

Testimony, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, July 31, 2013

Jenny White, Professor of Anthropology, Boston University

The good news: Turkey's GDP growth and banks are solid; it has the sixteenth largest economy in the world. As a result of the European Union accession process, Turkey has changed hundreds of its laws and institutions to align them with Europe. Parliament is writing a new constitution to replace the one written under military oversight after the 1980 coup, and many hope it will enshrine liberal individual rights. The government has initiated a peace deal with the PKK to end decades of war.

So why have tens of thousands of Turks across the country risen up and taken to the streets? The protest was ignited by the uprooting of sycamore trees in Gezi Park, the only remaining green space in Istanbul's central Taksim area, to make room for yet another mall. Polls showed that the majority of protesters that flooded the streets in dozens of cities across the country were initially motivated by the brutality of the police who shot teargas canisters and rubber bullets directly at peaceful protesters, causing severe injuries and deaths. Hundreds of protesters have been arrested and will likely be arraigned under draconian terrorism statutes. This was not the first incidence of police brutality, but the country had come to a tipping point.

The protest is not about Islam versus secularism; the issues cross those lines. Gezi Park has become emblematic of a much larger malaise and discontent with the increasing autocracy and authoritarianism of the ruling party, and its disregard for the wishes of the population on many issues. The AKP government, like those before it, has a majoritarian understanding of democracy that polls show is shared by many citizens -- that democracy

means that whichever party gets the most votes has won the right to impose the values of its community on society. This has been the case whether the government in power banned the headscarf or banned alcohol. The AKP sees “the public will” as a mandate to make unilateral decisions without input by citizens, experts, or sometimes even parliament.

Laws protecting the environment and requiring consultation have been weakened. Grandiose urban development schemes are despoiling the environment and erasing entire historic neighborhoods, often ethnically and religiously mixed, replacing them with middle-class housing for the Muslim bourgeoisie. Government schemes include building the world’s largest mosque and airport, a third Bosphorus bridge, and a canal between the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara that will dissect the European half of Istanbul. Such construction projects have provoked accusations of corruption, that the networks around AKP are reaping profit from private development of public land.

Just as pious Turks once were incensed by restrictions by previous secular governments on Islamic expression and wearing of headscarves in certain public places, Turks today are enraged by government intrusions into their private lives, what they should wear, what they should drink (restrictions on alcohol), and what they should do with their bodies (for instance, the government urging that women should have three children and stay at home, attempts to restrict abortions and Caesarian section) and the increasing arrogance of AKP supporters in demanding that only their norms be represented in society (confronting men and women kissing in public or strolling in a park together). Statistics show an increase in violence against women, which is higher in Turkey than in the EU or the US, yet the government has shut down women’s shelters

and shown little interest in dealing with the problem. These are issues that concern both pious and secular citizens.

Another issue that crosses pious/secular lines is anger at the AKP government for supporting Qaeda-linked and other radical jihadis who are allowed to enter Turkey and cross into Syria at will. Their presence has begun to polarize Turkey as well, turning Sunni Turks against their fellow Alevi citizens, although Alevis differ from Syria's Alawites and have nothing to do with the Syrian conflict. Even Turkish Sunnis on the border are afraid of the armed strangers in their midst.

Furthermore, Prime Minister Erdogan is attempting to change the constitution to make Turkey's parliamentary system into one that gives the president much greater powers and that would, in essence, remove the checks and balances on that power. And it is clear that he himself, like Putin in Russia, would like to occupy that position.

The press, led by media barons bought off or intimidated by the government, has not done a good job of reporting on these issues. Since May, fifty-nine journalists have been fired, mostly for covering the protests. Turkey now has more journalists in jail than any country in the world. Academics, authors, publishers, trade union members, speakers at Kurdish events, grandmothers and children attending protests, students demonstrating about school fees, and cartoonists are behind bars for "offenses" that in most countries would be considered freedom of speech issues.

The paradox is that the AKP received more than half the vote in the last election. One reason is the party's spectacular success in improving the country's economy and infrastructure (trains, buses, roads and so on) and increasing economic and political visibility abroad. The AKP government revived (and largely reinvented) Turkey's past

as a former world empire, the Ottoman empire, which gave it national pride and the ability to deal with the world politically and economically without always looking over its shoulder. Throughout the twentieth century, Turkey saw itself as a potential victim of outside powers aiming to undermine it, a repeat of WWI when Europeans dismantled the Ottoman Empire. Turkey's non-Muslim minorities were treated with suspicion as potential cat's paws of those outside powers. The culture, language and presence of Kurds and other non-conforming groups and individuals were banned and worse. The military saw itself as a guarantor of a culturally and politically unitary Turkey and had no compunction about staging coups to remove elected governments that it saw as representing dissonant views.

After the AKP was first elected in 2002, it attracted voters from across the political spectrum who believed that the party would blend the country's widespread conservatism with liberal changes and improved rights, especially freedom of religious expression (headscarves had been banned from universities) and freedom of speech. Indeed, AKP initially reinvigorated the EU accession process and passed a new penal code long desired by pious and secular feminists that improved women's rights. As a result of new EU-aligned laws, the government stripped the military of the power to interfere in politics. AKP also reached out to non-Muslim minorities and Kurds, returning some confiscated properties and restoring changed Kurdish place names.

But like a rubber band, after several years of liberal opening, AKP has snapped back to exhibiting what has long been the Turkish status quo of strongman autocracy, authoritarianism, patriarchy, and intolerance. All of these are characteristics that polls show are reflected by the population at large and are characteristic of the still highly

valued traditional family structure. PM Erdogan's projected stance as the authoritarian father punishing disobedient citizen children and protecting the national family against outsiders is familiar and laudable to many Turks.

What next? Turkey's government has been freely elected and no one, not even the protesters, disputes that. There is no desire to overturn the system or even kick out the elected AKP. There is dissatisfaction that PM Erdogan is not acting democratically and people would like to see his party remove him as prime minister (although realistically no one believes this would happen, even though he has to some extent become a liability to his party). A recent poll puts AKP support at 44 percent now (down 6%), still enough to win local elections next March.

The most important outcome of Gezi is that a sizable new constituency has emerged, as yet with no name, no platform, no leader. It is the first time in Turkish history that such masses of people — many with contradictory or competing interests -- have come together without any ideological or party organization. They cross class boundaries and bridge left/right, conservative/liberal, pious/secular. Despite government claims that there is an international cabal steering them, the protesters are out there to air a wide variety of complaints, but central is their demand that an elected government must also protect the rights of the people who did NOT vote for them, the rights of minorities, the rights of people whose ideas or lifestyle the electoral winners might not agree with.

However, youth (and women) have little say in Turkey's political life. Taking to the streets was really the only venue available to make themselves heard. To change the institutions that reproduce this flawed system, they will need to find a way to get into the system, perhaps as a new party, although that is difficult given

Turkey's restrictive election rules.

Nevertheless, the protests have reframed debates in Turkey away from Islamism/Kemalism as an explanatory framework and instead put the focus on shared rights and tolerance of difference. Pushback in the street, amplified by the PM's belief that the protests mean to topple him, could lead to a more cautious approach to development (although the evidence is against this as uprooting of trees and construction continue apace). The PM's aggressive recent response to the Kurds might make them unwilling partners in rewriting the constitution for a more powerful presidency, although their interest in signing the peace deal might win out.

PM Erdogan's approval of the brutality against peaceful protesters has galvanized a not insignificant part of the population against him and has dislodged his halo in international eyes. It is a steep fall. After his recent success in arranging a peace deal with the PKK after decades of fighting, people had been speaking about him as perhaps the greatest Turkish statesman since Ataturk. But he seems unable to move out of the twentieth-century definition of statesman as single-handed ruler of his people to statesman as skillful manager of diverse interests and lifestyles. His party and some of his followers are uncomfortable with the organized chaos that is social media and they are unable to envision a society composed of freely interacting individuals. They are always looking for the leader that defines them, the person or organization or country to blame.

US Response: President Obama's 2009 speech to the Muslim world promised moral leadership, but the US as well seems to be captured by 20th-century strategies that define conflicts in crude terms of Islam versus secularism. We turn a blind eye to human rights violations in return for stability and security, while abandoning the 21st-century

liberal and moderate constituencies that most resemble our own ideals (but that would include moderate Islamists as well). The youth of Tahrir Square toppled Mubarak and were then pushed aside. The Gezi constituency should at least be recognized.

Appeasement is a slippery slope. The US said nothing about the Turkish government's deadly repression of peaceful protests, and now has said nothing about live bullets in Cairo. What is needed is an acupuncture-like approach, knowing exactly where to apply pressure to exact change (for instance, liberalizing Turkish election laws), rather than wholesale support of problematic regimes or, worse, silence.