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Turkey

Confronting an Elected Dictator: Popular Mobilization in Turkey

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Mass demonstrations and harsh governmental crackdowns are not new in Turkish political history, however, although the current demonstrations in Istanbul and throughout Turkey were initiated by socialists, there is no doubt that we are experiencing something strikingly different this time, displayed by not only the visible lack of political experience of a significant number of the demonstrators but also the sheer number and incredible resiliency of the demonstrators in the face of massive and injurious tear gas assaults of the police. What is the cause of this massive social explosion in a country where there is no sign of economic crisis, and where the government was elected in 2011 with 50% of the votes?

To better understand what is happening, let's start with a discussion of the relationship between elections and democracy. Athenian democrats devised their democratic system without elections because they believed that elections are the oligarchic method of selecting the leaders, and mechanisms that prevent the formation of a political class (like the lottery and rotation systems) are the only democratic ways to select the rulers. Because, Athenian democrats believed that elections not only have an intrinsic class bias, but elections also provide the rulers autonomy from the ruled; that is, they make it possible for rulers to be able to do whatever they please. Indeed, the only reason why modern liberal representative government centered around elections is not simply an oligarchic system is because it is also a system that provides tools for the ruled, including methods of participation other than elections, freedoms for the opposition, and checks on the rulers. Although these tools are still severely inadequate, they do make it more challenging for the rulers to do whatever they wish and they do force rulers to respond to citizens to an extent. However, if elections start to become the only institution of a modern representative government, then elections merely become a tool for authoritarian rule by bolstering the executive branch with popular approval.

The historic demonstrations centered around the resistance in Istanbul's Gezi park is exactly about the grievances caused by the dictatorship of an executive branch that is reinforced by the electoral approval. Specifically, Gezi park resistance is one of those instances where both the class character of the state and the oligarchic nature of electoral authorization became blatantly obvious. Firstly, it signifies the class character of the state in a way that will not escape even the most crude Marxist analysis. Gezi is a public park at the political and social epicenter of the city, Taksim, and the government decided to replace the park with a shopping mall. When activists started to resist by not evacuating the park, the government sent in its police to fight for the conversion of a public park into a mall. To put it even more bluntly, the state blindly used its instruments of violence to serve the interests of capital, and to convert a collective good into private property. However, Gezi also demonstrates the oligarchic character of a political regime based solely on electoral authorization. Because, in the 2011 elections, nobody voted for the government to convert the public park in Taksim into a mall or any of the other governments incursions into the social sphere, yet short of specific mandates, and clear instructions on how to rule, the government had the legal right to rule as it pleases. However, despite their electoral mandate, this type of unilateral action may not have happened in a better functioning representative system which provides the ruled with other instruments of participation and opposition than elections. Because, even though its democratic content is limited, in a liberal representative government citizens would have some access to policy making, there would be a level of transparency and free public debate, and there would be legal scrutiny over the issue. In Turkey on the other hand, no such limits are in place given the AKP's unprecedented accumulation of power since 2007.

The AKP has now not only eliminated the well-known historical challenge from the army, but it has also taken control of the high courts, and then slowly but surely, using its popularity, eradicated all oppositional freedoms. Concretely speaking, Erdogan's policy could not be confronted by the non-existing oppositional media, and it could not be challenged by the judiciary that is now under the control of the executive, i.e. the ruling party. Therefore, when Erdogan wanted to turn a public space, where citizens can engage in free and equal interactions, into a right-wing conservative space, where customers focus on the acquisition of goods, there were no other way to stop him except

by the force of numbers.

However, the hundreds of thousands of people out protesting are not resisting the police and subjecting themselves to the massive use of tear gas and brute force just because of the injustice at Gezi park, or just because of the fact that Erdogan is an authoritarian leader. These protests happened because in addition to Erdogan's on-going attacks on oppositional groups (seculars, Alewites, Kurds, socialists and others), including purging them from positions of power, and criminalizing and imprisoning them en masse for various reasons, he deepened to an unprecedented extent his neoliberal and extremely conservative exclusionary social policies. To name a few of the most recent ones, last year, without much debate, the whole education system was reconfigured to better serve not only the needs of capital but also in Erdogan's words, 'to raise a more religious generation'. Last month, in a country where per capita alcohol consumption is by far the lowest among OECD countries, strict alcohol consumption restrictions passed, which were defended by Erdogan as follows: 'why is it defensible for you to accept a law passed by two drunkards [according to many signifying Ataturk and Inonu], but the law that is the imperative of religion becomes something that you need to deny...if you want to drink, buy your drink and go drink it in your own home'. Last week, the AKP enlarged its assault on women rights by making the morning after pill a prescription drug, and a couple of days ago Erdogan later approved of an announcement made in Ankara metro warning against kissing in public. Many of these regulations would be very difficult to implement if previously existing checks were still place. For example, the constitutional court might strike a few of the legal changes, or the council of the state would limit or remove some of the others. Considering the lack of avenues for voice and the lack of obstacles against Erdogan's power, these and many other similar policies, combined with his symbolically exclusionary and suffocating speeches, have apparently made a great many non-supporters feel not only completely powerless and frustrated, but also very angry.

This anger has now become embodied in massive demonstrations, where hundreds of thousands of people are taking back the autonomy that the government enjoys. In short, if the reason for the rebellion is the sense of powerlessness, lack of control over their own lives, the immediate result is perhaps the sense of power large sectors of the population are enjoying for the first time. For now, they have taken control of their city and of their lives. As a result, we are now part of a truly democratic moment. This is an experience that goes way beyond the 'democratic rights' enjoyed within liberal representative democracies, which at its best is a democracy tamed for the requirements of capitalism and the modern state. Therefore, in a counter-intuitive way, we probably owe this democratic explosion to the lack of democratic checks on the power of the electorally authorized executive. For Erdogan, on the other hand, before our very eyes we are witnessing the transformation of his image from a leader who is powerful, popular, and if a little impulsive, still reflective of the values of the 'Turkish nation', into a tyrant who is so greedy and drunk with power that although he has the votes, he cannot manage the country effectively anymore. He is indeed trapped in a dictatorial dilemma: if he caves into the current demands, he will lose the perception that he is all that powerful; if he does not cave in at all, he will have to rely on coercive power to the degree that he will turn into a cruel tyrant. So far he has taken the second route, still belittling and criminalizing the demonstrators, hoping that the next elections in less than a year will result in a way to dissipate the democratic euphoria. However, although this is one of those instances where the statement that 'politics is open-ended' is indeed the reality, it appears that sustained mobilization is the only course of action that will help satisfy both democratic and socialist goals.