

Now the protesters, and not the AKP, defend democracy

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The National

Jun 25, 2013

For four weeks now, anti-government "Gezi Park protests" have rocked Turkey. Five people have been killed and 8,000 injured – including 12 who lost their eyesight – as the government has responded harshly, arresting scores of people and using more than 130,000 canisters of tear gas.



Both the protests and the reaction have shocked a country often hailed as a model of development and Muslim democracy.

Rather than being conciliatory, prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has launched counter-rallies. Using increasingly religious discourse, he has vilified the protesters as immoral looters and praised his own supporters as the real owners of the country.

To understand this response, it is useful to compare these protests to the republican rallies of 2007.

It may appear that those protests posed a greater threat to Mr Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP): the AKP's grip on power was weaker then and the secularist military, which backed the rallies, was stronger. But in fact, these new protests are a much greater challenge to the AKP; these draw on democracy and freedoms, not just secularism.

The AKP has always benefited from religious-secular polarisation and representing the "disempowered pious majority" in the name of democracy. But these protests dislodge the AKP from that stance; it is the people of Gezi Park who are defending freedom and democracy.

The 2007 rallies started when the AKP nominated one of its chief figures, Abdullah Gul, for the presidency. The AKP could have earned some trust from the opposition by naming a more neutral candidate, but it was ultimately within its legal rights to name Mr Gul. And when the secularist military issued an anti-government ultimatum and promoted the protests, they brought to many minds the military intervention of 10 years earlier.

This time, however, trouble started when the police violently dispersed a peaceful sit-in in defence of a public park. The ensuing anger over police brutality quickly grew into a countrywide grassroots movement because the police kept using excessive force, the government was unapologetic and Mr Erdogan disparaged the protesters. This time, the government seems to be punishing those who use their constitutional right to peaceful protest.

In 2007, religious Turks sensed, with some reason, that their personal values were being offended because many secular protesters seemed annoyed that Mr Gul's wife wore an Islamic headscarf. But this time, it is secular Turks who legitimately feel that their personal values are threatened. Recent laws have expanded the scope for

religious education, restricted abortion and limited access to alcohol. Prominent figures have been prosecuted for "insulting religion" in their artistic and intellectual expressions.

People are angered by Mr Erdogan's increasingly religious-conservative language and policies. He has called abortion murder, alcohol-users drunkards, and protesters promiscuous trouble makers. He is working to restrict internet use. He referred to victims of a recent terrorist attack as "Sunni citizens". Last month, Ankara subway users were warned against public displays of affection; people who organised a "public kissing" protest ran into knife-waving thugs.

So secular fears are based on real concerns. This is different from 2007 when protesters were merely making inferences about the Islamists' hidden intentions. This time, it is the AKP/government side that is making inferences - that the protests are provoked merely to oust the government, for example.

In fact, the Taksim Solidarity Group, the original instigator of the protests, has a list of demands - mainly against police brutality - that does not mention the AKP.

In 2007, Turkish democracy was still subject to military tutelage and the threat of a coup was real. The AKP won a victory for democracy by not accepting the military's demands.

Since then, developments including the prosecution of hundreds of high-level officers for "conspiracy to overturn the government" have subdued the military. But now 250,000 barely accountable police seem to be able to override civil liberties, at the government's behest.

There are many differences between 2007's protests and this year's. Perhaps the most important difference is that the AKP government was different in 2007. Then it was presiding over a boom, rolling back military praetorianism, bringing in genuine democratic reforms and expanding individual rights. Today it is dismissive of the opposition, the EU and those who do not vote for it. The 2007 rallies were not met with police violence; this year, the AKP clamped down, violating civil rights and spurring violence.

The AKP is still spearheading important initiatives, especially an effort at better relations with the Kurdish minority and peace with the PKK. But rather than seeking consensus, it seems to seek hegemony. Rather than increasing pluralism, it seems to want to impose its own views on society.

Now that military tutelage has been eliminated and EU entry is less likely, the AKP's commitment to democratisation is unclear. Its discourse and policies reflect pro-state elitism and pro-Islamic social engineering.

And yet, these tactics may help Mr Erdogan sideline his more moderate rivals within the AKP. Unless the opposition parties can become more credible, he may also maintain his electoral support. Or he may begin to lose ground as people start to see the perils of polarisation and authoritarianism.

In any case, the government's current approach turns a potentially win-win situation into a zero-sum game. A conciliatory response to the protesters would have strengthened the AKP, appeased its opponents and furthered democracy. But the government's chosen course threatens to undo the democratic progress of recent years.

Clearly, Turkish democratisation has been missing some crucial components and has deep flaws.

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