

Turkey's Constitutional Referendum Divides Country, Opposition Cries Foul

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On Sunday, Turks voted on whether to replace its parliamentary system with a presidential one – affording Erdogan virtual dictatorial powers.

He can now rule by decree, short of circumventing existing laws. He can declare emergency rule, appoint two vice presidents, ministers and regime officials, as well as dissolve parliament if he wishes and call new elections.

He has more control over Turkey's courts. His power-grab prevailed on Sunday by a 51.3 – 48.7% margin. Reported turnout was 84%.

The referendum was held under state of emergency conditions, following last July's failed military coup – tens of thousands imprisoned in its aftermath, over 130,000 purged from regime, academic and other public positions.

Project on Middle East Democracy Turkey expert Howard Eissenstat said

“(j)udicial independence was already shockingly weak before the referendum. The new system makes that worse.”

Council of Europe German parliamentarian observer Andrej Hunko called campaigning in the run-up to Sunday's vote “completely unfair.”

Hundreds of observers were barred from monitoring the process. Many thousands of Kurds displaced by fighting had no address and couldn't vote, according to the Turkish Independent Election Monitoring Network.

Opposition members were intimidated, bullied, publicly beaten, several shot by unknown assailants.

Western governments reacted cautiously to Erdogan's victory, awaiting an OSCE assessment of Sunday's process.

EU rapporteur on Turkey Kati Piri minced no words, saying

“(t)his is a sad day for all democrats in Turkey.”

“It is clear that the country cannot join the EU with a constitution that doesn't respect the separation of powers and has no checks and balances.”

“If the package is implemented unchanged, this will have to lead to the formal suspension of the EU accession talks. Continuing to talk about Turkey’s integration into Europe under the current circumstances has become a farce.”

Washington withheld comment, pending the OSCE’s assessment. Turkish opposition figures reject announced referendum results, demanding a partial recount.

Main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu accused the Supreme Council of Elections of violating electoral law principles by accepting unofficially sealed voting papers, saying:

“We don’t find it right. We don’t accept this. The rules cannot be changed while a match is being played. But the (election watchdog) changed the rules after the polls were closed.”

Deputy CHP leader Erdal Aksunger said

“(s)ince this morning, there has been serious chaos all over Turkey.”

“The Supreme Board of Elections has declared that the board will deem ballots without official seals as valid” – a serious election law breach.

“This is a clear manipulation” before official results were announced. He claimed around “2.5 million problematic votes,” wants up to 60% of ballots recounted.

The pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) wants two-thirds of votes recounted.

Under hardline Erdogan rule, democracy was already absent before Sunday’s vote. Following the outcome, it’s entirely abandoned if the results hold.

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His new book as editor and contributor is titled “Flashpoint in Ukraine: How the US Drive for Hegemony Risks WW III.”

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