

Mr. Erdoğan Lost the Referendum
Statement by John Ralston Saul
On the Turkish referendum of April 16, 2017

In January of this year I took part in a PEN International mission to Turkey. During every meeting with government officials or supporters they explained the upcoming referendum with almost identical sentences: they would win handily; the people supported the president; once the referendum was over there would be clarity; this would lead to a relaxing of tensions and perhaps even the releasing of prisoners; Turkey would be onto a new and positive phase in its existence. Old problems would be solved thanks to the new powers of the president.

I have seen a lot of referenda and written about the referendum phenomenon throughout history. Speaking for myself, I replied each time that this referendum would almost inevitably lead to far greater divisions within Turkey and probably violence. Big referenda on big questions almost always leads to bitterness and division, even when they are organized around a clear question, transparency and a level of freedom of expression recognized by all sides. Certainly, without these three elements in place and recognized, a referendum will not be seen or felt to have been fair. In this case, the referendum failed on all three parts. There was no question. A critical mass of the opposition leaders were arrested and could not take part; a critical mass of the opposition media, both individuals and outlets, were shut down. The government used the excuse of the failed coup to arrest thousands of people who were neither involved nor sympathetic to the coup attempt. They were, however, members of the democratic opposition. For example, over 200 writers and media workers sit in prison for no reason other than their opposition to Mr. Erdoğan's politics. 120,000 have been fired from the civil service, the judiciary, the legal profession, the army, the police. 50,000 are in prison, 110,000 have been detained. This is a purge unrelated to the coup attempt. It is so extreme that the chain of command in public services – military or civil – no longer functions.

All of this speaks for itself. The government has made unacceptable use of the state of emergency which it put in place after the attempted coup nine months ago.

Two simple truths. You cannot hold a referendum which will be accepted by all sides under a state of emergency. No electoral process will be accepted if there are brutal and unfair limitations on freedom of expression.

In spite of all of these limitations on the ability of the no side to carry out their democratic role, the government almost lost the referendum by its own standards, or lack of standards. In fact, it is pretty clear that they did lose it and were only able to squeeze out a technical 1.4% majority by adding in invalid, unstained ballots at the last moment. The decision by the Electoral Board to allow invalid ballots and to say that they would only be invalidated if they were individually contested makes a travesty of the very idea of legal ballots.

Even under these profoundly undemocratic conditions imposed on the *no* side, the government was unable to carry a majority of the voters.

Mr. Erdoğan has slipped into that classic stage of a political leader, who has certain political talents, but has lost the most important one - the ability to listen to other people: the ability to respect the citizenry. He is leading Turkey into a zone of darkness for which he personally will be held responsible by his fellow citizens and history.