

Ankara, Aug 9 (AP) - Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the front-runner in Turkey's first direct presidential election on Sunday, says that if elected he will be an active head of state who "sweats, runs and rushes around" - not just a ceremonial figurehead as presidents have been in the past.

It's the kind of talk that leaves detractors, already alarmed at how much power Erdogan has concentrated in his hands, in a cold sweat.

Until now, Turkey's presidents have played a largely symbolic role although they can call general elections, approve or reject laws passed by Parliament and appoint prime ministers, the Council of Ministers and some high court judges.

The position also has some dormant powers, including the power to call Parliament, summon Cabinet meetings and preside over them. Those powers are a legacy of Turkey's 1980 military coup and have seldom been used.

Erdogan, who has dominated Turkish politics for more than a decade, says he intends to use these constitutional prerogatives to the full, effectively shaping the presidency into a more powerful position. He is widely expected to appoint an amenable prime minister, which would allow him to continue to rule Turkey pretty much in the same way as he did while premier.

The Turkish leader, who has steered Turkey toward relative economic prosperity and enjoys widespread support in the Turkish heartland, argues that - as the first president to be directly elected by voters - he would have the mandate to rule with strengthened powers as head of state.

Such comments by a leader who has displayed an increasingly authoritarian bent are raising concerns over democracy. In the past year, Erdogan has purged thousands of police and prosecutors, increased the powers of the intelligence agency and banned access to YouTube and Twitter as he fought off corruption probes that implicated the government and family members.

Nihat Zeybekci, the economy minister, suggested in comments printed in Hurriyet newspaper on Thursday that the position of prime minister could become obsolete if Erdogan is elected.

"There wouldn't be a prime minister, there would be a chairman of the Council of Ministers. Someone who chairs the Council of Ministers, who summons it to meetings," he said.

The latent constitutional powers were devised as safeguards to allow the president to intervene in exceptional circumstances. They were largely formulated to allow the 1980 coup leader - who became president in a referendum - to take command if necessary.

The power to chair the Cabinet "is essentially meant to be used under conditions of emergency. If there is a war or something," said Ilter Turan, a professor at Istanbul's Bilgi University. "It is not one in which the president calls a session and says: Let's build a bridge. That's not the idea."

Presidents take an oath to remain neutral when they come to power and the Constitution says they have to sever all ties with their political parties. It also states that the prime minister - not the president - is head of the executive.

Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, Erdogan's main rival in the presidential race, has vowed to uphold the president's traditional role. He says he is against the accumulation of too much power in one person's hands and insists it is not up to the head of state to be involved in day-to-day running of politics.

"It is not the president's role to build roads and bridges," he said as he launched his campaign in July.

Erdogan has derided those comments.

"Some of the other candidates say 'we won't be involved in (building) roads, with energy,'" Erdogan said in a speech in Ankara on Thursday. "I ask them to take a look at the Constitution ... They should look at the president's responsibilities."

"We are not placing an ornament or a vase in the presidency. (The president) will be responsible for many things, from this country's development to its unity and integrity. He will convene the Cabinet when it is necessary," Erdogan said.

Erdogan orchestrated the constitutional change for a direct vote as part of a two-stage move toward a presidential system similar to that of the United States, albeit without all of the checks and balances of the U.S. model. The second step - a new constitution that increases the powers of the presidency - stalled after he failed to muster big enough support to bring about the change.