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Turkey

The Taksim resistance

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There is a huge gap between the mass discontent and the socialist movement, as is shown by the fact that the people who participated in the resistance at Taksim are not affiliated to any political party. It was also the first time that most of them had taken part in political action. Moreover, many even expressed the need for a new political party. There is a huge gap between the mass discontent and the socialist movement, as is shown by the fact that the people who participated in the resistance at Taksim are not affiliated to any political party. It was also the first time that most of them had taken part in political action. Moreover, many even expressed the need for a new political party.

Diversity, solidarity and tolerance

Despite the fact that no social content was expressed overtly during the resistance, one of the subjects debated during the discussions underway in the forums held by youth in the various city parks focused on the possible political results of this resistance. The question is whether this explosion of anger aimed at the government and above all the Prime Minister will merely weaken the government a bit while strengthening the main opposition party, the CHP, without transforming itself into a political movement, or if it will open up a new channel of opposition.

It is hard to make a precise judgement on the composition of this movement, which has spread to several cities around the country. However, we can observe that sectors which could be considered as the nationalist left and CHP members massively participated in the demonstrations which took place in Ankara, where the attitude of the police was much harsher than elsewhere.

Initially there was participation, albeit limited, of the far-right Grey Wolves, in the demonstrations. But they quickly departed, after warnings from the MHP leadership. In a rather strange way, MHP and BDP thus took a common position regarding a situation for the first time in their history.

As for the Kurdish movement, it remained on the sidelines at the beginning of the demonstration when it saw Turkish flags and nationalist left activists, concerned that these events could harm the negotiation process. The message of support Abdullah Öcalan sent from prison was nonetheless an appeal, albeit a little late.

Even if there were not many of them, as the days passed young Kurds took their place in the streets with their dances [halays] and for the first time ever found themselves alongside the nationalist left in such a celebration.

But a mass well beyond the usual elements (such as socialists, the nationalist left, the Kurdish national movement and CHP supporters) took part in this movement. Thus, it was thanks to new participants in the struggle that such a heterogeneous mass succeeded in uniting. Even the barricades were not built by the activist left alone: here again, there was a vast spectrum ranging from LGBT activists to people participating in a political action for the first time.

Some specific groups came to the fore, the most popular being fans of the Besiktas football team known as ÇARSI (with the letter A written like the anarchist symbol). This group, which had already expressed its sensitivity to a whole series of social questions, became a Taksim resistance legend. The anti-police songs this group composed, with their experience of confrontation acquired during football matches, were on everyone's lips during the demonstrations.

Moreover, anti-capitalist Muslims, who had begun to make their voice heard in left journals and newspapers, as well as on television, by taking part in the Mayday demonstrations for some years, became a centre of interest during this resistance. During a religious feast at the time of the Taksim revolt, Gezi Park youth distributed little sesame cakes (a religious symbol of celebration) to other demonstrators, to show that everybody respected their religious practices, without any request to this effect by the Muslims.

Feminists and the LGBT movement seized an opportunity to make themselves known. At first there were no common slogans the broad masses could take up, so insults replaced these. The feminists erased sexist and obscene graffiti, to show the youth how to correct their language. And the youth broadly followed this approach.

The movement's most serious omission was its failure to form rank and file committees, which could have built a coordination with strong representativity. Currently, the forums in surrounding parks are attempting to tackle this lack. It is no doubt difficult for such a broad mass to form such a coordination, but it would be important, in order to counter police attacks and keep the movement's dynamism alive.

The creation of a free kitchen, infirmary, crèche and library for everyday life in common led to the formation of an interesting "moral" economy. Although common life in Gezi Park during these days developed various practices of solidarity encompassing very different sectors, with direct democracy relations to some extent, no "left" demands or questioning appeared.

The place of socialists

Erdogan tried to blame the radical left for the events, but this did not correspond to reality.

In recent years, May 1st demonstrations had become an occasion for the socialist movement to measure its strength. The demonstrations which sometimes took place with participation by rightwing unions and the curious (then counted among participants), became merely scenes of confrontation with the police. They were then seen as a show of force and nothing more.

This year Erdogan had closed Taksim Square, which had remained open for demonstrations last year. The police cut access to the square and the demonstrators barely succeeded in maintaining their positions around Besiktas just below Taksim, where even CHP MPs were exposed to tear gas. One month later, resistance at Taksim transformed the square into a liberated zone, surrounded by barricades, where no security forces and police could set foot for a fortnight! That is something the socialist movement could never have done.

Although socialist activists took a massive part (throughout the country) in the resistance at Taksim, the total number of socialist activists was never more than 10 % of all demonstrators. With the outbreak of events, various socialist groups and parties went to Taksim Square with their flags. Some of these relatively small groups, camping mainly at the edge of Taksim Square and Gezi park, succeeded in becoming full-fledged components of the movement; but most remained nothing more than "visitors" while others were not at the forefront of physical confrontations with the police.

Academic studies on the composition of the demonstrators have shown that, rather than seeking a social or political outcome, the youth above all opposed the government's interventions in every area of everyday life, as embodied by Erdogan's paternalist and authoritarian personality. The major demand was freedom. Even if they did not view the socialist groups as part of the political system they opposed, they did not see them as having the ability to contribute to the solution of their problems.

The Taksim resistance

The socialist left's main advantage was its participation was in the movement as a legitimate component. Despite this, it cannot be said that the flags and slogans they wished to impose on people there for other reasons were really appreciated!

Of the three main socialist groups, only the Communist Party of Turkey, the TKP, participated in the 2011 parliamentary elections (it won only 0.14% or 60,000 votes, 25,000 less than in the previous elections). If the Freedom and Solidarity Party (ÖDP) had been able to take part, it would probably have obtained a similar score. As for the Community Houses (Halkevleri), which present themselves as a movement and not a party, their social weight would have no doubt earned them a similar percentage of votes. In these circumstances, none of these movements had the means to make a leap forward. Furthermore, even if they could have formed a common party they would not represent a pole of attraction.

The election of an independent socialist candidate as MP following a campaign waged in a single Istanbul electoral constituency, with participation of broad socialist and other sectors but above all thanks to the Kurdish vote (the Kurdish movement began this campaign), still remains before us as a significant experience.

It is not possible to find in Turkey even the shadow of a Syriza, borne by the élan of struggles against the crisis. Each of the main socialist organisations has an electoral base totalling only 0.5 %. Thus it is easy to understand why they could not form a pole of attraction for the demonstrators, even cumulatively.

The socialist movement's incapacity to wage at least a united struggle has revealed one of its weaknesses during the resistance in Taksim. If a credible alternative cannot be created, also bringing in the new elements emerging from the resistance, it will become increasingly difficult to face a regime that will become more repressive in the coming period.

Social opposition, in recent years confined to struggles against hydroelectric power stations, unsuccessful strikes and routine Mayday demonstrations, has regained self-confidence with the Taksim resistance.

The socialist movement must absolutely resolve the problem of building an alternative, which can meet the challenge of upcoming elections. But that requires restructuring, succeeding in taking part in new areas of struggle and not limited to current forces alone. The Taksim has shown that it is possible to win if we fight. The movement has been from the dead weight dragging it down. To Strengthening this new position will demand new struggle and integrated struggles not confined solely to questions of liberties but also putting forth social demands.