

Commentary

Riots, Resistance and Repression: Notes on the Gezi Protests

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When police forces stormed the small Gezi Park in Taksim Square in Istanbul to disperse the small number of crowd who set up tents, neither the government nor the public and observers expected that this minor incident would spark nationwide waves of protests against the AKP government. The May 31, 2013 incident marked a significant turning point in Turkish history in the sense that a new form of protest was introduced and the AKP government faced a strong civilian resistance for the first time since it came to power eleven years ago.

For more than a decade, the AKP government ruled the country with a weak opposition, stood up against a military push in 2007, managed to force the strong military out of domestic politics, won all consecutive elections and gained a self-confidence that no previous government held for a very long time. But the government that brought an end to the military's guardianship role and survived a closure case by the Constitutional Court easily lost its control and self-confidence in the face of a social unrest that was basically non-violent, spontaneous, non-ideological and unorganized.

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All observers, protestors and the government agree on one point: it is not about a few trees that were to be cut off due to the rearrangement of the Gezi Park, neither is it about building a shopping mall on the grounds of the park. While for the government it was seen as an international conspiracy to oust the Erdoğan administration from power, for the protestors the resistance was against the growing authoritarian tendencies of the government and its excessive interference into the private sphere of its citizens. This does not necessarily mean that environmental issues were deemed insignificant, but the heavy handed approach of the government to suppress the peaceful protests had an impact on the public whose concerns were far beyond the well-being of the trees and the Park itself. The Gezi Park protests have been transformed into a symbol of resistance, a vivid example of government intolerance, a fresh hope for its critics and opposition and, ironically, a source of fear for the government and its supporters. It also set off a new terminology, as “resist” became a short-cut for any oppositional position during and after the demonstrations.

Interestingly, the government and its supporters in the media argued that Erdoğan and his government were under a well-coordinated attack which was orchestrated by international quarters. Erdoğan’s close aide Yalçın Akdoğan spelled out this view in the first days of the protests by publicly saying that “we will not allow them to finish off Tayyip Erdoğan.”¹ Believing that the main purpose of the protests was to remove Erdoğan from power, the government and Erdoğan’s close circle tried to maintain his image as a strong leader. Therefore, any compromise would have been considered to be a weakness on the part of Erdoğan and his government, and he was to stand up against this

¹ In his own words he said “Tayyip Erdoğan’ı kimseye yedirmeyiz.” *Akşam*, June 3, 2013.

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international conspiracy. Consequently, Erdoğan adopted a very harsh language criticizing and occasionally reprimanding the protestors, accusing them of being vandals.

This intolerant language and the disproportional use of force by the police during the demonstrations escalated the tension and the Erdoğan government unintentionally extended the life of the protests with its uncompromising policy. Especially in big cities Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Mersin, Adana and Hatay, the protests continued for nearly a month, left six people dead and hundreds wounded.

The Nature of the Protests

From a sociological point of view, the nationwide protests were initially a reaction by the secular middle classes who anxiously watched the AKP winning elections over and over again, while the main opposition party remained far from fulfilling the political expectations. Moreover, the military was helpless and could not protect its own personnel from various ongoing charges, the Islamists were now occupying all bureaucratic positions, and Erdoğan was making statements intrusive of the lifestyles of the secular people almost every other day. The police raid at Taksim was the last straw and it embodied all this accumulated outrage against the Erdoğan government and its excessive practices.

According to the information given by the Minister of Interior to the Parliament, the protests spread 77 cities out of 81 and about 2.4 million people participated in the protests, six people were killed and 4.000 people were wounded including 600

policemen.² This was the single biggest wave of protests in the history of Turkey.

It is interesting to note that those who went on the streets were mainly young people most of whom had not been involved in demonstrations before. This new generation was widely regarded as apolitical, indifferent to social and political developments and fallen prey to globalization's consumerism and hedonistic culture. Yet, this new wave of protests has transformed the practice of demonstrating with their creative ideas and witty slogans, some of which gained the admiration of pro-government journalists to a certain degree. The leftwing radical groups also joined the protests and often clashed with the police forces. Unlike radical groups, however, mainstream protestors were cautious not to attack the police and the premises in the demonstration zone. They have brought about a new culture of protest by sharing food and shelter, protesting but not destroying, resisting but not fighting, criticizing but not cursing.

While they emerged as a reaction to the heavy handed approach of the government, these protests were not intended to oust the government from power as the conservative circles claimed. After all, the protestors had neither the instruments nor the organizational capacity to overthrow the government and the protests were more focused on the protection of their lifestyles which the government seemed to ignore for some time. Generally speaking, the aim of the protests was to show the limits of government power. For the last couple of years, both Erdoğan himself and his government moved from the principle of pluralism and showed authoritarian tendencies. Erdoğan openly declared that their aim was to bring up a religious generation and that they planned to privatize Public Theaters and Operas, the government

² *Sabah*, June 4, 2013.

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passed an act limiting the practice of abortion (withdrawn after the reactions) and banned the sale of alcohol after 10 pm, *etc.* At the same time, the pressure on the media gained a new dimension as Erdoğan urged media owners to sack journalists who are critical of the government.³ Feeling that the Erdoğan government broke away its promise to respect different lifestyles, adhere to pluralism in society and politics, the secular middle classes erupted and poured into the streets for protest.

Although secular-minded and educated young people constituted the main body of the protestors, politically and ideologically diverse groups also participated in the protests. The Kurds in general shied away from the protests but there were Kurdish youngsters among the protestors. Considering that the widespread protests could lead to the collapse of the ongoing “Peace Process” to find a solution to the Kurdish issue, the representative of the nationalist Kurds, the BDP (Peace and Democracy Party) officially asked its supporters not to join the protests.

There were also small Islamist groups especially in Istanbul who called themselves “anti-capitalist Muslims” were critical of the emerging new Islamist business class, its conspicuous consumerism, the AKP’s anti-democratic practices and compromise with globalism.

The MHP, ultra-nationalist party, also urged its supporters not to be part of the protests, but in some cities its followers participated in the protest meetings. The MHP have a tradition not to fight with, or even confront any government body, especially the police. Considering that a number of Kurds also took part in the protests, the party did not prefer its members to demonstrate

³ *Cumhuriyet*, August 11, 2012.

against the government along with the Kurds and some leftist groups. Its tight hierarchical organization enabled the party to control its members and followers, though MHP sympathizers still protested against the government in some cities.

The young, mostly educated and secular-minded middle classes, and in some cases the unemployed thus constituted the main body of the protestors. In this sense, they set a precedent which illustrated that unorganized and spontaneous protests can be even more effective than the meetings and protests organized by the mainstream political parties or political groups.

The Gezi Protests and the Reconstruction of the Conspiracy Theories

Resorting to conspiracy theories is not something unusual in Turkish politics. In fact, it represents the mindset of the old regime which pointed its finger at foreign circles whenever it faced social and/or political challenges. It was commonplace to hear from the authorities that “Turkey’s enemies were determined to weaken and destabilize Turkey and that they had allies inside the country”. With the onset of the protests, it was interesting how the AKP government and its followers, who are critical of the old regime, adopted the same language in the first social protest they encountered.

The protestors were labeled as serving foreign interests, aimed to create instability to throw the government out of power. The pro-government *Yeni Şafak* newspaper even claimed that a play named “Mi Minör” was indeed a rehearsal of the protests, a part of the general conspiracy,⁴ and actor Memet Ali Alabora, who

⁴ *Yeni Şafak*, June 10, 2013.

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also produced the play and showed sympathy to the protestors, was targeted in both print and social media.

The most interesting part of the government's reaction to the protests was Erdoğan's allegation that an undefined "interest lobby" was behind the protests. Erdoğan even urged Turkish people not to use their credit cards in order to cut the revenues of this lobby.⁵ The biggest Turkish holding company, the Koç Group, was implicitly accused of supporting the protests, and that the hotels belonging to this group provided food to the protestors free of charge in Istanbul. The aim of these allegations seemed to associate the protestors with big business interests and to discredit them publicly.

While Erdoğan was understandably cautious not to name any specific country or group of countries, some pro-government figures pointed at Israel,⁶ some excluded Obama but accused the neo-cons of trying to punish the AKP government due to the troubled relations with Israel. Even CNN International's coverage of the events and its critical approach were taken as a proof how the international quarters tried to undermine a successful government.

The riots that broke out in Brazil almost simultaneously with Turkey were taken as another proof that there was a coordinated attack on the emerging powers like Turkey and Brazil. According to this reading of the developments, Turkey, with its successful economic growth record, emerged as a strong and independent actor capable of posing a threat to the Western interests. Therefore, with Gezi protests orchestrated by

⁵ *Hürriyet*, July 17, 2013.

⁶ For instance, *Türkiye* newspaper's headline was "Israel is praying for Gezi Protestors" July 11, 2013 and *Yeni Şafak* had a similar headline: "Israel's Pray is for the ousting of Erdoğan" 10 July, 2013.

international power-holders, the Turkish government was punished for its independent actions.

The fall of interest rates along with the fall of the inflation rate over the years was seen as another proof that the financial quarters were not happy with the government. Probably, the most absurd one among these allegations was made by a journalist who happened to be the prime minister's advisor; he claimed that both the "interest lobby" and the planned construction of a third airport in Istanbul which would be a rival to Frankfurt airport as a European hub in international flights were the main reasons behind the international conspiracy. However weird these allegations may sound, they had some impact on the AKP constituency.

Political Consequences of the Protests

The protests and the brute police force used against them had several effects on Turkish politics. First of all, the Gezi protests have contributed to the polarization of Turkish society. In fact, the government spared no effort to achieve this polarization through a political game to rally their constituency around the AKP lines. Erdoğan maintained his demagogical style and even called his supporters to sue their neighbors that openly supported the protestors by banging pots and pans at a certain time during the evening demonstrations.⁷ To discredit the protestors in the public eye, Erdoğan even claimed that some of the wounded protestors, while being treated by volunteer doctors in a mosque, consumed alcoholic drinks, though the imam of the mosque denied these allegations. The pro-government media was quick to

⁷ Some sued their neighbor in line with the urge by the prime minister. *Radikal*, July 20, 2013.

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buy into this allegation realizing the impact it might have on conservatives groups within the Turkish society.

Secondly, along with the police attacks, the intensive use of tear gas and the government's heavy-handed handling of the protests led most of the liberal intellectuals who initially lent their support to the AKP government believing that it would be the democratizing force intensified their criticism and most distanced themselves from the government.

Thirdly, the protests revealed that not only the government but also the opposition parties were caught off-guard and could not develop a clear and coherent position *vis-à-vis* the ongoing demonstrations. Both CHP and MHP faltered when the first wave of protests broke out. While some CHP MPs participated in the protests, the leader of the CHP, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was frank in his confession that they failed to fully understand the younger generation.

Fourthly, the Gezi protests have dealt a very serious blow to Erdoğan's plan to transform the Turkish political system into a presidential one. Playing on conservative votes had been a shrewd maneuver in the short term, but the protests displayed that Erdoğan could not embrace Turkish society as a whole and his ruling style is more conducive to dividing than uniting the society. In any case, the AKP received 50 percent of the votes which was enough to form a government but insufficient to indisputably guarantee Erdoğan's election as a president.

Last but not least, one of the most critical outcomes of the protests was that they adversely affected the democratic image of the government which was already beginning to be questioned in the West. Repressing the protests with brute police force, resorting to the conspiracy theories, the growing anti-western discourse

among the pro-government media has tarnished the image of the AKP government as a democratizing force in the country and a model in the greater Middle East. The government not only handled the protests in a harsh manner reminiscent of the previous governments, it has also started a witch hunt a month after the protests, and hundreds of protestors were detected through their twitter addresses and were arrested as a result. Erdoğan defended the police actions in the protests, accused the protestors on the grounds that they attacked the police, and declared that the police have done a “legendary” work and that they planned to employ more policemen in the future.⁸

The protests have been a litmus test for the tolerance and the degree of the government’s commitment to the democratic principles. While the protests enhanced the ongoing polarization of Turkish society, it also led to the departing of some of the liberal intellectuals from supporting the government.

⁸ “Polis Destan Yazdı,” *Milliyet*, June 25, 2013.