

Mass Anti-Neoliberal Protests in Turkey Brutally Repressed: Uprisings Sparked by Soaring Poverty, Inequality, Tyranny

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Trees sparked the recent widespread civil uprising in Turkey – the biggest such public protest in the history of the Turkish Republic since its formation in 1923. It started on May 27 after a small group of peaceful demonstrators gathered in Istanbul’s Gezi Park in an effort to save its 600 trees from being cut down to provide space for the construction of a new shopping mall. Gezi Park is the last green area in Istanbul.

Four days later, on May 31, police launched brutal attacks on the group, precipitating nationwide protests against the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The protests quickly spread to 78 of the country’s 81 cities and included hundreds of thousands of people. The protesters demanded Erdogan’s resignation.

By late June, at the time of this writing, barbarous police repression had killed at least five protestors and injured nearly 8,000 with water cannons, tear gas, and rubber bullets fired indiscriminately into the crowds. Thirteen people had been blinded, hundreds had their skin burned by the toxic chemicals laced in the water sprayed from the cannons. The police ordered doctors not to treat the injured, and some physicians who defied the police and did so were later reported to be “missing.” Many hundreds of people had been arrested and jailed, and Taksim Square in Istanbul had become the main centre of demonstrations.

Professor Feyzi Baban, who teaches international development at Trent University in Peterborough, was visiting Istanbul at the time of the uprising. He had previously lived in the Taksim Square neighbourhood for 47 years. “I was there on the evening of Saturday, June 15,” he said, “and I have never witnessed the kind of police brutality that I did on that night and later on Sunday. It was almost like a scene from a civil war. The amount of tear gas used and the fact that it was fired directly at protesters made Turkey look like a police state. Half of Istanbul was covered in tear gas and the city was locked up because there was a de-facto curfew. The moment you tried to get out on the street, the police would indiscriminately fire tear gas at you.”

The Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions (DISK), one of Turkey’s four main labour organizations, has supported the demonstrations, as has the Confederation of Public Workers Unions (KESK), which has also staged protest strikes.

The reasons for the stunningly fast development of such a massive national protest movement stem from Erdogan’s neoliberal economic policies, which have massively increased inequality in Turkey. His authoritarian methods, creeping Islamization, and

support for the overthrow of the Assad regime in neighbouring Syria — a policy deeply opposed by up to 80% of Turks – have intensified his government’s unpopularity. Erdogan is leader of the right-wing Justice and Development Party (AKP), which is Islamic fundamentalist and acts as a proxy for U.S. and European imperialism in the Middle East.

Turkey is a member of NATO, and the Erdogan government is considered “a moderate Islamist” one by the U.S. and promoted by Washington as a model for the Middle East. Strategically located at the intersection of Europe and the Middle East, Turkey has long been a crucial U.S. client state.

According to the World Socialist Website (WSWS), “Turkey is emerging as the keystone of a U.S.-backed regional alliance of Sunni Islamist regimes [Saudi Arabia and Qatar] fighting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad — a war ultimately directed at U.S.-led regime change in Iran, and securing U.S. imperialist hegemony throughout the Middle East... Washington’s escalating campaign of military aggression to secure U.S. hegemony over the oil-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia... threatens to drag the people of Turkey, the entire region and beyond into a bloody conflagration.”

Erdogan has been supplying U.S. and NATO arms to the rebels in Syria trying to overthrow the Assad government. To please his U.S. and European masters, especially Germany and France, that are actively working to overthrow Assad, Erdogan has made Turkey into the main arms supply transit route for the Syrian rebels, thus becoming critical to their survival.

The WSWS adds that “The CIA operates a major command and control center on Turkish soil, from which it co-ordinates the flow of weapons, supplies, and billions of dollars in cash across the Turkish-Syrian border as part of the rapidly escalating U.S.-led war against the Assad regime.” Ironically, as WSWS points out, “Having used Turkey as a forward base in its campaign to destabilize Syria and Iran, Washington has succeeded in destabilizing Turkey itself.”

A second irony is that Erdogan has demanded that Assad resign because his army fired on armed opponents. “A leader who kills his own people has lost his legitimacy,” Erdogan stated. Clearly, according to his own reasoning, Erdogan has now lost his own legitimacy by ordering police to fire on his own unarmed opponents, and should resign.

The AKP has been elected three times and has been ruling Turkey for ten years. It won the last election with 49.9% of the vote, but most Turks still did not vote for the AKP. The party represents the Turkish Muslim capitalist elite, for which it has intensified the neoliberal economic policies that have been implemented since 1980. In this year the Turkish military took over the state in a U.S.-supported coup precisely to carry out the neoliberal economic agenda.

As with the Washington-backed coups in Argentina (1976) and Chile (1973), the main purpose of the coup was to turn Turkey into a low-wage haven for multinational corporations and for a comprador domestic élite serving them. As Turkish journalist Burhan Ekinci explained: “The strategic aim was to unite Turkey with the kind of global economy that big business supports.” The military jailed 650,000 people and tortured hundreds of thousands. Thousands of people are still “missing.” The generals enforced massive privatization that up to now has seen the sale of 200 state enterprises, with Erdogan expanding this program.

Privatization has been accompanied by financial liberalization, the promotion of foreign

investment, and the suppression of unions and wages. Turkey's most valuable national assets have been sold to foreign companies that have been provided with cheap labour, making the economy dependent on unstable "speculative financial capital inflows." The country has become increasingly de-industrialized with mounting imports fuelling a spiralling trade deficit.

This neoliberal economic model has fostered crony capitalism, high levels of corruption, an unprecedented rise in inequality, and enormous poverty. Such an exploitative economic system also requires a ruthless repression of dissent to sustain it. Turkey now has the second highest level of income inequality of the 34 member countries of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The richest 10% of Turks have 15 times the income of the bottom 10%. One-third of Turks - a shocking 23.6 million of them - are now mired in poverty.

Since the financial crisis of 2008 and a severe domestic recession in 2009, the Turkish business élite has drastically reduced wages and laid off thousands of workers. Unemployment has soared to 16% (22% for youth), and basic union rights have been repressed. One hundred union activists have been jailed under anti-terrorism laws. Given Turkey's capital-friendly official policies, Western investment has poured in. As the WSWS puts it, "Like their counterparts in Greece and the rest of Europe, Turkish workers have confronted a brutal offensive by the international banks and corporations, which see the country as a cheap-labour platform and a source of super-profits."

This is why the planned felling of trees in Gezi Park provided the spark for the mass uprising. The AKP wanted to turn the park into a shopping centre to attract foreign investment and tourism, part of a "gentrification" plan for all of Istanbul. This was the latest and most blatant example of the privatization policies that have impoverished so many Turks — and they had finally had enough.

Free speech and a free press have also been repressed by the Erdogan government, with more journalists being jailed in Turkey than in any other country. The Turkish media are so terrified of the regime that they did not dare to report on the demonstrations that were front-page news outside Turkey. Press and civil rights violations have been commonplace under Erdogan. Last year, the AKP passed legislation that extensively restricted freedom of the press.

Journalists questioning official statements have been arrested for treason. Artists creating political art that criticizes Turkish officials have been arrested for "insulting the dignity of a state official." Protesters opposing Turkey's NATO role and its Syria policy have been harassed and detained in large numbers. Demonstrations are routinely broken up with police violence.

At the end of May, the Turkish Parliament approved Islamist legislation that limits the consumption of alcohol, banning its sale between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m., and creating alcohol-free zones. As an Istanbul resident complained, "If Turkey really is a secular state, then the government should not have the right to tell me when and where to drink alcohol... As long as I don't harm others, drinking is a matter of my own personal freedom."

Turkey was founded in 1923 as a strictly secular republic by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who wanted to create a westernized country. The republic came out of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the bulk of which was divided between European nations after World War I.

Ataturk felt that Turkey had to be secularized if it was to avoid the fate of the Ottoman Empire and catch up with the West militarily and economically. Many of the demonstrators in Istanbul are young and secular and, as one of them said, "The AKP are trying to delete everything from our republic. They are trying to destroy everything that Ataturk built up."

At this writing, the demonstrations in Turkey are continuing, but it is too early to say what long-term impact they are likely to have. What is clear is that the Turkish people have firmly rejected U.S. imperialism and neoliberalism, and are struggling against both. As with Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen, the Turkey that was Washington's dependable servant for 60 years is no more.

Asad Ismi is the CCPA Monitor's international affairs correspondent. This is the eighth in a series of articles on the Middle East Revolution by him. His latest radio documentary is "Capitalism is the Crisis". For his publications, visit www.asadismi.ws.

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