

The Middle Class Strikes Back

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Articles & Testimony

Turkey can become the first consolidated Muslim democracy if Erdogan begins to respect the will of his people.

Since 2002, Turkey's sound economic policies have made it a member of the Group of 20 and turned it into a majority middle-class society for the first time in its history. Yet this week's huge protests show that the ruling Justice and Development Party, known as the A.K.P., has become a victim of its own success.

Indeed, the middle class that the party has created is committed to individual freedoms -- and it is now challenging the A.K.P.'s style of governance and political domination. College students, mostly of middle-class origins and considered apolitical, emerged as an organizing force in the demonstrations. They set up makeshift clinics, provided legal counsel for those demonstrators arrested and established hot lines for injured people. Their participation offers an early glimpse of Turkey's future; these students were only in elementary school when the A.K.P. took office in 2002, and they have known no other party. They want their voices to be heard -- along with the environmentalists, ultranationalists, gay rights groups, members of the Alevi community, Kurdish separatists and secular liberals who have taken to the streets. These unlikely bedfellows all reject the A.K.P.'s heavy-handed political style.

All this suggests that modernization theory -- the idea that economic development leads to more democracy -- is in the process of being proved right in Turkey. Indeed, as countries become middle class, they tend to become irreversibly diverse and democratic, developing the bedrock for democratic governance, including consensual politics and respect for individual and minority rights.

This week's clashes have exposed a fundamental rift between that democratic vision and the ruling party's leadership style. The A.K.P. and its leader, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, have interpreted democracy simply as majoritarianism -- rule by and for the majority, no matter how narrow, with little regard for consensus building. Mr. Erdogan believes that once elected, leaders need not worry about opposing views. During the demonstrations, he dismissed the protesters' legitimacy, arguing that "the will of the people is manifested at the ballot box."

Mr. Erdogan is a democrat only in the sense that he believes in ruling through popularly elected governments. Half of Turkey supports the A.K.P., but the other half does not. Yet, acting on this mentality, Mr. Erdogan has pushed to remake Turkey in his own image: capitalist and conservative, while dismissing opposing views. He has embraced free-market economics, successfully privatizing Turkey's moribund public-sector companies. At the same time, his government has promoted a socially conservative, family-values agenda, encapsulated by his iconic call for each woman to have at least three children.

For several years, Mr. Erdogan's image as "a strong man with strong family values" worked. It brought him two successive election victories after 2002, with a growing share of the vote each time. But as Turkey prospered, more Turks were lifted out of poverty in the last decade than ever before.

Recently, though, the A.K.P. has faced severe public opposition to some of its projects, including legislation that limits the sale of alcohol as well as the catalyst for the protests: his plan to uproot hundreds of trees and turn a park adjacent to Istanbul's largest square into a shopping mall. Yet in both cases the A.K.P. leadership simply plowed ahead. For them, steamrolling opposing voices was just business as usual.

Mr. Erdogan has failed to realize that he is dealing with a new Turkey. It was surprising enough that an environmentalist sit-in was organized in downtown Istanbul to save a city park. Even more surprising was the fact that when the police moved in to crack down, tens of thousands of middle-class citizens poured into the streets in the middle of the night.

Since then, demonstrations have spread across the country deep into Anatolia, following the footsteps of the country's growing bourgeoisie, which is no longer only in historically cosmopolitan coastal centers like Istanbul and Izmir, but in provincial cities like Gaziantep and Malatya, where trade with neighboring countries like Iraq and Iran has brought newfound wealth. The nationwide popular reaction suggests the birth of a new Turkey that cherishes individual rights and the accouterments of middle-class life.

Even Mr. Erdogan's allies and supporters, including the Gulen movement, an influential grass-roots network that had hitherto mostly supported the A.K.P., threw some support behind the demonstrations and published a number of editorials in its media outlets criticizing the ruling party.

The new middle class that the A.K.P. has built is telling its government that democracy is not just about winning elections; it is also about building consensus. And they are telling Mr. Erdogan that while they may vote for him, they do not necessarily support all his policies.

This is good news for Turkey's future. The country has crossed a threshold -- it is too middle class and too diverse to fall under a one-size-fits-all democracy. And the A.K.P. will have to listen to opposing views, even though it remains the most popular party in the country.

Turkey has become the first majority middle-class and majority Muslim society in history. Now it can become the first consolidated democracy among all Muslim countries, if Mr. Erdogan begins to respect the will of his people.

*Soner Cagaptay, author of the forthcoming book **The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/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 Washington Institute. ❖*

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