



Middle East Q&A: Turkey's 2013 Taksim Square Protests

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Over the past week, a small environmental protest against a renovation project in central Istanbul has exploded into Turkey's largest ever anti-government protests. For the first time, a wide cross-section of Turkish society has taken to the streets in unprecedented numbers to oppose the policies of Prime Minister Tayyip Recep Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP). As talk grows of a "Turkish Spring" and the end of the AKP's era of unchallenged political dominance, it is worth exploring what the current protests hold in store for Prime Minister Erdogan and Turkish democracy. This *Asan Issue Brief* answers some of the misconceptions about the protests and offers some context for how we should interpret events.

Q. For the past decade, Turkey has been an icon of successful democratization, stable growth, and responsible international activism. What caused these sudden nationwide protests?

The initial cause for the protests was the government's decision to tear down Taksim Square's Gezi Park in central Istanbul and replace it with a replica Ottoman-era military barracks and shopping mall. Like Seoul in the 1990s, most of Istanbul's parks have disappeared in the quest for urban development. After the announcement, a

handful of environmental activists gathered to peacefully protest the decision which, as the most qualified democracy in the Muslim Middle East, Turkey has every day.

What turned a minor protest over an urban planning issue into a nationwide anti-government movement was the excessive police reaction involving tear gas, water cannons, and batons to disperse the protestors. Had the police not responded in such a heavy-handed manner it is doubtful whether the national reaction would have been so swift and widespread. Those early scenes of unarmed protesters being attacked by gas mask-wearing police officers were the catalyst that tapped into a deep reservoir of public resentment about the Erdogan government.

As we have seen in countless mass demonstrations around the world, the initial trigger is usually a byproduct of a broader set of grievances. In the case of Turkey, the main issue has been widespread perceptions that Prime Minister Erdogan has grown increasingly arrogant and authoritarian after ten years in office. Having received 50% of the vote in the last elections and made remarkable progress in democracy and economic growth, he is now seen as an overconfident leader who ignores the concerns of the 50% who did not vote for him. This is evident in Erdogan's recent remark on the protests, saying, "Where they gather 100,000, I will bring together one million from my party."

Yet, citizens who have experienced greater pluralism and prosperity thanks to Erdogan's time in office know that the actions of the government, especially since his third term began in 2011, go against the rule of democracy. What we are seeing is a boomerang effect of Erdogan's own creation that is commonly called the "paradox of democratization": greater freedom has led to greater expression of public opinion.

Q. Are we witnessing a "Turkish Spring" akin to the "Arab Spring"?

No. While some commentators have been quick to compare the protests with the Arab Spring, the truth is that Turkey is very different. Proponents of this view have cited Erdogan's growing authoritarianism, the spontaneous and broadly representative nature of the protests, and the use of social networking services such as Twitter and Facebook. However, Erdogan is no Hosni Mubarak, Zine Ben Ali, Muam-

mar Qadhafi, let alone Bashar al-Assad.

Considered a “conditional democracy” in political science discourse, Turkey has made enormous strides in raising the quality of democracy under Erdogan. Particularly during his first two terms, he made important progress on limiting the scope of the military in politics and improving the rights of the Kurdish population. Although Turkey has yet to become a “consolidated democracy,” the protests should be viewed within the context of the country’s continuing democratization.

The current protests share more in common with the spontaneous, mass protests that occur in other democracies such as Korea’s 2008 anti-US beef protests. While public anger is strong and some are calling for the Prime Minister’s resignation, this is unlikely to lead to a revolution. It is more likely that most people will settle for a sincere apology from Erdogan and a pledge to soften some of its harsher policies such as urban renewal and Islamist-inspired regulations. Then again, it is also likely that the protests will slowly fizzle out over time, particularly if the police reaction is restrained.

Q. How is it that a man that who was, until recently, one of the world’s most popular leaders is now being portrayed as an authoritarian dictator?

Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely. After nearly a decade in office, Prime Minister Erdogan and his AKP have become ossified in their positions of power. While they negotiated breakthroughs on a wide range of issues during his first two terms, including the Kurdish conflict, EU membership, and civil-military relations, electoral success has created a culture of entitlement. Meanwhile, the fragmented secular opposition, having lost credibility over decades of corruption, has given the AKP a monopoly on power. Erdogan’s desire to transform the role of the presidency is seen by many as merely the latest and clearest indication of his authoritarian ambitions.

Interestingly, echoing South Korea’s own demonstrations during the Lee Myung-bak administration, it is noteworthy that the trigger for Turkey’s protests was not the violation of press freedom or Erdogan’s foreign policy, but rather the construction of

grandiose development projects. Some of Erdogan's more ambitious projects such as building another bridge across the Bosphorous Strait and a canal connecting the Black Sea and Marmara Sea recall Lee's ambitious quest to build the Grand Korean Waterway linking Seoul and Busan, also known as the 4 Major Rivers Project.

This says something to the conviction or arrogance with which visionary or authoritarian leaders often pursue controversial initiatives. When such leaders encounter resistance, they inevitably invoke their popular mandate at the ballot box. Take, for instance, President Lee Myung-bak's attitude towards the 2008 anti-US beef protests. Having been elected in a landslide victory over his opposition candidate, he stubbornly refused to address the protester's demands, dismissing them as disgruntled, opposition supporters and created the term "uncommunicatable government." Similarly, Erdogan's decision to continue on with his trip to North Africa is indicative of his attitude towards the demonstrators. When asked about the meaning of democracy during his trip, the Prime Minister responded, "For me democracy is all about the ballot box." He would be wise to keep in mind that majoritarian rule is a weakness of representative democracy that paves the way for populist politics; it is often not a source of legitimacy.

Q. What implications do the current protests have for Korea?

Turkey remains one of Korea's key partners in a rapidly changing Middle East. The AKP's brand of moderate Islam, Erdogan's "Zero Problems with Neighbors" policy, and a decade of strong economic growth have all placed Turkey in an influential position vis-à-vis the region. For instance, Erdogan's leadership in supporting the Arab Spring and the rebels in Syria, while controversial domestically, has been welcomed by the international community. Indeed, Turkey's emergence as a regional power closely mirrors Korea's own rise during the past decade.

Nonetheless, the current protests reveal the need for the Prime Minister to use some of the charisma with which he has wooed the international community to address domestic grievances. As Korea looks to Turkey to serve as a gateway to new partnerships in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Middle East, the last thing it needs is for Turkey to take a detour through dictatorship. Turkey's experience of vibrant demo-

cratic debate and protest is something that should be encouraged, most of all by countries such as Korea, who are also consolidating their own democracies. The time has come for the renowned “Turkish Model” to take the next step and uphold political pluralism and democratic participation as values worthy of protection.

The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.



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