Reshaping the secular Turkish state can begin in earnest

It hardly qualifies as a resounding mandate, but his 2.6 percentage point victory margin is all Recep Tayyip Erdogan needs to start building the “New Turkey”.

It will, his supporters say, be a country in which the will of the people is reflected through the decisions of the president they have elected — never mind that almost half of Turks do not support him.

Over the next six months a flurry of legislation will lay the foundations for the transition from a parliamentary to presidential system. The change will be fully implemented in 2019, after presidential and parliamentary elections.

In theory, that means Erdogan and his AK Party might yet be ousted at the ballot box before they get the chance to enjoy Sunday’s victory. Other changes, however, are likely to be set in motion much sooner.

Erdogan has promised a rethink, and possibly a referendum, on whether to continue Turkey’s negotiations for EU membership. With anti-Europe feeling stoked furiously during the campaign, and relations with western allies at an all-time low, Turkey is likely to turn its face ever farther from the West it once aspired to be part of.

The President has also signalled that he will direct the parliament — in which a simple majority of seats are held by his party — to draft a bill to reintroduce the death penalty. It is a topic he has brought up repeatedly since last July’s attempted coup, and one that could seriously undermine Turkey’s relations with its NATO allies. Most significantly, this hair’s-breadth victory, 94 years after Kemal Ataturk founded the secular Turkish republic, symbolises a turning point in the country’s history. A president who is openly pious and committed to empowering those who think like him is poised to reshape the nation.
His faithful are overjoyed. For the rest, the options for holding him back are scant.

With the referendum result so close, and being called into question, Turkey faces an uncertain few weeks. Taksim Square in Istanbul, long a gathering place for demonstrators, was shut to traffic on Sunday. Should a re-count be ordered there are likely to be violent protests. Erdogan's political opponents have two years to get their houses in order if they are to present a serious challenge in 2019.

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