

**US House of Representatives  
Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats  
Hearing: Turkey at a Crossroads: What do the Gezi Park Protests  
Mean for Democracy in the Region?  
June 26, 2013**

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**Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen. Let me begin by thanking you for the invitation to speak to you today. The topic – Turkey at a Crossroads: What do the Gezi Park Protests Mean for Democracy in the Region? – is a most important and urgent one. I am, therefore, most honored to have been invited to offer a response to this and the related questions cited in the invitation. The latter largely focus on the meaning of these events for the prospects of Turkish democracy itself. These questions are indeed related because it has been hoped that the fact of Turkish democracy and its successful operation would serve as a model for democratic development in other parts of the Middle East region. This has been especially true since the advent of the so-called Arab Spring and the overthrow of authoritarian regimes. It has also been especially true since the rise to rule of Turkish Prime Minister and his AKP party which appeared to offer a model for the successful navigation of the tensions between democracy and Islam.**

**So what does Gezi Park mean? Alas from the perspective of both Turkish democracy and broader regional hopes the events surrounding Gezi Park are discouraging - especially the behavior of the Turkish government. Prime Minister Erdogan has insisted that he is acting democratically and enunciated what he means by that. It means according to him the rule of the will of the majority as represented by him – no matter how great or small that majority may be. Erdogan himself repeatedly refers to his own majority as that of 51% of the public – having in mind the support he gained in**

**the last election. Perhaps remarkably, he seems to have little concern that nearly as many people do not support him or his party as do. Having majority support and a still greater majority of the legislative seats – through the peculiarities of the Turkish election system – Erdogan insists that his will must be done. Indeed he often complains that the structure of the Turkish government thwarts his will and has proposed changes to the constitution which would remove checks to the highest authority. Moreover, he has verbally attacked his opponents in very strong, contemptuous, menacing and even slanderous terms. They are he says terrorists in league with foreign conspirators who are thereby committing treason. Their aim is to bring Turkey down – a Turkey which has been a glorious success under his rule. This Erdogan declares he will not permit and he promises to use the full force of the state to uncover and punish the traitorous conspirators and terrorists.**

**It must be said that Erdogan’s definition of democracy does cover a certain kind. But it is certainly not that kind of democracy known as liberal democracy. At least some of his opponents are seeking that kind of democracy and object to his efforts to stifle it.**

**How did this situation come to pass and what was the role of Gezi Park? Let me observe that Erdogan’s mode of rule has changed over time. At the beginning and for quite some years, Erdogan enjoyed beyond his substantial base constituency a quite diverse group of supporters – including people who eventually went to Gezi Park and Taksim Square to protest. Such people appreciated his ostensible efforts to remedy undemocratic features of previous governments – including the heavy role of the military.**

**But it now appears that this kind of political alliance was merely tactical rather than the articulation of a common democratic vision in which the whole Turkish public could share in some important degree. In April of this year, the matter was put rather clearly and bluntly by Aziz Babuscu, the chairman of the İstanbul AKP party organization. He said, “Those with whom we were stakeholders throughout the past 10 years will not be our**

**stakeholders in the coming decade. ... Let us say the liberals, in one way or another, were stakeholders in this process, but the future is a process of construction. This construction era will not be as they [liberals] wish. Hence, they [liberals] will no longer be with us. ... The Turkey that we will construct, the future that we will bring about, is not going to be a future that they will be able to accept.”**

**In this context what do the Gezi Park protests mean? Simply put, that the non-AKP stakeholders have gotten Babuscu’s message and that they object. It is likely that they will continue to object even though it is unclear what vehicle they might find to express their opposition. At all events, Erdogan has managed to turn Turkish democracy and politics more and more into a simple contest of wills, a contest he means to win, by force if necessary. That too proved to be involved in Babuscu’s message. Indeed it was Erdogan’s original use of force to evict the very small number of original Gezi Park protestors that produced the explosion in Taksim square and ultimately in many other public squares around Turkey.**

**It might seem that Gezi Park as such and the issue it most immediately entailed - the preservation of its trees - was incidental to the larger struggle going on within Turkish politics and society and served merely to strike the match to a fuse. In part this is correct. After all it was preceded by discontent with other actions taken by Erdogan as well as his way of speaking to the public. But it is perhaps not entirely incidental or accidental that Gezi Park produced an explosion. It is at least the case that the immediate issue did, in Babuscu’s phrase, involve construction - literally so - the building of a building. This is not simply surprising - Erdogan has dedicated himself to a massive building program in Istanbul not to mention elsewhere. This had already occasioned complaints. But the building in question in Gezi Park is also striking in its own right - it will be the reconstruction of an Ottoman era barracks which once stood in Taksim Square. The history of this building has symbolic significance. For in 1909 the Ottoman troops in this barracks launched a failed coup to overturn constitutional concessions made by the Ottoman Sultan and Caliph. In Erdogan’s vision “constructing the future” seems to mean the**

**renewal of the past – a past which was not notably democratic. In keeping with that spirit, Erdogan’s assault on Gezi Park was not only, as so many said, disproportionate but unlawful. For the question of the building was in litigation and there existed a Turkish court stay order against any government action. It was the latter that brought the Gezi Park protestors to the park. Erdogan was not merely assaulting their beloved trees but the rule of law.**

**More and more over the years Erdogan seems to act as if the law is what he says it is.**

**This arbitrariness is one source of the opposition to his rule.**

**The other is the vision which it appears to serve. That appears to be a refounding of the Turkish Republic through a revival of its pre-Republican past, morally, religiously and politically. Erdogan has placed special emphasis on 3 upcoming dates – 2023, 2053, 2071. Each is an important anniversary. The first 2023 is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Turkish Republic. The second 2053 is the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople and the end of the Byzantine Empire; the third is the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Manzikert and the victory of the Seljuk Turks over the Byzantines. It led to the Turkish conquest of Anatolia.**

**At the first, Erdogan hopes to preside as still ruler of Turkey. But he cannot in 2053; still less in 2071. But he has spoken fulsomely of forming new and more pious generations who will be his living legacy in those latter days.**

**It is fair to say that a fair portion of the public does not share this vision and at events don’t see what it has to do with building a healthy democracy.**

**What is the bearing of these events for the other two large questions which were posed: First what may be their impact on democracy in the region? Second, what are their potential implications for Turkish American relations?**

**About the first – the impact on the region – it is easy to see that the implications are not promising. The region and especially the Arab countries have an altogether too rich and deep experience of the politics of will – of authoritarian will. What it needs is some model of consensual democratic politics with some due accommodation of religious sensibilities. For a while it seemed and was hoped that Turkey could provide that. But that is hardly the case today. Indeed some in Turkey and the region now argue that Erdogan’s use of force has weakened his moral authority in the region, for example in situations like Syria. Another case, thus far less extreme, is Egypt. There both sides to the civil and political conflict, the Muslim Brotherhood government and its opponents, seem to have embraced the model of the politics of will, of majoritarian will, and each is willing to override democratic and constitutional forms. Turkey’s recent political experience can hardly serve to moderate the parties.**

**As for Turkish American relations there now exists a serious problem. To be sure we have very deep and long relations with Turkey, both bilateral and within the context of NATO. These will no doubt continue. But in recent years our relations were put on a new and more ambitious footing. In 2009, Pres. Obama gave a speech in Ankara, his first in a Muslim capital, which looked forward to a special American relationship with Turkey. It was one in which Turkey, especially and even necessarily under the leadership of Erdogan, would play the leading role in the Middle East, both in its own behalf and ours. This was in part because Turkey had “unique insights into a whole host of regional and strategic challenges that we may face.” It was also in part because Erdogan had been uniquely skillful in building a new Turkish politics, both domestically and internationally. The latter was the result of the new Turkish foreign policy which newly situated Turkey in the Muslim Middle East as an expressly Muslim power. Erdogan was the master of his own house and therefore poised to be master of the region.**

**Over the past two years and especially since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War there has been much reason to doubt Erdogan’s mastery of the Middle East. So much so is this the case,**

**that Erdogan's recent visit to the US was aimed at persuading us to lift the burden of leadership from him.**

**Of course, he is still master of his own house but it is an increasingly troubled house. In addition to matters already cited, the Gezi Park events have liberated disputes about a whole host of additional issues - for example Turkish policy in Syria and the resolution of the Kurdish issue. Erdogan's electoral strength remains substantial but he now has a much more complicated task of domestic navigation. One might hope that these new difficulties might chasten and moderate Erdogan. So far, however, there is little sign of this.**

**But perhaps this might be abetted by the US. The US still seems to have or at least should have a good deal of credit with Erdogan given the great respect he has been shown. And it is clear that he still harbors a great interest in the closeness of his relations with the US and Pres. Obama. It is noteworthy that since Gezi Park he and his colleagues have attacked many outside parties but not the US. So perhaps he may be open to some friendly advice. It is certainly true that he and the prospects of regional democracy could use it. But such advice to be truly useful requires less deference and more candor than has been his experience of us in the past.**

**Thank you for your kind attention.**