

Turkey schedules April 16 referendum on constitutional changes

By Halil Celik
13 February 2017

After a constitutional amendment package vastly strengthening the president's powers was approved in the Turkish parliament and sent to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on February 2, Prime Minister Binali Yildirim announced on Friday the holding of a referendum on the amendment on April 16.

“Our president has approved the constitutional amendment so the date of the public vote has become clear. God willing, the referendum will be held on April 16,” he told reporters.

The 18-article amendment package, proposed by Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) and backed by the fascistic Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), was passed by Turkish parliament in January 21, with 339 votes in favor. The opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) opposed the amendment.

The amendment, if approved in the referendum, would hand almost all executive power over to the president. Abolishing the post of prime minister, it would also allow the president to issue decrees having the force of law, appoint vice presidents and cabinet members, dissolve parliament and call elections, and declare a state of emergency—during which the president could rule by decree without any restriction from other branches of government.

The proposed amendment would also give the president vast powers over the judiciary—altering the configuration of the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK), reducing its number of members from 22 to 13. Four members of the board will be appointed by the president, while the justice minister will be the chairperson and the undersecretary a permanent member. The seven remaining members would be elected by the parliament, where the president's party would likely have a majority.

It would also reduce the age of candidates to 18, and raise the number of lawmakers to 600, while stipulating simultaneous parliamentary and presidential elections for a five-year term, starting in November 2019.

The referendum on the constitutional changes will take place under the state of emergency first declared days after the failed July 2016 coup attempt. Since then, the Erdogan government has further escalated its crackdown on the opposition.

In the last wave of purges, on February 7, 4,464 public employees, including 330 academics, were fired over suspected links to the so-called Fethullahist Terrorist Organization (FETO) of preacher Fethullah Gulen, whom the government accuses of organizing the failed coup attempt, or to other illegal groups.

Since July 15, more than 100,000 civil servants have been dismissed and some 50,000 people arrested in the state institutions. More than 1,500 associations, 15 universities, at least 177 media outlets and several trade unions have been shut down for alleged ties to FETO.

Facing sharp conflicts with its imperialist allies in NATO over the war in Syria and escalating social anger and strike activity in the working class, the AKP aspires to build an authoritarian regime. Its drive to dictatorship is not rooted in the personal decisions of the Turkish president and his inner circles, but the escalating class conflict and international rivalries of world capitalism.

Both within the ruling elite and especially in the population in Turkey, there exists substantial opposition to the referendum, whose success is increasingly uncertain, amid rising political and social tensions.

Suspicious are already being raised that Erdogan and the AKP would try to exploit potential terrorist attacks in the run-up to the April 16 referendum as effectively

as they did after the elections of June 7, 2015. In that election, for the first time since its foundation in 2001, the AKP had lost its absolute majority in the Turkish parliament. In a snap election only five months later, however, it came to power alone—exploiting fear over escalating terror attacks and the bankruptcy of the bourgeois opposition.

On January 25, in an interview with the state-run Anadolu Agency, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmus said that it would be possible to “create an atmosphere of fear in Turkey by using terrorist organizations to block the ‘yes’ vote in the referendum... We are taking all kinds of measures against [them], and after an overwhelming ‘yes’ vote in the referendum, the voice of terror will be cut off.”

CHP chairperson Kemal Kilicdaroglu said this was “a very unfortunate confession,” as it “effectively means ‘we are feeding terror, we overlook terrorist organizations and people are getting slaughtered. But if you choose us and help bring about a presidential regime, a one-man regime, terrorism will stop.’”

The government and the MHP are responding by using rumors about a “terrorist threat” to threaten the opposition, by claiming that it is united through the HDP with the banned Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). The AKP and MHP increasingly denounce the HDP as the “legal extension” of the outlawed Kurdish separatist group—a claim designed to tar anyone voting against the presidential system as aiding or abetting terrorism.

Since the last general elections of November 2015, thousands of Kurdish politicians and activists, from both the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) and its sister party, the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), have been arrested.

The Turkish government effectively decapitated the HDP, lifting its deputies’ parliamentary immunity last May with the support of the CHP and MHP—while Turkish army and special police units razed scores of Kurdish-populated towns to the ground and forced tens of thousands of Kurds to flee. Since then, thousands of HDP functionaries, including 12 deputies and the party’s two co-chairs, have been arrested on charges of maintaining direct links with the PKK.

Erdogan has personally involved himself in the campaign for a “yes” vote in the referendum, slamming credit rating agencies Fitch and Standard & Poor’s

over their recent downgrading of Turkey’s credit rating. Speaking to the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey, on February 7, he said, “Have you seen the justifications that [the credit rating agencies] used for the downgrade? ‘The constitution vote in Turkey.’ It is none of your business whether or not the constitution vote is held. Who are you?”

The demagogic and aggressive character of the “yes” campaign launched by Erdogan’s AKP and its fascistic accomplice, the MHP, reflects the fear that anger over growing social inequality, poverty and oppression within the working masses would produce a “no” vote in the referendum.

Indeed, according to the latest polls, by Gezici Research Company earlier this month, some 58-59 percent of voters, including 35 percent of AKP supporters, will vote “no” to the amendment. Meanwhile, the MHP’s cooperation of its leadership with the AKP has already divided MHP voters into two camps, with some 68 percent supporting “no.”

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