

Gezi Protests in Turkey: A Historic Milestone

By [Socialist Project](#)

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The Gezi Park protests in Istanbul have been the center of attention not only in Turkey but the whole world during the last few weeks. This has been a revolt unforeseeable in terms of its scale, influence, the intensity of its resentment, and the courage, determination, and self-confidence of masses of people, many with no previous political affiliation and experience. It is commonplace to say now that the movement was not just about the initial problem: the destruction of a 'couple of trees' to make space for a shopping mall or a kitsch Ottoman style caserne. It was essentially about demanding basic human rights or the right to demand rights.

But what were the big issues? Which developments led to these riots? Why does Taksim Square matter so much to Turkish people? And will this revolt be a factor to cease Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's unfinished transformation?

Hamilton University Professor of Economics Erol Balkan and Sabanci University Professor of Sociology Ahmet Öncü, have been asking these questions for years. In the book they are working on with Hamilton University Professor of Economics Nesecan Balkan, entitled *The Neoliberal Landscape and the Rise of Islamic Capital*, they analyze the economic and social context that gave rise to this movement. According to Balkan and Öncü, the Gezi Park protests will have to develop into a new, stronger and more inclusive movement in the future. They were interviewed by Kivanç Özvardar, a Turkish journalist writing regularly for *Ekonomist* weekly and on politics as a freelance reporter.

Kivanç Özvardar (KÖ): Could you explain the factors that led to the Gezi protests?

Erol Balkan (EB): Turkey is a  country that has extensively implemented neoliberal [Source: occupygezpics.tumblr.com] policies since the early 1980s starting with the [Turgut Özal](#) government. The AKP continued with these policies and put into effect additional privatization policies that resulted in huge amounts of capital accumulation. This was a very typical case of "accumulation by

dispossession.”

Furthermore, the AKP government has recently started to narrow the public sphere of the middle classes through the so-called “urban transformation process.”

KÖ: Has this capital accumulation process created its own social class?

EB: Yes, this accumulation by dispossession has created an Islamic bourgeoisie and middle class who benefitted immensely from these policies. When the government started to interfere with the lifestyle of the urban middle class with restrictions on individual freedoms (such as regulations on the consumption of alcohol), it was met with strong reaction. This is different from the Occupy Wall Street movement which emerged as an anti-system reaction.

Ahmet Öncü: The split within the Turkish bourgeoisie can be seen in the competition between MÜSIAD and [TÜSIAD](#) [both are business associations]. If we consider the global context, international capital has been searching new investment opportunities. AKP has ensured stability for global capital flows while also boosting the growth of small and medium enterprises in Anatolia. It has been able to transform its economic power into a strong political force. The AKP was opposed to [Kemalism](#) and it supported liberalism. It also supported EU membership and adopted neoliberal policies that promote growth rather than full employment.

KÖ: Do you think the protests exposed vulnerabilities within the economy? Did the political tensions affect the economy which has so far been described as stable and booming?

EB: The engine of economic growth for the last ten years was not increases in industrial production and technology or the rise in the competitiveness of the economy, but rather a growth in the influx of short term capital flows (hot money). Capital accumulation based on dispossession during the last ten years was so enormous in magnitude that it surpassed the total accumulation of previous decades.

But today a discussion has started on the fragility of the Turkish economy. Last week credit rating agencies declared that the protest would not affect Turkey’s credit rating. In the meantime foreign capital was urged not to leave. The government is concerned about increasing economic fragility and a possible capital outflow which can lead to economic crisis.

AÖ: For years the neoliberal ideology of privatization remained unchallenged in the society at large, despite some serious efforts to counter it on the part of professional associations and labour unions. In such a political and ideological milieu huge benefits were created for foreign capital. The AKP made use of this environment to its advantage. The Islamic bourgeoisie and middle class emerged out of this conjuncture. Also the AKP governments were ideologically supported by the media, either directly or through passive consent.

KÖ: Do you think the AKP understood the message from this movement?

AÖ: I think AKP’s base has understood the message, but Erdogan and his circle have not. Erdogan’s personal characteristics play an important role at this conjuncture. He has an

autocratic approach inspired by the neoliberal mantra “There is no alternative.” A certain fanaticism is apparent in this situation. Fanatics do not care what others think; if a fanatic has the political power s/he tends to ignore the others.

KÖ: As shown by recent research protestors belong to very different segments, political groups and NGOs, but most interestingly there are many unaffiliated ones. How do you explain this structure as a sociologist?

AÖ: We see the emergence of two new poles in the Turkish politics: anti fanaticism versus fanaticism. There is no place for fanaticism in democracy. In political theory one can speak of two different forms of politics: Politics of friend and enemy, and the one among friends. Where there is fanaticism, we can talk about the politics of friend and enemy. But in a democracy, even if you do not agree with “the other,” you have to recognize the rights and freedoms of “the other.” You are called on to treat “the other” as a “friend”; mutual respect is essential. People in Gezi Park understand what this democratic friendship is all about. In my opinion, this is a historical milestone in Turkey.

EB: This reminds me of one of the best slogans of the Occupy Movement: “Let’s agree to disagree.”

KÖ: In your opinion, how will this process evolve?

AÖ: I think now is the time to discuss whether it is possible to build a more democratic government as opposed to this unquestionably autocratic one. The economic aspect of this process will be a more important determinant. Recent political debates around the world, and especially the one in the EU countries, have mostly been on whether democracy and capitalism can be reconciled. Turkish capitalism has survived the challenges of the global economic downturn with relative success compared to the EU. So what we see in Turkey today is not an anti-capitalist protest; it is rather a protest against anti-democratic implementations of an increasingly autocratic government.

KÖ: Do you think international reactions will be effective? What will be the economic implications of the Occupy Gezi movement?

EB: International capital flows avoid political instabilities. If political and social tensions accelerate, foreign investors will lose confidence and exit the Turkish market. The survival of this government depends on a strong and stable economy which in turn is contingent upon foreign capital inflows. It is in the government’s best interest to act in a restrained manner and allow democratic rights and individual freedoms.

KÖ: Large numbers of protestors are women. Can these protests be described as a women’s movement?

AÖ: During the AKP government, women’s labour force participation has declined. Turkey is among the lowest scoring countries in terms of female labour force participation. Turkey has lost ground in terms of equality of women and men. Women were suppressed under the AKP governments. Therefore, I call the current movement the “Hanimeli” Movement. [Hanimeli is honeysuckle in English and it literally means “hand of the woman”].

KÖ: Is there any turning back from this movement? Do you think it is early to say that a new Turkey is emerging?

AÖ: This is a significant political moment for Turkey and it will probably be the most discussed milestone. But it is also a very serious conjuncture for the economy. I think there are groups within the AKP that are not in favour of instability and this is significant.

EB: Market economies cannot survive without a middle class. Therefore governments must pay attention to the economic and political demands of the middle class. The middle class does not like social tensions, economic instability and regional uncertainties. At this conjuncture, the rhetoric of “we have 50 per cent of the vote, so we can regulate everyone’s life style” is anti-democratic. It is clearly the dictatorship of the majority.

AÖ: Secular and conservative segments of the society came together during this movement; they learned how to stand side by side. A [muezzin](#) did not only help a group of protestors by letting them into his mosque but also defended them when these people were accused for blasphemy by the Prime Minister. This is of crucial importance and it will decide Turkey’s future. Democracy is not a theory; it is a practice. It means producing norms that are continuously evolving. As Wallerstein states, anti-systemic movements evolve gradually to show their true essence. We will see the real impact of the Occupy Gezi movement in three to four years. •

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