

Closed Session

Turkey's Political Landscape under the New Presidential System



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The TRT World Forum 2018, recognized as one of the most significant political events of the year, took place from October 3rd- 4th at the Swissotel in Istanbul gathering together over 600 esteemed guests and panelists. Consisting of 8 public sessions, 11 closed sessions and keynote speeches delivered by some of our most esteemed guests, this year's Forum succeeded in providing a platform for serious engagement with the most pressing challenges of our time. The themes of the sessions ranged from the future of the Middle East and the European Union to the growing trend of Islamophobia, refugees, Turkish foreign policy in an age of crisis, the crisis of new media and female leadership in a world of conflict. Uniting all of these themes was a focus on the fragmented state of today's world and a sincere desire to offer meaningful solutions.

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AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347

ULUS, BEŞİKTAŞ

İSTANBUL / TURKEY

TRT WORLD LONDON

PORTLAND HOUSE

4 GREAT PORTLAND STREET NO:4

LONDON / UNITED KINGDOM

TRT WORLD WASHINGTON D.C.

1819 L STREET NW SUITE 700 20036

WASHINGTON DC / UNITED STATES

www.trtworld.com

researchcentre.trtworld.com

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Background



On October 4, 2018 TRT World Research Centre held a roundtable meeting titled "Turkey's Political Landscape under the New Presidential System". This was part of a series of roundtable meetings in the two-day TRT World Forum 2018, which included eight public sessions and 11 closed sessions.

This roundtable meeting was held in English under the Chatham House Rule. It stipulates that 'when a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

The referendum of April 16th, 2017 marked a monumental transformation in Turkey's political system. People voted in favour of replacing Turkey's parliamentary system with an executive presidential democracy. According to those who framed this constitutional amendment,

the Turkish presidential system is not a carbon copy of other models but rather a distinct system that has taken Turkish political history, culture and values into account. The executive branch, which had hitherto been elected by and from the parliament, would now be elected directly by the electorate by popular vote. The first election for transitioning to the new presidential system was held on June 24th, 2018. In the course of the electoral process, new political alliances emerged on the parliamentary level, namely the Cumhur Alliance (AK Party and MHP) and Millet Alliance (CHP, IYI Party, DP and SP), signifying how the presidential system could fundamentally change the political arena in Turkey. The Turkish political landscape is open to potentially unexpected developments regarding the culture of alliances and their consolidation. The election resulted in a first-round victory for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and a parliamentary majority for the Cumhur Alliance. In light of these changes these changes, this session aimed to identify the potential fault lines and dynamics of the presidential system in Turkey.

Discussion themes of the session:

- The separation of the executive branch from the parliament regarding the governing process.
- The role of the parliament in the new political equation.
- The prospective adaptation of bureaucratic and decision-making processes to the presidential system.
- Discuss impacts of the new system on the rights and freedoms.

Turkey's Political Transformation

Until 1950, there was a one-party system in the country due to the obstacles on the path to democracy. After Turkey set out to integrate itself into the liberal world order, the Democrat Party came to power in 1950. With the partial aids of the Marshall Plan and Truman Doctrine, the government reinvigorated the economy and improved infrastructure, institutions and so on. However, the Democrat Party period has ended with the 1960 military coup which was the first coup in Turkey's political history.

The period between 1960 and 1980 was one of turmoil, and these two decades are known as years of political crisis in Turkey. The 1961 constitution aimed to create a new environment in the Turkish political system and society through majoritarian democracy and a very comprehensive version of fundamental rights and freedoms. However, it failed to live up to public expectations, which created a chaotic environment culminating in mass student protests in 1968. A military memorandum was issued in 1971 as a response to the unrest. From the 1970s to 1980, Turkey suffered from inconsistent coalition periods, violence on the street among partisans of different ideologies etc. The country was on the edge of new crisis and which ultimately led to another military coup in 1980.

The first speaker pointed out that the 1980 coup was seen as a turning point in Turkey's political system as the new president, Kenan Evren, was selected from the military. This was a result of the military's mistrust of civilian politicians, who they perceived as prone to corruption, populism and other ills, while the role of the soldiers was to protect the Republic. Following the 1982 referendum, the new constitution gave Evren additional powers to veto decisions and appoint ambassadors and university rectors among other expanded powers. Under normal circumstances in the parliamentary system, the president did not have the authority to make these appointments. Thus, it vested the powers of the Prime Minister in the President, creating a

struggle between the two offices which became a dilemma for governance in Turkey.

In Turkish political history, there have always been disagreements between the president and the parliamentary parties. The speaker pointed out the dispute between former President Ahmet Necdet Sezer and former Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit in 1999 when the president didn't agree with the policies of the government. That disagreement resulted in a major economic crisis in Turkish political history. The speaker emphasized that previous politicians such as Turgut Özal and Süleyman Demirel had supported the idea of shifting to the presidential system.

One of the important points that the speaker addressed was the implications of the tutelage system in Turkey which was very effective in the decision-making process. The tutelage system of the Republican single-party era was not removed after the switch to a multiparty system in 1950. The speaker pointed out that the tutelage system maintained the real wielders of power - regardless of the results of the electoral process. The group composed of the elites who controlled the state bureaucracy, especially the army and judiciary, and had direct influence on business and media, which gave them significant authority in impacting key political issues of the country. They cooperated against the elected officials of the government, which undermined civil politics in Turkey. The system has now been removed from Turkey's political scene, and the future of the state is determined by the people in free and fair elections.

After presenting a general picture of Turkish political transformation since the single-party era, he elaborated the form of a new presidential system. He then highlighted the changes and how they will affect the decision-making process, administration, cabinet, ministries, separation of powers and so on.

The New Presidential System

According to the speaker, the first advantage of the new presidential system is a clear separation of the executive branch from the legislative branch, enabling the parliament to focus primarily on legislative issues. The parliament also plays an important role in auditing the government (the executive branch) and the President's office. It also has the power to impeach the

President, provided it can secure a two-thirds majority in the parliament, and can launch investigations into the actions or policies of the President. The most important aspect is that the parliament has the freedom and autonomy to perform its main task of passing laws, as the government or the president's cabinet is no longer in a position to directly create or pass laws.

The speaker pointed out that the new presidential system bears similarities to the American system, in which the president has more power than the Congress in certain matters, while Congress maintains the upper hand in others. However, he underscored that it is not possible to apply the same system to Turkey since it is a unitary republican system, unlike the United States where the federal system gives the government greater room to manoeuvre.

After the speaker pointed out the new features of the parliament under the presidential system, he switched to new implementations for the president. As pointed out; the president can focus primarily on the executive branch and runs the political, economic, and social affairs of the country with his cabinet. He has the privilege of appointing anyone he wants to key positions, including ministers, deputy ministers, and other high ranking positions in the government. One of the most important advantages of the new system is that the appointment of ministers from outside removes the political pressure from the ministers. When ministers were also MPs at the same time, they were under pressure from their constituencies to deal with specific issues of their electoral base. This will no longer be the case. Ministers are no longer responsible for local political affairs but focus only on running national policies.

The second important advantage of the president appointing high ranking officials in the bureaucracy is that he can basically shape it to function in the most efficient manner. The ideal configuration of the bureaucracy remains an important problem in all different governing systems like parliamentary, presidential, semi-presidential and so on. The real problem is related to the implementation process after making a political decision, which requires an optimized bureaucracy. The president has the power to intervene and address inefficiency and wastage of time at any stage in the bureaucracy. This will help increase accountability in the bureaucracy, as well as encourage greater efficiency throughout each bureaucrat's tenure. Ministers cannot excuse inefficiency simply on the grounds that they are elected representatives – and thus will be compelled to perform their duties in a more consistent manner.

The speaker pointed out that the new system encourages cooperation between the president and the parliament. In case the President makes a major mistake, the Parliament retains the authority to impeach him if necessary. Another significant development is presidential accountability:

the president is elected directly by the people, and is responsible to fulfil his promises to them. If he makes a mistake or fails in his policies, he would risk losing in the next elections. In the old system, the president was answerable to the parliament, not to the people. An exception to this rule was the election of Abdullah Gul, which came out a political deadlock when the establishment tried to bring down AK Party government on ideologically motivated grounds by filing a case for the closure of the party in 2007. According to the speaker, Abdullah Gul's successful contestation of the presidency despite ideologically motivated allegations targeting him and his wife was a major turning point in Turkish politics.

The election of Recep Tayyip Erdogan by popular vote for a second term as president was a turning point in Turkish political history as well. Regarding the president's success in the ballot boxes, the speaker asserted that for some commentators it is difficult to understand why Erdogan manages to win in every election and referendum that he enters. In addition to being very successful, he was also able to change the system for many people. He emphasized that the new presidential system is at its beginning and its exact impacts will become clearer in the future.

The speaker talked about the possibility of the president making changes and revisions to the rules and regulations which impede the efficient functioning of the government. He cited the Turkish economy as an example where such a system makes it easier for the government to make the necessary changes in order to adapt to new circumstances. Previously, the administration used to have five ministries dealing with economic affairs. However, sometimes ministers' expertise was not in financing or treasury issues. This is remedied by unifying them into three ministries. Especially the formation of the Ministry of Finance and Treasury on orders of the president has played an important role in allocating greater manpower to the management of the budget and financial system.

Similarly, the new system allows the president to take an active role in managing the country's foreign policy. In addition to this, he can also address security issues immediately as the country's commander-in-chief. Thus, the President will work closely with the foreign ministry, intelligence agency and other institutions, all of which are extremely necessary in face of the internal and external threats Turkey currently faces.

Discussion Part

Question 1: Following the transition to the presidential system, many newspapers and media channels have criticized the increased concentration of power in President Erdogan's hands. What do you think about this?

The speaker stated he welcomed constructive criticism but some of those critics mistake President Erdogan's strong political personality for abuse of power. He said that even if he had continued as prime minister without any discussion about the presidential system, he would still be receiving this unfair criticism.

He pointed out that such criticisms fail to appreciate the key political processes Erdogan has facilitated in the past using his position. He was the first prime minister of Turkey to address the Kurdish problem, which was a huge risk for his own political career. The speaker stressed that no political leader, not even the determined and popular Turgut Ozal, was able to succeed in facilitating a peace process. Unfortunately, the later breakdown of that process has led to a loss of much political capital, in spite of the genuine efforts to solve the problem. If the Kurdish issue is resolved, it is undisputedly an achievement of President Erdogan and a clear indication of how he has integrated the demands of Kurdish people in the national will of Turkey.

The speaker spoke about the process that Prime Minister Erdogan allowed to move forward. At that time, the Chief of Intelligence Hakan Fidan was the main person dealing with the issue and coordinating the process. Many people in Turkey, especially state officials, had high hopes that these efforts will bear fruit. The speaker pointed out the damage Turkey has incurred in terms of economic and political instability, and how much money, human capital, and time could be better utilized instead of being spent on the fight against the PKK. The resolution of the PKK issue thus remains a key priority for the government; one which will be a huge achievement for any government, and necessitates an efficient executive branch at this point in time.

The speaker brought up two very damaging influences on the peace process. Firstly, after PKK's refusal to disarm on Ocalan's call, Hakan Fidan was almost arrested by Gulenist-FETO prosecutors for his involvement with the peace process. While the Gulenists seemingly

advocated pluralism and cultural rights for minorities, they deliberately thwarted the peace process. They tried to imprison Fidan claiming that his effort was a violation of constitution.

The second obstacle to the peace process was the Syrian civil war. While the Turkish government was trying to contain Gulenist prosecutors, the war in Syria took a different turn. On the issue of Raqqa, state officials held talks with US diplomats from the Obama administration including Susan Rice and Brett McGurk, and others who advocated US support of YPG-PYD. Turkish officials insisted that Turkey would fight against Daesh and YPG together with the United States, and there would be no need to rely on the YPG-PYD. In their stead, Turkey would provide support on the ground with the Turkish Armed Forces, Free Syrian Army, Turkomans and other Arab opposition forces to save Raqqa.

The speaker recounted the correspondence between President Obama and President Erdogan on Kobane. While Obama wished to deliver weapons to Kobane to help forces resisting Daesh, Erdogan insisted that Turkey was ready to help counter Daesh, and warned against cooperation with YPG-PYD because they are with PKK – a designated terrorist organization even by the US. Everybody knows that they are all PKK who getting orders from same Kandil Mountains. However, Obama stated that the delivery had already been made – he had called only to inform Erdogan. The willingness of the US to cooperate with an active terrorist threat to Turkey, a fellow NATO member and strategic partner, obviously soured relations and damaged the trust between the two. In spite of the risk of anti-state actors entering, Turkey did not compromise its humanitarian foreign policy and opened the doors for nearly 170,000 people from Kobane – preventing massive civilian casualties.

Ultimately, the US refused Turkey's offer of utilizing the Barzani Peshmerga, Turkmens, or even the FSA to fight against Daesh in Kobane, and instead favoured the YPG-PYD. On their part, the YPG-PYD simply wanted to get weapons and logistical support from the US. It was clear that the whole Kobane thing was a part of a bigger plan.

In that process, the American media coverage of the YPG-PYD was particularly shocking. Erdogan was

being accused of watching the massacre at the door, whereas YPG-PYD militants were portrayed as heroic fighters who were the main defence against Daesh. This romanticisation flew in the face of Turkish policy in the region, as well as downplayed Turkey's massive contribution and continued willingness to stabilize the region.

In the meantime, the PKK made itself a new home in northern Syria, in regions like Kobane, Jazira, Ayn Al Arab where they continue to train their militants. They occupied mostly Arab towns, such as Jarablus, where there are no Kurds. The speaker highlighted that while the PYD-YPG have razed villages to the ground and forcibly evicted people from their homes, Amnesty International published a report supporting the claims that PYD-YPG had committed war crime in these regions. The empowerment of the PYD-YPG in Syria has had a markedly adverse impact on the peace process with the PKK in Turkey.

The speaker spoke on the situation today and said that Turkey has to fight to maintain its internal stability. For all the false media narratives trying to argue otherwise, Erdogan used his power to advance the peace process and did everything to make it happen. However, it failed because they were undermined by foreign powers in northern Syria, and the continuing blockage from the PKK.

The speaker reiterated that most critiques of President Erdogan imply that his personal prerogative is too strong. The truth is that their issue with the presidential system is actually their issue with Erdogan himself. Erdogan's approach towards key issues was not any different when he was prime minister and he has put the interests of his country and its people first. It is his consequent challenge to current power relations on the national, regional, and global level which has angered those with different policy objectives, especially in the US. He stood in defense of the Palestinian issue, the Rohingya, the refugee crisis, and criticized the UN's exclusivity when he says 'the world is bigger than five'. These standpoints have upset many who want to perpetuate the existing status quo. On its part, Turkey has made many contributions to NATO. In comparison, countries like France and the UK maintain seats in the UNSC but have not done anything to address the aforementioned instances of well-documented persecution and injustice. Regional powers such as India, South Africa or Turkey are nevertheless barred

from taking a seat in UNSC. This is particularly upsetting for Turkey, as President Erdogan has done much to raise these issues in the name of justice.

One of the participants pointed out that Syria is no longer a player in the region, and has become a playground for all the global powers. After this comment, the moderator asked the participant if the Arab world needs a strong Turkey. As an answer to this question, the participant put an emphasis on the common interests among the countries. He replied by pointing out that even 30% of the water in the Arab world comes from Turkey. The real question is how we can convert a problem into an opportunity. Turkey is not interested in leading any region or group of countries, but rather in working together with them, despite attempts to paint an image of the president as an aspiring Ottoman sultan. Such claims are not verified by facts and the foreign policy.

The speaker talked about Turkey's stance towards other countries. Contrary to claims of neo-Ottoman ambition, Turkey shows its support to Palestinians because it believes in the Palestinian cause, not out of any material interest. Similarly, it has initiated investments worth billions of dollars in Somalia out of a desire to help its people in a time when they have been forgotten by other global powers, not to wave the Ottoman flag there. Similarly, Turkey wishes to maintain good relations with Balkan countries as a continuation of its strong historical and cultural ties with them. Ultimately, even if other countries in the region remain silent, Turkey cannot turn a blind eye to the suffering of the people of Bosnia, Palestine, Syria or other countries.

Turkey does not claim to be a leader, but it firmly believes these problems are affecting everyone. Every single day, Palestinians are violated, dishonoured, injured, and killed. The reason why President Erdogan has become a spokesman for this issue is because no one else is talking about Palestine in the way he does. When Trump declared Jerusalem as Israel's capital, there was no protest or resistance from Saudi Arabia. Where were the Arab voices? Can you see any important act or statement coming from them? They did not even come to the OIC extraordinary summit. Where are Saudi Arabia and Egypt, allegedly the most important players in the Arab world? This is not an Arab issue. It was only when we raised this issue that Arab nationalism kicked in and they all suddenly remembered they are Arabs, or that Al-Quds is very important. It's very frustrating. It was really thanks to tireless efforts of President Erdogan

in the extraordinary summit of OIC summit. If he had not called the attention of all parties, including the pope, to the Palestinian issue, we would not have seen the consequent solidarity with Palestine in the General Assembly of UN.

Question 2: Muslims can choose a different system like democracy or another. But do Muslims really need democracy?

The speaker pointed out that Turkey never claimed to be a perfect democracy. No nation in the world can claim to be a perfect democracy because it is always a work-in-progress. Turkey has its own internal problems, just as American democracy or French democracy have their own.

In the US system, interest group lobbies and elections' security are significant problems for American democracy. The gun lobby could in fact be more powerful than half of the Congress, and who finances American politics is one of the most pressing issues as well. Turkey's problem is that the country has gone through the stages of democratization, beginning with the switch to a multi-party system in 1950. Adnan Menderes became the first prime minister of the new system by defeating the Republican Party, which was previously the only party and hence the state itself. With the execution of Adnan Menderes in 1960, the military showed its might, and the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s were very difficult times for Turkey. Especially during 1970s, people were dying in the street every single day because of so-called "left and right wing" politics which made politics an impossible job. No one can explain how the violence and unrest of the 1970s ended in just one day, on the morning of September 12, 1980, following the military coup. What is clear is that the military needed chaos, violence and terrorism in the streets to claim to be the saviour of the nation.

He reminded the attendees that the AK Party is widely criticized because of its changing policies. In the first ten years of AK Party rule, under president Erdogan, Turkey had the opportunities for democratization and economic development to move forward. It also adopted a wider foreign policy, called 360-degree foreign politics, looking around the whole world rather than restricting itself only to the Western alliance. Simply by engaging in the Middle East, opening up to Africa, and seeking rapprochement with Russia, China and Latin America, Turkey was criticized for moving

away from the so-called Western axis. Nevertheless, Turkey has clearly told them that foreign policy is not a zero-sum game and one does not have to pick sides in a binary manner.

The speaker stated that Turkey retains an important position as a member of NATO but at the same time is willing to have good relations with Russia as a major player, trade partner and important neighbour. Turkey does not have to be at odds with Russia simply because it is a NATO member. Moreover, NATO has been trying to develop some kind of modus vivendi with Russia, and Turkey could potentially act as a mediator in this process. The speaker raised the topic of relations of Turkey with NATO by way of an example. In 2010 there was a NATO summit on the issue of what to do with Russia just before the Georgian War. In that summit, officials distributed a paper to all heads of states, including Abdullah Gul. However, Abdullah Gul refused to sign it before changing many points because the first version was anti-Russian. Gul nevertheless emphasized continued membership in NATO and underlined that pressure to sign the document without considering Turkey's perspective was not appropriate.

The speaker reminded the attendees that Turkey has undergone many difficulties in its history. The most dramatic experience was the 15 July coup attempt which traumatized the Turkish nation. Even in dealing with the aftermath, the state has kept the interests of the Turkish people in mind. For instance, the government has established a committee to go over the cases of those who have been fired or arrested in the aftermath of the post-coup measures. If they are cleared, they are allowed to go back to their original jobs, and many have been discharged in this manner. The speaker responded to criticisms claiming President Erdogan is using the post-coup environment for a crackdown on the opposition. He emphasized that the president does not need this, since he is a powerful political figure in his own right and has no need to go after the opposition. He added that the issue of journalists in Turkey is very complicated, as it is not easy to distinguish between journalists who do their job and others affiliated with terrorist and subversive groups.

The reason why Turkey is so cautious is because of the horrible episode of 15 July coup attempt. It is a known fact that one of the coup plotters' main goal was to reach the Marmaris hotel to kill President Erdogan, and to take over the state. But how did the West respond to this terrifying incident? Instead of standing with the Turkish

people and the government, many "allies" responded by saying just one thing to condemn the coup but nine things to criticize the government for how it took action against the coup plotters. When Turkey alerted the Americans that the person who planned the coup, Fetullah Gulen, was a resident in the US, the US did nothing. It's very hard to understand what kind of alliance this is. If a man like him was in Turkey planning a coup against American democracy, how do you imagine the Americans would have reacted?

Question 3: How do you see civil-military relations in Turkey under the new system of government?

The speaker stated that the country has made a lot of progress in resetting military-civil relations by putting the military under civilian control as a foundational element of democracy. Armed forces have been placed under defence minister in the new system, again something which was impossible under the old system. The military now takes its orders from the commander-in-chief and from the government. The whole culture around the military is changing dramatically. Militaries have no business in politics, as they are soldiers responsible for protecting the country, rather than being involved in politics. One of the key achievements of President Erdogan has also been the establishment of this new type of civil-military relation in Turkey.

Question 4: Is there any change in Turkey's position towards Egypt?

The speaker said that from the point of view of Turkey, there will be no major changes for the time being. The state can go to establish contact with Egyptian camp. But it is doing so slowly, and do not want to deal with the Sisi government under any circumstances.

Question 5: What are your thoughts on how well the new system has managed economic problems?

According to the speaker, the new system has made it easier for the government and the president to take key decisions quickly. The government has introduced new rules and regulations to spend the Turkish Lira, against currency pressure. However, they will see their effects in the next few months, not immediately. The country is aiming to attract foreign investment. Turkey has attracted a lot of positive attention from CEOs, especially in Germany. They are aware that the country has a very investment- friendly environment. Other states such as Qatar have made a huge contribution, helping and working with Turkey. Nevertheless, there are likely to be issues about financial movements from outside like what Trump said about the Lira, and we will see how well the new system handles these challenges.

Conclusion

The transition to the new presidential system following the vote on June 24th 2018, has ushered in a new era in the political history of Turkey. According to the framers of this constitutional amendment, the newly adopted Turkish presidential system is a tailored system that has taken Turkish political history, culture and values into account. The strengthening of the executive branch and its clear separation from the legislative branch of government allow both branches to function more independently and effectively. While some in the media have chosen to critique the change in system as merely some bid to

increase executive power at the expense of the country's welfare, our speaker pointed out the numerous political developments which have necessitated this transition. Furthermore, the presidential system has allowed greater flexibility and dynamism in light of the economic, security-related and political challenges which the country faces today. While the long-term ramifications of the new system remain to be seen, it is a welcome change and one which is helping ensure that Turkey adapts to the new economic and security-related challenges it faces.

