

FPC Briefing: Protests in Turkey and the discontents of a flawed model Prof. Mehmet Ugur

Since 27 May 2013, we have witnessed all-encompassing and democratic protests in Turkey, sparked by the plan to develop Gezi Park at the north edge of Taksim Square into a replica of a military barracks, a shopping centre and up-market residences. The plan was masterminded and pushed through by Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, despite a ruling against it by the Regional Board for Protecting Cultural Assets in Istanbul - and in spite of strong objections by professional bodies, civil society organisations, and environmentalists.

The content of the project and the way in which it has been pushed through by the prime minister speak volumes about the extent to which the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has been consolidating authoritarian rule over the country – mostly with open support from Western governments and in the name of democracy. The violent response to peaceful and democratic protests have now raised serious doubts about the AKP's and its leaders' democratic credentials.

How could it be otherwise? As of 17 June 2013, we know that at least 4 people were killed and 7,421 were injured as a result of excessive police violence. According to Turkish Medical Association¹, the number of injured reflects only those who reported to and received treatment in hospitals and clinics. Indeed, the actual number is very likely to be higher, perhaps over 10,000.

Therefore, over the last two weeks, the European Union, the United States, a number of European countries, and the United Nations have all criticised the excessive use of police force against the protestors; and indicated that the right to peaceful protest should be respected. The UK government has opted otherwise, signalling eagerness to gain favours with the Turkish government. Perhaps we should not blame the UK government too much because it may just be trying to be consistent! Indeed, western public opinion has been bombarded by pro-AKP rhetoric from western governments. With the exception of sporadic criticisms by *The Economist*, this rhetoric has been propagated by the Western media.

Yet protestors in Istanbul and across Turkey have called this neo-liberal bluff. Following the brutal police attack on the protestors in Gezi Park in the early hours of 28 May, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir and all other major cities. People showed their anger through various forms, including spontaneous demonstrations, marches, pan-banging, mocking the government-controlled media, and defending themselves, their streets and their communities against police attacks.

The range of protest forms has expanded and the mix of the demonstrators has become increasingly varied: workers, the Kurds, civil servants, teachers, professionals, Alevis, anti-capitalist Islamists, feminists, gay and lesbians have all taken part. Families have joined the protests by shouting at the police to clear off their neighbourhoods, by banging pans and turning the lights off, and by taking the gas-stricken protestors into their homes.

Initially, the Turkish media turned a blind eye; and the Western media presented the events as clashes with the police rather than police violence against peaceful demonstrators. This is no longer the case. Hence the Prime Minister's discovery of new 'enemies of Turkey', who include Turkish and international journalists and Western governments.

¹ Turkish Medical Association, The Health Status of the Demonstrators, June 2013, <http://www.ttb.org.tr/index.php/Haberler/veriler-3842.html>

Despite continued police violence and desperate government attempts at dividing the protest movement, the protestors have demonstrated resilience and creativity. The number of people demonstrating continued to increase until 16 June, when the Turkish police, backed with military units on stand-by, attacked with increased brutality. Not only the quantity of gas and water has increased, but debilitating chemicals have been added to the water used to disperse the protestors.

The prime minister has reacted with well-known tactics used by authoritarian rulers. Not only did he hold state-sponsored mass meetings to appeal to his Sunni support base; but he also pointed the finger at foreign and domestic enemies working to destroy his government and undo his economic success. He claimed protestors were attacking women with headscarves, drinking alcohol in mosques, and killing police officers on duty without providing evidence. Not surprisingly, soon after delivering these messages, a gang of men from his old neighbourhood (Kasımpaşa) took to the streets with knives and clubs, hunting for demonstrators. None of these criminals have been either questioned or arrested. On the contrary, his deputy prime minister and the minister for internal affairs have declared that protestors attempting to demonstrate on Taksim Square after 16 June would be treated as terrorists.

What did the protestors want? They wanted Gezi Park and Taksim to remain as a public space where civic pride can be enjoyed, demonstrations can be held, and diversity rules over neo-conservative uniformity. They wanted the governors and police chiefs of major cities where police violence caused deaths and injuries to resign. They wanted all detainees to be released. And they wanted removal of all restrictions on peaceful protests in major city squares, including Taksim in Istanbul and Kızılay in Ankara.

These demands struck a chord with a wide audience with grievances against the AKP rule. Since 2004, AKP governments have been pushing a massive campaign of dam building across the country without consultation about environmental impacts. They have tried several times to ban May Day demonstrations in Taksim Square, where 34 people were killed in 1977 as a result of a provocation widely believed to be orchestrated by the elements of the so-called Turkish 'deep state'. The prime minister, his ministers and numerous party officials have demonstrated open hostility towards and insulted workers as well as farmers demanding their fair share in terms of wages and produce prices. There has been massive violence towards and arbitrary arrests of Kurdish activists, all branded as terrorists and separatists. The government has been involved in and has encouraged AKP-run municipalities for implementing social engineering projects, including pressure on catering business not to serve alcohol, calling for women to have three children each, declaring abortion as murder, taking steps that would increase the appeal of religious education, controlling the media, and using the courts and the police as instruments for scoring political gains against the Kurds, the Kemalist establishment and even business conglomerates. Impunity and lack of accountability has become a norm, leading to arrogance by AKP officials and a sense of exclusion and powerlessness within dissenting groups.

Given this background, the police attack on 28 May against the protestors in Gezi Park proved to be the straw that broke the camel's back. A wide spectrum of the society felt it in their bones that it was time to say enough is enough. The feeling of injustice and the anger against increasing authoritarianism has united many groups who up to then have been separated by different class, cultural and local loyalties.

Is this a conspiracy aiming to topple a government possessing a healthy majority – as the prime minister and his propaganda machine have been claiming? Not really. There have always been questions about the AKP's democratic credentials. Its neo-liberal economic policy has produced handsome opportunities for the business elite, the composition of which has been transformed with

the rise of pro-AKP pro-Islamic entrepreneurs. It has also enabled international investors to secure high returns on their investment in Turkey.

But this was at the expense of the working classes and farmers, whose bargaining power has been curtailed systematically through government policy. It was also at the expense of curtailed democratic freedoms, which have been sacrificed at the altar of a majoritarian rule that is coloured by Islamic conservatism and distinguishable abhorrence of accountability. In his speech to the faithful, the prime minister has made it clear that this is what is on offer: he is responsible only to God, and those unhappy with his rule can change the government at the ballot box. There is nothing in between! No room for legal and administrative accountability, no room for accommodating the demands of any minority, and plenty of Machiavellian plotting to win the next elections.

The writing has been on the wall since 2004 – two years after AKP's first election victory and when the AKP government began to use excessive police force against demonstrators, including women. In that year, the prime minister and his party have taken a definite turn towards authoritarianism and abandoned democratisation reforms. As a result, the quantity and quality of the reforms that the AKP government has undertaken from 2004-2013 remained lower than the quantity and quality of the reforms undertaken from 2001-2004. Of course, prevarications by EU governments about Turkish accession have had a negative role to play. But it takes two to tango. Had the AKP government had a credible commitment to democratisation, Germany and France would have been less able to raise obstacles to Turkey's EU membership.

But even if we assume that EU reluctance to integrate Turkey has had a negative effect on the pace of reforms, who should be responsible? This may sound a trivial question, but it has never been asked. Under the AKP rule, there has been either a decline or stagnation in major governance indicators that reflect the quality of Turkish democracy. This can be seen clearly through indicators published by the World Bank and other organisations such as International Country Risk Guide. In addition, governance quality in Turkey is lower than that observed in comparable countries, including the average for Europe and Central Asia and for all countries in the same income group. That Turkey has the largest number of journalist in prison is not an aberration, but a telling indicator of an authoritarian regime that has been in the making since 2004.

Consequences on the ground have been heart-breaking. The war against the Kurds escalated, leading to thousands of deaths. All religious, ethnic, sexual, and political minorities felt under threat. The courts (including the constitutional court and the court of appeals) have been used as instruments of settling political scores between AKP and the Kemalist elites. Urban regeneration and dam-building projects have been forced through and any protest has been quashed by the police. Phone tapping, intrusive surveillance, mass detention of the Kurds, persecution of journalists, and the imposition of cultural and religious uniformity have become the norm.

True, Turkey has recorded high growth rates and re-paid the official IMF debt. However, this performance should be placed in context. In 2000s, high growth rates have been a characteristic of large developing countries in the middle-income category. Therefore, Turkey was following the trend rather than displaying AKP-specific miracles. In addition, the sustainability of Turkey's growth performance is questionable.

Growth and government deleverage have been accompanied with excessive current account deficits and massive private sector borrowing. Turkey's current account deficit under the AKP fluctuated between 10%-6% and, according to a recent IMF assessment, there is still no sign of sustainable

reversal². Private-sector debt in foreign currency stands at \$413 billion, which is equivalent to 51% of GDP and is one the highest in the world³.

On the other hand, Turkey's growth performance has been accompanied by increased inequality: The gross gini coefficient for Turkey has increased from about 40% in 2002 to 45% in 2009. (The proportion of population living under the poverty line in the second half of 2000s is 17.5%; and the poverty gap⁴ - i.e., the percentage by which mean income of the poor falls below the poverty line - is 32.9%. This is the second-highest level of poverty recorded amongst OECD countries after Mexico.⁵

This is the political and economic background against which the protests in Turkey have begun. The protest against demolition of Gezi Park has drawn massive support from other parts of Istanbul and the country because it has brought into the open the failures of the neo-liberal policies and the authoritarianism with which the AKP government has been suppressing dissent over the last decade. We all owe the protestors a big thank you for making reality prevail over disinformation; for highlighting the injustices that the AKP has been concealing with the help of compliant media; and for demonstrating that the people of Turkey have something to contribute to the global fight for true democracy and justice.

June 2013

Mehmet Ugur is Professor of Economics and Institutions at the University of Greenwich.

² IMF, Turkey: Selected Issues, December 2013, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2012/cr12339.pdf>

³ Bloomberg, Erdogan's IMF Triumph Masks Surge in Private Debt: Turkey Credit, May 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-05-13/erdogan-s-imf-triumph-masks-surge-in-private-debt-turkey-credit.html>

⁴ Millennium Development Goals Indicators, 1.2 Poverty Gap <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Metadata.aspx?IndicatorId=2>

⁵ OECD Factbook 2010: Economic, Environmental and Social Statistics, Poverty rates and Gaps, February 2011, <http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/factbook-2010-en/11/02/02/index.html?contentType=&itemId=/content/chapter/factbook-2010-89-en&containerItemId=/content/serial/18147364&accessItemIds=&mimeType=text/html>