

# The Political Reverberations of the Gezi Protests

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**ABSTRACT** *Although a lot has been said about the Gezi protests, analyses of the events consistently failed on two particular issues. First, in their efforts to analyze the dynamics behind the protests, analysts failed to distinguish the immediate triggers of the demonstrations from the more rooted causes of discontent. Second, the diverse and transforming makeup of the protesters was overlooked. The underlying assumption was that Gezi protesters were a homogenous group even as the crowds increased during the course of the demonstrations. This article offers an alternative perspective in analyzing the makeup and the motivation of the protesters.*

In June 2013, a wave of protests that have come to be known as the Gezi protests swept through Turkey. The Turkish political scene, unacquainted with this type of protest, had difficulty interpreting the events of Gezi protests. What had begun as a low-key protest against the urban planning project which included cutting down the trees at Taksim's Gezi Park – and fueled by the use of excessive police force and the administration's misdiagnosis of the events – turned into a wide-spread movement in a short period of time. During the three weeks the protests continued, the composition of the protesters, as well as their motivation and justification, evolved. Protestors, who were initially mobi-

lized out of environmental concerns, were soon joined by diverse groups whose contradictory motivations could not be reconciled. New waves of protestors ranged from those who sought to become political actors to those who were angered by having lost their status as political actors; from those who demanded a more participatory democracy to those who felt threatened by Turkey's democratization; from those who wanted to make their voices heard to those who wanted to oust a democratically elected government.

The meaning attributed to the Gezi protests continued to evolve even after the demonstrations themselves

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ended. As more time passed, both the meaning attributed to the events and their political reverberations mutated. Gradually, the real identity of the protestors and their original motivations came to mean less, while their political reflections came to mean more. As such, it would be beneficial to set aside the knee-jerk reactions and reflex interventions that caused the events to intensify and discuss the real consequences of these protests and what they will mean for the future of Turkey.

### **Dynamics Behind the Protests**

Such a discussion should begin with an evaluation of the dynamics that led the protestors to take to the streets. There is no question about what happened. The excessive use of police force during a low-key environmental protest, and the administration's misdiagnosis and mishandling of the events caused the protest to explode into a wide-spread movement. The

Prime Minister's strong and terse language and the excessive use of police force, without a doubt, functioned as trigger mechanisms. However, these two factors only explain how the existing tensions exploded in the form of protests, but fail to explain what caused such tensions in the first place. Therefore, when analyzing the dynamics behind the protests, it would be beneficial to distinguish the triggers from the causes of the deep seated-anger and societal tensions.

Masses take to the streets when they feel repressed, and when they believe they do not have adequate political representation. In other words, they take to streets when they feel discriminated against and helpless that their needs are not being addressed politically. The perception of repression is related to the policies and discourse of the administration and the feeling of hopelessness is related to the performance of the political opposition.

While the AK Party's policies and discourse during its decade-long rule consolidated its base of support in certain segments of the society, it led to discontent in others. The AK Party's efforts to respond to the demands of its constituency – such as democracy, freedom, recognition of identity, active foreign policy, and a more conservative lifestyle – was met with disappointment, discontent, and anger by the opposition constituency.

It is inevitable that in functioning democracies, incumbent parties fail to meet the demands of some segments of society. In such cases, the com-



plaints and demands that fall outside the scope of the executive branch find their way into the political sphere through different channels. Some of these channels include institutions that serve as a check-and-balance mechanism to the executive office, civil society organizations that lobby around these demands, and opposition parties. These channels can prevent the dissenting voices from being drowned out. It seems that the weakening of the checks-and-balances during the AK Party's efforts to prevent the undue influence of tutelary institutions, and the perceived hopelessness of the main opposition party becoming strong enough to counter-balance these aggressive moves were the reasons that precipitated such deep-seated tensions.

To wit, the vigor and the effectiveness of the relationship between the polit-

ical bodies and the people depend to a great extent on the strength and the performance of the political opposition. The purpose of the opposition in functioning democracies is to listen to the demands and complaints of the people, translate these voices into a political vocabulary, and then make sure they are represented in the political sphere. When the political opposition functions as it should, the need for the masses to take to the streets disappears. When the opposition does not perform and the peoples' voices are not transformed into viable political demands, the perception of inadequate representation turns into hopelessness, and protests ensue.

This is not the first time masses have felt underrepresented and repressed in Turkey. The repression faced by both the Kurds and the pious conservative populations during the

Protesters hold molotov cocktails in Taksim square in Istanbul during clashes between riot police and demonstrators.

AFP / Aris Messinis

1990s could not even be compared to the repression the protestors today feel they face. However, neither group considered demonstrations as a viable political option. This was mostly because neither Kurds nor the pious conservatives doubted that the opposition leaders they supported could bring their political struggle for rights to a successful end. As such, they preferred to continue their struggle within the boundaries of the democratic political sphere.

It should, then, be noted that dissent and opposition to ruling parties are part of functioning democracies. The fact that there is strong opposition to

as a reaction to the failure of the opposition party to respond to its constituency.

## The Diverse Makeup of the Protestors

What made the Gezi protests so powerful in its first few days was the difficulty of identifying the protestors by a particular socio-economic class or political ideology. This was something the political scene in Turkey had not yet witnessed and as such represented the Achilles' heel of the AK Party. As the protests progressed and the crowds got bigger, a group which clearly possessed strong political rhetoric and experience, and was more resistant to police force and whose disapproval of the AK Party was more intense, became more visible. As the protests transcended Gezi Park and spread across the country, they began to lose their novelty. The protests and protestors began to lose the power they drew from their diverse make up that transcended political and ideological boundaries and became easily locatable within the country's political landscape. In short, both the mission of the protests and the identity of the protestors changed within the first few days of the protests. As such, the protests not only lost their initial force and unpredictability, but also turned into yet another point of contestation along the familiar political divisions of the country. With the energy of these protests, the conventional fissures of Turkish political life once again became clearly visible.

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a ruling party that runs on a strong language of identity politics should not be surprising. What is unusual is that the dissenting populations feel the need to take to the streets to make their voices heard. In other words, any analysis of the underlying causes of the protests should account for the role of a dysfunctional political opposition as much as the role of a strong ruling party. The protests should not be perceived solely as manifestations of dissent against AK Party, but also

The prevalent analyses of the Gezi protests assume that the protestors are not affiliated with any political party or ideology and that they simply demand participatory democracy against the authoritarian style of the Prime Minister. This point of view fails to explain the dynamics of the Gezi protests in several ways. First of all, it assumes that the protestors are a homogenous group. It focuses on the young protestors that were initially located in Gezi Park and those who took to the streets only during the first few days of the protests. Not to mention that it fails to see the difference between the youth at Gezi and the youth that took to the streets in different parts of the country during the first few days. Second, by focusing on the spontaneous nature of the protests in the first few days, these analyses fail to account for the evolution of the protests into an organized political action. In other words, these analyses completely miss the transformation of the democratic dissent of the first few days into the desire of ousting a democratically elected government. Third, these analyses offer a psychological reading of the events by focusing on dignity and conscience of the protestors, and as such fail to consider the sociological and political dynamics that led to the protests. They overlook the simple fact that Erdogan's strong language, decontextualized from the sociological and political dynamics of the events, cannot be an adequate explanation for the masses taking to the streets. Furthermore, these analyses disregard the reverberations of identity politics that the AK party has followed in the

last ten years. Essentially, they fail to consider the ethnic, sectarian, ideological, and political polarization that shaped the political landscape for the last decade.

It is imperative that we recognize the fact that with these protests a new type of opposition – that is difficult to categorize – has emerged. For years to come, both the political actors and the public will expend effort to understand the processes the youth has experienced that led them to Gezi protests. Any successful analysis of the Gezi protests that aims to deconstruct the makeup and the message of the protestors will first have to recognize the heterogeneous nature of the group. Distinguishing the different identity groups among the Gezi protestors will prove beneficial for a more accurate understanding of the protestors' motives and objectives. To this end, the protestors could be categorized into three distinct groups.

The first group largely consists of the original Gezi Park protestors and those who reacted to the excessive use of police force. This is the group that hosts the most diverse and creative protestors. It is the group that challenged the existing political and social codes, and that will undoubtedly effect political change in the future. Contrary to the prevalent view, it would be incorrect to suggest that this group is apolitical. However, it would not be wrong to say they do not identify with any polarizing ideological formations. This group could function as an instrument of democ-

ratization of the public sphere in Turkey in addition to the progress made during the ten years of AK party rule. The legitimacy of the protests comes from the productive, participatory, and inclusive messages of this group. The various interpretations of Gezi protests since the beginning drew inspiration from this group. In fact, one could agree with most of these analyses, had they not extrapolated their analyses based on this group to protests at large. Nevertheless, it would still be a stretch to define this group simply as environmental activists with demands for a more participatory democracy. The protestors in this category, particularly those located in Gezi Park, clearly demonstrate certain political and socio-economical characteristics. Although, a strong disapproval of the AK Party has not yet come to define the dynamics of this group completely, it is hard to deny that one of their motivations is to see the AK Party weakened.

The second group consists of social segments that facilitated the spread of the protests across the country. The constituency of the main opposition party CHP (Republican People's Party) makes up a large portion of this group located in the city squares and residential streets. This group, rather than demanding democracy, takes a stance against the democratic progress made in the recent years. They feed on the sectarian divisions within the country, and feel comfortable within the boundaries of traditional and familiar political codes. It would be fair to hold this group, which condones social tensions to the ex-

tent that they don't threaten political stability, responsible for carrying the protests to a whole other level. This group served to transform the protests, whose initial power was in their unpredictable and indefinable nature, into a conventional political lexicon. As such, it took the legitimacy of the protests hostage. This group which relies on the ability of identity politics to hegemonize every political event, and on its polarizing influence, carries the risk of causing irreparable damage to social peace.

The third group consists of radical leftists who aim to terrorize the society by spreading provocative and manipulative messages over social media and those who desire to see the civil administration be ousted by the military. There is no need to offer a detailed explanation of this group. They illegally occupied public spaces at night and attacked citizens of different beliefs and ideologies, and was the group that undermined the original mission of the Gezi protests.

All three of these groups, albeit to different degrees, influenced both the politicians and the public's views of Gezi Park. For this reason, analyses that focus on the first group and fail to account for the other are at best naïve and at worst aim to serve different ideologies. Although discontent with the AK Party and disapproval of Erdogan was present during the protests in the first few days, it was certainly not the main driving factor. But as different groups joined the protests, this was conveyed to be the dominant motivation, to the extent

that all other demands were drowned out. This transformation caused the protests to seem like cheap attempts to damage the AK Party by the opposition groups that failed to beat them at the ballot box. From this perspective, the Gezi protests can be defined as political events that began spontaneously with the aim of voicing certain demands in the public sphere, but which were soon hijacked by multiple internal and external actors with various motivations, and thus turned into an anti-AK party and anti-Erdogan rally.

### **New and Old Alliances**

The protestors examined in these three different groups can, from a different perspective, be examined in two categories. When the political and social change the country has gone through during the AK Party rule is considered, it would be possible to argue that the protests consisted of those who could not accept the shifting balances of power and those who, despite having supported AK party in dismantling of the tutelage regime, did not want the new political system to be built by the AK Party. The common thread that ties these two groups together – groups who were sworn enemies until the referendum of September 12, 2010 – is the discontent they feel about the new political system being built by the AK Party. The September 12 referendum was an important milestone in the struggle to dismantle the tutelary actors that dominated Turkey for decades. Once the old tutelary elite

were dismantled, the next step was constructing a new political system in Turkey. Certain groups, particularly the leftist liberal circles, who did

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not hesitate to ally with AK Party in the struggle against the tutelary elite, turned into the staunchest detractors of the AK Party. The conservative and pious characteristics of the AK party, which were tolerable in the struggle against tutelary regime, became a problem during the construction of the new political system.

The splitting of old allies should not be interpreted from a perspective of democratization, but from a perspective of a power struggle. This fissure that is at its core, about the values that will define the new political regime, is often read through the lenses of democratization and authoritarian legacies. However, what the leftist liberals actually mean when they speak of democratization is that they want to be afforded privileged status in the

new system. To this end, the novelty of Gezi Park is the way it caused old enemies to become new allies. Those who joined forces with the AK Party in the struggle against the tutelage regime broke of all ties once the tutelage regime was weakened and formed an

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alliance with the old elite they helped oust. In other words, the AK party's former allies joined the old elite (a group that resented the AK Party for costing them their privileges) and were given the opportunity to voice their discontent under the disguise of demands for democracy. The irony is that those who opposed the AK Party because of its success in democratizing the country gained leverage against the AK Party by voicing their discontent in a lexicon of demands for democracy.

Therefore, the Gezi Park protests can be read as objection to the construction of the new political scene in Turkey at the hands of the AK Party. It represents the alliance of those who were defeated in the struggle against tutelage and those who felt excluded

from the construction process. What made this alliance possible was not the purported authoritarian tendencies of the AK Party, but that they were the main actor of the new system. It is also important to point out that the allies joined by their dislike of the AK Party had different expectations from these protests. While the supporters of the tutelage regime who were still bitter about losing their privileges dreamt about toppling the AK party, those who felt excluded from the construction process dreamt about a tamed AK party and Erdogan who begged for their help.

### **The Mood of the Protestors**

The protestors' motivation in taking to the streets was not proactive, in that they did not really want to voice their demands. Their motivation was rather reactionary in that they were rejecting something they could identify. This can be easily gleaned from ambiguous slogans such as "Enough" or "Damn Some Things." The protestors were not a group that had specific claims and demands, but rather a group that was discontented and angry. Therefore, it would be more accurate to examine why the protestors were angry rather than what they wanted. Four distinct moods and attitudes can be identified among the protestors: elitism, defeat, despair, and fear/paranoia. All these moods functioned, to differing degrees, as factors that fueled the tensions.

It would be fair to say that the common thread that tied the diverse



groups at the protests was elitism. In fact, it was elitism that formed the basis for the other three attitudes that prevailed. Different manifestations of elitism such as political, cultural, ideological, and socio-economical elitism were visible. Some conveyed their elitist attitude in their lament for the loss of political, economic, and cultural privileges during the AK Party rule; others were disgruntled about the upwardly mobile status of the previously repressed conservative and pious groups. The elitist tendencies of the tutelage supporters are not a secret. It is well known that it was their elitist attitude that soured nationalists on popular politics and democracy because it was democracy that brought the AK party to power. Nor is it a secret that they were not above resorting to undemocratic methods to regain ground.

The hesitancy of the leftist liberals, who were the pioneers of democratization, toward the AK Party as the builder of the new system is worth examining. The fact that groups that were previously labeled reactionary, uneducated peasants mobilized around the goal of democratization and conquered the old forts of the tutelage regime one by one became a source of tension for the leftist liberals. The best manifestation of this tension was the “Yes, but not enough” movement of the 2010 referendum. Although the emphasis on “not enough” was conveyed as an expression of the inadequacy of the new referendum to meet standards of democracy, it was in reality an expression of the discontent that

the AK Party defeated the tutelage regime. More importantly, it was a way to preclude the pressure this group felt for having become allies with the AK party, after they had for so long been a target of their condescension. In other words, the “Yes, but not enough” was not really about the content of the referendum package, but was an objection to having been forced to collaborate with AK Party. Both forms of elitism, at their core, were the result of the groups having to treat the AK Party and its conservative and pious constituency as their equal after having looked down upon them for years.

The second mood that prevailed was one of defeat. The elitist tendencies of the protestors, in effect intensified these feelings. This was the result of the secularist old elite losing the privileges they held since the founding of the Republic at the hands of the AK party and its democratic reforms. The fact that the majority group whose political existence had been denied for almost a century was able to realize their dreams of democracy and that they were finally in power was at the root of the secularists’ feelings of defeat.

The third feeling was one of hopelessness. Despair can, in fact, be considered a different level of feeling defeated. The source of despair was the realization that the defeat is permanent. There were other factors confirming that their new status was not temporary. First of all, the institutions of the tutelary regime, which were previously able to prevent the

ballot results to be actualized in politics, were no longer functional. Second, CHP, which was perceived as the last hope after the tutelary actors were purged, proved incapable of functioning as an effective opposition party. Third, the fact that the AK party won all the elections, and that its base of support seemed to multiply, led to the prediction that it would continue to win the elections in the foreseeable future. In short, the AK Party's increasing political influence, consolidation of its support base, and, most importantly the lack of an opposition party capable to serve as a checks-and-balance mechanism intensified the feelings of defeat of the old elite who did not doubt their own superiority for a minute.

The fourth mood was one of fear and paranoia. Feelings of elitism defeat and despair culminated in the fear and paranoia that everything would be lost. The exaggerated reaction to the new regulation on alcohol sales – which is similar to regulations in existence in many Western countries – was in essence a manifestation of this paranoia. The assumption that this was just another AK Party ploy to enforce a conservative lifestyle transformed harmless concerns into a full-fledged paranoia attack.

All these moods indicate that the underlying reason of the protests was the concern over changes to lifestyles. Populations with opposing political visions were able to participate in the protests on the same side because they feared losing their way of living and felt the need to defend

it against the AK Party. The main influence shaping the protests was neither demands for democracy nor rejection of authoritarian tendencies. It was the outward expression of the negative feelings of an elitist group who had been defeated, lost all hope for future and feared losing their way of life. Since the privileges they held onto for a century could most clearly be identified by their lifestyles, the defense of such privileges required a defense of lifestyles.

The fact that these protests were more a defense of lifestyles than a demand for democracy, or that they were more of a preemptive reaction to policies that could be implemented in the future rather than a reaction to already implemented policies, does not diminish their political value. The political incumbency has a duty to pay attention to the voices of the people regardless of the reasons or dynamics that led them to the streets. The protestors raised their voices for Erdogan and the AK party to hear. I have no doubt that their voices will be heard.

However, the political worth of the demonstrations does not preclude a discussion of the peculiarity of the situation or of the insipid nature of the prevalent moods. It is necessary to recognize that these feelings that begin with elitism and shifted to paranoia make living together as a united society difficult, perhaps even impossible. The way to improve this state of mind is not by offering unconditional acceptance of irrational fears but rather forcing a confronta-

tion with reality. A new political system in which no one has undue privileges, in which power is shaped by transparency, and the results of ballots are reflected in the politics is being constructed. Let's remind the AK party of the necessity and importance of recognizing diversity and respecting different lifestyles. Let's remind the protestors that their elitist attitudes only serve as an impediment to national reconciliation and that they need to confront reality.

To conclude, there is no doubt that the Gezi protests will influence the political discourse and practice in Turkey. The map of new political alliances these protests made visible will certainly influence the AK par-

ty's future strategies and policies. The political sphere in Turkey has met a new and strong form of opposition, which has the potential to shake politics (which has been in a lull since 2007) to its core. This new wave of opposition, despite having been mobilized with tendencies that exclude the traditional political actors, emphasizes a conventional way of doing politics. As such, it makes the ethnic, religious, and sectarian fissures that existed since the founding of the Republic, politically, socially and culturally visible. In addition to the short-term impact the protests will have on the ruling party, they will, without a doubt, have lasting impact on how politics will be conducted in the future.