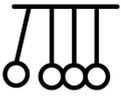


TURKEY'S UNHEARD VOICES

2017 ve 2018 Elections

POLITICS

ALİ KÜÇÜK



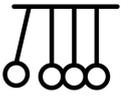
Content and Foreword

In this research, where we examine two major events that left a significant mark on Turkish politics, our subtopics include the 2017 Constitutional Amendment Referendum and the decision to hold Early Presidential Elections in June 2018, as well as the pressures faced by Muharrem İnce throughout this process. In this study, we will explore the details of these two events, their interconnections, and their societal impacts.

Politics in Turkey is a much more sensitive topic compared to other countries. It is a period where opposing sides cannot come to an agreement through dialogue—or even sit at the same table—where citizens try to defend unverified information they have heard from unreliable sources as if it were evidence, where the misconception that one's political preference can be identified just by their clothing has infected nearly everyone, and where the lack of a strong opposition has resulted in a powerful and nearly unshakable ruling bloc. In such times, even talking about politics poses a risk to keeping our criminal records clean.

The 2017 Constitutional Amendment Referendum

The Turkish Constitutional Amendment Referendum held on April 16, 2017, reached a record-high voter turnout of 85.5% and was enacted with a 51.43% "yes" vote in the public referendum. The changes involved amendments to eighteen articles of the existing Turkish Constitution, increasing the powers of the presidency while reducing the powers of the parliament. In this referendum, which largely resulted against the interests of most opposition parties, the CHP, HDP, and independents voted “no” in the parliamentary process. However, since the AK Party held the parliamentary majority, the vote count surpassed the 330-vote threshold, enabling the process to be brought to a mandatory referendum and, eventually, to a public vote. Nonetheless, it did not pass the 367-vote threshold required for direct parliamentary approval without a referendum. Although he had previously expressed opposition to a presidential system on several occasions, MHP Chairman Devlet Bahçeli called on the government in October 2016 to bring the amendment proposal to parliament and

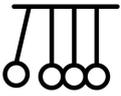


announced that they could cooperate during the process. Following the coup attempt on July 15, 2016, successive three-month states of emergency were declared throughout the country. After abandoning its 2009 “Kurdish Opening” initiative in the aftermath of the coup attempt, the AKP began to adopt a more nationalist political approach. As a result, the ties between the AKP and MHP were strengthened, contributing to the MHP’s support for the AKP during the 2017 referendum.

The proposed constitutional amendment aimed to abolish Turkey’s existing parliamentary system and replace it with a presidential system, remove the requirement for the president to be non-partisan, and eliminate the office of the prime minister. However, in May 2016, then-Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu resigned from his post after disagreements with President Erdoğan regarding the constitutional amendment that would abolish the prime ministry. He was replaced by Binali Yıldırım, who strongly advocated for the constitutional changes as a top priority. Subsequently, on December 12, 2019, the Future Party (*Gelecek Partisi*), an opposition party to the AKP, was founded under the leadership of Ahmet Davutoğlu. This party later became one of the members of the "Table of Six" alliance in the 2023 General Elections. The proposed constitutional amendment package also included an increase in the number of parliamentary deputies from 550 to 600. President Erdoğan emphasized that the constitutional change enacted on April 16, 2017, was far more comprehensive and meaningful than previous amendments, presenting it as the first time in the history of the Republic that a change in the system of governance had been made through civilian political means. Additionally, he expressed gratitude to citizens in the eastern and southeastern regions of Anatolia, citing a 10% to 20% increase in support in those areas. Erdoğan thanked not only these regions but all of Turkey for their votes, framing it as a choice made in the name of the nation's unity, solidarity, and brotherhood.

Among the notable article amendments are the following:

- **Article 101:** It was stated that individuals running for president could be nominated either by political parties that received at least 5% of the vote in the most recent elections—either alone or in alliance with other parties—or by 100,000 voters. It was decided that a president elected under this system would no longer be required to sever ties with the political party from which they were elected.
- **Article 104:** The president was declared the head of both state and government, and the position of prime minister was abolished. The president was granted the authority

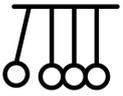


to appoint and dismiss vice presidents and ministers. Additionally, the president was given the power to submit constitutional amendment laws to a referendum if deemed necessary, and to issue “presidential decrees” on matters related to executive authority. The requirement for the president to have a four-year university degree was changed to a broader requirement of having completed “higher education.”

2018 Presidential Elections and Muharrem İnce

The 2018 Presidential Election, initially scheduled for November 3, 2019, was held earlier than planned in order to implement the constitutional changes introduced by the 2017 constitutional amendment referendum. The decision to move the election date forward was made after Devlet Bahçeli expressed the necessity of holding early elections and President Erdoğan responded positively on April 18, 2018. As a result, the 2018 Presidential Election was held on the same day as the general elections to determine the members of parliament. Following the AKP's abandonment of the Kurdish peace process and its adoption of a more nationalist political stance, ties between the AKP and MHP grew stronger. Consequently, in February 2018, the People's Alliance (Cumhur İttifakı) was formed, consisting of both parties. After gaining increased power as a result of the 2017 referendum, Erdoğan, now backed by Devlet Bahçeli, reached the peak of his political strength. This period is often considered the height of Erdoğan's power. Shortly after the formation of the People's Alliance, the Nation Alliance (Millet İttifakı) was established on May 5, 2018, consisting of the Republican People's Party (CHP), the Good Party (İYİ Party), the Felicity Party (Saadet Party), and the Democrat Party (Demokrat Parti).

Among the presidential candidates in the 2018 elections was also the imprisoned Selahattin Demirtaş. Former Secretary General of the Ministry of National Defense, Ümit Yalın, demanded the cancellation of Demirtaş's candidacy, citing photos of him taken with HDP member Pervin Buldan and members of the PKK terrorist organization on Mount Qandil. However, the Supreme Electoral Council (YSK) rejected this request and approved Demirtaş's candidacy. Demirtaş, the former co-chair of the HDP, participated in the election from behind bars and managed to receive nearly 4 million votes, securing 9.76% of the total vote. He became Turkey's first and only imprisoned presidential candidate. The Republican



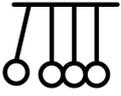
People's Party (CHP) nominated Muharrem İnce as its candidate. CHP announced İnce's candidacy only 51 days before the election, requiring him to quickly gather support and complete his campaign rallies in a very short time. Due to the late nomination, İnce held two rallies a day and experienced a highly intense campaign period. Despite the time constraints, İnce managed to draw record levels of public attention in a short span. One key reason for this was that after being nominated, he removed his party badge and continued his presidential



campaign with the aim of becoming “the people's president.” In one of his speeches, İnce called on both his party members and citizens to support other candidates (Meral Akşener, Temel Karamollaoğlu, Doğu Perinçek) by giving them signatures so they could officially run for office, as each needed at least 100,000 signatures to qualify. He commented on this gesture by saying, “this is what democracy looks like.” Another major factor behind İnce's popularity was the campaign promises he made. These promises included:

- He would resign from CHP membership and remain impartial, under the motto “President of everyone.”
- Turkey would return to a parliamentary system. The State of Emergency would be lifted.
- He would reside at the Çankaya Mansion instead of the Presidential Palace (Beştepe), and the palace would be allocated for student use.
- Youth would receive 500 TL on both May 19 (Commemoration of Atatürk, Youth and Sports Day) and October 29 (Republic Day) each year. (At the exchange rate in June 2018 — 1 USD = 4.7 TL — 500 TL equaled approximately 106 USD. As of March 2025, 106 USD is roughly equivalent to 4,000 TL.)
- The law criminalizing insults against the president would be abolished.
- Inflation would be reduced to 5%, and interest rates to 7%.
- Every family would have a home, and every home would have at least one salary.





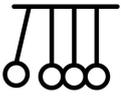
These promises were particularly the kind of reforms desired by the youth, and they contributed significantly to Muharrem İnce gaining a large following.

However, from the moment his candidacy was announced, Muharrem İnce began to face sabotage from within his own party. Despite working tirelessly with an intense campaign schedule, presenting promises that served the interests of Turkish society, and being an honest presidential candidate, the propaganda and conspiracies against him did not stop. For example, in



Ankara, fake Republican People's Party (CHP) campaign brochures bearing the anti-Islamist slogan "We will end the headscarf when we come (gelİNCE)" were distributed to the public. To this day, it remains unknown who was behind the distribution of these brochures. The Republican People's Party, which İnce had been a part of since 1992, was effectively betraying him. The CHP decided to run its own campaign separately from İnce's, even though he was their official presidential candidate. An animation video that was supposed to be prepared for İnce was instead prepared for the CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. On top of this, while İnce was holding a rally in Zonguldak, fourteen MPs who supported him were excluded from the candidate lists without any explanation. Furthermore, Muharrem İnce was not invited to the post-election evaluation meeting that took place 56 days after the election, even though he had been the presidential candidate. In the face of all this betrayal, İnce stated on a news program that he had considered resigning many times, but chose not to in order to keep hope alive for the opposition, and instead decided to remain patient.

Şaban Sevinç, who was the general manager of Halk TV during the election period, appeared on CNN Türk and claimed that "mobbing" was applied against Muharrem İnce within the CHP leadership. Sevinç stated that a CHP Deputy Chairman questioned Halk TV, which was broadcasting İnce's 2-3 rallies a day at the time, by asking: "Why are you broadcasting him so much? Are you trying to make him a problem for us?" Sevinç also emphasized that he had to visit former CHP leader Deniz Baykal in the hospital multiple times during this period. The accusations against İnce did not cease. On election night,



questions quickly surfaced regarding where İnce was and whether he had consumed alcohol. Tanju Özcan, the mayor of Bolu, who was with İnce the entire night, responded to these questions as follows: “He was at a hotel in Ankara, on a private floor with his family and others. He was constantly drinking tea, and he did not drink alcohol.”

In conclusion, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won the election with 52.59% of the vote. Muharrem İnce came in second with over 30% of the vote. Erdoğan's position during one of his strongest periods, along with Muharrem İnce being betrayed by his own party, were major factors contributing to this outcome. In 2021, Muharrem İnce left the CHP and founded the Memleket Party.

Conclusion

The 2017 Turkish Constitutional Amendment Referendum and the subsequent 2018 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections deeply affected Turkey's political and social structure. The presidential system, approved by the referendum, came into practical effect with the 2018 elections, transferring executive authority entirely to the president. While this change encouraged faster decision-making in governance, it also drew criticism for weakening checks and balances mechanisms. During the election process, debates arose regarding media control, freedom of expression, and fair competition conditions. The election results further deepened social polarization and increased political division among voters. At the same time, the impact of the new system on economic management and international relations sparked discussions related to Turkey's democratization process.