

The Clash of 'Nations' in Turkey: Reflections on the Gezi Park Incident

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ABSTRACT *This article argues that the devastating mass demonstrations triggered by a humble environmentalist protest in the Gezi Park of İstanbul cannot be understood without taking into account the notion of 'culture'. The driving force behind the demonstrations, which turned into an extensive social outburst, is cultural and rooted in the worries of the secular people of the country about the shrinking ground of their lifestyle as a result of government pressures. What happened during the weeks of Gezi Park demonstrations was actually a reaction of these people to the 'official' trend of intensification toward religious morality in daily life and the public space.*

“One cannot flatly deny the probability that there will arise two nations in Turkey, one secular, the other Islamic. The possibility of a violent confrontation between these two clusters seems distant but might become realistic in the future.”¹

Professor Şerif Mardin made the above spine-tingling prediction about the future of Turkey nearly 25 years ago, and he very well might feel that time has confirmed his warning.² Indeed, the recent social outburst in Turkey, which stemmed from a small park in İstanbul and spread to all major cities of the country, has many indications that it can be taken as a proof for Mardin's 'far-sightedness.'

A group of sensitive environmental activists took a stand against a reconstruction plan in Gezi Park, Taksim, sincerely for the sake of the trees. However, an overly aggressive and violent police response to their peaceful resistance sparked an outrage, particularly within the secular segments of Turkish society against the religiously inspired authoritarian policies of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party). These policies, clearly visible since 2011 when the AK Party had its third subsequent electoral victory by taking nearly half of the votes, had long caused resentments among these people, as they felt their non-religious (but not 'irreligious') lifestyle was threatened.

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People stand on the flashpoint Taksim square in Istanbul during a wave of new alternative protests.

EPA

In fact, the AK Party had come to this point by following a very different path – one far from the recent authoritarian line. Its striking success in Turkey can be explained by its ability to convince many liberal-minded (surely, secular) people of its loyalty to the principles of liberal democracy. On this basis, it recruited considerable support from the non-conservative segments of the society, among which were the liberal, leftist and socialist circles, in its fight to defy the military-bureaucratic tutelage, particularly after the unsuccessful attempt of military intervention on April 27, 2007 (popularly called the ‘e-coup’).

The prosecutions, detainments, and charges of a large number of military officials and civilians who were accused of planning a coup against the AK Party government signaled the end of military-bureaucratic authoritarianism and a decisive turn toward a genuine democratic setting. Alas, the vacuum of authoritarianism left by the military bureaucracy seemed

to be filled by the AK Party cadres – essentially, the Party replaced the Army! The AK Party moved away from being the leading force for civil-plural democracy to being the architect in the construction of a new identity and culture in Turkey. Nothing illustrates this change of orientation more perfectly than the words of Aziz Babuşçu, the provincial chairman of the AK Party for İstanbul, who emphasized in a speech that the second decade of the AK Party power would be a period of “construction.”³ Small wonder then that some new codes related to education, or attempts to bring new regulations over very private matters such as abortion, alcohol consumption, and even public displays of affection, are all linked with this ‘will of construction.’ No doubt, these new regulations all caused frustrations in the secular circles of the society.

These frustrations were deepened by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s personal views over these issues, which were manifested through

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his hardly popular exclamations: “We do not want a drunk youth,” and “Go, drink at your home, not outside!” Or, regarding the abundance of young couples kissing and hugging in public areas, “I don’t imagine any mother who wants to see her daughter on the lap of a man.”

The devastating mass demonstrations triggered by the Gezi Park incident need to be evaluated with this background in mind. It otherwise will not be easy to understand the rise of an extensive social outburst from such a humble environmentalist protest. Is isn’t useful to explain what happened in terms of dirty games of outside forces (or, the so-called ‘interest-rate lobby’ of foreign investors); provocations by opposition parties; attempts by illegal extremist groups; efforts by the remnants of ‘coup-seekers’ with their expectation of return to the ancient regime of military tutelage; and, finally, a last cry of ‘laicist’ nationalists who were extremely active on the streets in the period preceding the e-coup of 2007.

The main thrust of the demonstrations led by the ‘laicist elite’ in 2007 was political and ideological, aimed at ousting the AK Party government while favoring the establishment, then based on military tutelage. However, the driving force behind the recent demonstrations is, as mentioned above, cultural and rooted in the worries of the ‘secular masses’ about the shrinking ground of their lifestyle as a result of government pressures. In fact, it would seem that the 2007 demonstrations have less in common with the ones started by the Gezi protests, and are more comparable to the ones organized by the AK Party as a counterattack. Notwithstanding differences in their connections with the opposite poles of the sociopolitical spectrum, both sets of demonstrations share the same context – that is, the context of power. As in the case of the 2007 demonstrations called *Cumhuriyet Mitingleri* (Rallies for the sake of the Republic), the demonstrations organized by the AK Party and called *Millî İrade Mitingleri* (Rallies for the sake of the National Will) had the characteristics of ‘power mobilization.’ The fact that the former appealed to a minority while the latter to a majority, does not make a difference in qualitative terms. Further, as far as the AK Party is concerned, its principal figures that were once subject to coercive power in 2007 now appear as the practitioners of power and coercion. And this brings them in line with the conduct of once effective, but now overthrown, guardians of the regime of military tutelage.

By now, I have attempted to clarify that the Gezi Park outburst was a re-

sult of the desperation and helplessness the secular people of Turkey felt under the increasingly authoritarian rule of the AK Party. These feelings were elevated by a perception that the government, particularly Prime Minister Erdoğan, did not consider the secular people a “decent” component of society vis-à-vis the religious-conservative majority – whom he re-

middle and upper class urbanites of secular orientation; the Alevis of Turkish, Kurdish, and Arabic origins; and a considerable part of the nominally Sunni Kurds leaning toward the secular Peace and Democracy Party, whose political agenda is based on defending the Kurdish identity and the cultural rights of the Kurds.

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Be that as it may, the most significant and impressive portion of the participants in the demonstrations were the youth born in the 1990s. They can be called “children of popular culture”, particularly to emphasize their distance to politics. Popular culture most notably flourished in Turkey at the turn of the 1990s with the introduction of private television channels into society. Loosely speaking, being part of the culture of everyday life in an urban, capitalist, industrial setting, it is also organically connected with a secular space.

ferred to throughout the demonstrations as “the 50 percent,” the reins of whom, he added, were “hardly” held by himself (implying that they would attack and harass the protesters). As a matter of fact, all press conferences held by Erdoğan subsequently in this process of unrest seemed to help nothing, except to clarify the message that he ceased to be the prime minister of the whole country, but of those who “faithfully” supported him.

In my opinion, the “unfaithful” in this context consist mainly of the

Throughout this text, I prefer using the term ‘secular’ (*sekiüler*) instead of the more common Turkish term, *laiklik* (laicity, from *laïcité* in French). The reason for this is to draw a distinction between a ‘culture’ and a ‘state (also elitist) ideology’. In the Turkish sense, the term *laiklik* has more resonance as an ideological stance relating to official control over a religious culture. Therefore, I refrain from using it and turn to the term secular; etymologically derived from the Latin word *saecularis* as an opposite to the term ‘sacred’, it refers to ‘this-worldliness’ and offers a design, regulation, and rule of human life without applying a sacred procedure of any sort. What

is at work here is not the termination or even limitation of religiosity, but rather, independence from it in daily life.

What happened in Turkey during the weeks of Gezi Park demonstrations was a reaction of the secular-minded people – a significant portion of whom were of the '90s generation – to the 'official' trend of intensification toward religious morality in daily life and the (secular) public space. One needs to emphasize, however, that this was not a reaction against religion, nor does it mean that the youth of the '90s are nothing but irreligious delinquents plunged in immorality. Quite the contrary; these young adults seem to know very well how to be sensitive with respect to religion. Nothing demonstrates this more impressively than their effort to create a physical safety zone for the pious participants in the Gezi Park protests (the so-called 'anti-capitalist Muslims') in order to prevent them from any sudden attack of the police forces while they were praying. This is not a generation that disregards religion, rather a generation that is quite respectful of religion.

Some surveys conducted during the protests to reveal the background of demonstrations confirm the points put forward here. Only 10 percent of the protesters said they were in Gezi Park for the trees. Ninety percent of them expressed that they were disturbed by and unhappy with the authoritarian discourse and attitude of Prime Minister Erdoğan, and were therefore in the streets and pub-

lic squares. Eighty-five percent also agreed that there was an increasing interference of the government in people's lives. The most pronounced motives of the participants in the surveys are freedom, democracy, and pluralism, while the least common include ideology, secret organizations, or party affiliations. And, the most dynamic element of the demonstrations was revealed to be young adults of the '90s generation.⁴

Finally, one should also not overlook the visibility of some members of the secular bourgeoisie as another economically significant (albeit demographically minor) part of the complex composition of the protestors. The existence of such a component also explains, I think, the priority of culture over ideological or economic dynamics in the nature of the uprising. Trade unions and leftist-socialist movements rallied together with these 'capitalists' throughout the demonstrations. The reason for this is solely cultural – in other words, coming together through a willingness to maintain the secular mode of life.

The secular bourgeoisie of Turkey, connected with *TÜSİAD* (Association of Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen), has long been disillusioned with the AK Party. This is because the government deliberately promoted the newly emerged "Muslim bourgeoisie" of Turkey, who had been initiated by the Prime Minister Turgut Özal in the 1980s but flourished and turned much more influential under the AK Party. Represented by the Islamist business association,

MÜSİAD (Association of Independent Industrialists and Businessmen)⁵ as a counterbalance to *TÜSİAD*, this religiously energized bourgeoisie cannot come to terms with its (secular) ‘classmates’ in class interests.⁶ Such is the ‘knot’: cultural conflict does not give way to class alliance. And these two bourgeois classes appear to support different national ideals – one secular, the other Islamic. Thus, Prof. Mardin’s remarks mentioned in the beginning of this article, in which he envisioned Turkey splitting into two nations about 25 years ago, also makes sense in this context. If we bring to mind that at the core of a nation lies the bourgeois dynamic, the culturally divided capitalist class in Turkey might indeed fuel tendencies of separation into two distinct national entities.

I conclude this paper with another quote from a much earlier, yet also seminal, work of Prof. Bernard Lewis. In his book, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, Lewis also brought to our attention the possibility of a cultural confrontation in Turkey, which appears as a similar version of the one introduced by Mardin nearly 30 years later. The prediction made by Lewis, however, includes a sense of optimism:

“The Turkish people, by the exercise of their practical common sense and powers of improvisation, may yet find a workable compromise between Islam and modernism that will enable

them, without conflict, to follow both their fathers’ path to freedom and progress and their grandfathers’ path to God.”⁷

Considering the political performance of the AK Party before 2011, one might have had full hope for the creation of such a ‘workable compromise’ in Turkey. Yet, the experience of the post-2011 period with the AK Party, particularly with the unfortunate course of events surrounding Gezi Park, tempt one to conclude that this hope was just in vain. ■

Endnotes

1. Şerif Mardin, “Culture and Religion: Towards the Year 2000,” in Turkish Political Science Association, *Turkey in the Year 2000* (Ankara, 1989), p. 185.

2. The actual focus of Mardin’s projection was the growth of religiosity in Turkey in the 1980s, a phenomenon not unconnected with the worldwide effect of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran.

3. Cited by Özgür Mumcu, “Alternatif Erdoğan gerçekliği,” *Radikal*, June 17, 2013.

4. I use the survey results quoted in *Radikal* (“Direnişçilerin portresi: Gençim, özgürlükçüyüm, Başbakan’a kızgınıml!”), June 5, 2013. See also Eyüp Can, “Kim bu Geziciler?,” *Radikal*, June 15, 2013.

5. It is quite popular in Turkey to argue that the ‘M’ in the acronym, although representing *müstakil*, which means independent in Turkish, does actually imply ‘Muslim.’

6. As an extensive, but also clear-cut account of this new, ‘Islamic’ capitalist class in Turkey, see Gül Berna Özcan and Hasan Turunç, “Economic Liberalization and Class Dynamics in Turkey”: New Business Groups and Islamic Mobilization,” *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 13, No. 3, (2011), p. 63-86.

7. Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) p. 424.