

Turkey at a Crossroads:

What Do the Gezi Park Protests Mean for Democracy in the Region?

(Part 2)

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The demonstrations that broke out in Gezi Park and Taksim Square in Istanbul in late May represent the biggest challenge to Prime Minister Erdogan's AK Party rule in the eleven years the party has been in power. That said, the demonstrations do not indicate a serious erosion of support for the prime minister and his party, although his popularity has dropped somewhat in recent polls. Thus it is highly unlikely that the demonstrations will lead to the toppling of the AKP government, or early elections, now scheduled for 2015.

But what the demonstrations, and the government's reaction to them, do show is that Turkey is increasingly split into two quite different political groupings, and that the government might be contributing to further polarization of the society. This is the situation of greatest concern to those of us who have worked with and follow Turkey closely. Any government has the right to restore order, and at least some of the demonstrators came from violent, radical backgrounds, while blocking a major traffic center in one of the world's biggest cities for weeks is not something that any government will allow to go on indefinitely.

But what has troubled both observers, including me, and the U.S. government is the at times seemingly indiscriminate force used against peaceful demonstrators, including those in the park as well as those blocking Taksim Square. Perhaps even more troubling is the attitude of some, but not all, of the government leaders. These leaders, including the prime minister, have generally demonized all of the demonstrators, despite the PM's meeting with a delegation of them and adopting a reasonable position on resolving the park question.

But the language used against the demonstrators, and both the police as well as legal actions directed against them, call into question the government's commitment to free speech and assembly, to the principle of proportionality, and, at bottom, to the democratic principle that minorities cannot simply be ignored.

When ignored, they are likely to challenge not just the government, ultimately in elections, but quite possibly the very foundations of the state, creating instability and potentially chaos. Concern about this has led to a 20 percent drop in the stock market, as well as the value of the Turkish lira, along with indications of a drop in tourism and FDI. Turkey will recover from these immediate effects, but the long-term effects of a deep fissure in society on the country's stability, and thus its ability to maintain a high-tech, "First World" economy driven by exports, could be very negative.

But as long as Turkey is a democracy, we have to have faith in both the Turkish people and leadership that Turkey can work its way through this apparent dichotomy between majority power and minority rights, and reestablish its enviable stability, upon which its equally enviable economic growth is based. Specifically, Turkey faces not only parliamentary elections in 2015, but potentially much more important votes in 2014 -- for a new president, and in a referendum for a constitution to replace the 1980s one approved under military rule. Prime Minister Erdogan has long hoped to use the 2014 ballots to become president of a different, far more presidential democracy. His position on the fissures within his society, and the effect of those fissures on Turkey's development, will likely have a key impact on these votes.

WHAT SHOULD THE U.S. DO?

The U.S. has spoken out repeatedly, but has been restrained in its reaction. That is a good decision on the part of the U.S., although not everyone will agree with it. While we have to speak out, and in the case of Turkey have spoken out, to defend our values and concept of democracy and freedom, we also have to consider the context.

First, Turkey, again, is a democracy, and the people have the right to pass judgment on all that has been said and done related to the demonstrations. It is wise to await that judgment. Second, publicly condemning Turkey and Prime Minister Erdogan would be strongly counterproductive. It will not push the Turkish government to tailor its response. Turkey has long lived with strong American criticism of one or another aspect of its domestic policies.

Moreover, the U.S. does not have a strong standing within the Turkish population. According to the Pew Survey, despite massive U.S. public diplomacy efforts, educational programs, and close policy coordination, favorable attitudes toward the U.S. in Turkey have dropped from roughly 23-30 percent through most of the 2002-2005 period to 9-17 percent in the past six years; this is, with limited competition from Pakistan, the lowest favorability rating in any significant country around the globe.

If we make the demonstrations about us, about the outsiders, or otherwise follow the tack that many in Europe seem to be adopting, we will undercut the chance for voices and opinions favoring compromise and reconciliation to gain ground. Obviously, were Turkey to take a serious turn away from participatory democracy, this approach would not work, but we have seen no such turn.

Third, we have only limited leverage with Turkey; no development aid to speak of, trade is relatively small in comparative terms, and our massive defense sales are at least as much in our interest as in Turkey's.

Finally, and in my mind most importantly, we need good relations with Turkey to deal with the dangers that beset the region. We have not seen the region in so much turmoil and insecurity in decades. Regional stability, the survival of regimes, the security of the oil trade, and even the overall structure of U.S.-led international security are at risk. We need to coordinate closely with Turkey on all three of the most pressing problems -- the Syrian civil war, the threat of division in Iraq, and the Iranian nuclear file. The last thing the U.S. needs, in the midst of this, is a major row with one of our few key allies sufficiently strong and stable to actually assist us.

Having said that, it is important that the U.S., as a friend, counsel the Turkish government, behind closed doors, without threat, but forcefully, about the long-term effects of continued government policies and attitudes of the sort we have seen. Aside from the erosion of democratic values such policies and attitudes encourage, Turkey's international image -- for

political competency and as an example of Middle Eastern democracy -- as well as at least some aspects of its economic success and the social stability that reinforces both its image and economy will all be placed at risk.

This is bad for Turkey, bad for the United States, and bad for regional stability.