

TURKEY: POLITICS OF THE GEZI PROTESTS

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WHAT HAPPENED?

The protests initially began on May 28, 2013, as a reaction to the extreme measures employed by the police in evicting the activists from the Gezi Park adjacent to Taksim Square of Istanbul. The activists were camping out at the park trying to block its demolition, which was to clear terrain for a new structure including a shopping center. By May 31, as a result of excessive use of teargas and water cannons by the police, the protests grew into mass anti-government mobilization that also spread to the cities of Ankara and Izmir. On June 2, Prime Minister Erdogan made a statement in which he heavily criticized the protesters, calling them “looters”, and daring them to block the redevelopment plans that, he proclaimed, would go ahead as planned. This statement instigated further protests in now several major cities with thousands going out every night, parading and chanting against Erdogan and the government. In the following days, Erdogan kept his uncompromising stance accusing demonstrators of extremism and terrorism. In the meantime, President Abdullah Gul, Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc, and the Governor of Istanbul Huseyin Avni Mutlu, took a conciliatory approach and urged the demonstrators to exercise their right of assembly in a peaceful manner. On June 10, the government offered to start an open dialogue with the demonstrators. Erdogan himself met with several groups representing the protesters in the following days. While the demonstrators focused their anger on Erdogan, the AKP (Justice and Development Party) supporters also began to mobilize across Turkey in his support. Two pro-government rallies took place in Ankara (June 15) and Istanbul (June 16), drawing hundreds of thousands of supporters. In the following days, the protests became even more violent turn before they began to lose steam by June 25. The protests left three demonstrators and a policeman dead, thousands injured, and hundreds arrested.

PROFILE OF THE DEMONSTRATORS

Numerous accounts in the Turkish and international media suggested that the Gezi protesters represent a new generation discontent with the direction Turkey has taken under the leadership of Erdogan and the AKP government. The protesters were described as young, nonpartisan, educated, and environmentally conscious. The anti-government mobilization did, however, draw crowds beyond this characterization. After the initial focus on saving the Gezi Park, the sentiment shifted to more political and partisan expression of discontent with Erdogan and the AKP. Halfway through the protests, some known illegal and violent groups such as DHKP-C, which perpetrated the bombing of the US Embassy in Ankara last February, took the center stage in the demonstrations in Taksim and Ankara.

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During the Gezi protests, several reputable Turkish polling firms published reports profiling the demonstrators. KONDA interviewed 4411 adults on June 6-7 and GENAR interviewed 498 adults on June 8-9 in Taksim Square. KONDA established that the average age of the demonstrators was 28. The demonstrators were better educated than the average, were employed or students. Fifty-five percent of them have been involved in past demonstrations. With regard to their motives, GENAR found that “solidarity with demonstrators” was on the top of the list. KONDA, on the other hand, showed that 58 percent joined the demonstrations to protest restrictions on freedoms, 37 percent to protest the AKP, 30 percent to protest Erdogan’s remarks, and 20 percent to protest the removal of trees at the park.

In terms of political affiliation and ideology, both KONDA and GENAR’s polls showed that an overwhelming majority of those demonstrating on the streets voted for or supported the CHP (Republican People’s Party), the main opposition party. The AKP supporters were critical of the protests, while the MHP (Nationalist Action Party) nationalists preferred to stay out of fray and the pro-Kurdish BDP (Peace and Democracy Party) base participated in a very limited fashion, perhaps not to jeopardize the ongoing Kurdish peace process. Two national polls by ANDY-AR and GENAR found that 31 and 37 percent of the public, respectively, were in favor of the protests.

THE INTERNATIONAL REACTION

There was a notable international interest in the Gezi protests. The demonstrations and the police response were broadcasted live on many international media outlets, effectively undermining Turkey’s profile of a model democratic Muslim country with a growing economy in its region. Turkey’s government was criticized by the international community and especially by the European Union leaders. The government returned the favor, including a rebuke by Erdogan of the European Parliament that adopted a resolution condemning the police brutality in Turkey. While

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received numerous cancellations and the Istanbul Stock Exchange lost 20 percent of its value following a sellout by international investors.

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Surveys as well as statements made during the demonstrations showed that the Gezi protests represented an outburst of accumulated anger and discontent with the policies of the Erdogan government among some segments of the Turkish society. The AKP's consecutive electoral wins in the last 11 years, the depoliticization and neutralization of the military (which used to side with the CHP base in the past), Erdogan's consolidation of power, and the lack of viable political alternatives, all contributed to a sense of frustration and desperation that, apparently, merely needed a trigger to explode. This has been the case even in the face of growing prosperity and significantly higher life standards compared to the early 2000s. Conversely, given the extreme police measures applied to the initially insignificant protests and Erdogan's subsequent rhetoric demonstrate that the AKP government took the very same factors as signs for an absolute mandate. Consequently, a challenge to an insignificant redevelopment plan received a bitter response, which in turn, triggered a larger public outrage.

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Contrary to some analyses, the Gezi protests were not the greatest challenge Erdogan faced in his 10-year tenure. Erdogan and the AKP saw greater demonstrations in 2007 prior to the election of the president, a process which unleashed a constitutional crisis but led to further AKP victories in the subsequent elections. In 2009, the Constitutional Court was one vote short of banning the AKP altogether. The Kurdish issue and

the related PKK terrorism has also been an ongoing problem. But the real impact of the protests was in the international arena. The constant flow of news reports, images, video clips, social media messages, and live broadcasts, depicting street battles, tear gas attacks, and police brutality, coming from a democratic and ambitious government, simply shocked the world. Consequently, in the aftermath of the Gezi protests, the AKP government needed not only address an array of domestic concerns but also correct its charred international image.

ALEVI INITIATIVES

Probably the best outcome of the Gezi protests are the consequent government initiatives designed to address the well-known demands of the Alevi community in Turkey. Although the protests were not particularly identified with the Alevi community, they all featured large Alevi presence. The Alevi community—roughly 7-8 percent of the population—and especially the urban community, is highly secularized; thus, the concerns about the government's encroachment on the secular lifestyle were among the motives that led them to take part in the Gezi protests. In addition, in the heartland of Anatolia, and even in urban settings, Alevis tend to organize their social networks around cemevi (place of congregation and worship) and dede (religio-communal leader). Among the ongoing demands of the Alevi community is to get official recognition for their cemevis and dedes. As a result, on June 22, Prime Minister Erdogan unveiled a set of policies, which include, among others, recognition of cemevis as centers of faith and culture, the designation of public lands for cemevi constructions, and subsidies for dedes.

DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

Turkey, despite its unique democratic record among the Muslim countries, and its growing economy and influence, is still not an advanced democracy. There are a number of key reasons for this democratic deficit, most important being the legacy of military supervision that plagued most of the democratic era that began in 1950. In

recent years, although the political influence of the military has waned, the constitution that was imposed by the military in 1982 still stands. One of the main election promises of the AKP prior to June 2011 parliamentary elections was to draft a new, and this time, a civilian-made, constitution. The AKP won by a landslide and a constitutional commission began to deliberate on a new constitution. The commission has since been working, albeit slow, to come up with a text on which all four major parties agree. This task proved to be quite daunting; so last spring, the AKP unveiled an alternative draft constitution, the highlight of which was a presidential system with an unusually powerful president. Consequently, the Turkish political scene was already paralyzed before the Gezi protests by the waning prospect of a new democratic constitution and Mr. Erdogan's personal aspirations.

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The Gezi protests, although dramatic, have not yet generated an alternative political movement and were not powerful enough to shift the political balance. National trend polls noted no significant change in favorability ratings of Erdogan and the AKP in the aftermath of the Gezi protests. Notwithstanding, the protests have shaken the sense in which the AKP has no credible political challenge and duly eliminated the prospect of presidential system in the near future. The fact that such an effect can be exerted outside elections, by public mobilization, through social media, shows that long-term electoral calculations and the notion of settling scores at the ballot box are not appropriate and effective means when it comes to deeper issues of discontent expressed during the protests. This makes the completion of the ongoing constitutional project all the more important.

About the Author

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