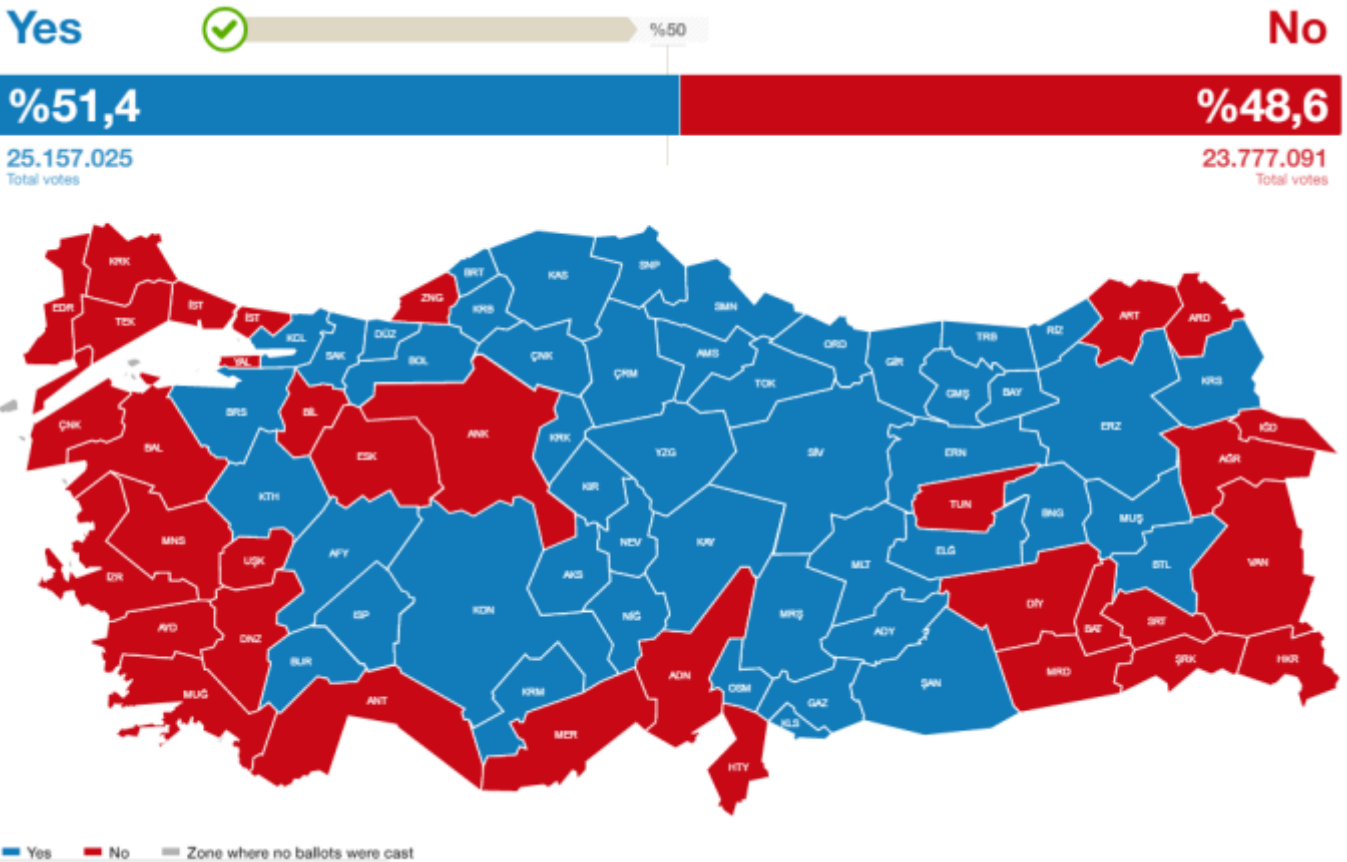


THE 2017 TURKISH CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM

On April 16, Turkey went to the polls to cast their decision regarding the new constitution. 49.7 million of Turkey's 58.3 million electorate voted in the referendum on the proposed constitutional amendments proposed by the ruling AK Party and supported by the pro-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The primary opposition – the People's Republican Party (CHP) and the pro-Kurdish HDP – campaigned against the proposed constitutional amendments.



According to unofficial results in advance of the Supreme Election Council's final announcement, the "Yes" votes, won the referendum with 51.4%, leaving the "No" vote with 48.6%. The outcome highlights two primary issues ahead for the ruling party to confront. First, although representing a slim majority of the vote, the results were disappointing for the AK Party and MPH as they collectively secured 61.4% of the votes in the November 1, 2015 elections, meaning that the parties lost a significant portion of their previous electoral support. Second, the geographic spread of the no votes suggests that Turkey's urbanized industrialized hubs – necessary for further economic development – do not support the new amendments. The Aegean and interior Anatolian regions voted against the amendments, while the interior supported them. Turkey's two largest cities, Istanbul and Ankara voted against the constitutional amendments even though the AK Party has held majority since first coming to power in 2002.



Source: Anadolu Agency-Yeni Safak

THE TURKISH DIASPORA

The referendum was open to the Turkish diaspora holding Turkish passports. This population, estimated at 1.5 million, represented an essential constituency in the referendum not only in size but also messaging. Referendum campaign extended beyond Turkey to countries including Germany and the Netherlands. The outcome in countries with high concentrations of Turkish voters favored the amendments. However, the Turkish population in the United States, United Kingdom and the Gulf excepting Saudi Arabia voted against the amendments.

THE PROPOSED AMENDMENTS

The referendum introduced one amendment with 18 articles to the Turkish constitution. Nine of them are of greatest significance (and controversy):

1. The prime ministry will be abolished.
2. The president will replace the prime minister as the executive.
3. An unspecified number of vice presidents could be assigned by the president. The president will appoint the ministers out of the parliament. Members of the parliament cannot serve as ministers.
4. The president will have the authority to issue statutory decrees; prepare the budget; announce state of emergency; and call for early presidential and parliamentary elections.
5. The amendment dictates that a call for elections automatically calls for both presidential and parliamentary elections at the same time.
6. The number of MPs will increase from 550 to 600, and the minimum age of political candidacy will decrease from 25 to 18.
7. The parliament will no longer be able to call for an inquiry against ministers but will be able to initiate an impeachment process against the president with a majority vote instead.
8. The president will be able to serve as the chairman of a party.
9. The president will be able appoint the majority of the judiciary directly or indirectly.

POST-REFERENDUM CHANGES

Although passing by a bare majority, the referendum's outcome is that the president will effectively become Turkey's primary political actor overseeing all government decisions. Those who favor the system established by the above-referenced articles argue that the new system will ensure political and economic stability for reasons including the elimination of potential coups. Opponents, however, contend that the new system will diminish the separation of powers including processes of checks and balances necessary to effectively control and harness presidential authority. Therefore, they argue that the new system will, at best, facilitate the centralization of power under a single authority or, at worst, foster a dictatorship. Such a system, they believe, will increase uncertainty and therefore instability in cases where the president's party does not receive a majority of seats in the parliament.

NEXT STEPS

The opposition parties – the CHP and HDP – have already contested the results based on a subset of the counted votes. The parties have stated that the Higher Election Council's (YSK) decision to validate votes in unsealed envelopes was "unlawful." The CHP formally applied to YSK to nullify the referendum results because the YSK was unable to identify the total number of votes associated with the unsealed envelopes. Experts suggest that such nullification is a remote possibility.

Popular response to the results included sporadic, peaceful protests in cities casting a majority of no votes, including Istanbul and Ankara.

In Sunday's victory speech, President Erdoğan stated that a majority of the amendment's articles most will enter into force with the presidential and general elections of 2019. In the meantime, the ruling AK Party is expected to initiate a process aligning all current legislation with the presidential system. To do so, the parliament will focus on restructuring ministries and other public institutions through laws, by-laws, regulations, decrees, and notifications.

In response to the disappointing bare majority, analysts expect the AK Party will review its current policies and overall national strategy. The government is also expected to focus on structural macro-economic reforms necessary to stimulate the economy and promote growth. A number of prominent pro-government figures claim that Turkey will even normalize its relations with Europe despite the nationalistic rhetoric dominating the referendum run-up. This normalization will be difficult given EU officials' negative response to Turkish campaign statements and tactics, including President Erdoğan's inclusion of his support of reinstating the death penalty in his victory speech.

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