GEZI MOVEMENT

What can it mean for Turkey?

Efpraxia Nerantzaki*

The “Gezi movement” marks one of the milestones in the recent Turkish political history. The Gezi park protests, which started from a small scale environmental demonstration in Istanbul on 31 May, have, after the violent intervention by the police forces, expanded all over the country in the form of an anti-government, or maybe more correctly as an anti-Erdogan movement. The following paper will try to explore the ways in which the Gezi demonstrations can affect the future of the country, the political landscape and the society.
The public discontent to the majoritarian and interventionist leadership style in combination with the excessive violence exercised by the police forces has triggered countrywide demonstrations. It is still early to make safe predictions—predictions are never safe after all—but it can be said that the ongoing uprising may have several implications on the policy making, the role of the public opinion, on political and social issues and the choices of the parties. There is a general sense that things will never be the same as they used to be in the pre-Gezi Turkey in many respects. Marches have been taking place almost every night especially in Istanbul, Ankara but in other cities as well. Protests have also acquired different forms, such as forums, sit-ins, silent marches, even theatrical plays. However, clashes with state forces are still a reality as police has not abandoned their brutal practices. The fact that the demonstrations have been continuing for more than one and a half months constitutes a proof of their dynamics, which are maintained as people are overwhelmed by the sense of empowerment. At the same time, what should not be forgotten in a climate of anti-AKP sentiments is that although the government has indeed shown authoritarian tendencies, the Gezi generation—at least the younger wing—matured in a relatively democratic climate, in a country with economic and political stability, achieved by the very same party and the very same prime minister. The general aftermath of the upheaval cannot yet be predicted but some consequences at different levels can already hesitantly be identified.

When we turn our eyes to the ruling party we can observe that the protests gave room for internal opposition, given the fact that until now Erdoğan’s domination was uncontested. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has failed to see the real dimensions of the protests; he instead insists on attributing the demonstrations to an international conspiracy against Turkey, and picturing the protesters as a handful of “looters” dominated by “marginal and terrorist groups.” Along the same motif many AKP figures, such as the minister of EU affairs, Egemen Bağış and the 20-year mayor of Ankara, Melih Gökçek, espoused enthusiastically scenarios of “foreign conspiracies” and “dark forces.” However, many members of the party have adopted a more compromising profile in their public statements. The deputy prime minister and one of the founding members of AKP Bülent Arınç apologised from the first days of the upheaval for the excessive force applied by the police. Another typical example is the one of the deputy Ibrahim Yiğit who openly expressed his objections to Erdoğan’s practices, accusing the latter of risking triggering a civil war if he insists on the same stance.

The ongoing protests acquire a special weight if one takes into account that the year to come will be an election year and all political parties and individuals will inevitably be judged by the Turkish people in the light of the recent developments. Although there are no signs that AKP will not gain the majority of the votes, it will not be easy to maintain its high percentage. The first political test will be the local elections to be held most probably in summer 2014. AKP will have to face the discontent even among its own constituencies and especially the liberals, who notice an authoritarian turn compared to the first two terms in power and the nationalists, who disagree with the government’s Kurdish opening and may therefore resort to the nationalist MHP. Parliamentary elections will most probably be held in 2015, although there are scenarios about the date’s moving to summer 2014, along with the local elections. AKP’s internal regulation does not allow the deputies to run for more than three consecutive terms. If the regulation remains unchanged Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and many heavyweights of the party will be excluded from the government, thus changing the face of the party and its perception among the voters. Erdoğan has expressed the desire to run for the presidency in June 2014 elections. The question that is raised here is whether it will be a presidency with limited powers or an executive-style presidency.
Constitutional change is needed in order to introduce a presidential system. Nevertheless, the works for the re-writing of the Constitution have been stalled because of the failure of the involved parties to reach consensus; the chances become lower due to the political and social polarisation after Gezi. Erdoğan’s plans to ensure the support of the pro-Kurdish BDP in exchange for an agreement on the Kurdish issue may not end up successful as the solution process is not without problems.

Abdullah Gül’s moves are also to be taken into consideration. Erdoğan and Gül may decide to switch places with each other. Or they may run against each other. If Gül decides to run for the presidency again, Erdoğan’s political plans may be under threat, as his place has been weakened and his image has been tarnished. To the contrary Abdullah Gül has kept some distance from the government’s discourse and has adopted a more democratic stance to the demonstrations. His statement that “democracy is not just about elections” and his overall attitude have undoubtedly strengthened his hand and popularity. According to a poll conducted by Metropoll after the outbreak of the Gezi protests, Gül is the most liked one among the existing political figures with 72,5 percent, followed by Erdoğan with 53.5 percent.

The figure of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk has been quite prominent in the movement as a picture in the flags in the hands of the nationalists (ulusalcılar), a large group among the protesters who feel that their lifestyles and their domination in the political and public life has been threatened. The main political voice of this group, the main opposition party, CHP, has been proven incapable of being a credible and strong counterweight to the government. The recent developments could provide a good opportunity for the party to strengthen its position and win the confidence of the voters, on the condition that it identifies its orientation, solves the internal conflicts and finds the subtle balance between the left-wing and nationalist factions, both within the party itself and its base. In discussions about change in the leadership of the party names from the nationalist wing are being heard louder. Members who have participated actively in the Gezi protests, such Emine Ülker Tarhan, who at the same time belongs to the nationalist wing, have won the fondness of the demonstrators.

The question of whether the Gezi movement can lead to the establishment of a new party has also arisen. The left and liberal constituencies often do not feel affiliated with any of the existing political parties. The Gezi uprising has generated enthusiasm and hope for both a more democratic future, but for a new political alternative as well. The polymorphous and diverse character of the movement renders it less likely, but not totally impossible. It remains to be seen if street activism will be able to evoke the formation of a credible political entity that could challenge the status quo.

Many eyes turned to the Kurdish movement and its stance towards the demonstrations as the peace—or solution—process is ongoing. The government’s initiative has given hope to a large part of the Kurdish population that they will start enjoy the same cultural, political and citizenship rights with the Turks and stop living in the state of constant fear. In order not to risk breaking this fragile balance the Kurdish political movement approached the developments hesitantly in the beginning, while the Southeast witnessed limited scale demonstrations. The active participation of the nationalists constitutes another factor that explains the wait-and-see attitude. Selahattin Demirtaş, the co-chair of the pro-Kurdish BDP recognised the significance of people’s reaction, but clarified that his party cannot join the “nationalist and fascists groups” who aim at derailing the settlement process. Later Gülten Kışanak, the other co-chair of their party, supported the developments in a more clear way by saying that, “there can be no solution to the Kurdish issue if we don’t resist to state violence and state terror; we know that very well.” At the
same time the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), the alleged political wing of the PKK, called the Kurdish people “to take initiatives” and to contribute “to the strengthening of democracy.” In June 29 a demonstration against the construction of a new gendarmerie post in Lice, in Diyarbakir, and the killing of a young protester by the soldiers caused more tension between the Kurds and the Turkish state. On the other hand, this incident brought Diyarbakir closer to Istanbul and Ankara, where people started protesting against state violence in the Southeast. People understood that demands for freedom and democracy should go hand in hand with demands for rights for the Kurds and that public dialogue and the wider participation of the civil society is needed. They came to the realisation that the state violence which was now being exercised upon them has been an everyday reality in the East and the Southeast, a reality never depicted in the mass media, what was exactly the case with the Gezi protests as well.

The demolition of walls and the construction of bridges –hopefully stable- between different groups through the pursuing of common goals is of great significance. People learned to communicate better with each other; they started to discuss openly about important issues like minority rights, LGBT rights, women’s rights, the Kurdish issue, freedom of expression. An interesting example is the forums that have been organised along the lines of direct democracy and have provided a platform for different views to be expressed. On the other hand, one can also observe that the recent developments in combination with Erdoğan’s provocative rhetoric, as well as the falsified information by members of the government and the media did contribute to further division and polarisation of the society. The clashes that have occurred between government supporters and demonstrators reminded of the political violence of the 1970s.

Gezi created optimism but also brought to the fore once again problems that are not related only to Erdoğan or to AKP but rather to the political culture of Turkey and the legacy of the past. The list is unfortunately long: violation of human rights, authoritarian practices, state violence, inefficiency of the judiciary, illegal detentions, impunity, media partisanship. Gezi can provide a great opportunity for the establishment of a full-fledged democracy in which concepts such as respect for minority groups, participatory decision-making system, pluralism, public dialogue, respect for fundamental rights and liberties and true secularism will be cemented. In Tariq Ali’s words, “the key now is how to institutionalise this change so that Turkish democracy is enhanced.” Cengiz Çandar, a prominent Turkish journalist, sets the following dilemma: “It is said that after Gezi everything will change in the [Turkish] politics; either we will start walking towards fascism or towards a more democratic Turkey…” The level of matureness of the Turkish society allows us to hold the hope that real democracy is possible.
A survey conducted among the protesters by Bilgi University revealed that 92 percent of the protesters identify the prime minister as the main reason of the protests, see İstemil, Hüseyin, “Yüzde 92 Erdoğan’a kızdığını için sokakta”, Taraf, (06/06/2013) http://www.taraf.com.tr/haber/yuzde-92-Erdoğan-a-kizdigi-icin-sokakta.htm


A poll conducted in June by Metropoll suggests that 27 percent of the AKP voters agree that AKP has shown authoritarian tendencies. See, Daği, İhsan, “Kim marjinal, kim merkez?”, Zaman, (18/06/2013) http://www.zaman.com.tr/ihsan-dagi/kim-marjinal-kim-merkez_2101676.html


In Turkish there are two different words equivalent of the word “nationalist”: “milliyetçi” and “ulusalcı.” The first derives from the word “millet” which means nation, more in a sense of a community organised along religious lines. The second one is a newer term and derives from the word “ulus” which means nation but does not include the concept of religion. The term “ulusalcı” is often rendered as “neo-nationalist” in English.


CNN Türk, “Demirtaş’tan "Gezi" yorumu?”, (02/06/2013) http://www.cnnturk.com/2013/turkiye/06/01/demirtastan.gezi.yorumu/710325.0/index.html


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