



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات  
ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

## Report

# From Taksim to Tahrir: A Turkish 'Arab Spring'?

*Dr. Larbi Sadiki\**

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**The Turkish national flag flutters on a pole above the crowd of people who gather for a rally against the government at the Taksim Square in Istanbul, Turkey, 09 June 2013.**

**[SUNA EPA/SEDAT]**

How poetic! Turkish PM, Recep Erdogan goes to the Arab Maghreb, the birth place of the Arab Spring. One simile is unavoidable. Erdogan's flight to an Arab monarchy is like that which landed Bin Ali in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on January 14, 2011, opening the revolutionary deluge the 'travel' of which continues beyond Arab borders.

The resulting people's power affirmations have thus far manifested themselves in a fascinating itinerary. The Arab Spring's journey departed from the Bourguiba Boulevard in Tunis to Cairo's Tahrir, via Benghazi, Manama, Sana'a and Damascus and all the way to New York's Wall Street. This travel itinerary joining moral protest movements from 'Occupy Wall Street' to 'Occupy Gezi' in Turkey calls for exploration, to weave together a narrative that delves into the specific 'detonators' as well the universal commons that have today catapulted an Arab Spring-like people's power activism into the forefront of dynamics of change in Turkey.

The factors that have detonated people's power protest in Turkey call for special attention: authoritarian space, single leadership cult, neo-liberalism, and youth dynamism.

## Authoritarian Space

Under authoritarian orders, anywhere, space, urban geography and even architecture make and shape citizenship. What has been unfurling in Turkey is no velvet revolution. However, the 'Occupy Gezi Park' protest in Istanbul, like in the public Squares of the Arab Spring, was an opportunity to reclaim public space for the purpose of re-making citizenship and unleashing democratic identities. That was the powerful symbolism of what Mohammed Bouazizi effected in Sidi Bouzid on December 17 when he committed an act of self-immolation in front of the building that represented central authority and in plain day light in front of an emasculated citizenry. In doing so, he raised the issue of 'ownership' of public space. He therefore chose to commit the act of self-immolation in broad day light, using a space that he thought was public and to which he had every right to sell his goods. That is perhaps why what Bouazizi did was not suicide, a private act hidden from the public eye. This is one of the chief commons of the uprisings in Arab countries and Turkey: geographies of resistance intended to challenge not only the hegemonic design of public space, returning people to political centre-stage as sovereigns.

So how does this apply to Turkey more specifically?

The detonator of the Turkish uprising was public resistance against effacing the historic Gezi Park, the epicentre of Taksim Square, from Istanbul's green space. It is a pleasant public garden that adds character to this space that Istanbul residents value as part of the identity of their magnificent city. Public outcry was therefore immediate, massive, and astounding. Its reverberations were felt, first and foremost, by the Turkish Prime Minister, Erdoğan and his AKP Islamist Party. Never was Erdoğan, who is still championed as a reformer and an icon of an economically buoyant Turkey since the rise of his party to power in 2002, challenged in such a way. Turkey's economic success story under his stewardship has, until early June, provided his administration with a firewall against his secular opponents whose track-record in government places into insignificance by comparison with the Islamist Prime Minister's achievements. To an extent, Erdoğan is the victim of his own success. That is, success that has helped him reinvent himself into an iconic stalwart of Turkish politics, over-confident, and, as far as the defenders of Gezi Park were concerned, may be even arrogant. It is this persona that has become so engrossed into its own sense of self-importance that proved unpopular when the matter entered the public domain, galvanising thousands to save the park's trees against the planned 'transformation' (the term used in the government's rhetoric) that would convert the centrally-located charming green park into a shopping mall. The so-called 'transformation' is part and parcel of a mega urban re-designing of

Istanbul. It aims to reconstruct Topçu Kışlası (Ottoman military Barracks) through a twofold plan: 1- erect a large and glamorous shopping mall; and 2- construct luxury residential apartments within Gezi Park, literally signing the death warrant of this green space that is much frequented and adored by Istanbul residents and tourists alike.

From the aforementioned, a few observations are in order. Firstly, like in the case of Bouazizi's self-immolation, the Gezi Park protest served simply as a detonator; it is both a cause and an effect. That is, it is a cause in the sense it has quickly become a rallying symbol for channelling public outrage against central authority. Secondly, like in the case of Arab protests, the Gezi Park protests cannot be interpreted ahistorically. Hence the cumulative frustration and disaffection came to the fore all at once. Such frustration and disaffection, as shall be elaborated below, has many facets. These include public perception that: the AKP is returning Turkish politics to singularity; existing opposition has been unable to carve a margin of existence for better representation of public preferences, leaving the public sphere solely in the hands of Erdoğan and the bourgeoisie, both Islamist and secular, that has benefited from his liberal policies; and, finally the re-design of public space to suit the constellation of interests that were set to profit from the 'transformation' of the park was felt as insensitive to the silent measurable segment of Turkish society for whom the project symbolised the last straw that broke the camel's back. That is, the silent had to come out in force to voice opposition to what they viewed as a policy preference 'vandalising' not only public space, but also a set of freedoms the incumbent power-holders were seen to be taking for granted. These did not only concern draconian laws about show of affection in public space and consumption of alcohol, but also what kind of 'public space' citizens are entitled to in a democracy. Luxury malls and residential buildings that the have-nots will be economically constrained to use will not compensate them for the loss of the freedom to sit, free of charge, in the shade of the trees removed from Gezi Park.

### **Single Leadership Cult**

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan returned to Turkey in the second week of June – proving he is still the subject of wide adulation by the AKP's rank-and-file and cadres. Erdoğan is no Bin Ali or a Mubarak. He owes his bona fide to the ballot not the bullet. His ten-year tenure was inaugurated with his democratic election in 2003. He returned to the public on two other occasions to seek new mandates in free and fair elections. He is credited with many a political feat in Turkey: economic success, the fight against the deep state or derin devlet, taming the historically dominant military, peace-making with the Kurds, and, of course, solid economic performance.

His opponents find all kinds of faults, including imprisonment of secular opponents and some abuses for human rights and public freedoms – including recent laws to ban the sale of alcohol from 10pm to 6am, sale of alcohol around mosques and school precincts, and show of affection in public space. For his detractors, this is a back-door for imposing shari'a-like public morality in a staunchly secularist country where Kemalist legacy outlives the election of Islamists into power.

Erdoğan is not short of charisma, and fighting spirit. Nor is he lacking in self-conceit, either. This may be where he behaves and has behaved since the eruption of the protests in Turkey defiantly. He has no time for 'street politics'. This is perhaps where he has lost ground by appearing haughty and impervious to what the instantaneous barometer of public opinion says. Erdoğan always looks healthy, sporty, tall, confident, and sufficiently Westernised in attire and outlook, especially in terms of economic liberalism. He has made up for EU rejection of Turkey's membership by investing in economic prowess that EU PIGS (Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Spain) can only dream of in the foreseeable future. The man made his mark in Turkish politics through hands-on management as mayor of Istanbul and through direct engagement with ordinary citizens seem today remote. Perhaps he has grown too big for his shoes. On the one hand, he seems to look the look and talks the talk, projecting an image of a Turkey that aspires to stand tall amongst the ranks of nation-states. It occupies today position number 17 amongst the world's most powerful economies, more than doubling his country's gross domestic product. On the other, in gatherings of the Justice and Development Party he can adopt threatening rhetoric against those who stand on the way of Turkey's march – and this has increasingly threatened his ideological foes, seeing his sayings and deeds to be proof that he is keen on marching alone and foisting upon Turkey a narrow-minded brand of Islamist state. Erdoğan has come a long way: someone with strong Islamist convictions for which he suffered personally through imprisonment in 1999. He has prevailed over the deep state through which the hidden hands of the military were always assumed to sabotage anti-Kemalists, such as Islamists. However, he has prevailed in ways that has definitely changed Turkey: more tolerance of ethnic minorities, acceptance of Kurds and peace-making with them, diverse media speaking with many ideological tongues, and confrontation of past tragedies, including persecution of Alawites, amongst others, and the attempt to deploy diplomacy to resolve questions over the Armenian past.

However, even with this glowing career and long Curriculum Vitae rich in achievements that no other Islamist leader anywhere can boast, Erdoğan may have over-stayed his welcome in Turkish politics. This is a common thread linking Arab

Spring protests and those begun in Taksim Square in Turkey in early June 2013. Erdoğan perhaps represents a personality cult that has resulted from political success and democratic vetting in free and fair elections. This personality cult, even if partly accidental, clashes with a moment of popular symbolism and the rise of people as the focus of protest-based politics. Ten years at the helm in a democracy is ten years too long in the modern era where publics everywhere demand alternation of power, young blood, and fresh faces. Even the athletic, sporty and elegant Erdoğan may have aged in the consciousness of Turkish citizenry. And Erdoğan own demeanour and conceit have not helped even if the softer image off his wife Emine, chic in head scarf and modest, appeals to millions of Turks who have been given the freedom to yearn and evolve freely as Muslims in both the public and private spheres, overturning decades of Kemalist draconian reinvention and re-modelling of Turkish identity in the image of secular Europeans. Today iconic leaders are no longer a mark of modern politics. Rather, it is the phrase 'short and sweet' that modern citizens associate with political tenure. The Taksim Square protests may force Erdoğan into earlier retirement from the helm. Certainly, politics after the protests will no doubt fan the ambitions of younger cadres and capable leaders who have thus far shown deference and reverence towards Erdoğan. Longevity in power can narrow a leader's prism. This might have already happened to Erdoğan whose reliance on close advisory acolytes form within the AKP may already immure him from the woes of the little people whose protests in the past a few days sent him a not so veiled message to either shape up or pay the price of self-centrism: early political retirement.

### **Neo-Liberal Economic Dogmatism**

Islamist ideology can work in tandem with neoliberal dogmatism. This where the AKP has dazzled those who has until recently seen it as a model for newly-democratising Arab Spring countries. One wonders what would a 'Wikileaks' cable reads like if the business dealing and wheeling of the capitalist class, including that affiliated with the ruling AKP, was to be made public. This is not to suggest corruption is rife. Rather, it is a comment on the business empire building that has evolved under the AKP – mostly to the benefit of Turkey. Some of that business involved transactions in the hundreds of millions, at some point in time, with Israel. Regardless, the gist of the point being made here is that Islamist economic management over ten years has plugged Turkey into the global capitalist economy. The result is an unashamedly neo-liberal economy with, inevitably, authoritarian aspects in terms of distribution. Many got richer, but many more got poorer. The AKP has over ten years overturned the economic misfortune that beleaguered previous secular administrations. Partly, this success must be accounted for within

the specific context of pandering to the EU 'hoop' Turkey wanted to jump through on its way to full membership, now almost abandoned and represented through anti-EU rhetoric. This earlier scheme of things meant equal full commitment towards economic neoliberalism – a full-blown capitalist economy to match EU member states' economic values and standards. Two pillars on which this twin policy preference was built was privatisation and liberalisation. Indices of poverty improved in the 2003-2007 period only to come down again as of 2009, for instance. Privatisation also surged ahead according to plan. From 2003 to 2011, when Erdoğan won his third term in office, the privatisation jumped from \$ 405 million to \$ 5.9 billion. The big public firms and companies that underpinned the Turkish state for decades were amongst the assets sold to the private sector: TEKEL, construction, tobacco, and hydraulic power dams, namely HES. This aggressive liberalisation pitted a segment of the labour force against the Islamist privatising administration. These voices, still angry about battles that were never won during the height of privatisation, might have joined Taksim and other Turkish Squares in order to vent out pent-up disaffection and disillusionment.

### Youth Dynamism

The element of youth is important when accounting for the rapid spread of the protests to many Turkish cities and the ambiance of solidarity created to rally around the defence of Gezi Park. In fact, nowhere was this rare show of esprit de corps visible than in the unity that brought fiercely rival football fans into unison in Taksim Square and elsewhere. Young morbidly hostile football fans — used confronting riot police and tear gas barrages during post-match hooligan battles — have put their differences aside and joined Taksim Square demonstrations, shielding protesters from police brutality. Prior to the protests, no one could have imagined die-hard football fans from Turkey's top three richest and most powerful clubs, Fenarbahçe, Galatasaray and Besiktas, coming together in one stand in support of the protesters and against the government. There are football followers whose post-match violence and mutual enmity resulted in bans against them to spectate games in matches where their clubs played each other. It was quite a spectacle to see this side of football settled peacefully in the arena of politics — fans in their club jerseys adding panache, youth, dynamism and colourfulness to Taksim Square. The symbolism could not be more powerful. Just as rival football fans forgot about their differences, so seemed Taksim Square as waves of protesters swelled by the hour. The power of the powerless, emboldened by the dynamism and fearless of youth, struck deep into the hearts of AKP stalwarts who have for ten years perhaps forgotten that they were not alone and that there were 'publics' out there, other than their committed constituency, that they must factor into the

political equation when making big decisions such as designing public space or planning malls in the place where a much valued park stands. It is youth dynamism that also united the European and Asian sides of Istanbul.. On June 1st, thousands of largely young men and women walked the length of Bagdad caddesi, in the Asian side, to cross the famous suspension bridge and make their way to Taksim Square. It is this solidarity that emboldened youth possessive and protective of certain freedoms that made Turkey's people speak out in one voice 'hands off Gezi Park'. And in identical show of unity and passion they sought to walk on Erdoğan Prime Ministerial offices. Finally, like Arab youth movements from Tunis to Sana'a, young men and women made vast use of IT know-how, bringing social media- Facebook and Twitter – to the fore in the dissemination of information, mobilisation and organisation. It was as if they were reading from the scripts of Arab Spring protests: Twitter fans through hashtags like #occupygezi opened channels of communication. The spirit of solidarity and defiance in the face of brutality and draconian reaction could not be extinguished by police riot control vehicles' water-hoses. Similarly, Facebook users shared with the country and the world live footage, pictures, slogans, and messages. They succeeded to save Gezi Park. This could be a rehearsal for protests to follow in the future – no doubt.

## Conclusion

One week is a long time in politics, as it is always said. The uprisings of Turkey have proved this to be a truism. A week before the ruling AKP and its charismatic leader, Prime Minister Erdoğan, were paraded as 'models' for Arab Spring fledgling democracies. What is certain is that Erdoğan and his ruling party, the AKP, after Taksim Square protests will never be the same. A page is being turned in the history of arguably the most successful Islamist party anywhere in the Muslim world. The AKP may have no choice but to ditch Erdoğan lest Erdoğan condemns his party to the proverbial dustbin of history. Henceforth, for the AKP it is a case of 'reform or perish'. In any case, the seeds of a Turkish Spring may have been sown in the very grounds of the space, Gezi Park, the AKP planned to bury. Nature has a way of striking back: Gezi Park has come so close to burying Erdoğan and his party.

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*\*Dr Larbi Sadiki is a former Senior Lecturer in Middle East Politics at the University of Exeter, and author of Arab Democratization: Elections without Democracy (Oxford University Press, 2009) and The Search for Arab Democracy: Discourses and Counter-Discourses (Columbia University Press, 2004). He now teaches at Qatar University.*