

Will Protests at Home Affect Turkey's Foreign Policy?

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Brief Analysis

On June 13, 2013, Soner Cagaptay and James F. Jeffrey addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz distinguished visiting fellow at the Institute and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey (2008-2010) and Iraq (2010-2012). Dr. Cagaptay, author of the forthcoming book [The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power \(/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power/\)](/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power/), is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at the Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

SONER CAGAPTAY

Making sense of Turkey's recent unrest requires avoiding several misconceptions about the character of the protests. First, the demonstrations do not signal a slide in support for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). By most measures, about 50 percent of Turks continue to support the party. Second, this is not just another manifestation of the secularist-Islamist cleavage that has defined many of Turkey's political battles in recent years. Although most of the protestors are secular, their rallies are not about secularism per se, but rather about the quality of Turkish democracy.

Moreover, this new dynamic is likely to persist. Members of the movement have discovered that they have strength in numbers and can sustain their demonstrations, largely thanks to social media technologies. Indeed, the protests represent Turkey's first massive, grassroots political movement. In the past, grassroots movements never reached a massive scale, while large anti-Islamist protests were often organized in a top-down fashion, with the military as an important player.

In this regard, the AKP is a victim of its own success. Through prudent economic policies, the party has created a majority middle-class society in Turkey for the first time. This new social bloc is now making some very middle-class

demands, calling for individual rights, media freedom, the right to assemble, environmental protections, and, most of all, for the government to heed disparate voices.

Turkey's emerging opposition could complicate Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's political agenda should he, for instance, decide to proceed with redrafting the constitution and transforming the country's parliamentary democracy into a presidential system. President Abdullah Gul has already positioned himself as a nonpartisan figure, supporting the protestors' right to assemble and stating that "democracy is not just winning elections."

Erdogan will likely respond by consolidating his hold over right-leaning Turkish voters, who comprise more than 60 percent of the electorate. The opposition's distinctive secular, liberal, and leftist hue make this strategy possible, since the right-leaning bloc -- which ranges from center-right factions to Islamists -- will never make common cause with this camp. To be sure, some conservatives have grown uneasy with Erdogan's personality, but he is likely to prevail if he sticks to his message, namely, "You may not like my style, but would you really prefer the leftists and liberals?" Rallying conservatives behind the AKP's banner will be even easier given the proliferation of images showing far-left vandalism and violence in Taksim Square.

Erdogan's rightward recalibration will likely affect the AKP's foreign policy as well, particularly if he resorts to populist moves abroad that appeal to nationalist and pro-Islamist sentiments. For example, Ankara could turn the EU into a rhetorical punching bag or begin grandstanding on issues related to Cyprus and Armenia. It will also likely slow its rapprochement with Israel to a turtle's pace. As for Syria, although most Turks do not support Bashar al-Assad, they are unnerved by Ankara's policy toward the regime, which they believe has exposed Turkey to increased risks and costs. Accordingly, Erdogan will likely move toward a more measured position, leading from behind.

In contrast, Turkey's relationship with the United States is unlikely to suffer much from the unrest. Jeopardizing relations with Washington comes with a high price tag that Erdogan is loath to pay, and his strong rapport with President Obama will help resolve any wrinkles that arise from U.S. criticism of Ankara's conduct. Still, Erdogan will probably be unable to resist a certain amount of America bashing as election season gets underway.

JAMES F. JEFFREY

Despite the many valid criticisms leveled at Turkey recently, one should not forget that it is a democratic state. In fact, certain aspects of the government's response to the unrest are hardly different from that seen in Europe and the United States. Tear gas, riot police, and water cannons are commonplace at IMF and G-8 summits, while countries like Germany have a long tradition of meeting violent demonstrations with muscular police force. Excessive crackdowns are wrong wherever they occur, but Turkey is not alone in this regard.

Of course, Turkey differs from other democracies in the scale and nature of its response to the current protests, with the use of force against peaceful demonstrators in Gezi Park a case in point. And Western countries are right to criticize Erdogan's combative rhetoric at home, which is further polarizing the people. Still, the significance of these incidents for Turkey's political scene should not be overstated. In U.S. politics, for instance, it was once chic to support the antigovernment movements of the late 1960s, and the visibility and romantic appeal of these groups gave the impression that they would become a powerful force and tilt the balance in the White House and Congress. Yet these expectations failed to account for America's sizable and unglamorous "silent majority," which gave Richard Nixon a resounding victory in the 1972 presidential election.

Likewise, while it is fashionable to support the Gezi protestors, they do not have electoral sway in proportion to their high visibility. As a result, Turkey's large conservative base -- which has been mostly absent from the movement -- could play a role akin to Nixon's silent majority.

Despite the current drama, the Turkey that Washington will have to deal with in the next couple years will look much like the Turkey of a year ago, including in foreign policy terms. Washington relies heavily on Ankara to help secure

U.S. interests in the region. Turkey is the tacit balancer of Iranian power, and this role has grown in importance as Ankara challenges Tehran's prerogatives in Syria, where the United States cannot act constructively without Turkey's participation. Similarly, a common U.S.-Turkish policy on Iraq is the only way to forestall that state's fragmentation under grave pressure from the Syria crisis.

Turkey's protests could be more damaging on the economic front, however. The Turkish economy is driven by a globally competitive export sector as well as other industries that must compete in global markets (e.g., tourism). Turkey does not sell hydrocarbons or raw materials; it sells items whose appeal is directly connected to its overall appeal as a society. Domestic polarization and a heavy-handed government also threaten the economy's dynamism. Turkey is striving to become a fast and flexible postindustrial economy, which requires freewheeling creativity of the sort found in Silicon Valley. Such conditions are impossible without allowing different lifestyles to flourish in the public space. The "China model" will not deliver long-term growth to Turkey, and if the economy loses its dynamism, Ankara's foreign policy will have to be downsized as well.

Finally, the diplomatic fallout from the protests will most likely culminate in a readjustment of expectations in both Ankara and the West. Overhyped Western expectations of Turkey's democratic flowering will likely be brought back to reality, with observers recategorizing the country alongside developing democracies such as those in South America and East Asia. Like Turkey, these societies went through decades of turbulent political development and took some time to acquire all the accoutrements of fully advanced democracies.

For its part, Ankara needs to readjust its mindset. Throughout the protests, the AKP has held fast to the principle of state sovereignty as an absolute safeguard against Western criticism, however incompatible its conduct has been with prevailing democratic norms. This attitude needs to change if Turkey is to be inducted into the exclusive club of democratic states. Turkey's rulers must realize they cannot expect to join that club if they remain selective about which rules they follow when it comes to upholding the highest standards of democratic governance.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Tyler Evans.



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