Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has spent the past few years laying the groundwork for authoritarian rule shaded by Islamism. With tomorrow's referendum, he seeks to ratify his gains and sweep away the remnants of Turkey's once-liberal democracy.

Those are the stakes in the referendum, in which voters will decide whether to transform the country's parliamentary model into a strong executive system with Erdogan at the top.

Polls show a slight advantage for “Yes”, though opinion polling should be taken with a grain of salt amid the paranoia and repression that prevail in Turkey.

Under the proposed changes, Erdogan would be allowed to lead Turkey until 2029. His powers would expand to include declaring emergencies, issuing decrees, and appointing ministers and senior civil servants. The changes would permit Erdogan to check the judicial branch in some instances and simultaneously to head a political party while in office, something the constitution denies him today.

This presidential system would be the culmination of an authoritarian drive Erdogan launched a decade ago, when the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) purged a secular establishment that was the main bulwark against Islamism. The AKP has since tightened controls over the internet, brutally suppressed a youth uprising in 2013 and won Turkey the dubious honour of being the world's foremost jailer of journalists.

Then came last year's attempted coup, for which Erdogan blames his erstwhile ally Fethullah Gulen, a US-based imam who leads a rival Islamist network. Since the coup, the government has detained, fired or otherwise punished more than 140,000 Turks. In parallel to his domestic repression, Erdogan has intensified his anti-Western rhetoric.
Ankara has accused the Dutch and German governments of “Nazi” practices after they denied permission to pro-Erdogan rallies.

All of this has transpired under Turkey’s current parliamentary system, in which opposition parties can still vie for seats and check at least some of Erdogan’s excesses. If the AKP had more seats, Erdogan could have pushed through the constitutional change without having to bother with a referendum.

If he gets his wish for a stronger executive, the opposition would be further marginalised. This suggests Turkish democracy’s future could be grim no matter the outcome, and the choice facing voters is between shades of black.

If Erdogan loses, he will continue to strengthen the repressive apparatus and whip up nationalism with his gratuitous war on Turkey’s Kurdish minority. But if he wins, the possibility of democratically removing the AKP from power will be even narrower.

The danger for the Middle East, and for Turkey’s NATO allies, is the country could evolve into an Islamist state in the mould of Iran — albeit Sunni, not Shia. Erdogan beguiled many in his early years as an Islamist leader who claimed to respect democratic norms, but the sad irony is his drive for authoritarian power will lead many in the West to the unfortunate conclusion that Islam and democracy are incompatible.

*The Wall Street Journal*