

Erdogan's election gamble

By [Megan Field](#)

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DEMOCRACY IS AN essentially contested concept, but ahead of a constitutional referendum in Turkey there is little doubt that the country's political system is under threat. The vote, which is scheduled for 16 April, would create what appears to be a presidential system akin to the US. However, to bestow such substantial power in the hands of one individual is only legitimate when accompanied by adequately rigorous checks and balances, alongside a free press willing to scrutinise contentious policy. For this reason, critics fear constitutional change would signal a move towards authoritarianism.

If successful, the draft constitution would abolish the position of the Prime Minister, replacing it with as many as three Vice President positions. The President would then become head of the executive, as well as the head of state, and retain ties to a political party. The governing AKP party are attempting to present the move as a vote for stability; arguably, the constitution enshrines a struggle for power between the President and the Prime Minister. On these grounds, the case is made that the change would fix this longstanding conflict, do away with the relic of the military constitution imposed in the early 1980s, and eradicate the instability of coalition government.

Of course, critics are far from content with accepting this justification at face value; Bülent Tezcan, an opposition MP with the Republican People's Party (CHP) voiced his concerns that: "The democratic regime in Turkey will be replaced with one-man rule". Indeed, the amendments would grant President Erdogan sweeping new powers to appoint both ministers and the majority of senior judges and enact certain laws by decree- alongside the ability to unilaterally announce a state of emergency and dismiss parliament. While there is an argument to be made that such measures would streamline decision making and avoid the cumbersome parliamentary coalitions which have crippled Turkey in the past, this begins to crumble when one examines the context in which these amendments would occur.

Referendums are controversial at the best of times, as was demonstrated via the political point scoring on both sides of the Brexit debate. However, in light of the attempted coup d'etat last July, we must consider the ever shrinking space for free speech in Turkey. Accordingly, the media saturation of the UK almost looks appealing. It is not surprising that Turkey is now 151 of 180 on the press freedom index of Watchdog Reporter Without Borders, given the fact that throughout its three month state of emergency the government has ordered the closure of 102 media outlets and issued arrest warrants for more than 100 journalists. Although there is not a ban on saying no to the campaign, this does not necessarily mean the opposition will be heard. All these events make for a sensitive time in Turkey to be pro-democracy and civil rights.

Until such issues are resolved, the referendum can be seen as nothing more than a democratic facade for an otherwise dictatorial power grab.



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