

Turks Have Learned the Power of Grassroots Politics

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Even if this week's demonstrations fizzle away, grassroots activism and middle-class demands for liberties have apparently become a force in Turkish politics.

Turkey witnessed two fascinating developments last week. In the first, pro-environment groups organized a sit-in to protest government plans to cut down trees in the heart of Istanbul to make way for a shopping mall. Attendance at the sit-in, later dubbed the "Tree revolution," grew quickly into the thousands, suggesting the birth of a new environmental dynamic in Turkish politics. More importantly, when the security forces cracked down on the sit-in, using teargas and water cannons, tens of thousands of people poured into Istanbul's streets in the middle of the night to defend their right to protest, as well as the right of people of different ideological stripes to do the same. These two incidents signal the birth of a new type of grassroots politics in Turkey.

Turkey's civil society was brutally crippled by the 1980 coup, which saw the military shut down all NGOs, including labor unions and even chess clubs. These NGOs remained closed for years as per the military's decree, and many withered away as a result.

The 1980 coup had followed a decade of political violence in the country between the government and radical right-wing groups on the one hand and radical leftists on the other (the communists also fought among themselves). The violent leftist and right-wing groups were attached to key NGOs, so that even after the military regime ended in 1983 and NGOs were permitted, many Turks shied away from old civil society groups.

The birth of a middle class in the country in the late 1980s and the 1990s allowed new NGOs to form, such as those promoting women's rights. But many of these urban groups failed to appeal to mainline citizens across Anatolia.

Turkey's civil society remained weak. When mass demonstrations took place, they failed to bring forth change. In fact, often times, these rallies were sponsored by the government, as was the case in 1989 when Turks took to the streets following the government's call to protest the forced-Bulgarization campaign of the ethnic Turks in Bulgaria.

In other cases, demonstrations were limited to specific groups, such as rallies held by Alevis in 1993 to protest the fire bombing of a hotel in central Turkey that killed a number of prominent Alevi and leftist artists. In other instances, demonstrations were linked to the military, such as the 2007 rallies in which secularist Turks took to the streets to protest the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP). Because this rally was partly a call for the military to put pressure on politicians, it failed to garner widespread legitimacy among the public.

But today, we may be witnessing a turning point. Currently, protestors in Turkey have occupied Istanbul's city's central square for days and the demonstrations have spread around to over 60 Turkish cities. And this time, civil society action has brought about some change in government policy. On June 2, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan recanted his shopping mall proposal. And after Erdogan left for a trip to Morocco, acting prime minister Bulent Arinc, a prominent member of the governing party, apologized to the sit-in demonstrators for police violence, and also offered to meet them.

Two factors account for the rebirth of grassroots politics in Turkey. The first is social media, which alone helped turn a pro-tree sit-in into a massive anti-government rally and has sustained it for days.

The second factor is Turkey's new middle class. In the past decade, Turkey has become a majority middle-class society, ironically thanks to Erdogan's successful economic policies. Now, though, this demographic majority is demanding respect for individual liberties (such as the right to assembly), and everything that comes with it, such as respect for the environment and urban heritage.

The rallies have included a number of AKP voters, suggesting that these are not the same as the old anti-AKP secular rallies. This is the Turks' way of saying to the AKP: "We may vote for you, but it does not mean we will support all your policies."

Now the middle-class has tasted the power of organized grassroots action, forcing Erdogan -- who has nurtured a strong man image in politics -- to change his mind about the park-to-shopping mall project. Even if this week's demonstrations eventually fizzle away, grassroots activism and middle-class demands for liberties appear to have become a force of Turkish politics, thanks to a campaign to save some trees.

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