

Anti-Government Protests Rock Turkey

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In 2001, Recep Tayyip Erdogan established the Justice and Development Party (AKP). In November 2002, it won nearly two-thirds of parliamentary seats. It did so with 35% of the vote.

Earlier dominant parties were rebuffed. Hard times aroused public anger. Voters rejected corrupt political rule. At the time, Istanbul newspaper Sabah called AKP's triumph a "revolution by impoverished Anatolia against the old political guard."

Party leader Erdogan earlier was Istanbul mayor. On March 14, 2003, he became prime minister. He feigned moderation. He pretended advocacy for poor, disadvantaged, oppressed Turks.

He spurned them straightaway. He's authoritarian. His policies are hardline. He supports wealth and power interests. He backed Washington's war on terror. An official AKP statement said:

"Our party will give priority to establish a necessary international basis against terrorism and the cooperation of Turkey in this struggle."

"We will continue our longstanding defence collaboration with USA and spread this relationship to the economy, investment, science and technology."

Erdogan's been prime minister for over 10 years. He was reelected twice. Why voters did so they'll have to explain. He last won in June 2011. General elections are scheduled every five years. Often they're held early. Parliament can call them. So can Turkey's president.

Turkey is more police state than democracy. Press freedom is compromised. Censorship is standard practice. Dissent isn't tolerated. It's considered terrorism.

No country imprisons more journalists than Turkey. A well-known saying goes: "The Turkish translation of freedom of speech (says) the less you talk the longer you'll be out of prison."

Journalists, academics, students, trade unionists, human rights supporters, lawyers, and other activists challenging regime rule are vulnerable. Thousands are imprisoned for doing so. Erdogan rules repressively. He's more despot than democrat.

Civil and human rights abuses are commonplace. Wealth and power interests alone matter. Popular needs go begging. Authoritarian neoliberalism defines policy.

Police state violence targets dissenters. Thousands are arrested. Terrorism and other false charges follow. So do convictions. Victims face harsh imprisonment. For some it's longterm.

On June 2, [Reuters](#) headlined “Protesters defiant as Turkey unrest goes into third day.” Hours later the headline read “Calm on Turkish streets after days of fierce protests.” They could resume any time.

On May 28, initial ones began in Istanbul. They were nonviolent. Environmentalists led them. They oppose replacing Taksim Gezi Park with a shopping mall. Reconstructing Taksim Military Barracks is planned.

Police initiated clashes. Demonstrators were attacked violently. Hundreds were arrested. Many more were injured. Several deaths were reported.

Clashes continued Saturday. Arrests and injuries followed. Serious ones include head trauma and broken limbs. One student lost an eye. State-sponsored repression defines Turkish policy. One observer called what’s ongoing “a new low, even for Turkey.

Protests spread nationwide. Doing so challenges Erdogan’s rule. On Saturday, Istanbul protesters yelled “Erdogan Resign.”

What began against destroying Taksim Gezi Park’s green space now reflects antagonism against authoritarian neoliberal harshness and more.

Recent polls show two-thirds of Turks oppose war with Syria. Last fall, tens of thousands protested in Istanbul. They pledged support for Syria’s people.

They denounced Erdogan’s ties to Washington. They did so after parliament authorized him to send soldiers into “foreign countries.” The ruling followed a shell fired from Syria. It killed five people in Akcakale. Perhaps insurgents did so provocatively.

Two days of mortar fire followed. Erdogan pledged “to act in a timely and quick manner against any additional risks and threats facing our country.”

Turkish warplanes struck a Syrian military camp. An unknown number of soldiers were killed. A NATO statement wrongfully blamed Assad. Pentagon press secretary George Little condemned what he called his “depraved behavior.”

Washington, Turkey, other key NATO powers, Israel, and rogue Arab state allies bear full responsibility for ongoing Syrian conflict.

Erdogan’s now in the eye of the storm at home. He menaces regional stability. He governs despotically. Public rage challenges him.

Opposition MP Suat Kiniklioglu said, “Things have been building up and Gezi Park was the last straw.” It’s not “about trees any more.”

Other contentious issues include new legislation prohibiting public drinking and alcohol promotion. Last week, Erdogan said he’d name a new bridge over the Bosphorus after an Ottoman Caliphate founding sultan. He repressed Turkey’s Alevi religious minority.

In Ankara, a television channel bureau chief was arrested. Coverage of ongoing protests he aired were blocked. Other local news channels broadcast cooking or unrelated programs. They did so during the worst of police violence.

On June 1, Noam Chomsky condemned it. In a written statement, he said he joins with “others who defend basic human rights in condemning the brutal measures of the state authorities in response to the peaceful protests in Taksim in Central Istanbul.”

“The reports of the past few days are reminiscent of some of the most shameful moments of Turkish history.”

Some observers ask if what’s ongoing reflects Erdogan’s Mubarak moment. It’s far too early to know. It’s unlikely but who knows. Anything is possible.

On February 1, 2011, Erdogan challenged Mubarak. He was perhaps the first prominent political leader urging him to step down.

“No government can survive against the will of its people,” he said. He warned Mubarak adding: “We are all passing, and we will be judged by what we left behind.”

On Saturday, protesters set parts of central Istanbul and Ankara ablaze. Police responded with tear gas, pepper spray, water cannons, and other forms of brutality.

Sunday in Istanbul was calm. Clashes continued in Ankara. They resumed in Istanbul and other cities on Monday. [Russia Today](#)’s web site provides live central Istanbul coverage. It’s ongoing. During Sunday AM hours, people were milling around. Banners remain displayed.

By afternoon, huge crowds returned. Police didn’t challenge them. They could any time. Public anger hasn’t abated. On Saturday, people yelled “dictator,” “murderers,” “fascists.” A message spray-painted on a department store facade said: “AKP to the grave, the people to reign.”

Journalist Mahir Zeynalov called public anger expressed “unprecedented in character.” It reflects what appears to be mass nationwide sentiment.

Protesters marched past state television TRT headquarters. They shouted, “Burn the state media.” Sabah is a major pro-government newspaper. On Saturday, its lead article promoted Erdogan’s anti-smoking campaign.

Reuters said protesters “lit bonfires among overturned vehicles, broken glass and rocks and played cat-and-mouse on side streets with riot police.”

“The ferocity of the police response has shocked Turks, as well as tourists caught up in the unrest in one of the world’s most visited destinations.”

Helicopters fired tear gas into residential neighborhoods. Various buildings were targeted. Video footage showed one protester struck by an armored police truck.

Retired government employee Mehmet Haspinar was quoted saying “All dictators use the same methods, oppressing their people.”

In 2011, Erdogan urged establishing a new presidential system. He wants power transferred to the office. He want to seek it. If elected under new rules, he’ll govern for another decade.

He wants unchallenged power. He wants major Turkish regional political, military and economic influence. He wants greater overall control. He wants popular interests

suppressed.

What's ongoing perhaps reflects more than he bargained for. He remains defiant. In a televised Saturday speech, he vowed to proceed with Taksim Park plans.

One protester perhaps spoke for others saying:

"He's crazy. No one knows what he's doing or thinking. He's completely crazy. Whatever he says today, he will say something different tomorrow."

In a late Saturday twitter message, he said for every 100,000 protesters, he'll mobilize a million supporters against them. He accused protesters of having "questionable ties."

He mocked them saying so. "Taksim Square cannot be an area where extremists are running wild," he added.

Millions of Turks appear fed up with his authoritarian rule. Their concerns aren't addressed. People shouted "This is just the beginning. Our struggle will continue."

On Saturday, Kurdish Peace and Democracy party (BDP) MP Sirri Sureyya Onder was injured. He responded accusing Erdogan of going too far.

Protesters "are rebelling against all of this now," he said. "People are fed up with this lack of public discussion, with the disrespect, the immoderateness, the lawlessness, and the authoritarianism of this government."

"It is not very good at apologizing. But this time I think it will have to." Lack of media coverage inflamed tensions. A student protester said there's "a total media blackout on this in Turkey."

"They all collaborate with the government. We follow the foreign news coverage to get more information."

A makeshift clinic was set up in Istanbul's Chamber of Mechanical Engineers. Volunteer doctors treated injured protesters. One anonymously said police "use a very heavy teargas that causes serious health problems."

Empty canisters showed it's made in America. Perhaps it's what's used in Bahrain. One or more US companies supply it. It's far more noxious than ordinary tear gas.

Symptoms include severe abdominal pains, vomiting blood, temporary blindness, temporary memory loss, shivers, seizures, and long-lasting breathing difficulties. Bahraini doctors think it's nerve gas. Deaths result.

It's too early to know what's ahead. Clearly people are fed up. They're angry. They're sick and tired of a regime drunk with power.

It remains to be seen what follows. So-called Arab Spring protests achieved nothing. Hardline rule continues. Popular concerns aren't addressed.

It shows what people wanting something better face. It's unlikely Turks will fare better than others. Change never comes easily or quickly.

Liberating struggles take time. They're longterm. They require sustained commitment. Often energy wanes. What's ahead bears close scrutiny.

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