Turkey’s critical turning point

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan should heed the lesson of his narrow win in the country’s constitutional referendum. He did not achieve the sweeping victory he wanted when he embarked on his campaign to give himself vastly increased, almost dictatorial, powers and the right potentially to stay in power until 2029.

Only weeks ago, with the media skewed in favour of the yes vote and the state working overtime to influence voters to support the changes, Erdogan aides talked of winning by 60 per cent or more. Instead, amid widespread charges of electoral fraud from the opposition, Mr Erdogan eked out a threadbare 51.2 per cent to 48.8 per cent win. He made a muted victory speech indoors rather than one of his triumphant addresses outdoors from a balcony. But in a foretaste of what he appears to have in mind for the future, he called for “an end to unnecessary discussions”. The result could prove a Pyrrhic victory, however, if he fails to understand why areas where residents have benefited most from his economic reforms voted no. These included Istanbul, where he was once a popular mayor, and Ankara, the capital. As he mulls over the outcome from inside his 1000-room palace, Mr Erdogan should resolve not to use his vastly enhanced powers to destroy the liberal and secular modern Turkish state founded by Kemal Ataturk in 1923.

Mr Erdogan legitimately can claim to have achieved much, especially for the economy, since becoming prime minister in 2003. But his increasing authoritarianism towards critics, as well his preoccupation with imposing hardline Islamism (especially in dress codes for women), has put Turkey violently at odds with itself. This has been most evident in his ruthless action against the Kurdish minority.

In its own interests, and as a vital Western ally in the turmoil of the Middle East, Turkey desperately needs stability. But last year’s crackdown — in which 134,000 people lost their jobs, tens of thousands of people were detained and 149 media outlets were closed — following an attempted coup in July raises worrying questions about where Turkey may be headed.