of constitutional amendments at the University of Bahçeşehir.

Last but not least, the regime attacked to the Kurdish-rooted Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), backing a “No” vote as an extension of presidential powers would mean empowering President Erdoğan, who is perceived as an insurmountable obstacle for the constitution of a Kurdish state on the Turkish territory.

Since President Erdoğan he relies on the nationalist and conservative electorate, the AKP has long elected the Kurdish minority as the “enemy of the Turkish people” and is making the most of the military conflict in the area to use force and to jail Kurdish opponents.

In the report “[Turkey: Crackdown on Kurdish Opposition](#)” published on March 20, 2017 *Human Rights Watch* maintained that the Turkish authorities arrested 13 members of the pro-Kurdish opposition and removed the elected heads of 82 districts in the southeast of the country and that since July 2016, more than 5,000 pro-Kurdish party members have been arrested. The Kurds have been particularly weakened by the demise of Selahattin Demiraş, the charismatic critic of the presidential system and most powerful rival of Erdoğan, who is incarcerated since last November.

The repression of political opponents is mirrored in the restricted freedom of expression of the media, which are being pressured to follow the government line in two different ways. On one hand indeed, media are obliged to give up to their freedom of expression and are threatened or shut down. On the other hand, TV and media appearance throughout electoral campaign was clearly piloted in favour of the AKP and President Erdoğan.

According to the *Stockholm Center for Freedom*, since last July **191 Turkish journalists were imprisoned and 839 were charged of dissidence; moreover, 16 television channels, 23 radio stations, 45 newspapers, 15 magazines and 29 publishing houses were shut down.** The Turkish authorities stigmatised journalists as thieves, rapists and terrorist, and on March 27, 2017 they started a trial against 29 journalists accused of being Gülenists.

On the other hand, the governmental-friendly media outlets have granted the “Yes” faction a near-monopoly on referendum coverage – Erdoğan and AKP appeared on the news more than four-fold the full coverage dedicated to any other opposition only in March.

Furthermore, **the regime has prosecuted against prominent academic representatives and intellectuals expressing ideological differences with the current leadership.** Raw numbers tell that since July last year 370 lawyers have been arrested and 967 are being investigated. In addition to that, over 44,000 teachers, more than 7,000 scientists and over 4,000 judges and prosecutors were fired. This witch-hunt have made any constructive criticism of the establishment impossible and **will entail a huge cultural loss for Turkey in the long run**, as many intellectuals have decided to flee the country and bring their talents abroad, where countries like Germany are supplying them hospitality and active help.

To conclude, **the current leadership is getting rid of the “undesirables” exponents in the army and the security agencies: the last episode took place on March 23, 2017 when 44 employees of Aselsan, the largest electronics manufacturer for the Turkish Defence Ministry, were detained on charges of having links with Gülen.** It is also estimated that after the putsch **more than 10,000 soldiers were arrested in Turkey and that about 25,000 were fired.** These measures significantly weaken the agencies’ capacity of protecting the country from organized crime, such as drugs, weapons and human trafficking, and of operating efficient counter-terrorism actions against ISIS and other terrorist groups.

The most surprising element is that despite this structured operation of demonization of dissidents, Erdoğan and AKP are not certain about the result, and pollsters refuse to provide the public with a prediction of the votes because the result is too tight. Thus, the need of the establishment to secure the victory of the “Yes” in the referendum to strengthen the grip on power in case the economic crisis will trigger popular unrest raises doubts on the possibility that the regime will accomplish electoral frauds.

Although the “No” campaigners and the majority of the independent analysts believe that the votes will be counted fairly and doubt that the government would attempt a large-scale vote rigging, three elements should be carefully considered.

First of all, **even if the elections will be fair they are held in a situation of emergency and where the *de facto* elimination of freedom of speech do not allow the vote to be free and meaningful**, hence transforming Turkey in a one-day electoral democracy.

Secondly, **the security of this referendum is under threat in certain regions.** South-eastern Turkey indeed is shaken by a military conflict that will not allow a proper settlement of the constituencies and carrying out of the electoral procedures, which entail the risk that a plethora of anti-establishment votes of the Kurdish minority will be dispersed or not be taken into account.

And last but not least, **the result is so tight that if facing the alternative of the loss of power and internal crisis versus the opportunity of electoral frauds to secure the victory**, the government would most likely be inclined towards the latter option.

To conclude, we should remember that **life in Turkey does not end on the day of the referendum**, and in case of a “Yes” victory the Turkish civil society is likely

to tackle further restriction of rights and freedoms in what the German Minister of Finance Wolfgang Schäuble among others identified as a “project for the constitution of a dictatorship”.

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