

Gezi Park one month on: what lies ahead?

Amanda Paul and Demir Murat Seyrek

For almost a month, Turkey has been witnessing serious challenges to its social and political stability, with protestors defying the authority of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Sparked by a harsh response to a quiet environmental demonstration over Taksim's Gezi Park, the protests caught the world by surprise, as did the government's reaction to them. The defiant attitude of Erdoğan, along with the heavy-handed approach of the police, cast a dark shadow over Turkey's ruling elites and attracted criticism from the international community, including the EU.

Gezi Park is only the tip of the iceberg. The protestors have broader demands: a more participatory decision-making system, particularly regarding matters that directly affect people's lives; a more pluralist system that respects the demands of the minority as much as the majority; no imposition of religious and cultural values or norms on society; improving fundamental rights and liberties, including but not limited to freedom of assembly, free speech and free media; and a political system that functions through dialogue and respect. These demands are all legitimate and should be respected in a democratic society.

While the government has taken steps towards resolving the Gezi Park issue, Erdoğan's ongoing negative rhetoric, including at recent AKP rallies in Ankara, Istanbul and Erzurum, have increased doubts over his readiness for dialogue and willingness to take on board broader concerns. The extent to which these events will affect Turkey's domestic politics remains to be seen. Yet with important elections slated for 2014 and 2015, it seems that a more nuanced political landscape may be on the horizon.

The 'one man decides all' phenomenon

After more than a decade in power, Erdoğan stands accused of using his dominant position to pursue an agenda that is shaped by his own ideology and the beliefs of his conservative support base and increasingly ignores the concerns of those who do not share this lifestyle: almost fifty percent of the country (those who did not vote for the AKP in the 2011 parliamentary elections). Many Turks consider their lifestyle and freedom to be under attack, believing that an increasingly conservative agenda is creeping into every crevice of their lives, moulding Turkey in an irreversible manner. The new alcohol law and the stated goal of raising a "religious generation" represent two such examples.

Coming from all corners of Turkey, the majority of protestors are young individuals including university students and well-educated professionals without any political or NGO affiliation, who are supported by some 116 organisations from diverse backgrounds. They are mainly apolitical but are strong supporters of democracy, pluralism, pacifism and fundamental rights and freedoms. In this sense, while there is no doubt that some extremist elements used the protests in an unacceptable way, further provoking the situation, Erdoğan's ongoing insistence that extremists and "external forces" have been a driving force behind them do not have credible grounds.

The protestors are equally against the ultra-secular and discriminatory regime as much as they are against the conservative policies of the government. Hence this movement should not be evaluated by the old dynamic of 'ultra-secular elite' vs. the AKP. Protestors support religious freedoms but they simply do not want values, whether religious or non-religious, to be imposed upon them.

What impact?

The Turkish economy has already felt the effect of the protests, with the Istanbul Stock Exchange falling sharply. If tensions persist, there may be a greater impact including on tourism, which brings in around \$20bn annually, and on foreign investment. Many holiday bookings (particularly to Istanbul) were cancelled as a consequence of the protests. Moreover, much of the foreign capital flow into Turkey is 'portfolio capital' and increasingly short term, making it very sensitive to change. Any sudden shock may result in capital flight. Furthermore, while the economy did reasonably well in the first quarter of 2013, growth was predominantly driven by

public spending, with exports contributing nothing to growth for the first time in two years. Moreover, with a current account deficit of some \$50bn, it is clearly in Turkey's economic interest to find a peaceful resolution to the protests quickly.

On the political front, the landscape of political parties may become more nuanced. While the AKP remains the most powerful party, the emergence of new opposition parties would seem likely. Given that there is increasing concern regarding green matters, the emergence of Turkey's first green party is probable. Moreover, dissatisfaction with the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), which remains directionless and disconnected from youth, may lead to the creation of new centre-left movements. However, the 10% election threshold will represent a key challenge for new parties and political movements.

This will add to challenges which may come from within the AKP. While the AKP seems to be unified under Erdoğan, it is not a homogenous party. Different groups within the party may become more vocal. 70 senior MPs, including Bülent Arınç, Ali Babacan and Taner Yıldız, are not able to run in the next elections due to an AKP statutes rule, which prevents MPs from running for four consecutive terms of office. Some of these MPs may create a base for a potential opposition group with a less conservative approach to that of the AKP, attracting support from other circles in Turkey as well as from more liberal AKP supporters.

Further dissatisfaction may also come from the AKP's nationalist members, among whom concern is growing over some of Erdoğan's policies, including the way the peace process with the Kurds was conducted. MPs representing the nationalist electorate, mainly from central and eastern Anatolia, do not fully support direct negotiations with the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) or concessions. Furthermore, they do not feel comfortable with the lack of transparency in the negotiations and face negative reactions from their own electorate on these matters.

Turkish President Abdullah Gül's position is also important. A conciliatory figure, Gül has made statements aimed at reducing the tension, yet moderate people within the AKP and the protestors themselves expect him to be more proactive in terms of supporting protestors' demands. It remains unclear whether he is ready to do this. The forthcoming 2014 presidential elections will be a litmus test for relations between Erdoğan and Gül and in shaping the country's political landscape. Gül has always played second fiddle to Erdoğan, shying away from direct confrontation and tension. Yet if Gül decides to run for the Presidency, it could potentially create an explosive situation in Turkey, and increasingly divide the AKP. Much will depend on whether or not Erdoğan nominates Gül to become Prime Minister or whether he chooses a weaker figure he could control from the Presidential Palace. Therefore whether or not Gül and Erdoğan will be able to reach an agreement has consequences for Turkish politics.

The protests also sparked a new crisis in the Turkey-EU relationship. While the EU's reaction was initially limited to statements and a European Parliament Resolution "strongly condemning the excessive use of force," the situation soured further when Germany announced plans to block the opening of Chapter 22 on Regional Policies as a consequence of the Turkish authorities' response to the protests. After three years of no new accession chapter being opened, Chapter 22 had become very symbolic. With a divided EU, a furious Ankara, and a fear of a total breakdown in relations, a compromise was found. Chapter 22 was declared to have been opened, although the opening of talks and accompanying Intergovernmental Conference were postponed until the publication of Turkey's 2013 Progress Report. While this will allow the EU to assess whether Turkey has addressed concerns linked to Gezi Park, it will also conveniently happen after September's elections in Germany. Moreover, there is no guarantee that all member states will agree that Turkey has done enough to address the concerns. Therefore Turkey-EU relations may experience another 'flashpoint' in October.

Meanwhile, it is important for the EU to support the peaceful protestors and other pro-democracy actors in Turkey, including by reaching out to youth across the country, the majority of which share similar values to those espoused by the EU. This movement can be used by the EU to support the reform process. The rest can be solved within the internal social and democratic dynamics of Turkey.

Amanda Paul is a policy analyst at the European Policy Centre in Brussels. Demir Murat Seyrek is an independent analyst on European affairs.