

Turkey at a Crossroads:

What Do the Gezi Park Protests Mean for Democracy in the Region?

(Part 1)

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, for giving me the opportunity to testify on the recent protests in Turkey and their implications for democracy in Turkey and its neighborhood. The following is a summary of my prepared remarks.

Turkey, a NATO member state, is an important country for the United States. Situated between the Caucasus, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Europe, Turkey is vital to U.S. interests across these regions. Take, for instance, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Turkey is the only country that borders these three nations and is vital for U.S. policy toward them.

According to some analysts, the recent protests that rocked Istanbul and other Turkish cities pose the greatest challenge the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has faced in over a decade in power. What do the protests mean for Turkey's stability and democracy, as well as for democracy in the Middle East?

Since coming to power in 2002, the AKP has implemented sound economic policies that have grown Turkey's economy and facilitated its membership in the Group of 20. And unlike many other emerging market growth stories, Turkish growth has actually reduced economic inequality and transformed the country into a majority middle-class society for the first time in its history. Yet, the recent protests show that the ruling AKP has, perhaps, become a victim of its own success.

Indeed, the middle class that the party has created is committed to individual freedoms -- and it is now challenging the AKP's style of governance and attempts at political domination.

All this suggests that modernization theory -- the idea that economic development leads to more democracy -- is being validated in Turkey. Indeed, as countries become middle class, they tend to become irreversibly diverse, developing the bedrock for democratic governance, including consensual politics and respect for individual and minority rights.

The developments in Turkey do not constitute an episode of the "Arab Spring." Turkey did not experience a proverbial political winter. The country is and remains a democracy.

Nor do the protests suggest a weakening of the AKP. By most measures, about 50 percent of Turks continue to support the party. Turkey's prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has organized a number of rallies to bring his own supporters onto the streets as a counterweight

to the Gezi protests. These pro-government demonstrations have produced a turnout comparable to the anti-government marches across Istanbul.

Nor are the demonstrations yet another manifestation of the secularist-Islamist cleavage that has defined many of Turkey's political battles in recent years. Although most of the protestors are secular, their rallies are not about secularism per se, but rather about the quality of Turkish democracy and a demand for liberal values.

Mr. Chairman, I believe that in the last analysis, these demonstrations present a new dynamic in Turkish politics. Members of the protest movement have discovered that they have strength in numbers and can sustain their demonstrations, largely thanks to social media technologies. Indeed, the protests represent Turkey's first massive, grassroots political movement. In the past, grassroots movements never reached a massive scale. Conversely, Turkey has witnessed several large anti-government protests, such as the rallies of 2007. But these demonstrations were organized in a top-down fashion and were linked to the military.

This new form of grassroots and liberal opposition politics could complicate Prime Minister Erdogan's political agenda. Should he, for instance, decide to proceed with transforming the country's parliamentary democracy into a presidential system, he may face a highly effective backlash. Meanwhile, Turkish president Abdullah Gul has already positioned himself as a nonpartisan figure, supporting the protestors' right to assemble and stating that "democracy is not just winning elections."

The new opposition is likely to shape Turkey's Syria policy. Although most Turks do not support Bashar al-Assad, they are unnerved by Ankara's policy toward the regime, which they believe has exposed Turkey to increased risks and costs. On May 11, 2013, the Turkish border town of Reyhanli suffered a devastating terror attack that claimed the lives of fifty-one people. This attack followed months of periodic cross-border shelling from Syria and worries about terrorist infiltration into Turkey's urban centers. Accordingly, facing a new and persistent opposition on the streets, Ankara will move toward a more measured position of leading from behind in Syria.

In contrast, Turkey's relationship with the United States is unlikely to suffer much from the unrest. Ankara values its relationship with Washington, and the strong rapport that Turkish leader Erdogan has with President Obama will help resolve any wrinkles that arise from U.S. criticism of Ankara's conduct.

Still, the issue remains, Mr. Chairman, Turkey is politically divided almost evenly between supporters and opponents of the governing AKP. And recent protests may have deepened this chasm further.

The secular, middle-class, and liberal voters are demanding respect for freedom of the press, expression, association, and assembly, as well as for a voice on environmental policy and urban space. In this regard, the Turkish leadership should take comfort in the fact that, notwithstanding marginal violent groups that have penetrated some of the protests, the demonstrations are not directly against the AKP, but rather for individual rights and better democracy. The Turkish leadership should also avoid giving credit to widespread conspiracy theories which allege that the demonstrations are driven by "outside forces." Over a million Turks have demonstrated in over 78 Turkish cities over the course of the past month. This is clearly an indigenous Turkish movement, and the country's government would be better served to listen to it, embracing democracy. In this regard, Brazil is a case in point.

Mr. Chairman, Turkey's way forward at this juncture overlaps with U.S. interests in the Middle

East. Having become an economic motor and soft power in the region, today's Turkey sees itself as a Middle East power. And importantly, Ankara wants Washington to treat it as such. As far as U.S. policymakers are concerned, Turkey can become a leader in the Middle East only if it shines as an example of liberal democracy.

To this end, the Turkish government would do well to embrace broad individual liberties, including freedoms of assembly, association, media, and expression. At the moment, Turkey is attempting to draft its first civilian-made constitution. This presents Ankara with a unique opportunity: the new charter should recognize these liberties, and do so without restrictions.

It would be in the interests of all Turks if the new constitution also addressed Turkey's political fault lines, providing for constitutionally mandated gender equality, as well as freedom of religion and freedom from religion, so that religious and secular Turks alike can feel welcome in the new Turkey.

Commitment to liberal democracy would also provide Turkey with much needed stability. Turkey grows because it attracts investment; international funds are drawn to the Istanbul stock market because Turkey is deemed a rare island of stability, surrounded by unstable countries. Ankara cannot afford to lose this unique advantage.

Mr. Chairman, what is good for Turkey is also good for the Middle East, as well as for the United States. Turkey can overcome its political tensions by adopting a constitution that respects individual freedoms and recognizes the country's differences. This would mark an important milestone on the path to becoming a role model for other countries in the Middle East. This is the sort of Turkey Washington would be proud to have as a partner in the region.

Mr. Chairman, the takeaway of today's conversation, and our message to our ally Turkey, the country's citizens, and its neighbors, should be the following: democracy is not just about the right to be equal, it is also about protecting the right to be different.