

# Unrest in Istanbul: Turkey's season of struggle

by [Howard Eissenstat](#) in the [September 18, 2013](#) issue



Taksim Square, June 2013 (© Alan Hilditch)

Everything seemed to be going so well in Turkey—until this past summer when popular protests broke out and were met by a violent government crackdown.

The country is in many ways the Middle East's success story. Under a charismatic leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the ruling Justice and Development Party (known by its Turkish initials as the AKP) has enjoyed a level of electoral success not seen in Turkey since the 1950s, and its political achievements have been remarkable.

The AKP tamed the hyperinflation that haunted Turkey for decades, while managing a period of strong economic growth. Turkey has weathered the global economic slowdown better than most countries. The AKP also faced down Turkey's arrogant military elite, forcing them out of political life and back into the barracks. It initiated an important series of liberalizing legal reforms and opened up greater avenues for expression of Kurdish cultural identity. While the government still engages in a massive public campaign against recognizing the Armenian genocide during World War I, discussion and even commemoration of the genocide is now commonplace, at least in some cities.

Though the AKP's efforts at asserting a greater role for Turkey internationally has had a number of serious setbacks—most notably its newly sour relations with Israel and its early resistance to NATO intervention in Libya—the overall trajectory has

been positive. Turkish businesses have played a major role in rebuilding Iraq and are showing a willingness to venture further afield. Africa, for example, has become a new focus for Turkish diplomats and businesses.

Under the Obama administration, U.S.-Turkish cooperation is probably as close as it has been at any time since the cold war. Obama and Erdoğan have a strong working relationship, which has only intensified since the beginning of the Arab uprisings in 2011. Turkey is arguably the most important American ally in addressing the crisis in Syria, for example, and Turkish cooperation with the United States on Iran seems to be considerably stronger than it was a few years ago.

American officials have frequently spoken of Turkey as a democratic model for the Middle East. It is easy to see why. Turkey's development is fueled not by oil but by a strong educational system and an aggressive market sector. Unlike the oil-driven wealth of much of the Middle East, Turkey enjoys a diverse and vibrant economy. And unlike most of the region, it is solidly democratic. The AKP clearly has Islamist roots, but the party believes that power comes from the ballot box, and it has been committed to working within secular institutions. In Turkey, where more than 99 percent of the people are officially listed by the state as Muslim, being a good Muslim does not mean calling for Islamic law.

But the popular protests that began in June in Turkey reveal some of the deeper problems the country faces. The protests may have been sparked by attempts to demolish Gezi Park in Istanbul, but the deeper cause can be found in long-standing failures on the part of Erdoğan and the AKP. Religion plays a role in this unrest, but Islamism is not the core of what has gone wrong in Turkey.

The AKP displays a kind of illiberalism that has marked Turkish political life since the modern state was founded in 1923. As Kerem Öktem has shown in *Angry Nation*, a history of modern Turkey, the violence of Turkish nationalism at the time the state was founded was retained in efforts to create a hegemonic national culture. Ethnic, religious and cultural diversity have been regarded with disdain. The AKP has amended this approach in small ways, but it remains a very strong feature of the ruling culture.

As the AKP consolidated power, it became more traditionally "Turkish" in its rhetoric and tactics. It engaged in a particularly brutal crackdown on Kurdish nationalists until peace negotiations, now apparently running aground, were begun last year.

While the AKP had once been willing to implement significant reforms in an effort to enter the European Union, by 2011 this process has been abandoned in all but name. Following EU criticism of this summer's crackdown on protesters, Erdoğan's response was matter-of-fact: "You [the EU] do not respect democracy." Under the AKP, Turkey functions as a democratically elected single-party state.

To be sure, Turkey enjoys regular, free, fair elections. But the AKP's electoral success, buoyed by an electoral system that is specifically aimed at neutering minority (and particularly Kurdish) voices, has over the past decade rewarded it with unprecedented political success at virtually all levels of government. Moreover, because the role of local government is very weak compared to the central state, the AKP has been able to exert its will in almost every corner of Turkish society.

Like any effective political machine, the AKP has capitalized on its electoral success by cementing its base, rewarding friends and cowing enemies. In this, it resembles the great urban political machines of mid-20th-century America, but with an important difference: it operates at a national level, and there is no outside force to counterbalance it. The Turkish military once held dangerous sway over Turkish politics, but its removal from political life, necessary as it was, did little to improve Turkey's record on human rights.

Over time, virtually every state bureaucracy, from the police to the postal service, has been filled with AKP allies. Businesses that are viewed as friendly to the AKP are rewarded with contracts and an easy path through government regulations. Businesses that are viewed as enemies are punished with obstruction, investigations and steep fines. Political enemies are hounded by the courts and by the press.

A recent article by Yavuz Baydar in the *New York Times* noted that the collusion of big business and big government in Turkey has virtually eliminated serious reporting ("In Turkey, Media Bosses Are Undermining Democracy," July 19). Any journalist brave enough to flout the bosses and report unpopular news will be sacked. (Baydar himself was fired from his position at the daily paper *Sabah* within days of his *Times* article.) And when that doesn't work, there is always jail. Reporters Without Borders has termed Turkey "the world's biggest prison for journalists" because of the large number of reporters who have been arrested under antiterrorism or other statutes.

In following Turkish human rights issues over the years, I've often been struck by how little outrage outrageous state crimes can generate. The nation gave a

collective shrug at the news that Turkish authorities had bombed unarmed Turkish civilians at Uludere in 2011. The harsh tactics that security forces utilized this past summer on protesters in Istanbul are long-standing and a nearly weekly event in some Kurdish towns in the eastern part of the country. Some Kurds, watching the Gezi crackdown, responded by saying, “Now you know what we’ve experienced for the last 30 years.”

What made events at Gezi Park different was the way they crystalized larger issues for a wide coalition of actors. The government’s shockingly heavy-handed response to a handful of mostly middle-class nonviolent demonstrators provoked thousands—and eventually millions—of protesters to take to the streets.

One important component of the protests is their critique of the AKP’s penchant for rapid and sometimes gratuitous expansion. Istanbul and much of Turkey has been transformed over the past decade. One can marvel at the economic vibrancy and commercial flare of the country’s development, but the cultural and social costs have been high. Long-established family businesses and historic sites have been pushed out to make space for shopping malls. Erdoğan seems to have acquired a taste for large projects aimed at cementing his legacy, even if it means bypassing normal systems of planning and consultation in the process.

Erdoğan’s plans for Gezi Park and nearby Taksim Square are one example of that approach. It is for him a chance to make his mark on the center of Republican Istanbul.

Gezi Park was built almost literally on the bones of an Armenian past. The park, like much of Taksim Square, was built over an Armenian cemetery that was expropriated after the creation of the Turkish Republic. Now it is one of the few remaining green spaces in the city and is viewed as the heart of secular Turkey. It is a place where residents of a vast and heterogeneous city can meet and mix with relatively little tension.

Erdoğan’s vision of the new Taksim, which included a new mosque, a reconstructed Ottoman army barracks and a shopping mall, was seen by many Turks as a gratuitous attack on one of the last places where the AKP vision did not yet hold sway.

The miscalculation is a mark of Erdoğan’s increasing tone deafness. In many ways, Erdoğan is an attractive personality. His tough, brusque charisma is well received in

a society that values strong-willed, patriarchal figures. Yet he can be intolerant and disdainful of criticism, and he seems to take unseemly pleasure in demonstrating the weakness of his opponents.

The AKP shows an increased use of social engineering, as evidenced by new limitations on alcohol, attacks on reproductive rights and a campaign against public displays of affection. This agenda is not a sign of Islamism as it is generally understood in the West, however, for it includes no calls for enacting Islamic law. Erdoğan clearly believes in secular institutions. Rather, the moves roughly parallel those of social conservatives in the United States who seek to embrace secular institutions and infuse them with moral content colored by religion. Perhaps the most striking example of this effort is the AKP's support for creationism, which is routinely taught in Turkish schools. The arguments, examples and illustrations are often directly borrowed from American creationist literature.

One of the secrets of the AKP's electoral success has been the seemingly unbridgeable divisions among the opposition. The crackdown on protesters at Gezi Park seemed to encapsulate common fears, and, at least for the moment, it brought that opposition together in a remarkable mass movement.

The protests have in many respects highlighted the best in Turkish society. They have been remarkably diverse, including members of the LGBT community, non-Muslims, secularists, militant nationalists, Kurdish nationalists, anticapitalists and liberals. They have been remarkably creative, including tango dances with gas masks, silent protests and polite community forums. And, at least when the tear gas wasn't too thick, they have been joyful. Most recently a group of anticapitalist Muslims organized massive communal dinners for breaking the fast of Ramadan.

In contrast, Erdoğan's response to the protests has demonstrated remarkably little flexibility. Erdoğan has showed disdain toward the protests, calling participants "bandits" and "hooligans." He has termed Twitter "a social disease" for its role in helping protesters organize and chronicle abuses. He has called international critics "ill-informed" and hypocritical.

Erdoğan sees the protests as fundamentally undemocratic, an attempt to take power in the streets when it could not be won at the ballot box. He remembers with bitterness that many of his critics had once counted on the military to oust him. Moreover, Erdoğan is without question the most popular politician in Turkey. Not

only did his party win recent elections with an increasing percentage of the vote, but few doubt that he would win again if he called elections today.

Turkey is a divided country, but Erdoğan has the unswerving support of nearly half of it, while the political opposition is hopelessly divided and largely incompetent. A survey of the protesters in Taksim Square in early June by researchers at Bilgi University indicated that only about 5 percent of those who participated viewed themselves as potentially supporting the AKP. National surveys indicate that AKP support has only dropped by about the same percentage despite the crisis and a declining economy. The AKP has clearly opted for a twofold response: rallying its base and cracking down on its opposition.

Since the beginning of the crisis, Erdoğan has staged a series of massive public rallies. His rhetoric at these events has been decisively polemical, aimed not at healing wounds but at mobilizing his supporters. Violent attacks on protesters by AKP supporters have been reported in a number of places. Men armed with machetes and truncheons have been seen working alongside the police.

The rhetoric has focused fury on the international media, on unnamed foreign powers and, sometimes subtly and sometimes openly, at “the Jews.” The last of these is particularly troubling because it represents a renewal of an anti-Semitism that Erdoğan’s generation had worked to marginalize in the late 1990s. His embrace of it now tells us that he is willing to feed the worst instincts of his base to cement support. It also tells us that he no longer is particularly concerned about what the West will say.

This militant rhetorical response is coupled with a renewed attempt to centralize power and to neuter political opposition. Since the Gezi crisis began, the government has reworked legal language to further underline that the military has no role in politics and executed a purge of the foreign ministry to ensure that top positions are held by party loyalists. An urban planner who was a key figure in criticizing the original redevelopment plan has been transferred to a distant province. A large number of journalists have been fired from their positions for reporting on the news (or they resigned in disgust when they were prevented from doing so). Hundreds have been arrested in the aftermath of the protests, including many who were arrested on the basis of messages they sent via social media.

In the short term, Erdoğan's strategy will almost certainly win out. For all of its vibrancy, the Gezi protest movement shows little capacity to mobilize an effective political campaign. The opposition remains divided and, with the exception of some figures in the Kurdish BDP, unimpressive.

There are, however, two important reasons for hope. The first is that significant elements of the AKP are distinctly unhappy with Erdoğan's handling of the protests. The most important counterweight to Erdoğan within the party is the powerful Gülen movement, which has made its discomfort with his handling of the crisis an open secret. It is noteworthy that Turkish president Abdullah Gül, who is close to the movement, has taken a markedly more liberal approach than Erdoğan in his response to the crisis.

The Gülen movement is a religious and social movement led by Turkish Islamic scholar Fethullah Gülen. Gülenists constitute an important wing within the ruling AKP but have long been uneasy about Erdoğan's aggressive style, even if they share his long-term vision of a Turkey that embraces both modern capitalism and Islam. Both the Gülenists and Erdoğan assume that devout Islamic faith and secular modern institutions can—and indeed must—coexist. They also assume that Turkey should take a leading role in world affairs and serve as a bridge between civilizations.

For the Gülenists, the violence of the crackdown and the crassness of Erdoğan's attacks on the sensibilities of the opposition are simply bad strategy, which undermine the movement's long-term objectives. In a statement regarding the protests, Gülen makes clear his disdain for the protesters, but he is equally clear that the government's response was a clumsy one:

We therefore need to be alert and act intelligently. We need to see the smallest problems as consequential, and we need to handle them in a smart way. If you are facing an invasion of ants, do not dismiss it. They reach into your pots of butter and honey, and pollute them with toxins; do not dismiss it. Taking problems lightly stems from light thinking, light reasoning, and light judgment.

It is not clear what compromise the two powerful wings of the AKP will eventually reach, but it is likely that Erdoğan will be pushed to reign in his instinct for confrontation.

The second positive element can be seen in the public forums that have sprung up in Turkey since the crackdown. These events, in which diversity of opinion is openly

and publicly expressed, represent an important break from the depoliticized public of Turkey's recent past, and their celebration of diverse opinions represents a significant departure from the old rhetoric of an undivided Turkish nation.

A few weeks ago a friend of mine told me the story of a young, middle-class woman standing up at one of these forums and saying, "I just want to say to the Kurds here: I'm sorry. I didn't know. Or perhaps I knew and didn't care what you were experiencing. I could have done better. And I want to apologize now."

Empathy for the other and respect for diversity. If the Gezi protests have introduced those themes into Turkish political culture, then they have accomplished something great indeed.