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Gezi Park Revolts: For or Against Democracy?

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ABSTRACT *The anti-government protests in Turkey emerged as a legitimate and even necessary reaction against police brutality to evolved into violent revolts targeting Prime Minister Erdoğan. Since the initial protests, commentators sought to make sense of the phenomenon with reference to the Gezi youth. A closer examination, however, would reveal the Leftist-Kemalist aura of the protests that came under the tutelage of Taksim Solidarity, an umbrella organization of left-wing associations, and the Republican People's Party. Meanwhile, the general public kept its distance from the violent demonstrations. Not only AK Party supporters but also many liberals and secular-minded democrats found the developments alarming. While the protests marks a step forward for Turkey's once-apatetic opposition groups, their failure prevented a revival of authoritarianism.*

The Gezi Park events were without doubt among the most significant social developments in the history of Turkey. Although the country witnessed horrible acts of terror leading up to the military coup on September 12th, 1980, the perpetrators of violence at the time consisted of small marginal groups detached from the general public and mostly fought among themselves. They did not resort to street violence nor did they occupy public spaces. The subtext of violent clashes was purely ideological. There was a struggle between left groups that embraced violence as a revolutionary means and right-wing factions fighting fire with fire. In hind-

sight, it became clear that operatives of a 'deep state' manipulated both warring parties to undermine democracy.

The most recent wave of unrests were also unprecedented in terms of media attention. The protests surpassed their initial local and national appeal and, before long, attracted global interest. Meanwhile, the events represented a complex phenomenon that proved challenging to comprehend. The movement had many faces and numerous components. This was precisely why observers within the country and elsewhere could reach entirely different conclusions about the nature of Gezi Park protests.

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Gezi: A Multitude of Gezi Movements

In order to accurately analyze the Gezi Park revolts, we must first identify and acknowledge the multitude of objectives that coexisted within the movement. Simultaneously, the unrests identified several immediate goals along with an extended political agenda. Many observers and commentators were unable to overcome partial evaluations due to their inability to identify the multitude of events, their exclusive focus on individual agendas and their mistaking

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individual pieces of a puzzle as either the entirety or the sole significant indicator of the big picture.

What exactly happened during the Gezi Park events? It all began when a group of people established an impromptu organization, Taksim Solidarity (*Taksim Dayanışması*, or TD), in late May 2013 over environmental concerns of questionable realism and legitimacy. TD originally stated that the protest aimed to save several hundred trees at Gezi Park and halt an urban development project to rebuild the historic Ottoman barracks

that the despotic İsmet İnönü regime demolished in the 1940s. Before long, the group proceeded to occupy Gezi Park. Occupiers built tents to prevent the general public's access to the park, claimed control of the area, and transformed Gezi Park into a form of communal property. Several days later, on May 31st, 2013, the authorities attempted to evacuate the park through excessive, unjust and borderline criminal police violence that resulted in clashes and injuries. The media's curious failure to report the story, knowingly or not, allowed social media users to blow the situation out of proportion. Social outburst followed. People from all ideological backgrounds rushed to Taksim Square to speak up against police brutality. Among them were AK Party supporters, young liberals and members of 'Young Civilians' (*Genç Siviller*), a youth organization that built a strong track record in pro-democracy activism over the past years. Protestors clashed with the police at Gezi Park and its vicinity. Fearing the unrest's potential expansion, the police withdrew from Taksim Square and the adjacent Gezi Park. Up until this point, Gezi Park revolts aimed to attain their immediate objectives.

Although the civilian population's violent (yet thus far legitimate and even necessary) response to police brutality should have stopped following the authorities' decision to allow protestors access to the park, what followed was the exact opposite. Taksim Solidarity, whose political agenda turned out to reach beyond saving Gezi Park, resorted to any means available to

them in an attempt to keep the unrest alive. Thousands of people proceeded to occupy Gezi Park. Taksim Square, too, was annexed to the original occupied site. Occupiers used damaged public buses to barricade off boulevards leading up to the square. As such, the movement hindered public transportation to the city's leading commercial, cultural, and touristic center and declared the area off-limits for the general public. Emanating from Taksim Square, violence rapidly spread across town. Violent attackers targeted the Prime Minister's offices in Dolmabahçe-Beşiktaş, a neighboring district located in Istanbul's European districts, for the initial three days of June. Mobs gathering in various parts of the city imposed roadblocks and attempted to march to Taksim Square. This violent turn indicated that Gezi Park protests began to evolve into something bigger, as offshoots of the movement surfaced in various other major urban centers across the country. Ankara, Mersin, and Izmir witnessed particularly intense clashes. In the nation's capital, mobs sought to occupy Kızılay, the largest public square in Ankara. Some overzealous groups attempted to storm the Prime Minister's official residence as well as the Prime Ministry Headquarters. Hatay, a border town with Syria, home to a large Nusayri-Alawi community, turned into a ticking time bomb as two natives of the province perished during clashes—a development that aggravated the existing tensions over the government's Syria policy. Meanwhile, protestors harassed devout Muslims, especially women, in many isolat-

ed events. Terrified and threatened, some conservative women refused to leave their homes for the duration of events. The Gezi Park movement's broader agenda was thus born.

Allegedly motivated by environmentalist sentiments, the movement rapidly began to echo the various exaggerated and illegitimate political demands of its secular-authoritarian predecessors and targeted Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the hopes of removing the country's democratically elected government from power. The most popular slogan among protestors, "Down with Tayyip," attested to this objective. The movement "wisely" declared that it demanded the Prime Minister's resignation yet did not have any issues with either the Justice and Development Party or the government itself. According to protestors, the party was supposed to govern without its Prime Minister even though this arrangement would be a practical impossibility. Without doubt, the Prime Minister's removal would inevitably lead to the downfall of the ruling party. Having failed to outlaw the party in 2008, the establishment would now attempt to succeed through street violence.

How to Analyze Gezi Park Protests?

To develop an accurate analysis of the revolts, we must first develop a strong understanding of how *not* to analyze the phenomenon. It is impossible to develop a sociological argument

based on the group of people that gathered at Gezi Park and occupied the area for two weeks. After all, the crowd was the result of an impromptu alliance. There was no single social issue with a concrete identity and characteristics that arose out of Gezi Park. Furthermore, the movement failed to maintain its initial heterogeneous constitution. Young Civilians and conservative participants of the police brutality protests withdrew their support from the movement as it adopted a broader political agenda. Finally, the events attracted an alliance of the radical Left, violent organizations, Kemalists, and members of the Republican People's Party.

Similarly, it would be meaningless to concentrate on the *Gezi youth*, a non-existent entity, in our analysis of Gezi Park revolts. According to various surveys, the participants' average age was around 30. The average participant continued their formal education until 12th grade –as opposed to the national average of 7th grade. Simply put, Gezi Park mobilized a specific subgroup of the nation's youth as opposed to a representative sample of the entire country.

Therefore, a well-founded analysis of the Gezi Park unrest must not depend on individual members of an impromptu alliance at the protest site but instead concentrate on the sociological and ideological traits of particular social groups and others, particularly Taksim Solidarity, that initiated the movement from the beginning to the end. Moreover, a look into the profile of Gezi supporters on

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various media outlets might provide valuable insight. Similarly, we might benefit from acknowledging big business assistance to the movement.

Another approach that we must avoid (or at least remain cautious toward) in our analysis is to view and portray Gezi Park revolts as a foreign conspiracy. While such mass movements might (and often do, as the international media's excessive interest suggests) have international connections in the age of globalization, the movement is unmistakably rooted in domestic ground. Similarly, it would be odd and unjust to propose that everyone who rushed to Taksim Square with different demands and expectations knowingly participated in a conspiracy. Either way, we shall conclude that the protest movement's domestic dimensions outweigh its international implications.

Shades of Gezi Park

Having described the Gezi Park movement with its immediate concerns and broader political agenda, it is now possible to embark on an analysis of the revolt's social, ideological, and sociological inclinations.

To the best of my understanding, the broader Gezi Park agenda represented a fundamentally Kemalist reaction against democracy. Republican People's Party supporters' widespread participation in the movement attests to this assessment. After all, Republican People's Party Chairman Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu himself proudly and at times naively raised this point. Commenting on the party's involvement in the protests, Kılıçdaroğlu stated that they "did not become involved but offered support" to the movement. On May 31st, 2013, the main opposition party cancelled an outdoor party day at Kadıköy Square on Istanbul's Asian coast and actively redirected thousands of party members to Taksim Square to suggest that the leadership expected Republican People's Party supporters to stand in solidarity with the attacks on the police. .

Furthermore, the organizational composition of Taksim Solidarity, the main sponsor of the protests demonstrated its Left-Kemalist position. Although TD presents itself as a civil society organization, it serves as an umbrella organization for various labor unions and professional associations with strong Kemalist traditions. As such, Taksim Solidarity consists of various organizations established by specific laws and these semi – official structures can exert public authority. The law declares membership in these professional organizations mandatory for anyone who wishes to practice their particular trade. As such, these organizations represent state authority as opposed to civil society. Taksim Solidarity's particular composition

corroborates with popular claims that Gezi Park protests marked the bureaucratic-authoritarian establishment's most recent move against the democratically elected government. Not long ago, the same professional organizations performed similar tasks on behalf of the establishment. In cooperation with the country's military, they helped orchestrate a 'post-modern coup' in February 1997 and contributed to efforts to overthrow the country's democratically elected government.

Did the Gezi Park movement represent a broad social coalition to overthrow the Justice and Development Party government or raise questions about its legitimacy? It would seem difficult to reach that conclusion. Although observers tend to assume that small yet loud groups that resort to street violence during social upheavals represent the majority of a given society, such assumptions often prove misleading. The broader Gezi Park movement and even the initial environmentalist protests failed to speak for all but a small minority within Turkey's society. The Nationalist Movement Party, one of the major political parties in the country, maintained a safe distance from Gezi Park protests in line with the party leadership's decision. The party refrained from assisting the movement because of the potential risk that it would undermine democratic legitimacy. Without a doubt, many Nationalist Movement Party supporters would have sided with the Justice and Development Party government even if the party leadership were to assume



Anti-government protesters throwing stones to riot police in Gezi park near Taksim square in Istanbul.

EPA

a different position vis-à-vis the protests. After all, the two parties' voter bases maintain strong sociological similarities and are highly volatile. Meanwhile, the Peace and Democracy Party, often believed to represent Turkey's Kurdish community, also opted to not participate in the movement. The party was unmistakably worried about the revolts' potential to undermine the ongoing peace process and hopes for a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish Question. This was no unwarranted concern: Prime Minister Erdoğan's demise would have inevitably resulted in the peace process' failure. Perhaps more interesting was that most Republican People's Party supporters in central and eastern Anatolia, as well as in the central and eastern Black Sea region, did not support the Gezi Park move-

ment. This pattern might be considered unsurprising as all parties' voter profiles in these parts of the country are similar in their dislike of such violent mass movements. Based on the aforementioned information, it is safe to conclude that the Gezi Park movement succeeded in mobilizing approximately 20 percent of the country's entire population.

The Gezi Park Revolts: Underlying Factors

Gezi Park actioners and sympathizers often cite the government's decision to rebuild the historic Ottoman barracks at Gezi Park as the leading reason for the protests. Many participants claim that the urban development project would damage the en-

vironment, destroy grown trees, and deprive the public of the only park in the district. Furthermore, supporters state that the Prime Minister tends to unilaterally embark on grand projects without due consultation with the people. Another popular claim is that the Prime Minister, *not* the Justice and Development Party government, seeks to interfere with the secular population's lifestyles.

Although located at one of the most crowded and popular parts of Istanbul, Gezi Park for a long time could not attract the average citizen who was either unaware of the park itself or was reluctant to visit due to security concerns. The historic Ottoman barracks building that preceded the park was demolished in the 1940s on the orders of İsmet İnönü, the then-dictator of the single party regime. The original plan was to build a public park on part of the vacated plot and a grand sculpture of himself to challenge Atatürk monuments across the country. Turkey's transition into democracy, however, made the latter plan impossible. The park, along with the stairs originally intended to lead up to the monument, remained in the area.

Prime Minister Erdoğan, a native of Istanbul and the city's former mayor, planned to rebuild the Ottoman barracks as a multi-purpose facility with a cultural center, an entertainment area, and a shopping mall. Clearly, local governments typically evaluate and undertake such projects in regular democratic systems. However, the Prime Minister's own background

attracted his interest in the area and led him to personally endorse the development project. Although the democratically elected local and national government had a legal mandate to make the decision, it would have been ideal to call for a referendum to bolster the project's legitimacy amidst passionate objections. The decision was overdue.

In response, Taksim Solidarity identified itself as the sole authority regarding the Gezi Park project and called for mass action despite lacking democratic and moral legitimacy. The protests expanded their focus beyond the park itself, as the trees that the movement attempted to save had but symbolic value to its participants. After all, the Justice and Development Party government has a proven track record in taking measures to protect the environment, as hundreds of thousands of trees are removed and planted every year. Therefore, the initial concerns with protecting the park and voicing environmental concerns served as a stepping stone to broader political mobilization. It was later discovered that a local court ruled to suspend the urban development project on June 6th, 2013, and that Taksim Solidarity failed to make the information public in order to maintain the protests' momentum and prevent participants from leaving the park. The organization adopted the same strategy following talks with the Justice and Development Party government. Despite the government's agreement with the protestors' demands and the Prime Minister's highly publicized decision to call for

a referendum over the urban development project even if the appeals court upheld the local court's ruling to suspend the plans, this did not stop Taksim Solidarity from aggravating the situation. At first, the organization objected to the idea of holding a referendum and declared their demands to be non-negotiable. Meanwhile, it proclaimed its monopoly over scientific studies and declared its position to be scientific. The organization failed to vacate the premises

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even after the government pledged to meet their demands. Instead, TD issued a provocative public statement reiterating their commitment to their struggle "at a time when [they were] most organized and strong." The organization's various steps along the way demonstrate that, although environmental concerns represented initial concerns for the movement, the organizers had a broader political agenda all along.

Prime Minister Erdoğan often receives criticism for his harsh, strongly-worded, irritating, and alienating statements. There seems to be agree-

ment on this even in Justice and Development Party circles. However, the Prime Minister's choice of rhetoric did not create the issues at hand nor could they serve as legitimate grounds for an uprising. Mr Kılıçdaroğlu, Turkey's main opposition leader, also suffers from the occasional problem of rhetoric. For instance, he often states that the government will have to draft a new Constitution "over our dead bodies." Is it unclear that this attitude represents a clear rejection of democratic politics and an overt declaration of war? Does it not stand for imposing an arbitrary restriction upon the majority's use of their legitimate mandate? Political leaders and others are free to rebut and discredit the Prime Minister's choice of words with rhetoric. This is, after all, the nature of politics and public debate. Furthermore, Mr Erdoğan's strong words or even authoritarian discourse does not inherently reflect his approach to public service. In the final analysis, we must consider his entire track record in public service. Accusing the Prime Minister of dictatorialism represents no more than a smear campaign. Mr Kılıçdaroğlu once referred to the Prime Minister as "the dictator" 80 times over the course of a single parliamentary address. This approach clearly aimed to leave an imprint in the public's minds. Without doubt, the act itself would be beyond the opposition leader's reach had the Prime Minister been an actual dictator. In other words, it would be impossible to consistently and strongly criticize the country's chief executive in a country whose media outlets operate under the leader's iron will.

Critics who accuse the Prime Minister of intervening in secular lifestyles fail to produce concrete evidence to support their claims. The Prime Minister's unnecessary and extravagant words represent excessive rhetoric, as opposed to government intervention in people's lives. Furthermore, there is no question that oft-cited issues, including the abortion debate and new regulations on alcohol sale, do not qualify as intervention. Turkey not only did not outlaw the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages, but also replaced its existing regulations with new standards –as do numerous democratic countries. On the other hand, there are plenty of people suffering from state interventions in their lifestyles and arbitrary restrictions on their civil rights in Turkey. We would only have to take the issue of human rights of the religious Muslims, Kurds, and non-Muslim minorities into account. In Turkey, hijabi women are not eligible to run for public office or to become public employees. The country's vast Kurdish community is unable to educate their children in their native language. Non-Muslim minorities are not allowed to establish independent education institutions. As such, the Kemalists emerge as a group whose lifestyles are rather minimally affected by government policies and who historically justified state intervention in other groups' lifestyles is used to maintain their own lifestyles. Over the past decades, Kemalists remained indifferent towards, if not effectively supporting, the pillaging of various social groups in Turkey. During Gezi Park events, however, they cited

imaginary government interventions in their lifestyles in their attempts to overthrow a democratically elected government.

We must also address popular claims that the Prime Minister and his government polarize the country. While there is little doubt that some of the Prime Minister's statements (i.e. his comments about those who consume alcohol) might trigger polarization, Turkey's history of polarization far outdates the Justice and Development Party's rise to power. The country suffered multiple waves of polarization, most recently during the 1997 'post-modern' military coup when the civilian and military bureaucracy joined forces with the Republican People's Party, the media, and semi-official civil society organizations (such as professional associations mentioned above) to alienate religious Muslims. The group's lifestyles became subject to public humiliation, while the government imposed serious restrictions on their civil rights. The same groups exposed the country's Kurdish community to similar double standards since the Republic's establishment. Turkey's traditionally disadvantaged groups now challenge the old order: The Kurds develop their own means to struggle as religious Muslims seek to control government instruments through elections. This seemingly inevitable transformation leaves the Kemalist bureaucracy and certain social groups disgruntled and disillusioned.

Big business in Istanbul represents a particularly interesting member of the Gezi Park alliance. During the

upheaval, some Istanbul-based corporations offered logistical support to the mobs. A leading businessmen sponsored the revolts by sending out thousands of lunch bags to the protest site. The country's oldest business group has opposed the Justice and Development Party government ever since its rise to power and fought its battles in a variety of fronts, including political maneuvering and popular uprisings. Established after the 1960 military coup and seeking to mobilize public support for the military bureaucracy, the state controlled media system fights its own battles with the government. Despite allegations of total government control over the media, two thirds of all media outlets remain under Kemalist control. The government's erosion of Kemalist power within the political system creates a lot of anger and resentment in these circles. Without a doubt, the Balyoz and Ergenekon coup plot trials represented a milestone in Turkey's history. Charged with plotting a military coup against the democratically elected government, military officers underwent trial and received various sentences. Having worshipped the military for ages, Kemalists find these developments unbearable and believe that the coup plot trials represent the Justice and Development Party's elimination of patriotic soldiers. Meanwhile, their failure to win elections ties their hands. Similarly, they now find themselves sharing the same social spaces with Kurds and religious Muslims whom they previously despised and humiliated. They gradually came to terms with the fact that they are but a minority group

within the broader society. And although their ever-apparent minority status should lead them to advocate for greater liberal democracy, they instead seek to retreat to the nostalgia for the single-party dictatorship, a mythological golden age for the Kemalist masses. In this sense, they demand that everybody else adopt their own lifestyles and worldview.

Gezi Park's Repercussions

The most recent wave of unrests, without a doubt, did not only influence Kemalists but also entailed certain repercussions for the general public. Kemalists were contented with the protests and tried their best to fight a battle against the government. Street violence excluded, the demonstrations represented a certain degree of progress for this social group. Having realized that old alliances with the military were difficult, if not altogether impossible, to maintain, the Kemalists instead rushed to the streets. This can be seen, indeed, as a positive development for Turkey's democracy. However, they now face new challenges such as developing a more peaceful rhetoric and a more democratic ideology. The prospects of such realignment, though, remains grim due to the continued dominance of Kemalist ideology in these circles. It remains to be seen whether the Kemalists shall understand that the Kemalist ideology cannot form the main body of democracy in Turkey even though it might find room for itself within the broader framework of liberal democracy. Therefore,

Kemalism needs to come to terms with its position as one of many ideologies within the Turkish political spectrum. Alas, the task seems elusive for many Kemalists today.

The vast majority of Turkey's society maintained its distance from both the Gezi Park events and their extended political agenda. Some even expressed outright discomfort. Surely enough, the wave of unrests primarily disgruntled Justice and Development Party supporters. Members of the party regarded the movement's attacks against the Prime Minister as a covert battle against themselves—and these concerns were not unwarranted. Members of Turkey's religious Muslim community found themselves targeted in many places and in various forms. Particularly hijabi women faced a disproportionate amount of verbal and physical attacks. The Gezi Park protestors' engagement in such vigilante acts made it clear for the religious Muslim community that the movement's success would inevitably lead to the mistreatment of their political leadership and to arbitrary restrictions on their lifestyles. As such, they rushed to massive pro-government demonstrations to stand in solidarity with the Prime Minister.

However, the wave of protests did not exclusively disturb Justice and Development Party supporters. Some liberals and democrats with more secular lifestyles, including yours truly, expressed concern over the developments and even regarded the demonstrations as a challenge to their val-

The vast majority of Turkey's society maintained its distance from both the Gezi Park events and their extended political agenda

ues. They reacted to street violence and demanded that the protestors respect the rightful place of the ballot box in democratic regimes as the sole venue to fight political battles. Meanwhile, they called upon the people to condemn and prevent both police brutality and street violence in order to restore public order.

The Erdoğan Syndrome: A Revival of the Menderes Syndrome?

The Gezi Park protests' broader political agenda had an unmistakable potential to undermine Turkey's democracy. Had Gezi Park protestors proved successful in their attempts to overthrow Prime Minister Erdoğan, the country's political history would develop a new concept, the Erdoğan syndrome, alongside the Menderes syndrome that emerged out of the 1960 military coup. In other words, future politicians would be compelled to constantly keep in mind that the military might execute them like Prime Minister Adnan Menderes in 1961, or that organized minorities with corporate backing would be able to overthrow them through low-intensity street violence. As such, they

would fail to take initiatives in crucial matters.

Turkey's political history demonstrates that the country has an unusually intense and challenging experience with the following phenomenon that other democracies might also encounter. Two institutions, the state and the government, share political power among themselves. The former consists of bureaucratic powerholders with their own ideology and no accountability to the public. It also has its civilian allies. The latter manifests itself in the form of democratically elected representatives of the people that accumulate political power through elections (with the notable exception of military coups) and are

therefore held accountable for their mistakes. Without a doubt, one of the elected government's main functions is to safeguard the people from bureaucratic despotism. In a way, the Gezi Park revolts would seem to represent a contestation between the two major powerholders and an attempt by the ever-weakening former group to restore the old order if possible. Had the orchestrators succeeded in their efforts, Turkey would have entered a period of restoration that, like the period of restoration following former President Turgut Özal's death, would respawn and fortify the ancien regime. As such, the Gezi Park movement's failure represents an important step toward Turkey's democratic consolidation. ■