

Gezi Park: Negotiating a New Left Identity

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ABSTRACT *Unknown to most of the world only a month ago, Gezi Park –the epicenter of Turkey’s June 2013 protests- has rapidly emerged as a historic site for the country’s democracy. During the course of events, many observers almost exclusively concentrated on young, politically unaffiliated citizens who took the streets for the first time in their lives. However, the movement was really an amorphous whole whose members identify with the Left in the broadest sense of the term. As such, the Gezi Park protests represent a critical juncture in the history of the Turkish Left and a call to existing political parties to reinvent their platform in order to accommodate the demands of underrepresented groups including liberals, the LGBT community and environmentalists.*

If anyone claimed that what began as a minor protest at Istanbul’s Taksim Square on May 27, 2013 would develop into one of the greatest challenges to the Justice and Development Party’s decade-long tenure, they would be discredited as delusional and uninformed. However, more than a month of protests effectively put the movement’s influence beyond dispute. More important, however, was that the mass reaction to the police’s disproportionate use of force against peaceful activists on May 31st evolved into one of the most interesting political experiments in the Republic’s 90-year history, as people from all Left convictions camped out at Gezi Park and (perhaps for the first time ever) talked to each other

about the country’s future and their expectations. For nearly two weeks following the governor’s decision to withdraw police forces from the Taksim area, Gezi Park was home to an amorphous group of people including LGBT activists, Kemalist hardliners, revolutionary Left parties, Kurdish nationalists and others who felt their voices had been unheard for too long at a time when the Justice and Development Party’s popular support uniquely qualified Prime Minister Erdogan and his cabinet to single-handedly influence the country’s future. This new beast in Turkey’s political habitat, which proved difficult to tame despite all efforts, represents a call to Turkish Left, whose democratic credentials have been less than

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Demonstrators
posing on the
burned public bus.

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ideal, to revise leftover policies and alliances from the Cold War period in order to speak for underrepresented groups.

Before moving onto our discussion of the Gezi Park movement as a social force that might reform the Turkish Left's old ways, let us briefly recall the history of the Left's alliance with the Kemalist bureaucracy. Turkey's restoration of its multi-party democracy in 1946 following over twenty years of singly-party rule under the Republican People's Party led a group of parliamentarians to establish the

Democratic Party. The Democrats came to power only four years later. Throughout the 1950s, the party's policies helped forge an alliance between the Kemalist bureaucracy and the Left. On one hand, the Democrats' economic liberalism effectively undermined the livelihood of urban working classes and lower ranks of the bureaucracy. Moreover, the party's attempts to revise certain policies that were part of the Republic's authoritarian modernization drive in the 1920s and the 1930s alarmed the regime's founding elites who believed that the government challenged the

secular order. As such, the DP became the mutual source of grievances for labor and the state bureaucracy alike. The growing political proximity between the two groups led them to welcome the 1960 coup d'état against the country's first democratically elected government as the de facto alliance became embodied in the 1961

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Constitution. The new setting benefited both parties: while the Kemalist bureaucracy was able to seize control of political decision-making mechanisms, the Left secured new constitutional entitlements such as the right to strike.

Although the bureaucratic elite's March 12, 1971 memorandum and the 1980 military coup gradually eliminated the Left's earnings from the 1961 agreement and allowed the bureaucracy to exert total control over government policies, the parliamentary Left continued to seek alliances with the country's powers-

that-be. Perhaps *the* major exception to this general trend was the Social Democratic People's Party (SHP) which accumulated considerable popular support by running on a pro-democracy platform with a strong emphasis on human rights and liberties. However, the party's efforts to challenge conventions by introducing Kurdish politicians such as Leyla Zana, Hatip Dicle and Ahmet Türk (now leading figures within the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party) to national politics backfired as the party was forced to merge with the Republican People's Party in 1995 to ensure that the establishment would retain control of Left politics—as it did with center-right parties. As such, traditional alliances with the Kemalist state elite replaced the Left's most notable effort to ride the wave of liberal democracy across the globe.

Despite said global trends, however, Leftist politicians in Turkey remained largely uninterested in abandoning Cold War politics that prioritized state interests over the public's demands for greater recognition. The most notable outcome of the Left's decision to ally itself with the bureaucratic elite was that Left parties in the country failed to incorporate novel causes such as green politics, LGBT rights and minority rights—which successfully penetrated the Left mainstream in Europe and elsewhere from the mid-1970s onwards—into their platforms. Even in the face of center-right parties' attempts to attract voters through identity politics, the Turkish Left utilized emerging challenges to the Kemalist

status quo to bolster its working relationship with the old guard. It was therefore not at all surprising that it was the legendary Bülent Ecevit who famously (and rather ironically) de-

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clared that the Parliament was “not the place to challenge the state” when a hijabi parliamentarian-elect took the floor to be sworn in. Similarly, the Left maintained a safe distance when then-controversial issues such as the Kurdish population’s cultural rights and democratization reforms that curbed military power over civilian politics came to the forefront of public debate. Although the Republican People’s Party, Turkey’s main opposition since 2002, promised significant changes to its party platform when reformist bureaucrat-cum-politician Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu became Chairman, little could be accomplished amidst power struggles between reformist and hardliner factions within the party. Most recently, the RPP retracted its January 2013 offer to contribute to disarmament talks between the Erdogan administration and Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK whose violent campaign

claimed thousands of lives since the mid-1980s.

During the early days of the protests, one of the most heavily debated issues was whether the Prime Minister and his government were able to understand Gezi Park’s message. On June 3rd, Erdogan furiously questioned the myth of “the message” in a heated exchange with a Reuters correspondent during a press conference. The administration resorted to various explanations in order to account for one of the most unexpected developments in Turkish politics since the Justice and Development Party’s 2007 standoff with the military command who publicly contested then-Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül’s decision to run for the country’s top political office. Although media attention was fixated on the Prime Minister’s response, it was only natural that Gezi Park’s message –if there ever was one– would be directed to the Left opposition.

The abrupt end of negotiations between Gezi Park representatives and government officials, including Prime Minister Erdogan, resulted in a police raid at the protest site on June 15, 2013. The area was consequently cleared off all protestors as security forces barricaded the park. From this point onwards, the movement adopted a two-tier strategy whereby they sought to reach out to previously uninvolved citizens by organizing ‘neighborhood forums’ in addition to street demonstrations where clashes between the police and activists were a frequent sight. Without doubt, the

forums allowed the movement to compensate for its anti-hierarchical structure –an initial advantage that turned into a liability as protestors attempted to communicate a coherent political message to the public. The single most important outcome of these meetings was the understanding that the movement needed to designate and endorse independent candidates who would participate in local and national elections to influence decision-making process on behalf of the millions who participated in the protests.

The above mentioned developments and historical trajectories demonstrate that the wave of protests which shook the foundations of parliamentary politics in Turkey represent a challenge to the Left's traditional conventions and alliance with the

bureaucracy. Millions of people communicated a loud and clear message: The Turkish Left must, after over two decades, understand that the Cold War is over and its politics can no longer be sustained. In order to survive, Left parties will have to find ways to reconcile their class perspective with real-life problems such as discrimination, civil liberties and equal access to opportunity. Meanwhile, the Left mainstream needs to take necessary steps in order to accommodate relatively unpopular causes including LGBT rights and green politics –whose significance shall improved in the future. Not only the future of existing Left parties but also Turkey's hopes to consolidate its post-authoritarian democracy depend on a successful negotiation for a new Left identity in the aftermath of Gezi Park protests. ■



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