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5 on 45:

On democracy after the Turkish referendum

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(Music)

KIRIŞCI: I am Kemal Kirişci, TÜSİAD senior fellow and director of the Turkey Project at Brookings Center on the United States and Europe. The Turkish electorate will be going to the polls to vote yes or no this Sunday for a package of amendments to the country's constitution. If adopted, these amendments will transform the parliamentary system, in place since 1946, into a presidential one, allowing the current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to be also the leader of his party. Previous president could not have a party association, and instead had to be neutral to be able to represent the whole country. These amendments will take away executive powers from the prime minister and his cabinet, composed of parliamentary deputies, and transfer them to the president. The president will then be able to appoint his own vice presidents and ministers from outside the parliament. Unlike in the U.S. system, these people will not go through a confirmation process or some scrutiny by the parliament. The amendments would also give the president the possibility to issue decrees. In principle, the parliament would have the right to overturn them, but in practice, if the majority of the parliament is composed of members from the president's own party, this would be unlikely to happen. In this new system, the president would be entitled to serve, starting from 2019, for two times five-yearly terms. Under a technicality, this could be extended to a third one. In that event, this would mean he could be in power until 2034. This way, he would have served more than three decades, the longest in the history of the Turkish

Republic. Many commentators, including the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Venice Commission, a body of the Council of Europe, fear that these amendments will do away with checks and balances critical to the functioning of a democratic political system. Instead, it would consolidate Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian one-man rule. The emphasis on a one-man rule is also evident in the way in which the amendments would undermine the independence of the judiciary, by allowing the president to determine most of the members of the constitutional court and the body that appoints and overlooks the promotion of judges and prosecutors. Again, unlike in the U.S., there would not be any confirmation process.

Opinion surveys suggest that the "yes" and "no" votes are running a neck-and-neck race. However, there are complaints that the "no" campaigners are harassed and even called terrorists and traitors to discredit them, while the media is pretty much dominated by the government and its narrative. Many journalists and critics have actually been jailed under the country's state of emergency rule, introduced after the coup attempt of last summer. Turkey and its neighborhood is going through critical times. The government has advocated that these amendments will enable the president to run the country more effectively and efficiently. Ironically, it was the same government under the current leader that had gained the admiration of most of the country and the international community for having made Turkey a model of democracy and a dynamic economy able to develop good relations with all of its neighbors. The country will be voting this Sunday without having had a chance to debate this irony and the implications of these amendments on Turkish democracy. Under a one-man rule, it's difficult to see how the country will be able to address many of the challenges it's facing,

from reviving its economic to integrating more than three million refugees and helping to find a solution to the war in Syria next door. This will have implications for the United States. It is unlikely that a Turkey that drifts away from pluralist democracy will be able to support a rule-based world order at such challenging times.

(Music)

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