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Turkey at the threshold of a regime change

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Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Parti) and Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), declared in a joint press conference on Dec. 1 that they had agreed on the draft of a constitutional change to shift Turkey's parliamentary system to an executive presidential one.

That has been the prime political target of President Tayyip Erdoğan since 2007 when the country went into a political crisis over the election of former President Abdullah Gül. Erdoğan thinks that in order to take and implement decisions quickly without being “slowed down” by the parliament or the judiciary, concentrating all the executive power in the president's hands is the best solution for the problems of the country.

The current constitution suggests the division of executive power between the cabinet and the president, who has immunity before the courts for his actions during office apart from treason. In the system suggested by the AK Parti and MHP, there would be no place for a prime minister; it is the president who would chair the cabinet, with one or two deputy presidents. It is not clear yet whether the president with more executive powers will be accountable to the courts. The AK Parti proposal had suggested that the president should have the power to abolish the parliament

to take the country to an early election, despite the MHP counter-proposal to give a similar power to the parliament to take down the president, but that detail was not shared with the press in yesterday's press conference. And the necessity in the current constitution to stipulate that the president resign from his (or her) party (if there is one) as soon as he (or she) is elected will be lifted if the draft is approved by the parliament. A few months after the bloody coup attempt of July 15, the country is at the threshold of an administrative regime change from a parliamentary to an executive presidential one.

Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of the social democratic main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), has been against such a shift saying that under the circumstances, it could drag the country into one-man-rule.

Bahçeli's response to such criticisms is that Erdoğan has been ruling the country in a de facto presidential system anyway and that it was time to make it legal in order to have political stability. The MHP also supports the shift – the sooner the better – with the justification of improving the struggle against terrorism.

It is not the name of the regime, whether parliamentary or presidential, which determines the nature and quality of democracy in a country; it is the litmus test of the separation of powers, checks and balances, as well as criteria like judicial independence and media freedom. If not, a parliamentary regime could turn into a dictatorship while a presidential system could be an example of an advanced democracy.

Turkey has been facing difficult tests one after other in the last few years, and this is likely to be the mother of all tests.