

POLITICS

Turkey haunted by ghosts of the past

Erdogan follows in the footsteps of country's sultans and strongmen



Sreeram Chaulia

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A narrow victory margin of only 2 percentage points in Turkey's referendum to approve sweeping constitutional changes has set the stage for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to anoint himself as a modern-day sultan with untrammelled authority. Following in the footsteps of the 16th century Ottoman ruler Suleyman the Magnificent, and the 20th century founder of the Turkish republic Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, Erdogan has attained virtually supreme dominance to shape his country's fate.

Sunday's referendum outcome is a landmark event in Turkey's steady march to illiberal democracy. Erdogan's populist juggernaut has won contest after contest at the ballot box, often in less than free and fair conditions, and amid allegations of fraud and intimidation. He has then used the resulting popular mandates to erode constraints and remove limits in exercising his power as a conservative strongman.

Erdogan's right-wing populist nationalism, social conservatism and personal charisma have hoisted him to a pinnacle of power that most leaders around the world could only envy. Gaining such influence in all aspects of a nation's life within a democratic system requires strategy and patient plotting over a long period. Erdogan's journey to sultan-like status took 14 years of persuasive rhetoric and social reengineering tactics after he first became prime minister in 2003.

For all his myriad flaws and policy errors, the Turkish president has an uncanny ability to read the aspirations of his social base. He has boosted the morale of downtrodden and devout Islamic Turks from the countryside and small towns. He has also built up an effective patronage network under the ruling Islamist AKP party, which is now converting Turkey into a "party state."

The referendum will switch Turkey's governing system from a parliamentary model to a presidential one and allow Erdogan to remain in office with few institutional barriers until 2029. If that happens, he will by then have ruled Turkey for 26 years, a remarkable achievement in a country once known for unstable governments and military coups.

For the slim majority of voters who voted "yes" to granting Erdogan enhanced powers, what really mattered was the president's clever mix of appeals to Turkish nationalism, Islamist sentiment and promises of stability and continuity. His campaign theme was that a more powerful presidency would deliver better governance and security, which resonated with his core base in the Islamic hinterland.

The "yes" campaign's promise to streamline the Turkish economy, which has been flat since 2012, through a single power center run by Erdogan and with fewer competing policymaking nodes, also appears to have struck a chord with some voters. Erdogan's supporters believe that divided government, with tensions between the offices of prime minister and president, had led to economic crises in earlier eras.

With the referendum done, Turkey will proceed to abolish the post of prime minister altogether, a "reform" and restructuring that has been painted by Erdogan's party as beneficial, giving clear and predictable signals to raise the confidence of the business community and foreign investors. The uncertainty since the July 2016 military coup attempt and Erdogan's subsequent indiscriminate crackdown had sunk the Turkish lira to new lows. Now, there is expectation of a currency bounce with Erdogan securely in post as the first and only "executive president" for the foreseeable future.

Social fractures

Yet nearly 49% of Turkish voters opposed the constitutional changes in the referendum. The "no" calls came mainly from liberal, secular and cosmopolitan urban areas, as seen in the electoral map of the referendum result. They reflect considerable anxiety about Erdogan's dictatorial tendencies. His drive for unlimited power and his ability now to control almost every public institution are ominous signs of more draconian measures to come in crushing dissent among the half of the population that has resisted him. The severe social fractures engendered by the polarizing Erdogan are not vanishing and could end up undermining any long-term economic recovery.

Turkey is coming to practise the crudest form of democracy, where the winner of a simple majority vote takes power and punishes those who do not submit to his will. Erdogan is famous for mocking Western liberal models and promoting the concept of "Turkish-style democracy," based on a political culture of authoritarianism, Islamic piety and patrimonial rule. His referendum campaign took defiantly anti-Western positions to argue that Turkey needed to find its own path based on its historic traditions and governance practices.

Erdogan's victory also raises the question of whether Islamists can truly advance democracy. The Turkish president once remarked that "democracy is like a train, you get off once you have reached your destination." The instrumental use of democratic institutions like the election process, the news media, the judiciary, the civil service and universities to reach a destination determined by religiously inspired visions has characterized Islamist movements such as Erdogan's AKP or the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

Liberal critics see in Islamist political movements opportunistic attitudes that initially promise to strengthen democracy but ultimately will destroy it. Indeed, in his first years as prime minister, Erdogan was acclaimed for the determination with which he tamed and depoliticized the military. The principle of civilian supremacy in all aspects of policymaking was unknown in Turkey until Erdogan's AKP came to power in 2003 and slowly began dismantling the military's privileged hold over the country's economy and politics. Last year's aborted coup against Erdogan and his resounding recovery are still fresh in people's minds and arguably contributed to his slim referendum victory.

No matter how brazenly Erdogan undermines civil liberties, many Turks recall far more fearful times under military juntas a few decades ago. Erdogan's promise that he would rewrite Turkey's constitution -- enacted in the 1980s by a military regime -- had strong resonance among the public.

The result is that while Islamists like Erdogan are notoriously illiberal, they portray themselves as democratic reformers who act as saviors against fundamentally absolutist powers such as the military. Their winning formula can be described as: "We may be harsh but we keep the nation safe from military tyranny or anarchy."

Some analysts predict that the post-referendum Erdogan will soften his combative approach in foreign affairs. The outlandish allegations of "Nazi practices" he leveled at Germany and the Netherlands during the referendum campaign, and his deep suspicion of the U.S. for harboring his bete noire, the Sufi cleric Fethullah Gulen, helped mobilize nationalist voters in Turkey.

A more benign leader?

Now that Erdogan no longer needs to rally the public around the flag and Turkish national pride at least until the next election, there are hopes that his international outlook will soften, particularly toward the European Union. Peace with Kurdish minorities in southern Turkey and initiatives aimed at resolving Syria's civil war are also being mentioned as positive dividends of Erdogan's referendum win.

But there is a deeply troubling implication if Western governments, which claim to loathe Erdogan's illiberal ways, now become more accommodative as he reaches the apex of power in Turkey. It suggests that Erdogan must feel he enjoys unbridled power at home before he can behave moderately abroad. Otherwise, argue some critics, he would continue to show aggressive intent in neighboring countries and display hostility toward the international community if he remained shackled by democratic norms at home.

In other words, every policy and value espoused by Erdogan is expedient, and can be overturned or revised depending on the stage of his political ascendance. That is how erstwhile Ottoman sultans and military strongmen governed. The ghosts of the past have not left Turkey.



Sreeram Chaulia is a professor and dean at the Jindal School of International Affairs in Sonapat, India. His latest book is "Modi Doctrine: The Foreign Policy of India's Prime Minister."