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# Turkey's Rising Wave of Social Protests

by [Soner Cagaptay](#)

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Brief Analysis

**This year's Istanbul election and last year's move to a presidential system have unified and galvanized the opposition, raising questions about Erdogan's next move.**

**E**ver since the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) [suffered a rout](#) in Istanbul's June 23 mayoral race, Turkey has witnessed a rise in anti-government protests, mostly focusing on environmental issues. The wave of peaceful demonstrations—the country's largest since the 2013 Gezi Park rallies—suggests a newfound vitality among the opposition, with potentially deep implications for Turkey's democracy.

## FROM GEZI TO GOLD MINING

**I**n May 2013, a small group of environmentalists started a demonstration in downtown Istanbul's Gezi Park, protesting the government's decision to turn the park into a shopping mall. Police brutality against this group soon sparked Turkey's largest protest movement in recent history—some 2.5 million citizens joined anti-government rallies that erupted in seventy-nine of the country's eighty-one provinces and lasted for weeks. The government cracked down on these rallies as well, resulting in over a dozen deaths among protestors and police alike. When the demonstrations ended that August, a new era had begun in Turkey, with the police subsequently cracking down on even the smallest anti-government rally.

The ground may be shifting again this summer, however. On July 26, a small group of activists staged a peaceful protest against a gold mining project in the Ida Mountains in west Turkey. Environmentalists say the mine, which

will be built through a public-private partnership, will cause mass deforestation, pollute land and water resources, and devastate the local ecosystem. Public outrage swelled when the TEMA Foundation, a Turkish NGO formed to combat soil erosion, revealed that upwards of 195,000 trees had been cut down ahead of construction—more than four times the number promised by the mining company and approved by the Ministry of Energy and National Resources.

Within days, the rally grew to tens of thousands, and protestors began calling for a halt in construction and greater public consultation on environmental issues. Energized by their shared victory in the June 23 Istanbul election, the political opposition has adopted an active role in the demonstration, with members of the Republican People's Party (CHP), the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), and the IYI Party attending. In doing so, these politicians have downplayed their partisan identities and presented a united front.

The protests came to the forefront of domestic politics on August 5, when activists formed a kilometer-long procession called the “Great Water and Conscience Meeting” near the construction site. Hundreds of activists remain camped in the area, organizing nightly forums to discuss their demands and busing in more demonstrators daily from surrounding areas. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Turks have expressed their support online with the hashtag #KazdaginaDokunma (“Don't touch the Ida Mountains”), and nearly half a million have signed a petition to halt the project. Indeed, participants in the demonstration hail from all over Turkey, including local residents, politicians, environmentalists, civil society organizations, students, and artists.

Other environmental issues have united the opposition recently as well. The government's June decision to start filling the Ilisu Dam reservoir in the southeast has aroused criticism from a broad coalition of activists and politicians concerned about the irreversible ecological and cultural damage that would result from rising waters. Despite the protests, authorities have already begun relocating residents of the historic town of Hasankeyf, which will be completely submerged.

In July, the Ministry of Environment and Urbanisation announced plans to build a public park around Lake Salda in the southwest, an area known as Turkey's Maldives because of its white sand beaches and crystal clear water. The announcement came after the government downgraded the lake's protected status, no longer prohibiting all construction on the site. Activists, lawyers, and opposition politicians presented a united front against the development project, which would include the installation of bungalow houses, bathrooms, prayer rooms, and cafeterias, in part so that the site could eventually host festivals.

Images of diverse groups of citizens united against what they see as the government's indifference to public opinion on environmental issues brings to mind the nationwide protests of 2013. So far, Ankara has not cracked down on groups protesting the projects in the Ida Mountains, Hasankeyf, or Lake Salda, but it has reaffirmed its intentions to move forward with each project.

## **ISTANBUL WAS A TURNING POINT**

**A** key driver of the recent rallies has been the June 23 Istanbul election, where the AKP's loss damaged President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's image as the “invincible politician.” Following a string of electoral victories, economic successes, and legal machinations since 2003, he has become the most powerful politician in the seventy-year history of Turkey's multiparty democracy. Erdogan is now simultaneously head of state, government, the national police, the military (as commander-in-chief), and the parliament's leading party. This consolidation of power, coupled with frequent crackdowns on protestors, left many in the opposition disheartened.

At least until Istanbul. In March, opposition candidate Ekrem Imamoglu was elected as the city's mayor—a crucial post that holds responsibility over nearly 20 percent of Turkey's population and has served as a stepping stone to national political prominence in the past. Feeling threatened by the AKP's loss, Erdogan used his influence with the

election board and other Turkish institutions to annul the vote based on supposed “irregularities,” setting the stage for a new vote on June 23. He then mobilized his control over most Turkish media and state resources in favor of his candidate. Yet Imamoglu not only won the second round, he increased his margin of victory from round one by a whopping fifty times. The outcome was a turning point for the opposition, many of whom believe once again that Erdogan can be challenged peacefully.

## COALESCING OPPOSITION

**W**hen Erdogan shifted Turkey’s political system from a parliamentary to a presidential model last year, he likely did not realize he would be helping the opposition. Previously, he had won successive elections not only because he delivered strong economic growth, but also because he was blessed with a divided opposition. Nearly half of Turkey’s citizenry opposes the president, but until recently their numbers were split among disparate groups of Turkish and Kurdish nationalists, center-left and center-right factions, and conservative and liberal groups. Given this ideological constellation, the gap between opposition groups was often wider than their gap with Erdogan’s AKP. Yet the structure of the new presidential system means that most elections are now destined to become two-party races. If no candidate receives more than 50 percent of the vote in the first round of a presidential election, the top two candidates must enter a run-off—a situation that has forced Turkey’s normally antagonistic opposition factions to hold their noses and form electoral alliances.

The first such alliance fell short in last year’s presidential race, but Imamoglu won Istanbul using the same approach, with the full spectrum of Turkey’s opposition tallying behind him. The CHP, representing leftist and social democrat voters, IYI, representing center-right and Turkish nationalist voters, and HDP, representing Kurdish nationalist and liberal voters, all backed him; even the conservative Islamist Felicity Party supported him, if indirectly. Turkey’s slowing economy has only accelerated this unity and momentum.

## CONCLUSION

**T**he last time major anti-government rallies took place in Turkey, Erdogan was able to snuff them out not only because of his power over state security organs, but also because the opposition lacked a unified platform and leadership. This time, the opposition seems more united than it was in 2013, and it might even have a symbolic leader in the person of Imamoglu, the only politician who has defeated Erdogan since 2003. It is yet to be seen if Erdogan will crack down on the new wave of rallies or try to co-opt and divide the opposition. Dissent has emerged even within his own party, with former AKP economic minister Ali Babacan, the wunderkind responsible for Turkey’s “economic miracle” in the 2000s, announcing that he will establish a new political movement. Whichever path Erdogan chooses, he will face an invigorated opposition seemingly bent on pushing Turkey’s democracy into a new phase.

*Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of the forthcoming book [Erdogan’s Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East](#). Deniz Yuksel is a research assistant at the Institute.* ❖



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