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Mounting political tensions in aftermath of Turkish referendum

By Halil Celik

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Sunday's constitutional referendum in Turkey, which saw the passage by a razor thin margin of amendments giving President Recep Tayyip Erdogan quasi-dictatorial powers, has intensified the political crisis within the country and further complicated Ankara's already tense relations with Europe.

Widespread voting irregularities have provoked protests in some Turkish cities as well as sharp criticism from the European Union.

On Sunday night and Monday, thousands of "No" voters took to the streets in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir and Samsun to protest the result, while pro-Erdogan crowds chanted the president's name and shouted "God is great!"

At a press conference Monday, Bulent Tezcan, deputy chairperson of the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), confirmed that his organization would lodge an appeal with the Turkish Constitutional Court and the European Court of Human Rights citing breaches of voting laws. "The only way to end ongoing discussions on the referendum's legitimacy is to annul it," he said.

Also on Monday, representatives of both the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe told a press conference in Ankara that the referendum did not conform to the standards set by the Council of Europe. The two vote monitoring organizations noted the widespread state pressure against the "No" campaign in advance of referendum day.

President Erdogan quickly rebuffed the OECD statement. "First, you should know your place!" he declared, adding, "We will not consider, see or recognize your political report. We will go our own way."

Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz said the result was a "clear signal against the European Union" and called for an end to the "fiction" of Turkey's bid to join the EU. Julia Klöckner, a member of German Prime Minister Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union, said the door to EU accession for Turkey was "well and truly shut."

Speaking to supporters at the Ankara airport, Erdogan responded to these critics by declaring, "The crusader mentality in the West and its servants at home have attacked us, but we have not grown weary or lost heart. We have stood tall as a nation because we bow only before our Lord in prayer."

During the referendum campaign, held under a state of emergency, Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) mobilized all of the resources of the government, including its financial resources and its power over the media, to promote the "Yes" campaign, while working to intimidate and disrupt the opposition. Over the course of the nine months since the state of emergency was imposed following the failed coup of July 2016, the AKP government has shuttered scores of opposition media outlets and jailed thousands of people, including 13 MPs of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and some 150 journalists for suspected "links to terrorist organizations."

Another issue increasing tensions between Ankara and the EU is the possible reinstatement of the death penalty, which would formally disqualify Turkey from becoming an EU member. In response to fascistic supporters who constantly demand the reinstatement of capital punishment, Erdogan said Monday that "if passed and sent by parliament," he would approve it. He also suggested that a referendum could be held on the issue.

This provoked a warning from the office of the French president that any referendum on restoring the death penalty would "obviously mark a break with the values" Turkey had accepted in joining the Council of Europe.

In a joint statement, German Chancellor Merkel and Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel said, "The German federal government respects the right of Turkish citizens to decide on their own constitutional order." The statement went on to call for political dialogue to address European concerns over the transition to a presidential system in Turkey. "The [German] federal government expects that the Turkish government will seek a respectful dialogue with all political and social actors after a tough referendum campaign," it added.

US President Donald Trump called Erdogan to congratulate him on the referendum victory. According to the pro-government *Daily Sabah*, Trump and Erdogan had a 45 minute-long “pleasant” call, during which they discussed the Syrian crisis and reiterated their “willingness to cooperate in the fight against the Islamic State.”

Reflecting a cooling of relations between Ankara and Moscow following Erdogan’s “full support” for the US missile attack on a Syrian air base last week, there has thus far been no congratulatory call from Russian President Vladimir Putin. According to the Russian news agency TASS, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in a news conference Monday that the Turkish referendum results were “Turkey’s sovereign business.” Peskov added, “We believe everyone should respect the Turkish people’s will.”

Later on Monday, addressing his supporters outside the presidential complex in Ankara, Erdogan accused European countries of campaigning for a “No” vote “harder than opposition parties in Turkey.” He added that the EU’s “threats of suspending membership talks don’t mean much to Turkey.”

In an interview with pan-Arab daily *Asharq al-Awsat* the previous day, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu had spoken of Turkish-EU relations passing through a difficult phase due to European positions in the run-up to referendum and the aftermath of the July 15 coup attempt. “Instead of receiving solidarity and support, Turkey has faced unfair criticism concerning measures it took in the aftermath of the aborted coup,” he said.

However, Cavusoglu reasserted that EU membership remained a priority for the Turkish government. “There is a loss of trust towards the EU in Turkey, stemming from the EU’s latest attitude,” he declared. “But we are still expecting positive concrete steps to overcome the confidence crisis.”

Along similar lines, Mehmet Simsek, deputy prime minister for economy, in an interview on a private TV channel emphasized that “necessary structural reforms” would be “strongly implemented in the medium-run.”

Another deputy prime minister, Nurettin Canikli, said that economic relations with the European Union would improve. He called the current acrimonious rhetoric between Turkey and the EU “temporary” and cautioned that it “should not be given too much attention.”

The statements of two ministers reflect the traditionally pro-European views of the dominant sections of the ruling class, which have called for “the restoration of national unity” in order to push through pro-market economic reforms. On Sunday, the Turkish Industry and Business Association declared in a written statement: “Now it is time to make progress by maintaining freedoms, pluralism and solidarity. We urge the government and the parliament to prioritize the reform agenda.” The organization also called on the government to seek closer relations with the EU on issues such as customs duties, media and Internet freedom, security cooperation on refugee policy, visa-free travel, a political solution in Cyprus and a resolution to the war in Syria.

Meanwhile, the National Security Council convened in Ankara Monday evening, presided over by Erdogan. It advised the government to extend the state of emergency for another three months.