



INSS Insight No. 434, June 6, 2013

The Protests in Turkey:

Letting off Steam or Engine of Change?

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The protests that started at Taksim Square in Istanbul and have spread to other locations throughout Turkey are among the most interesting developments to have occurred in the country since the Justice and Development Party first came to power over a decade ago. While it is still difficult to envision a scenario in which these protests might topple Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, they could hamper his efforts to achieve constitutional reform before the direct presidential election in 2014, in which he plans to run. In fact, parts of Turkey's population are worried about a strongman president, a la Russia's Vladimir Putin, which is one of the underlying factors causing the protests. Pamphlets distributed during the demonstrations read: "This is not about a park. It's about not being heard. It's about the abuse of state power. It's about media being censored. It's about minorities not being protected. This is about democracy."

Secular Turks comprise a key protest group. Among them one may discern a wide range of ideologies – liberals, communists, and conservative Kemalists. Young liberals are growing more hostile towards the Justice and Development Party and feel that they have no representation in parliament. They express repugnance for the obsolete stances of the Republican People's Party (founded by Kemal Ataturk) and do not identify with the nationalistic positions of the National Action Party.

Another interesting group participating in the demonstrations is made up of the country's Alevi minority, estimated at 15 percent of the population, and possesses historic grievances against the Sunni majority. Some of its current frustration seems to be a result of the recent peace process between the government and the Kurds, a process in which the Alevis think their rights have been forgotten. A symbolic manifestation of the government's attitude to this minority is seen in the ambitious plan to build a third bridge over the Bosphorus that will be named Yavuz Sultan Suleiman Bridge, after the ninth Ottoman sultan, 'Selim the Grim', historically known for slaughtering Alevis. In addition, the Alevis are unhappy with Turkey's policy regarding events in Syria and its tough stance against Bashar al-Assad's regime. The

Kurdish minority also has a presence at the protest, though southeast Turkey is relatively quiet.

People who identify with the Gulen movement seem to be sitting on the fence. On the one hand, they're unhappy with Erdogan's increasingly authoritarian tendencies, but on the other hand many of the movement's supporters are Justice and Development Party voters. The military is also not a player in the protests, neither in the social media nor in the streets. This is hardly surprising, given the process Erdogan started and implemented in recent years of neutralizing the Turkish army as a political player. Most of the demonstrators in the Square also don't want the military's interference. Nonetheless, in terms of historical perspective, this could turn out to be a precedent as political instability was in the past one of the strongest motives for military intervention.

One of Turkey's most pressing problems in recent years is the self-censorship of the media resulting from the arrests of many of the country's journalists and the pressure exerted by the Justice and Development Party on media outlets not toeing the government line. Thus, the social media – already popular in Turkey (32 million registered Facebook users and some 10 million on Twitter in a population of almost 74 million) – have become a major factor in the spread of the protests and the gain in their momentum. There was criticism of the Turkish traditional media before the protests too, but the media's conduct during the demonstrations (as well as that of the police) was described on the social media as 'betrayal'.

As for what led to the protest, social media discourse claimed the demonstrations were a spontaneous, emotional reaction to the regime's violent, suppressive conduct. Tear gas, water cannons and other violent ways to disperse demonstration were only some of the means the police used to break up the civil, non-violent protest. As a result of the mismanagement of the initial protest, the chain reaction accelerated, as did the regime's inability to contain and control the height of the flames. The situation worsened when it was clear that the official, traditional media were co-opted by the regime. When the riots erupted, all the official television stations continued with their previously scheduled programming. The social protest wasn't covered and no official media platform was extended for it to be heard. The frustration was therefore fueled even more, and the coverage, analysis and documentation of the protest became almost exclusively the province of social media. The government's anxiety about the effect of social media is reflected by the fact that Turkcell, the country's leading cell phone provider, admitted that on the first day of large-scale demonstration it was told to curtail service in the Taksim Square area, and, as well, by Erdogan's public assertion that Twitter is full of lies.

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's and President Abdullah Gul's comments that the protests may tarnish Turkey's image, are notable. They should be understood in the general context of Turkey's attempt to expand its influence in adjacent regions via soft power and the concept of the 'Turkish model'. But it would be more accurate to say that the demonstrations are not what is harming Turkey's

image but rather the manner in which they are being suppressed. More specifically, the comments of these senior Turkish representatives should be understood in the context of Istanbul's campaign to host the 2020 Summer Olympic Games. Given that the decision on the games' host city is supposed to be announced in September, current assessments are that Istanbul's chances to win the coveted host role have been seriously compromised.

The possibility of the demonstrations becoming a Turkish Spring, in the sense of toppling the government, seems remote. On the social media, many stressed that Taksim is not Tahrir, and the Turkish president noted the demonstrations have more in common with Occupy Wall Street than they do with the upheavals in the Arab world. It would also be a mistake to view what is happening in Turkey as simply a struggle between secular and pious Turks. Even if the secularists are leading the protests, other members of the public also identify with some of their criticism of Erdogan's conduct. The current protest may be seen therefore as a warning sign to the Justice and Development Party. The claim on the social media is that the popular outburst will have a strategic impact on Turkey's political map. Many believe that what started as a spontaneous social protest must be translated into organized political activity. Even though some signs carried during the demonstrations called for Erdogan's resignation, it is apparent that most of the protesters are primarily interested in restraining him and some of his steps, which have recently been viewed by many as undemocratic.