


Turkey's 'indignants' take to the streets

William Chislett | Associate researcher at the Elcano Royal Institute and author of six Working Papers on Turkey | www.WilliamChislett.com | @rielcano 

The protests that started in Istanbul and have shaken the country are rooted in a lot more than complaints about riding rough-shod over opposition to the redevelopment of one of the few green spaces in the historic heart of a city of 13 million and turning it into a shopping mall.

Other grievances have coalesced around a demonstration that began last week in Gezi Park near to Taksim Square and spread to other cities including Ankara, the capital. They include the recent law pushed through parliament by the Islamist-rooted government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan restricting the sale and consumption of alcohol, the jailing of many journalists on questionable grounds and the handing down of a suspended 10-month sentence for Fazil Say, an internationally-acclaimed pianist, for insulting Islam in Twitter postings.



In general there is a growing discontent, particularly among middle-class secularists, with the authoritarian style of government of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has been in power for more than 10 years, and with what is perceived as a creeping Islamicisation under a one-party state that goes through the motions of democracy with regular elections which it keeps on winning.

The government's policy towards Syria is also becoming unpopular. Its support for the opposition in Syria's civil war and vociferous criticism of the regime of President Bashar Al-Assad is believed to have led to the detonating of two car bombs last month in a town on Turkey's border with Syria, which killed more than 40 people. Syria denied involvement of its intelligence service.

Erdogan justified the alcohol restrictions on the grounds that he wanted to stop young Turks from 'wandering about in a state of inebriation'. According to a recent OECD study, Turks are Europe's soberest people as annual alcohol consumption (2010) is just 1.5 litres per head, which hardly justifies banning shops from selling drink between 10pm and 6am or displaying the stuff in windows.

Figure 1.



Source: Financial Times.

While Spain's 'indignant' protest movement was born two years ago out of the harsh austerity measures brought on by recession and frustration at the lack of job opportunities, particularly among young adults, Turkey's protest movement is much more cultural and political than economic. The Turkish economy has been the fastest growing in Europe over the last decade, though the pace of growth has slowed down considerably this year. The size of the economy trebled between 2002, when the AKP came to power with a landslide victory that swept away the old guard secularist and corrupt political establishment, and 2011, when the party was elected for the third time and with an increased share of the vote (almost 50%). Per capita income has risen substantially. Erdogan has also achieved a truce in the 30-year bloody **conflict with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)**.

It was indicative of the cosy relations between Turkey's media barons and the government that the Gezi Park protests and the heavy-handed police reaction were largely or completely ignored by Turkish TV channels. For example, while CNN International covered the protests live last Friday when they started, with the endless volleys of teargas against demonstrators, CNN Turk, the network's Turkish-language affiliate ran a cooking show.

The Carnegie Endowment, a nonpartisan US-based think tank, concluded early this year that press freedom in Turkey 'is moving backward'. Reporters Without Borders reported last December that Turkey was 'the world's biggest prison for journalists – a sad paradox for a country that portrays itself as a regional democratic model'. Turkey still has repressive legislation with 'broad and vaguely-worded provisions that allow all kinds of excesses, and markedly paranoid judicial attitudes that prioritize security concerns to the detriment of defence rights and freedom of information'.



The first half of Erdogan's decade in office saw considerable momentum in democratic reforms, spurred by the AKP's desire to meet the conditions for opening EU accession negotiations. Most notably, the wings of the armed forces, which between 1960 and 1980 staged three direct coups and one 'postmodern' one in 1997, were clipped and its political influence reduced. When the army, the self-proclaimed defender of secularism, issued a statement on its website in 2007 expressing concern at the election of Abdullah Gül, whose wife wears the Islamic headscarf, as president, Erdogan faced down the generals and called a snap election which he won resoundingly.

EU accession negotiations were begun in 2005, but progress has been very slow, because of the foot dragging by Ankara in various areas, including the failure to implement the 2005 Ankara Protocol and open its ports and airports to Greek Cypriot traffic and hence extend its customs union with the EU (since 1996) and recognise the Republic of Cyprus, an EU country since 2004, and opposition to Turkey's full EU membership in Germany and France.

The European Council suspended eight chapters (areas of EU law and policy known as *acquis*) in December 2006 of the 35 that Ankara has to fulfil because of the wrangle over Cyprus. Nine are also frozen by the French and Cypriot governments. So far, only 13 chapters have been opened (none for three years).

An outraged Erdogan has been dismissive of the protestors, calling them 'looters', describing Twitter as a 'curse' and branding anyone who drank alcohol an alcoholic. He blamed the escalation of the protests on 'extremist forces' and ordered the intelligence services to investigate foreign links to the demonstrations. 'These events have nothing to do with trees', he said. 'This is an ideological fight against me'.

A court decision has halted construction on the park, but whether this produces an orderly end to the protests remains to be seen. Washington is watching events very closely in what it regards as an 'excellent model' for the 'Arab spring' countries.

The protests have given the opposition to the AKP a unifying cause. So far the opposition has proved to be ineffective, especially the social democratic Republican People's Party (CHP), established by Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic in 1923, which spearheaded the hard-line secularism that the AKP has chipped away at over the last decade. The CHP has 135 of the 550 seats in the Grand Assembly.

A conciliatory approach by Erdogan would entail involving the opposition more in negotiating a new constitution to replace the one drawn up by the military after its 1980 coup and forging a more inclusive democracy. Direct elections for the president will be held next year, and Erdogan hankers after the post and an empowered one if he can achieve certain changes to the constitution.

Ten years is a long time in politics. At that stage both Tony Blair, the British prime minister, and Felipe González, the Spanish premier, suffered from hubris and began to face serious problems that led them eventually to leave the political arena. Erdogan shows no sign of wanting to give up power.