

Row with Dutch could boost Erdogan's referendum campaign

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Turkey's row with the Netherlands over its blocking of Turkish referendum rallies has stirred up anti-European sentiment that could boost President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's chances of winning an April 16th vote to change the constitution and grant the presidency extensive executive powers.

Riot police clashed with Turkish protesters outside the country's consulate in the Dutch city of Rotterdam on March 11th after Turkish Family Affairs Minister Fatma Betül Sayan Kaya was barred from entering the building and escorted back to Germany.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu had been due to address a rally of expat voters in the city but his plane was turned back by Dutch authorities, who said they feared the meeting would inflame feelings ahead of their own general election on March 15th.

■ Polls indicate Erdogan is revered by half the population and loathed by the rest.

Erdogan told an election rally in Turkey the Dutch leaders were "Nazi remnants, they are fascists... I thought Nazism was over but I was wrong. In fact, Nazism is alive in the West."

Addressing a later rally shown live on television, Erdogan ramped up the rhetoric against the Netherlands, invoking the 1995 Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia-Herzegovina in which Serbian forces killed thousands of Bosnians who had sought refuge with a small contingent of Dutch peacekeepers.

The Dutch, Erdogan said, "have nothing to do with civilisation,

nothing to do with the modern world. These are the people who murdered around 8,000 Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica. We know their character. Sadly, they have not been able to become civilised. They haven't become modern. They have not taken their place in humanity."

Emotions in Turkey are running high. Erdogan supporters tweeted the number for Rotterdam police and urged Turks to call and play the Quran, the call to prayer or an Erdogan campaign song to show their rage. Thousands of Turks obliged and dialled the number provided but police in the small town of Rotterdam, New York, in the United States were left wondering why they were being inundated by the calls.

Meanwhile, a group of farmers in western Turkey said they were deporting 40 Dutch dairy cows to the Netherlands and an Istanbul city councillor said he would slit the throat of his cow. Protesters in the Turkish Black Sea city of Samsun burned a French flag, apparently mistaking it for a Dutch one.

Whatever the geographical confusion of some government supporters, there is a rich vein of resentment towards a European family of nations that has spurned Turkey's albeit faint-hearted attempts to join for generations.

Turkey became an associate member of the European Economic Community in 1963 but it took until 1999 for the country to become a candidate for full membership and until 2005 for entry negotiations to start. Since then, out of 35 benchmarks necessary to join the European Union, Turkey has completed just one.

After 14 years in power, polls indicate Erdogan is revered by half the population and loathed by the rest. The conservative Islamist president is seeking a "yes" vote in the referendum that asks the electorate to approve a new constitution giving the presidency sweeping powers, abolishing the office of prime minister and reducing the oversight of parliament.



Help from unlikely places. People walk past a poster of Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım reading "Yes" in Istanbul, on March 15th.

(AFP)

Erdogan argues Turkey needs a strong presidency to tackle the multiple threats from the Islamic State (ISIS) in neighbouring Iraq and Syria, Kurdish separatists at home, regional instability and erstwhile allies he blames for last year's failed coup.

The president and his supporters have repeatedly sought to paint those campaigning for a "no" vote as being in league with terrorists and Turkey's enemies.

In a country where scores of newspapers and media outlets have been shut down and 153 journalists, 13 members of parliament and 80 mayors jailed, the opposition has struggled to organise rallies or gain air time while "no" campaigners have been attacked in the streets.

Even so, polls have remained stubbornly close with the "no" sup-

port slightly ahead in most.

Overall unemployment stood at 12.7% in December and youth unemployment was 24%, Turkish Statistics Institute figures released on March 15th stated. Economic growth is sluggish. The lira fell 17% against the US dollar in 2016 and a further 7% this year.

Lest anyone fail to take the threat of ISIS, Kurdish rebels and coup plotters sufficiently seriously, the spectre of a hostile, Islamophobic Europe could help bring doubters around to the president's view of an embattled Turkey encircled by hostile powers.

Stoking nationalist feeling should also shore up the "yes" vote among supporters of a far-right party that was split by the decision to hold a referendum. The far-right usually gets about 10% of the vote in na-

tional elections.

It also serves to discredit pro-Western secularists, derided as "white Turks", who dominated political power for decades until Erdogan became prime minister in 2003. He has been president since August 2014.

Beyond the fracas, Turkey and the Netherlands enjoy strong trade ties – worth \$6.5 billion in 2016. That should mean the current row will likely blow over once the referendum is out of the way, if not before.

"Let's not always be angry at Germany and the Netherlands. Maybe we should thank them just a bit. They have contributed to the 'yes' vote by at least two percentage points," the Hurriyet newspaper quoted government parliamentarian Huseyin Kocabiyyik as saying.

Turkey's relations with Europe sink

Viewpoint



Francis Ghilès

The Netherlands has followed Germany in banning rallies for Turkey's referendum on a new constitution. Turkish ministers,

notably Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, were effectively barred from addressing a meeting in the Dutch city of Rotterdam, ironically at the behest of the mayor who is a Muslim of Moroccan origin.

The Turkish government fears it might lose what has turned into a tight race on whether to introduce a presidential system of government.

"The sun rises in the east – no good will come from the West," Yıldırım said. That suggests Turkey is no longer interested in joining the European Union.

The crisis reverberated across Europe as Danish Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen cancelled a meeting with his Turkish counterpart. Political rallies in the run-up to the Turkish referendum on April 16th have been cancelled in Austria, Switzerland and Sweden. Only France broke ranks with its European partners, allowing Yıldırım to have a meeting in Strasbourg. However, far-right presidential candidate Marine Le Pen quickly condemned Turkey.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reacted, as he is wont to

do, by insulting his peers in Europe, accusing the Germans and the Dutch of behaving like Nazis. He called the Netherlands a "banana republic" and said it "would pay for the price of its actions".

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte described the comments as "completely unacceptable". He took a tough stance on immigration in the run-up to elections March 6th to fend off a charge from Dutch anti-Islam candidate Geert Wilders, who called for Turks loyal to Erdogan to be expelled from the Netherlands.

Accusing the Dutch and German governments of anti-democratic practices sits uncomfortably with a man who is increasingly turning away from democratic principles and intent on establishing in Turkey an Islamic-minded autocracy. Is it not hypocritical for Erdogan to demand greater freedom for his surrogates overseas while restricting the same freedoms for his opponents in Turkey?

He is repeating the tactics he used in the 2015 elections in which he identified enemies of the country – then the Kurds, now Europe – and asked voters to vote "yes", to create a strong executive so it can deal with these enemies of the country.

If successful, next month's referendum will give Erdogan increased powers over parliament, the judiciary and the civil bureaucracy. The offices of head of government and state will be merged and the president could stay in power until 2029. Erdogan

is increasingly compared to Sultan Abdulhamid II, a pious, paranoid and absolutist ruler who was overthrown in a coup in 1909.

The Dutch government had understandable fears that the presence of Turkish ministers would provoke public unrest, especially in the days before polling as the campaign for the general elections has been dominated by the themes of immigration and integration.

German authorities can only take note of the increased hostility among Turks in Germany. Threats against shops that belong to Turks who refuse to back Erdogan are common as are those proffered in mosques. Turkey's liberal, Kurdish and Alevi minorities are suffering under the hardening rule of Erdogan and the German and Dutch authorities have no desire to see domestic Turkish feuds imported into their respective countries.

Nearly 1.5 million Turks in Germany are eligible to vote in the April 16th referendum on Erdogan's constitutional reforms as are many Turks in the Netherlands. The two expat communities are vital blocs in a tight campaign.

The historic entangling of internal politics and foreign affairs is, however, nothing new. It is simply taking on unforeseen dimensions. For centuries, Turkey was locked in a wider international order, first as an empire with vast land holdings in Europe and then as an ally of the West in the Cold War, later as a contender for EU membership.

Erdogan is increasingly compared to Sultan Abdulhamid II.

The effective shelving of Turkey's bid for membership of the European Union by French president Nicolas Sarkozy was endorsed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Turkey remains a candidate country but with no realistic chance of joining, which explains why Western Europe has lost much of its leverage on Turkey.

Relations between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart recovered from a low last summer after the Russian leader offered Erdogan immediate and unequivocal support after an attempted coup by the followers of self-exiled Turkish preacher Fethullah Gulen. The West was left scrambling for a response. Although it remains a member of NATO, Turkey is at odds with the West and Erdogan loves to manufacture crises, which play well to a very nationalistic electorate.

Just more than a century ago, the Ottoman empire had its first experience with constitutional democracy just as its very existence was threatened by the European powers, stripping it of its territories from Algeria after 1830 to Egypt in the 1880s and its internal balance by Western-style liberals, turbaned reactionaries and minorities, notably the Greeks and the Armenians who militated for rights and autonomy – with European support. *Plus ça change...*

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