Turkey's Turmoil

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POMEPS Briefings 23

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

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Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan occupied a dominant political position not too long ago. In June 2011, his Justice and Development Party (AKP) won nearly 60 percent of the seats in parliament while expanding its lead over its closest competitor. Turkey seemed well primed to take advantage of the Arab uprisings, with its independent foreign policy and criticism of Israel playing well with Arab audiences. Erdogan even seemed keen to find a resolution to the long-running struggle with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and reconcile with the country's Kurdish citizens.

Those days seem distant indeed. For at least the last six months, Erdogan has struggled to respond to sustained popular protests, a growing corruption scandal, a stalled peace process with the PKK, a deeply unpopular and ineffective Syria policy, and dissent from within his own party. How did Erdogan's fortunes reverse so quickly? Are his problems primarily the natural decay of a leader too long in power or do they speak to deeper problems with his party's ideology or the foundations of Turkish democracy? The 14 deeply researched and analytically powerful *Foreign Policy Middle East Channel* essays collected in this POMEPS Briefing go deeply into the origins, dynamics, and likely implications of Turkey's new political scene.

Growing discontent with Erdogan crystallized in June 2013 with the protests in Istanbul over a development project in Gezi Park and the heavy-handed response by the police. Some of the contributors to this briefing focus upon the protesters themselves. Whit Mason views the protests as the manifestation of an emerging secular middle class, while Aaron Stein points to growing battles inside the AKP. Almost all of the contributors agree on the novel nature of the protests: Murat Somer, for instance, highlights the generational change in the opposition, while Lisel Hintz details the political culture of the protesters and their strategic deployment of humor.

Other contributors focus on the pathologies of the Turkish political system. Sinan Ulgen argues that Erdogan's failure to understand the depth of the discontent and his over-confidence in his own power led him to badly miscalculate his response. Quinn Mecham focuses upon the inevitable arrogance, corruption, and mistakes that follow from absence of accountability in a system so dominated by a single party. Steven Cook and Michael Koplow place the eruption of protests within a longer-term decay of Turkish democracy as Erdogan and the AKP consolidated their power and ruled by majoritarian decree.

Erdogan survived the Gezi Park protests, but — as Cook observed — as a much-diminished political force. The economic miracle over which he had presided, as Stein outlines, had given way to a currency free-fall and increasingly dire fiscal prospects. After dominating Turkish politics for so long, Henri Barkey notes, Erdogan had flown too close to the sun. A mounting corruption scandal forced him to shuffle his government in December 2013, and left him scrambling for political survival. As Noah Blaser points out, it would be foolish to underestimate

Erdogan's prospects of survival and even vindication. His opponents have yet to put forward a compelling alternative, and have few mechanisms to force the issue. But Erdogan seems unlikely to return to his former dominant position even if he clings to power.

Caught up in this political maelstrom has been the fate of Erdogan's outreach to the PKK and effort to finally resolve Turkey's Kurdish problem. Over the summer, PKK leaders told Jake Hess that they hoped for an end to the conflict, the release of prisoners, and the enactment of reforms such as the revision of the Anti-Terror law and the reduction of the electoral threshold to allow Kurdish parties to compete. At the end of September 2013, as Blaser reports, Erdogan announced a reform package which met some Kurdish demands but fell short of satisfying their aspirations. By December, Kurdish leaders interviewed by Chase Winter sounded pessimistic.

There is much riding on the ability of Turkey's political institutions, new social movements, and embattled leaders to resolve these struggles within a democratic framework. We hope that the reporting and analysis collected in *POMEPS Briefing #23: Turkey's Turmoil* helps to put these struggles into perspective.

Marc Lynch, Director of POMEPS
January 13, 2014

Erdogan's dilemma

By Sinan Ulgen, June 2, 2013

The demonstrations started in Istanbul a few days ago. The initial objective was to protect the park in Taksim, Istanbul's central square, from being demolished and replaced by a shopping mall. But the police intervened with excessive force against a peaceful assembly, liberally using tear gas to disperse protesters. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that the project will go ahead regardless of the "few" people that oppose it. As a result, this local dispute was unexpectedly transformed into a city and then a nation-wide mass demonstration against his polarizing style.

The mass protests should be seen as a reaction against the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Erdogan's style of majoritarian governance. By cementing a pro-government majority and avoiding consensus on sensitive issues, Erdogan's political strategy has polarized Turkish society. This majoritarian approach to decision-making has worked well for him so far. He not only succeeded in setting the agenda for the country, but he also increased his popular support over three successive elections. But it now seems that this style of governance has reached the limit of Turkish society's tolerance. The recent adoption of a law on alcohol that significantly impedes the marketing, sales, and consumption of alcoholic drinks had already stirred a debate in Turkey about the government's negligence to take into account the sensitivities of Turkey's non-conservatives. Moreover, Erdogan's defense of the law by referencing religious principles only served to provoke the law's secular opponents. Instead the decision to transform a public park in the central square of Istanbul into a shopping mall became the rallying theme for many Turks to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with Erdogan's leadership.

Compared to past rallies in Turkey's democratic history, this week's events stand out for a number of reasons. First, the mass demonstrations are against the non-participatory style of decision-making adopted by the Erdogan government, but they are not ideological. They have not been hijacked or led by any single political party or ideology, as the protesters hail from disparate backgrounds and represent the rich diversity of Turkish society. They are composed of youth, women, football club supporters, trade unionists, college students, NGO activists, and urban professionals.

Second, there is for the first time a sense of empowerment against a government that has dominated the political scene for the past decade. This sense of popular empowerment stands in stark contrast with the dismal performance of Turkey's parliamentary opposition. The oft-made comparisons to the Tahrir demonstrations are not correct. Turkey is a democracy and there is no call for regime change like in Egypt. The only overlap with Tahrir remains this immense sense of empowerment and emancipation by the ordinary citizens that have seen the impact they can have on the political system if they act in unison.

And then there is the media. Turkey's mainstream media has become the laughing stock of the country. While Istanbul was burning with tear gas, Turkish TV channels were busy broadcasting documentaries, cooking shows, or soap operas. The Saturday edition of the pro-government major daily Sabah has not mentioned the events. The government imposed a blackout and the widespread self-censorship further discredited the mainstream media in the eyes of the Turkish public, which turned to international media outlets or to social media to follow the events on their streets. Indeed, one clear winner has been social media. Many Turks rushed to Twitter and the like to witness the rallies in real time. According to a study conducted by New York University's Social Media and Political Participation Laboratory, the social media response to and the role of social media in the protests has been phenomenal. Within a window of 24 hours, at least two million tweets mentioning hashtags related to the protest, have been posted. Even after midnight on Friday, more than 3,000 tweets about the protest were published every minute.

The way forward is, however, unclear. Erdogan conceded a small victory on Saturday to the protesters by withdrawing the police forces from Taksim square and admitting to their excessive use of force. But more defiantly, he reiterated his willingness to proceed with the disputed Taksim square reconstruction project. Yet regardless of how the events unfold in the coming days, there are two conclusions that can be drawn even now from this episode of unplanned and yet massive protest movements that shook one of Europe's largest cities: one is the glaring need to fundamentally restructure the media in Turkey; and the other the urgency of behavioral change in Erdogan's leadership style.

The blatant failure of the Turkish press to fulfill, even minimally, its role to report events harms the progress of democracy in Turkey. Consequently, new measures should be legislated, such as forcing media companies to shed their non-media activities, to ensure that the independence of the media can be re-established and maintained. Another set of rules should focus on safeguarding media pluralism.

Although they do not represent an immediate threat to Erdogan's rule in Turkey, these mass protests should nonetheless be taken seriously by the Turkish prime minister. Many Turks have grown increasingly disaffected with the top-down, non-inclusive style of decision-making that has characterized the later years of the Erdogan government. They are tired of polarization and strive for more consensual politics. Erdogan needs to understand this yearning and adopt a more conciliatory mode of leadership.

But possibly even more important for Turkey's future political stability is the increasingly visible gap on the acceptable forms of dissent between the Turkish leadership and society. Erdogan seems genuinely to believe that mass protests have no place in a country administered by a strong, stable, and economically successful government. He emphasizes the ballot box as the venue for social and political stakeholders to show their disaffection with the government. "Every four years we hold elections and this nation makes its choice," he said on Saturday. "Those who have a problem with government's policies can express their opinions within the framework of law and democracy." But with its maturing and increasingly pluralistic civil society, Turkey has moved beyond this more limited definition of democratic freedoms. The Turkish political leadership, including the parliamentary opposition, have to readjust their outlook. Otherwise with the newly found sense of empowerment of its citizenry, public turbulence in Turkey will become much more common.

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How democratic is Turkey?

By Steven A. Cook and Michael Koplow, June 2, 2013

It seems strange that the biggest challenge to Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's authority during more than a decade in power would begin as a small environmental rally, but as thousands of Turks pour into the streets in cities across Turkey, it is clear that something much larger than the destruction of trees in Istanbul's Gezi Park — an underwhelming patch of green space close to Taksim Square — is driving the unrest.

The Gezi protests, which have been marked by incredible scenes of demonstrators shouting for Erdogan and the government to resign as Turkish police respond with tear gas and truncheons**,** are the culmination of growing popular discontent over the recent direction of Turkish politics. The actual issue at hand is the tearing down of a park that is not more than six square blocks so that the government can replace it with a shopping mall but the whole affair represents the way in which the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has slowly strangled all opposition while making sure to remain within democratic lines. Turkey under the AKP has become the textbook case of a hollow democracy.

The ferocity of the protests and police response in Istanbul's Gezi Park is no doubt a surprise to many in Washington. Turkey, that "excellent model" or "model partner," is also, as many put it, "more democratic than it was a decade ago." There is a certain amount of truth to these assertions, though the latter, which is repeated ad nauseum, misrepresents the complex and often contradictory political processes underway in Turkey. Under the AKP and the charismatic Erdogan, unprecedented numbers of Turks have become politically mobilized and prosperous — the Turkish economy tripled in size from 2002 to 2011, and 87 percent of Turks voted in the most recent parliamentary elections, compared with 79 percent in the 2002 election that brought the AKP to power. Yet this mobilization has not come with a concomitant ability to contest politics. In fact, the opposite is the case, paving the way for the AKP to cement its hold on power and turn Turkey into a single-party state. The irony is that the AKP was building an illiberal system just as Washington was holding up Turkey as a model for the post-uprising states of the Arab world.

Shortly after the AKP came to power in 2002, a debate got under way in the United States and Europe about whether Turkey was "leaving the West." Much of this was the result of the polite Islamophobia prevalent in the immediate post-9/11 era. It was also not true. From the start, Turkey's new reformist-minded Islamists did everything they could to dispel the notion that by dint of their election, Turkey was turning its back on its decade of cooperation and integration with the West. Ankara re-affirmed Turkey's commitment to NATO and crucially undertook wide-ranging political reforms that did away with many of the authoritarian legacies of the past, such as placing the military under civilian control and reforming the judicial system.

The new political, cultural, and economic openness helped Erdogan ride a coalition of pious Muslims, Kurds, cosmopolitan elites, big business, and average Turks to re-election with 47 percent of the popular vote in the summer of 2007, the first time any party had gotten more than 45 percent of the vote since 1983. This was unprecedented in Turkish politics. Yet Erdogan was not done. In 2011, the prime minister reinforced his political mystique with 49.95 percent of the popular vote.

Turkey, it seemed, had arrived. By 2012, Erdogan presided over the 17th-largest economy in the world, had become an influential actor in the Middle East, and the Turkish prime minister was a trusted interlocutor with none other than the president of the United States. Yet even as the AKP was winning elections at home and plaudits from abroad, an authoritarian turn was underway. In 2007, the party seized upon a plot in which elements of Turkey's so-called deep state — military officers, intelligence operatives,

and criminal underworld — sought to overthrow the government and used it to silence its critics. Since then, Turkey has become a country where journalists are routinely jailed on questionable grounds, the machinery of the state has been used against private business concerns because their owners disagree with the government, and freedom of expression in all its forms is under pressure.

Spokesmen and apologists for the AKP offer a variety of explanations for these deficiencies, from "it's the law" and the "context is missing," to "it's purely fabricated." These excuses falter under scrutiny and reveal the AKP's simplistic view of democracy. They also look and sound much like the self-serving justifications that deposed Arab potentates once used to narrow the political field and institutionalize the power of their parties and families. Yet somehow, Washington's foreign-policy elite saw Turkey as a "model" or the appropriate partner to forge a soft-landing in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and elsewhere.

In the midst of the endless volley of teargas against protesters in Taksim, one of the prime ministers advisors plaintively asked, "How can a government that received almost 50 percent of the vote be authoritarian?" This perfectly captures the more recent dynamic of Erdogan's Turkey, where the government uses its growing margins of victory in elections to justify all sorts of actions that run up against large reservoirs of opposition.

The most obvious way this pattern has manifested itself is in the debate over the new Turkish constitution, which Erdogan had been determined to use as a vehicle to institute a presidential system in which he would serve as Turkey's first newly empowered president. When the opposition parties voiced their fervent opposition to such a plan and the constitutional commission deadlocked in late 2012 — missing its deadline of the end of the year to submit its recommendations — Erdogan threatened to disregard the commission entirely and ram through his own constitutional plan. He floated the idea again in early April 2013, but softened his position as it became clear that there is significant opposition to his presidential vision even within the AKP.

Turkey's new alcohol law, which among other things sets restrictions on alcohol sales after 10:00 p.m., curtails advertising, and bans new liquor licenses from establishments near mosques and schools, is another example of the AKP's majoritarian turn. Despite vociferous opposition, the law was written, debated, and passed in just two weeks, and Erdogan's response to the law's critics has been to assert that they should just drink at home.

Similarly, the AKP is undertaking massive construction projects in Istanbul, including the renovation of Taksim Square, the building of a new airport, and the construction of a third bridge over the Bosphorus, all of which are controversial and opposed by widespread coalitions of diverse interests. Yet in every case, the government has run roughshod over the projects' opponents in a dismissive manner, asserting that anyone who does not like what is taking place should remember how popular the AKP has been when elections roll around. In a typical attempt to use the AKP's vote margins as a cudgel, Erdogan on June 1 warned the Republican People's Party (CHP) — Turkey's main opposition party — "if you gather 100,000 people, I can gather a million."

Turkey's anti-democratic turn has all taken place without much notice from the outside world. It was not just coercive measures — arrests, investigations, tax fines, and imprisonments — that Washington willfully overlooked in favor of a sunnier narrative about the "Turkish miracle." Perhaps it is not as clear, but over the last decade the AKP has built an informal, powerful, coalition of party-affiliated businessmen and media outlets whose livelihoods depend on the political order that Erdogan is constructing. Those who resist do so at their own risk.

All this is why the current tumult over the "redevelopment" of Gezi Park runs deeper than merely the bulldozing of green space. It represents outrage over crony capitalism, arrogance of power, and the opacity of the AKP machine. In the media, Erdogan has encouraged changes in ownership or intimidated others to ensure positive coverage — or, in the case of the Gezi Park protests, no coverage. In what was a surreal scene — but sadly one

that was altogether unsurprising to close observers of Turkey — CNN International on May 31 was covering the protests live in Taksim while at the very same time CNN Turk, the network's Turkish-language affiliate, was running a cooking show as the historic heart of Turkey's largest city was in enormous upheaval. This dynamic of Turkish press censorship and intimidation, in which media outlets critical of the government are targeted for reprisal, has resulted in the dismissal of talented journalists like Amberin Zaman, Hasan Cemal, and Ahmet Altan for criticizing the government or defying its dictates. This type of implicit government intimidation is unreasonable in an allegedly democratic or democratizing society.

Under these circumstances, Turkish politics is not necessarily more open than it was a decade ago, when the AKP was pursuing democratic reforms in order to meet the European Union's requirements for membership negotiations. It is just closed in an entirely different way. Turkey has essentially become a one-party state. In this the AKP has received help from Turkey's insipid opposition, which wallows in Turkey's lost insularity and mourns the passing of the hardline Kemalist elite that had no particular commitment to democracy. Successful democracies provide their citizens with ways in which to express their desires and frustrations beyond periodic elections, and Turkey has failed spectacularly in this regard.

The combination of a feckless opposition and the AKP's heavy-handed tactics have finally come to a head. This episode will not bring down the government, but it will reset Turkish politics in a new direction; the question is whether the AKP will learn some important lessons from the people amassing in the streets or continue to double down on the theory that elections confer upon the government the right to do anything it pleases.

It is not just the AKP that needs to reassess its policies, but Washington as well. Perhaps the Obama administration does not care about Turkey's reversion or has deemed it better to counsel, cajole, and encourage Erdogan privately and through quiet acts of defiance like extending the term of Ambassador Francis Ricciardone, who has gotten under the government's skin over press freedom, for another year.

This long game has not worked. It is time the White House realize that Erdogan's rhetoric on democracy has far outstripped reality. Turkey has less to offer the Arab world than the Obama administration appears to think, and rather than just urging Arab governments to pay attention to the demands of their citizens, Washington might want to urge its friends in Ankara to do the same as well. The AKP and Erdogan might have been elected with an increasing share of the popular vote over the last decade, but the government's actions increasingly make it seem as if Turkish democracy does not extend farther than the voting booth.

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Turkey's secular awakening

By Whit Mason, June 5, 2013

The protests that have been convulsing the center of Istanbul and other Turkish cities over the last several days are more than the comeuppance of its intolerably high-handed prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Both the diversity of the protesters and the nature of their grievances show that Turkey has become a much more liberal society over the decade the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been in power. Turkey has a democracy — now protesters are demanding a liberal democracy. Turkey has witnessed big demonstrations before, of course — but they've always been staged by a single group, defined by either ethnicity or ideology. This is the first time that people from all walks of life have joined forces to constrain the power of their country's leaders.

The changes occurring in Turkey are evident in its new, up-and-coming middle class, whose members have formed the core of the protest movement. A friend of mine — let's call him Mehmet — works near Istanbul's Taksim Square, the center of the demonstrations. Mehmet had always been a pretty typical yuppie, more interested in wine tasting than politics. But since the demonstrations erupted, he has been consumed by them and vows to carry on until Erdogan backs down. Another friend, who teaches at a private college in the coastal city of Izmir, says his best students, all from conservative, prosperous families, were exhausted from their nightly clashes with police. He tells me that taxi drivers and shopkeepers who hail from the Black Sea, like Erdogan's family, have told him they voted for the AKP but have been turned into the party's enemies by the brutality of the police and the prime minister's contemptuous rhetoric.

Those who have opposed the AKP since it won power in 2000 have always believed that Erdogan and his cohorts are thinly disguised Islamists, intent on using the mechanisms of democracy to impose their values on the rest of the country. Their fears have been bolstered in recent days, as the government has seemingly tried to force them to conform to its religiously inspired conservatism — most notably through a new raft of laws regulating alcohol. However, the problem with the AKP has never been that it's Islamist — but that, much like every other party that's ruled Turkey, it's illiberal.

Erdogan has become a caricature of this illiberal style. He has opined that if people want to drink, they should drink *ayran*, a traditional yogurt drink. He has spoken about building a canal through Istanbul to replace the Bosphorus Strait as a shipping channel, which even he describes as his "crazy project," as if only to underscore that no scheme is beyond his power. More ominously, a record number of journalists have been imprisoned under his watch. He has blamed the current protests on drunks, extremists, and foreign agents. Such behavior has helped the protesters to clarify what it is they actually want — which is for the power conferred by Erdogan's undeniable electoral mandate to be constrained, as it would be in a liberal democracy.

Turkish governments have always been happy to dictate how to behave in areas that liberal political cultures would regard as off-limits to state intrusion. The state's predilection for intruding into people's private affairs reflects the illiberalism of the wider society. Despite pockets of social liberty, until recently Turkey has remained what political anthropologists have called a "segmentary" society — individuals are expected to rigidly conform to the mores of their group, while other members of the group are happy to intrude into others' lives to enforce those norms.

When I first moved to Istanbul in 1998, manifestations of this group-oriented conformism were ubiquitous. Though the state has licensed the production of alcoholic drinks since the founding of the republic, 83 percent of all Turks today are still teetotallers — a vivid measure of Turkey's cultural distance from Europe. Before the economic growth of the past decade, both credit to buy an apartment or launch a business were in short supply. For almost all Turks, the only way to get access to either was through family connections or by supporting a powerful political party. This

fact of life required people to go to extraordinary lengths to avoid offending their prospective patrons.

From my experience, many Turks manage inevitable differences of opinion with their elders through what might politely be termed prevarication. This tendency, beginning in childhood, has long retarded the competition of ideas at the heart of liberal political cultures.

The cumulative effect of such conflict avoidance is that many Turks have not experienced the constructive potential of conflict that plays out within civil bounds. In Turkey's political life, the lack of experience with constructive, civil conflict takes a number of reactionary forms: Party leaders assume a paternalistic posture toward their supporters, who reciprocate with a loyalty that survives even humiliating electoral defeats. Turks have traditionally displayed an easy tolerance of state restrictions on civil liberties, and share their leaders' inability to consider political compromise or admit misdeeds, such as the Armenian genocide.

But things are changing in Turkey. These days, signs of growing liberalism are everywhere: Ten years ago, I was struck by how rarely anyone on the buses or trains were reading. Even fairly decent hotels often didn't have a reading light next to the bed. In the years the AKP has been in power, book sales in Turkey have tripled. Much of this boom comes from educational books, thanks to the flourishing economy and the funds invested in schools. An unprecedented number of young Turks are now reading novels, which both reflect and nourish curiosity about the world beyond their own social environment.

Years of fairly steady economic growth under the AKP have vastly expanded opportunities to make a good life without depending on any patronage network — a form of autonomy that seems to be a precondition for individual liberty.

My friend Mehmet exemplifies the liberated Turk. He grew up in a pokey concrete apartment in a small city in central Anatolia. His father, a former butcher whose only formal education was in a school for prayer leaders, taught him to calm animals before slitting their throats for the annual ritual sacrifice of *bayram*. He won a scholarship to study tourism in Istanbul, learned English, and now supports his passion for travel and wine with a senior marketing job in a German company. Mehmet has never been much interested in politics, but he has made his own luck in the world and he'll be damned if he's going to sit by quietly while the prime minister and his friends contrive new ways to inflict their values on him and his beloved city.

Turks like Mehmet expect to be treated with respect — and that includes being consulted on matters that directly affect their daily lives. Such consultation has been entirely absent from the project to bulldoze Gezi Park outside Mehmet's office, and replace it with a faux-Ottoman shopping mall.

President Abdullah Gul — a gentler, more sophisticated man than Erdogan and the obvious alternative to lead the AKP — has said the government needs to listen to the people. "The message has been taken," Gul told the protesters, in a statement imploring them to return home. "Democracy is not only about [the] ballot box."

This is a hopeful moment for Turkey. All Turks have been raised to revere the father of the nation, Ataturk, who set Turkey on the path toward becoming a European-style state. Ataturk died in 1938 having made revolutionary changes to Turkish political life, but without having created a liberal political culture. A leader who manages to use the current crisis to help Turkey embrace the constraints on state power at the heart of liberalism would earn himself a place in the country's remarkably sparse pantheon of political heroes.

But if the events now taking place in Turkey come to be regarded as a landmark in its evolution as a liberal European society, as may well happen, their hero will not be a great leader but the thousands of Turks, like my friend Mehmet, who refuse to be dictated to by anyone.

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The AKP's accountability problem

By Quinn Mecham, June 7, 2013

This week's widespread protests in Turkey, which escalated to violent clashes in some places, are unprecedented in recent Turkish politics. They caught most Turks by surprise, including Turkey's government led by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which tried unsuccessfully to be dismissive. The rapid spread of the demonstrations beyond Istanbul's central Taksim square reveal a latent anger by a significant portion of Turkey's population regarding how the government has been going about its business. A deeper source of the protests, however, is a palpable anxiety about the gradual decline in mechanisms by which the ruling party can be held accountable for its visionary but polarizing policies.

Coinciding with the escalation of protests in Istanbul was a large conference at Istanbul's Sehir University that sought to assess the legacies of the decade in which the AKP has led the Turkish government. As participants noted, much has gone right in Turkey over the last decade of AKP rule, including rapid economic growth in a region that is currently in economic crisis. Additionally, several rounds of constitutional reforms designed to increase individual rights, reduce the independence of the military, and align Turkey's political system with EU standards have helped to strengthen and democratize the Turkish political system.

However, any assessment of the AKP's decade of rule reveals a number of lingering shadows that cast doubt on the long-term democratic project in Turkey. The ongoing demonstrations in Istanbul, are at base, a result of deep anxieties among a portion of the Turkish population that Turkey's evolving democracy is ill-suited to meet the needs of all of its citizens. These anxieties were further consolidated because of the government's bungled response to the protests, which was unreasonably heavy-handed for a government that is never shy about espousing its own democratic credentials. Apologies from some senior officials over the government's handling of the protests appeared half-hearted and came too late.

Though the proximate grievances that allowed initial protests over an urban redevelopment project to escalate concerned the government's ambitious and contentious plans to remake public space, the more fundamental concerns revolve around the inability of the AKP's opponents and disaffected citizens to see a future in which the ruling party and its political agenda can be reasonably contained. Over the course of three national electoral cycles, the AKP has become too dominant in Turkish politics for its own good. Like the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, a popular and dominant party without real competition can lose its sense of accountability. This is what the Turkish protesters are trying to remedy.

Accountability in democracy can be understood in several ways. First, vertical accountability is accountability to voters in elections, in which voters have the opportunity to punish governments at the ballot box. Voters have rewarded the AKP by reelecting the party twice, both times with a higher percentage of votes than in the previous round (and about 50 percent of the total vote in 2011). Coupled with a general implosion of its political opposition, the AKP has come to feel secure in its relationship with voters, and few anticipate the rise of a credible challenger prior to the next election. For the half of the Turkish population that votes for other political parties, it has been difficult to see how the AKP's dominance will be effectively challenged through the electoral process. While voters could theoretically punish the AKP at the ballot box, the party has so far been given wide latitude, and it has grown more secure in its long-term position. The AKP has thus come to feel less accountable to a population that has proven consistently willing to reelect the party, and this often comes across in the tone with which Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan dismisses his opposition.

A second form of accountability, one of checks and balances across state institutions, is sometimes termed

horizontal accountability. Over the last decade, horizontal accountability for the AKP has also declined. In its early days, the AKP felt under threat from a military establishment committed to defending principles of Kemalism, and was openly challenged by the Constitutional Court over the constitutional acceptability of its policies. Due to a number of constitutional reforms and military scandals however, both the military and the courts have lost some of their ability to keep the AKP's government's actions in check (justifiably or not). Further consolidation of the party's control over the presidency, a position to which Erdogan aspires at the conclusion of his current term, would also reduce horizontal accountability. The AKP has likewise increasingly tamed the media in an effort to hinder any potential opposition from civil society.

In its aspirations to meet accession criteria for the European Union, the AKP has also historically faced some external accountability to Europe for its actions, and has often used the EU accession criteria in its bid to reduce the power of the military in Turkish politics. Since the middle of the last decade, however, as Europe's disinterest in Turkish membership grew increasingly stark, the AKP has felt less external accountability to the EU in its policies. This again has led to greater autonomy on the part of the AKP government.

After a decade of rule in which the AKP has faced diminishing vertical, horizontal, and external accountability for its policies, what the Turkish protests are trying to provide is an alternative mechanism to hold the government accountable through a newly coordinated and vocal civil society. In this respect, the protests have already been successful at turning the international spotlight on controversial aspects of the AKP's governance. They have thus forced the government to publicly acknowledge, if not yet fully address, their concerns.

Because Turkey is a democracy in which the AKP will have to face voters again at the polls, and because the party does command widespread popular support, Erdogan is correct that the current Turkish protests cannot be justifiably compared to those that started the Arab Spring. Where he is mistaken, however, is in his dismissal of the protesters as undemocratic agents of the political opposition.

Rather, the protests should be taken as a serious and widespread signal of popular anxiety over the AKP's use of its perceived democratic mandate to act in increasingly undemocratic ways. Just as the more entrenched of the protesters risk overplaying their hand in discounting the ruling party's popularity, AKP leaders have so far underplayed the magnitude of anxiety over the specter of their party's perpetual domination of Turkish politics. That anxiety is unlikely to erode unless the AKP begins to recognize that vibrant democracy requires the government to demonstrate greater accountability to those it governs. Because in addition to voting, those that the AKP governs are learning to stand up and yell.

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Wings of change

By Aaron Stein, June 7, 2013

As the protests in Turkey continue, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan remains defiant. Upon returning to Istanbul early on Friday, June 7, he proclaimed to a crowd of gathered supporters that the protests against his rule are "bordering on illegality [and] must come to an end immediately." The day before, he had reiterated his intention to move forward with his plans to uproot Gezi Park — one of the few green spaces left in Istanbul — to make way for a replica Ottoman barracks and a shopping mall.

But even as Erdogan seems intent on bulldozing the opposition, other members of his party may not be so sure. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is not monolithic; it represents a disparate coalition of pious Muslims, a segment of the Kurdish population, the economic elite, the Anatolian masses, and some Turkish nationalists. The differences within it have also been magnified in the wake of the protests. It is clear that the party has two wings: one represented by President Abdullah Gul, and the other by Erdogan.

Since rising to power in 2002, the party has been forced to balance its legislative agenda between its factions in order to avoid ostracizing various elements of its base. Over time, this struggle has turned into a virtual tug of war: The Gul wing maintains that the party should pursue policies in line with conservative democratic principles modeled on Germany's Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

Like the CDU, Gul has embraced faith-based expression consistent with an American-style definition of secularism. Thus, the party's emphasis at the outset of its rule was on taking the necessary legislative steps to open EU accession talks. The process would make Turkey more liberal, which would then allow for all people — including Turkey's long-repressed religious majority — to express themselves more freely.

After the process stalled, however, the AKP began using France and Germany's hostility to Turkish EU accession to deepen its appeal to the party's nationalist wing. After emphasizing the need for the European Union to deepen Turkish democracy in the early 2000s, officials in Ankara now claim it is Europe that needs Turkey to cure its ailing economy.

Especially since the 2011 general election, when the AKP won nearly 50 percent of the vote, the party's Erdogan wing has moved away from the democratic-reformist rhetoric of earlier years. The party now leans on religious language far more frequently to justify its policies. This change in rhetoric has coincided with an emphasis on massive public works projects — costing a breathtaking $400 billion — that, along with the economy, has become the centerpiece of the AKP's political messaging.

Erdogan's brash rhetoric and his penchant to emphasize Turkey's grandiose Ottoman past resonate with the AKP's nationalist wing. The prime minister has recently felt the need to weigh in on citizens' private lives: He has counseled Turks on the number of children they should have and on the type of bread they should eat. Most recently, he has spoken disparagingly against those who drink alcohol and has imposed new restrictions on the buying and selling of spirits.

The Gul wing is also believed to be closer to Fethullah Gulen — a powerful cleric in the AKP who lives in self-imposed exile in the United States. Gulen has echoed Gul's more moderate tone during the protests, subtly warning Erdogan to take the protesters' demands more seriously. The Gul-Gulen alliance represents a potentially powerful bloc opposing Erdogan, especially as the prime minister continues to prod his party to pass a new constitution that could set the stage for a contest between Erdogan and Gul.

Due to his party's internal rules, Erdogan will not be allowed to run for another term as prime minister when his current term is up in 2015. This has raised widespread speculation about his political future. The prime minister

has proven eager to amend the Turkish constitution to create a powerful presidency, transforming it from the largely ceremonial office that it is today. In all likelihood, Erdogan will assume the presidency, but the scope of his powers once in office is still very much up for debate.

Erdogan's constitutional proposal, however, has been met with stiff resistance in parliament — even from members of his own party. Thus, while Erdogan may control the party list and exercise great sway over AKP members of parliament (MPs), it appears he may have overreached. As the behind-the-scenes jostling continues, the real prize for Erdogan and Gul is who will control the party list after 2014.

The political differences within the AKP were exacerbated after a 2011 purge of more liberal AKP MPs — who were known to support Gul — and a purposeful decision to ostracize the liberal bloc within the party. Erdogan controls the party list, which has given him tremendous influence over AKP MPs. As a result, after the 2011 election the party began to take on a more nationalist tinge.

These schisms within the party are not inconsequential. Erdogan's brash rhetoric has already run afoul of the Gul wing, and if the protests persist, he runs the risk of further polarizing the AKP. While Erdogan has effectively purged most of the opposition within the party, he has not been able to convince it to unanimously support his presidential ambitions.

Erdogan, therefore, faces the biggest challenge of his political career. In addition to the protests, the prime minister must address the different constituencies in his party at a time when he needs its unanimous support to reform the Turkish constitution. For now, he has chosen to tack to the nationalist right — despite the fact this approach will further complicate his designs on the presidency.

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The might of the pen(guin) in Turkey's protests

By Lisel Hintz, June 10, 2013

It is somewhat ironic that of all the images shown on Turkish television channels during the violent police crackdown in Istanbul's Gezi Park — from cooking shows to soap opera reruns — penguins should become the symbol of media censorship in Turkey's ongoing protests. After all, it is a magazine called Penguen that constitutes a bastion of social and political satire in Turkish media, using impressive wit to critique that which mainstream media most often does not — or, more accurately, cannot. Now infamous for being the country with the most jailed journalists, Turkey's restrictions on press freedoms stem from an obstreperous prime minister who does not take criticism lightly and the complex business links between his ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi* — AKP) and the media barons controlling the industry. Despite this highly contracted space for expression, Penguen continues to publish wickedly humorous and searingly critical caricatures of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. For now, at least.

The Turkish media's general reluctance to portray Erdogan's government in a negative light was brought

into stark perspective by protesters flooding the internet with penguins of a different sort last week. CNN Turk's airing of a nature documentary featuring penguins while CNN International provided live footage of the brutal means used to disperse demonstrators sparked outrage that, within hours, transformed efforts to preserve a park from destruction into a countrywide protest against police violence and media silence. Creatively turning a democratic deficit of traditional media into a tool of protest, AKP dissenters took to social media to share satirical penguin-themed cartoons. In one poignant depiction, a penguin on a melting iceberg watches Istanbul fill with tear gas on CNN International while a Turk at home watches penguins on CNN Turk, neither viewer aware of his own imminent demise. Actor Sermiyan Midyat surprised a CNN Turk anchor during a live broadcast by taking off his shirt to reveal a penguin T-shirt underneath, while a man prank-called CNN Turk to request on his mother's behalf that the penguin documentary be shown again — but that next time could the penguins be younger and of a different size, please?

While the penguin image has since become a comical but familiar symbol among those protesting media censorship in the form of penguin masks, balloons, and inflatable toys, another iconic image has been co-opted in creative ways to protest unprovoked violence by police against peaceful demonstrators. The unforgettable series of photos depicting a girl in a red dress standing in front of police

and then being sprayed in the face at close range with tear gas has been transformed into T-shirts worn both at demonstrations and on television. On the last episode of comedy talk show 3+1, all three hosts proudly display their T-shirts. One host relates his own experience at the Gezi Park protest in which, after being blinded by tear gas, he believes someone is trying to help him when in fact the presumed do-gooder just wanted a photo with him. With the audience laughing hysterically at the comic delivery of the anecdote, it is clear that humor is being used as an effective vehicle for conveying opposition to the government's heavy-handed tactics.

This ability to find humor in dire and dangerous circumstances and to use it as a weapon against the increasing authoritarianism of the AKP government is perhaps what stands out most from Turkey's ongoing protests. While the clever transformation of Erdogan's dismissal of protesters as "capulcular" (looters or hooligans) into a word that now means one who fights for rights and freedoms has gone viral as Andy Carvin notes, thousands of witty riffs on other themes of autocratic rule can be found amongst dissenters on the web and on the ground. Absent a free press and subject to violence

when assembling in protest, Turks — like James Scott's subjects of study in Weapons of the Weak — use humor to bolster their own morale and to incrementally erode the legitimacy and power of their leader in (relatively) costless ways. The alteration of the Apple symbol into that of a quince with a bite taken from it — to eat quince (ayvayi yemek) means to be in hot water or in trouble in Turkish — seeks to undermine Erdogan's credibility as a leader through wit rather than through force.

In the boldest display of creative dissent in a restricted environment, the host of popular game show Kelime Oyunu (Word Game) Ihsan Varol wrote all the answers that contestants had to guess during its live June 3 broadcast around the Gezi Park protest theme. Including answers such as tear gas, dictator, and Twitter (which Erdogan referred to as a lie-spreading menace), arguably the most hard-hitting critique was the answer to the clue "the lungs of democracy:" gas mask. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the game show has since been removed from live airing and is showing pre-recorded episodes.

While the fate of both the protests and the protesters themselves remains uncertain, the inspirational and mobilizational power Turks continue to generate through humor under threatening conditions is unquestionable. The might of the pen, the power of words and images is being put to the test against a formidable opponent wielding more deadly weapons in Turkey's protests. With thousands of people injured and two dead from violence during police crackdowns on protests thus far, the great majority of demonstrators continue to urge peaceful means; a commonly chanted slogan at Thursday's Occupy Kugulu Park protest in Ankara was "No stone, no stick; our goal is liberty." With sticks and stones off the table and with words on their side in the form of satire and humor, Turkey's protesters are waging a fight the government seems ill-disposed to win: a battle of wits.

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Not the same old protests in Turkey

By Murat Somer, June 20, 2013

For two weeks, massive anti-government protests have rocked Turkey, a country widely seen as a bastion of stability and secular democracy in its region. According to official statements, four people have been killed and up to 5,000 injured during the countrywide clashes between police and protesters. The uprisings are becoming the biggest challenge to the government of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) since it came to power in 2002.

But this is not the first time the party has been faced with mass protests. In 2007, popular "republican rallies" threatened to unsettle the government. Then, much like now, secular sensitivities were among the motivations of the protesters. International media often portrayed the fault lines in terms of Islamists versus secularists, or "black Turks" versus "white Turks." Then as now, the government vilified the protesters as autocrats who wanted to bring back military tutelage and impose the will of a

minority on the pro-government majority. It accused them of conspiring with the "deep state" and with corporate and foreign interests in order to depose the elected government.

Other than these similarities, however, these two episodes are entirely different. Then, the AKP government and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan had rightfully earned the democratic world's sympathy and deserved the benefit of doubt. Today, they don't.

First of all, the instigating events are very dissimilar. In 2007, rallies began when the AKP decided to nominate one of its principal figures Abdullah Gul for the presidency. The critics had a valid point that the AKP could be more consensus-oriented and gain the trust of the opposition by jointly picking a more neutral presidential figure. But ultimately they were rallying against something that the AKP had the legal right to do. And, worst of all, the secularist military issued an anti-government ultimatum and encouraged the protests in ways that resembled the military intervention 10 years earlier.

This time, however, everything started when the police violently dispersed a peaceful sit-in to protect a public park. The ensuing anger over police brutality quickly grew into a countrywide grassroots movement because the police continued to disrespect human rights, the government was unapologetic and dismissive, Erdogan kept berating the protesters, and the domestic media was conspicuously silenced.

In 2007, it was religious Turks who legitimately felt that their personal values were under attack because many protesters seemed to be irritated by Gul's wife wearing an Islamic headscarf. Now, secular Turks legitimately sense that their personal values are threatened. A series of laws passed in recent years increased the scope for religious education and severely restricted abortion rights and the sale and consumption of alcohol. In addition, prominent figures have been prosecuted for "insulting religion" due to their artistic and intellectual expressions.

But much more than laws, people are incensed by restrictions on everyday life practices and Erdogan's derogatory language. He has called abortion murder, anybody who consumes alcohol a drunkard, and the protesters both marauders (capulcu) and drunkards. In passing, he asserted that it would be legitimate for the state to use Islamic justification for restricting a harmful practice for the "people's own good." Last month, announcements in the Ankara subway instructed people not to engage in public displays of affection. Erdogan declared that such immorality could not be allowed in a subway "belonging to the state" and a group of knife-wielding radicals assaulted people who protested the new restrictions by organizing a "public kissing" event.

These examples suggest that secular fears are based on some concrete policies and public statements of Erdogan and his cadre. This is different from 2007 when secular concerns mainly drew on what Turks call "intention-reading," i.e. making inferences about the Islamists' hidden intentions. And, arguably, this time around many of the fears expressed by the government itself — such as the fear that the protests are fabricated merely to topple the government — can be seen as intention-reading as well. Most protesters simply want a more responsive and more accountable government that respects their personal and civil liberties and human rights.

In 2007, Turkish democracy was still under military tutelage and the threat of a military intervention was very real. The AKP won a victory for democracy by not bowing down to the military's demands as its predecessors did. Since then, legal and political developments including the prosecution of hundreds of high-level officers for "conspiracy to overturn the government" have subdued the military. Instead, a 200,000 plus strong, heavily armed, and barely accountable police force appears to have the power to repress civil liberties at the government's behest.

Even though ordinary attendees had mixed motivations when they joined the republican rallies six years ago, their "spokespeople" clearly included people with ultranationalist, anti-western and militaristic views. By contrast, the 2013

protests have no visible leadership and organization. The original architects of the protests, the "Taksim solidarity group" consists of simple citizens who promote peaceful resistance to protect Gezi Park and does not necessarily represent others. Protesters are loosely organized and spontaneously mobilized through social media.

The core participants of the Gezi resistance are comprised of a diverse group of people, a major portion from the 1990s generation. They represent post-industrial liberal values and a new type of politics. In many ways, they are products of the rapid economic development that Turkey has enjoyed during the 2000s with the help of the AKP. Many of the protesters are too young to remember either the 2007 rallies or military interventions. But they are old enough to recall the government's authoritarian acts in recent years. Heavily consisting of university students and women, they include leftists, liberals, secular nationalists, and small but novel groups such as secular and Islamist feminists, vocal groups of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activists, and "anti-capitalist Muslims." They rely on the "soft power" of arts, humor, and the Internet. Their main ally that has the "hard power" of mobilizing large numbers ready to challenge the leviathan-like police seems to be the so-called "Carsi," a vocal and politicized group of soccer fans.

The hundreds of thousands who come to their support are even more diverse, hailing from across Turkey's social and ideological spectrum. They are united by their anger over the government's recent policies, police violence, and Erdogan's interventionist puritanism.

Finally, the most visible participants may perhaps be the least representative. They are small but organized militant groups of ultranationalists and extreme-leftists who fight the police with petrol bombs in front of TV cameras, and, occasionally, pro-Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) groups brandishing posters of Abdullah Ocalan.

The media in 2007 was divided with one side actively promoting the anti-government rallies. Today, the media is still divided but at the same time, the government appears to have especially subordinated the broadcast media. One of the events that fueled many protesters' furor was that the Turkish affiliate of CNN International, CCN-Turk, aired a documentary about penguins while violent clashes were taking place between the police and protesters all over Istanbul. The mainstream TV and radio stations were silenced to an extent that suggested a gravely controlled and intimidated society.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, the AKP government was different in 2007. The most palpable indication of this was that, in sharp contrast to the current protests, the republican rallies were not met with heavy-handed police crackdowns. In return, while polarizing and often militant, the rallies were mainly peaceful.

Erdogan could have ended the protests on the very first day by visiting the park and telling the protesters that he was sorry for the actions of the police and his government would reconsider the demolition of the Gezi Park. Instead, he waited for more than two weeks to invite for a meeting in his office in Ankara a handful of handpicked artists and academics who were clearly unrepresentative of the protesters.

In 2007, the AKP could boast not only of unprecedented economic growth but also of revolutionary democratic reforms that earned Turkey the start of EU accession talks. Its inclusive and liberal-democratic discourse reflected a political agenda focusing on the elimination of military and judiciary praetorianism, freedoms and human rights for all segments of Turkish society, and constructing a democracy that met European standards.

To be sure, the AKP is still spearheading brave and historical democratic initiatives most importantly the peace process with the PKK.

However, it also seems ever ready to oppress its opponents by whatever methods it deems necessary. Rather than seeking consensus, it seems to seek hegemony. Rather than seeking more pluralism it seems to try to reshape society according to its own ideology. Now that the military

tutelage is gone and EU prospects are more doubtful than ever, the AKP's roadmap for further democratization is unclear. The AKP is highly critical and dismissive of the opposition, the EU, and those segments of society who do not vote for it. Its discourse and policies often smack of pro-state elitism and pro-Islamic social engineering by using the very means of the domineering state apparatus that the AKP used to challenge and promised to bring under societal control.

In 2007, it was much more ambiguous which side represented the autocrats and which side the democrats, who were the victims and the oppressors, and who should be supported in the name of democracy and human rights. In 2007 the AKP government had earned the world's conditional support and a chance to lead the country's democratization. Today, the same government is acting oppressively. Unless the opposition parties can restructure themselves as credible alternatives, it may still be the most viable political actor to steer democratic reforms such as writing a more democratic constitution. But things cannot remain the same after the Gezi protests. The AKP must be held accountable for its actions and pushed to implement reforms lest Turkey miss its historical opportunity to consolidate true democracy. Otherwise, there is a real peril that it will evolve into a de facto authoritarian regime with a seemingly liberal economy and feckless elections every four years.

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Turkish tailspin

By Aaron Stein, June 18, 2013

As the protests in Turkey enter their third week, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan remains defiant, claiming during his weekly speech to the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) parliamentary group meeting that law enforcement acted with "common sense" when it responded violently to anti-government protests and that he would "expand the powers of the police." The prime minister's speech came just days after he dispatched riot police to clear demonstrators from Istanbul's Gezi Park, sparking renewed clashes in cities across the country. The violence has since subsided and demonstrators have taken to standing silently in public to express their discontent, but weeks of unrest have taken their toll on Turkey's financial markets and eroded investor confidence — an ominous sign for Erdogan, whose electoral success has depended in large part on the strength of the economy.

Erdogan and other senior members of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) have blamed the protests on "foreign circles" uncomfortable with Turkey's economic and political progress. The country's economy minister, Zafer Caglayan, even went as far as accusing an international "interest rate lobby" of conspiring to seize $1.5 trillion from Turkey in the past 30 years. He was echoing previous statements by the powerful prime minister, who has paid special attention to Turkey's own interest rate over the years. In particular, Erdogan has argued that the rate should remain close to zero in order to prevent the same "interest rate lobby" from taking advantage of Turkey.

It remains unclear who exactly is behind the prime minister's nefarious — if non-existent — interest rate

lobby, though one pro-government newspaper has identified it as a secret alliance between Jewish financiers, members of Opus Dei, and the Illuminati — all of whom are working together to tame Turkey's impressive economic growth. More prosaically, Erdogan is probably referring to the chorus of investors, financial journalists, and other analysts who have called for Turkey's benchmark interest rate to be raised to combat inflation. (The prime minister favors low benchmark interest rates in order to help stimulate the economy).

Following the 2011 election, most observers expected Turkey to tighten its monetary policy so as to dampen inflation and slow its overheating economy. However, the independent Turkish Central Bank (TCMB) opted to cut the benchmark interest rate instead. It argued that following standard monetary policy and raising interest rates would attract more short-term portfolio funds — of the type Turkey relies on to finance its current account deficit, which as of April stood at roughly 6 percent of GDP — but also make the country more susceptible to external shocks, since these investments can move quickly out of markets.

The TCMB, therefore, opted to pursue a rather unorthodox strategy aimed at curbing the appreciation of the Lira and decreasing bank loans. The policy, known as an interest rate corridor, allows the government to vary its rates between the lower benchmark rate and the much higher overnight lending rate. In essence, the policy represents a compromise between the independent TCMB and Erdogan — which in turn raises questions about the prime minister's influence in Turkish financial decision-making.

The policy has had mixed results. On the one hand, the economy slowed considerably, with GDP growth cooling from 8.8 percent in 2011 to 2.2 percent in 2012. On the other hand, private lending continued at a high pace, despite the TCMB's higher overnight lending rates. The engineered slowdown did help narrow the current account deficit — driven to unsustainable levels by Turkey's roaring GDP growth — and curb inflation, but worries about the country's reliance on short-term financing persist. Going forward, there are signs that Turkey's economic balancing act may be coming to an end.

Turkey's perpetually high current-account deficit — which varies between 6 and 10 percent of GDP — is a long-term structural issue for the economy. In order to finance the current account deficit, Ankara relies on both foreign direct investment (FDI) and short-term portfolio flows. But Turkey's long-term FDI has slowed, leaving the country at the mercy of portfolio flows and vulnerable to external shocks — whether it be independent actions by the U.S. Federal Reserve or the European Central Bank, or domestic political unrest. The bottom line is that Turkey's dependence on speculative money — which goes out as easily as it comes in — puts the economy at risk.

In a worrying sign for the Turkish economy, money has recently begun to flee developing country markets for bonds in the United States. And while the retreat from investing in emerging markets began before the protests erupted in Turkey, the unrest has certainly called into question the country's political stability and hastened the monetary retreat from Turkish markets. The capital flight began in late May, after Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke telegraphed his intention to taper the $85 billion in bonds that the Fed is buying each month. If the Fed does decide to slow down its stimulus plan and U.S. bond yields continue to rise, countries with high-current-account deficits — like Turkey — are particularly vulnerable.

Also worrying for the Turkish economy is the poor performance of its currency. In May, the Lira hit its lowest value against the U.S. dollar in 17 months. The protests have exacerbated this downward trend and eventually forced Turkey's central bank to intervene to prevent the Lira from depreciating further. On June 12, it auctioned off $250 million to Turkish banks to help prevent the further depreciation of the Lira. While the auction did manage to stabilize the currency, Turkey's capacity to intervene further remains limited. One potential option to combat this weakness is to raise interest rates, but Erdogan has remained steadfastly opposed to this option, maintaining that low interest rates are vital for Turkey's economic success.

Despite these difficulties, the Turkish economy grew at an annualized rate of 3 percent for the first quarter of 2013, though this is well short of the country's 4 percent growth target for the year. In reality, the economic picture is far more complicated than the economy minister — or Erdogan — would like Turkish voters to think. While blaming phantoms may appeal to some segments of the AKP's base, it papers over the political and economic conundrum now facing Turkey's leadership.

The protests have already dented Turkey's tourism industry — a key source of revenue for financing the current account deficit — and the combination of a slumping EU economy and the various crises in the Middle East has made it harder for Turkey to export its way out of economic malaise. Ankara will therefore have to rely on domestic demand to fuel economic growth, which will inevitably increase the country's current account deficit — in turn making it even more vulnerable to the whims of the U.S. Federal Reserve. While Turkey's economy is not going to collapse because of the continued protests, the future is nonetheless gloomy. As a result, the AKP will most likely continue to focus on placing the blame elsewhere, rather than face the combined pressures of domestic unrest and central bank decisions abroad — both of which may have a profound impact on the Turkish economy going forward. While Erdogan has no influence on the Fed, he could opt to try and mimic the protesters and stay silent, in order to at least dampen the growing feeling in some financial circles that he has lost touch with reality.

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The strong man at his weakest

By Steven A. Cook, June 19, 2013

ISTANBUL - "Re-cep Tay-yip Er-do-gan! Re-cep Tay-yip Er-do-gan!" chanted supporters of the Turkish prime minister, as a friend and I made our way through the absolutely mammoth crowd that descended on the Kazlicesme area of Istanbul last Sunday to hear their leader speak. As with Erdogan's rally in the capital, Ankara, the day before, the people who turned out here, many of whom were decked out in scarves, T-shirts, and masks supporting the prime minister, vastly outnumbered the Gezi Park protesters who have captured global headlines. Young, old, well-to-do, decidedly modest, religious, and secular all declared their devotion to the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Erdogan. When the prime minister surveyed the 295,000 souls who had come to express their devotion and thundered, "Taksim Square is not Turkey!" it was a vindication of his vision, his economic policies, and the strength of his leadership. Yet the irony was that at Kazlicesme, Erdogan's demonstration of strength revealed his profound weakness and political vulnerability.

Anyone with even a passing interest in Turkey knows something about the Erdogan mystique. He's the tough guy from the Kasimpasa neighborhood — literally and figuratively down a steep slope from Taksim Square — who has remade Turkey over the last decade. For the media personalities parachuted into a maelstrom of tear gas,

water cannons, and pepper spray, Turkey under Erdogan is best described as an economic and political success story, a "model" of a "Muslim democracy and prosperity" for the Arab world. But Erdogan's reservoir of support is based on a much more tangible set of factors. The fact that he presides over the 17th-largest economy in the world — it was the 16th in the 1990s — is less important than the fact that more people are participating in it than ever before. There are still fabulously wealthy and terribly poor people in Turkey, but the overall gap between the two has narrowed. That is no small accomplishment. In other high-growth countries like Brazil, China, and Russia, for example, that gap has grown.

Consistent with the kind of grassroots work that the AKP's precursor, the Welfare Party, perfected in the 1980s and 1990s, Erdogan — the guy who used to sell the Turkish version of the bagel, called simit, from a cart on the street — has focused much of his time in office on improving the lives of ordinary Turks. In places where transportation was thin, healthcare was basic, and government services were non-existent, the prime minister has paved roads, built airports, established "Erdogan-care," and forced local governments to be responsive to their constituents. As a result, Kasimpasa is not so rough-and-tumble anymore and the people there love him for it.

Economics does not explain everything, however. Erdogan, whose political skills are unrivaled in Turkey, has an innate ability to appeal to his core constituents and, until not too long ago, beyond. His fiery and emotional rhetoric gets most of the attention, but it is framed around a folksy common sense that resonates across the country. When a law restricting the sale of alcohol to certain times and places came under fire from secular elites, many average Turks may have winced at Erdogan's oblique reference to the fact that Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and his deputy Ismet Inonu were alcoholics, but they also could not figure out what all the fuss was about. For them, the fact that liquor can be sold around schools and mosques at any time of day to anyone of any age offends a basic sense of right and wrong — to say nothing of piety.

Nothing reinforced the wholesome values of Erdogan and his constituency more than the pedestal upon which the policemen were placed at the Kazlicesme rally. At the center of the city, where the black-clad and helmeted riot police were busy expending copious amounts of tear gas against their fellow Turks, the AKP rally was a law-and-order love fest. When police moved about on the streets adjacent to the site, the throngs parted ways and cheered for them. Young officers who had been brought into Istanbul for the event could not help but blush. The cops were relaxed, even chit-chatty. Unlike their colleagues who were engaged in a pitched battle in and around Istiklal Street at about the same time, the biggest problem for the police at the AKP rally was helping two foreigners find an outlet to recharge dying or dead iPhones.

Of course, Erdogan has become the sun around which Turkish politics revolves in part because his formal, parliamentary opposition has nothing to offer Turks. One of the many ironies of the last three weeks has been the indignation of the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) over the prime minister's authoritarian drift. Hardly a paragon of democratic governance itself, the CHP can count on the support of a hard-core base that represents the Kemalist elite. Their commitment to a diverse and democratic Turkey is suspect, at best. The party of Ataturk is a relic of the past and, like the variety of lesser parties who have shown up in Taksim Square to show their colors, they appeal to a narrow slice of the electorate.

For Erdogan and his supporters, the rallies in Ankara and Istanbul only reinforced the AKP's mastery of the political arena. It was hard not to feel this energy and vibe in the carnival-like atmosphere of Kazlicesme. As one homemade placard declared: "Today is Turkey's Day!" Yet there was a dark underside to Erdogan's demonstration of power. The man holding the sign could have been appealing for Turkish unity, but in the context of the last three weeks, he was advancing the idea that Erdogan has consistently perpetuated — the notion that the Gezi Park protesters were somehow not good Turks.

One of the prime minister's great accomplishments — and

a source of his mystique in Europe and the United States during his early years in power — was his efforts to forge a Turkey that was (all at the same time) more Muslim, more European, and more democratic without losing that fiercely held sense of "Turkishness." For other politicians, the contradictions in this would be too difficult to manage politically, but not for Erdogan. What better agent of change than the physically imposing, wear-his-emotions-on-his-sleeve, confident embodiment of the new Turkish man to bring the country out of its self-imposed insularity. Erdogan held out hope that the debilitating war over Turkish identity that had been at the heart of the country's political drama since the republic's founding might come to an end, and he rode a broad coalition of Turks back to power in 2007, and again in 2011.

The first (and until Gezi Park, the only) political crisis of Erdogan's tenure came in the late spring of 2007, when the prime minister appealed to democracy, a sense of fairness, and widely shared sentiments about a new Turkey — giving him a victory over the military, which had sought to block Abdullah Gul from becoming president. There were many Turks who were deeply worried that having a president from Turkey's Islamist party would alter the country irrevocably, but Erdogan appealed to the Turks' collective better angels. This was the Turkish leader at his zenith.

Almost exactly six years later, Erdogan has done the exact opposite, summoning the worst instincts of Turkish political culture and sharpening its divide. This strategy — identifying your opponents as extremists, "marginals," or foreign agents — is the hallmark of leaders who have lost the ability to reach the kind of broad constituencies that assure political success. Slashing and burning as Erdogan has been doing shores up the base and suggests that he is still very much in command, but at a significant price. The destruction of the squatter camp in Gezi Park on June 15 was an awesome show of force, but not of political power. A secure leader would have let the park become a smelly mess until the hippie-dippies who took it over drifted away. Yet for Erdogan, every day that the protesters were out in the streets was a festering reminder that not all Turks were buying what he and his party were selling, which held out the prospect that more and more people might join the demonstrators. Not necessarily in Gezi Park, but nevertheless join them politically.

Erdogan may not be in danger of losing an election, but he has sharpened the divides to such an extent that there are now two Turkeys — one that thinks he is evil and another that thinks he is benevolent. And in order to keep the large numbers in the former camp in line, he will have to resort to authoritarian measures. Erdogan has already done an effective job intimidating the traditional Turkish media, but at great cost to journalists who have been openly mocked throughout the Gezi crisis. Now he has set his sights on social media. Early on, Erdogan referred to Twitter as a "menace" or a "curse." Now his justice and interior ministers are teaming up to write regulations that would outlaw what the government considers provocative tweets. If there was ever an indication of a leader's weakness, it is to try and roll back the freedom of expression that people have found online. Comparisons to Tahrir Square are met with visceral denunciations among AKP supporters and Egyptians who jealously guard their uprising, but Erdogan's effort to control Twitter is reminiscent of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's own failed campaign against bloggers, Facebook, and SMS text messaging.

Erdogan has also engaged in the crude and absurd in an increasingly panicked effort to roll back open dissent. Turkish police rounded up about 100 activists in Istanbul, Ankara, and Eskisehir for instigating protests. The public prosecutor declared the possession of swim goggles — an innocent tool for protecting eyes from tear gas canisters and the toxic brew that comes out of police water cannons — to be an offense tantamount to terrorism. On June 18, the interior ministry announced that the original "Standing Man," the performance artist Erdem Gunduz, might be charged with "resisting police without resistance." When one adds to all this the increasingly unhinged pronouncements of government ministers about foreign plots, the American Enterprise Institute, "interest rate lobbies," Jews, and the foreign media, a more complex picture of Turkish politics emerges in which leaders are in fear of losing command.

The fact that Erdogan is actually weak may come as a surprise to those who have felt his wrath, or be dismissed as wishful thinking among those who revere him. In the intensity of the past three weeks, it has not dawned on Turks why a leader who is allegedly so strong needs to call rallies of the party faithful — more are planned for the coming week in Kayseri, Erzurum, and Samsun — to prove that he is strong.

Turkey is at an interesting and high-stakes moment, but political activists seem to be waiting on the sideline for something to happen. Erdogan has, in an unintended way, given them a narrative with which to challenge him politically — something along the lines of "no to authoritarianism, yes to democracy." But if they want to change the trajectory of Turkish politics, they should make haste, because the strong man is at his weakest now.

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The PKK's tentative peace with Turkey

By Jake Hess, June 19, 2013

QANDIL MOUNTAINS, IRAQ — Murat Karayilan's mustached face soured as he read from the daily intelligence report prepared by his field commanders in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the rebel group that has fought Turkey since 1984.

The Turkish army is flying Cobra attack helicopters even as PKK guerrillas withdraw from Turkey to camps in northern Iraq, the report said. U.S. drones still buzz over the PKK's mountain strongholds. Turkish military operations continue near the Iraqi border, the militants have written.

Karayilan, chairman of the executive council of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), the umbrella formation that encompasses the PKK, denounced these and other "provocations," but insisted they will not upset the tentative peace process with Ankara as long as there are no attacks. The PKK's broad popular support and impenetrable mountain fortress on the Iraqi border with Iran offer it the choice of continuing the insurgency. But Karayilan sees the PKK's future in the cities of Turkey, not the rebel hideouts he has waged war from for almost 30 years.

"If Turkey carries out reforms, if the process is successful, our goal is to be legal and lawful, not illegal in the mountains," Karayilan told *Foreign Policy* in an interview at a PKK safe house in the Qandil Mountains.

Some 40,000 people have been killed in the conflict, most of them Kurds. The PKK abandoned its original goal of establishing an independent Kurdish state in the 1990s. It now officially backs a negotiated settlement based on Kurdish rights and some form of autonomy within Turkey's existing borders.

Talks between Turkey and jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan resumed in fall 2012 following months of bloody fighting and a dramatic hunger strike by thousands of Kurdish political prisoners. Both sides have honored a cease-fire, and the PKK started pulling back its fighters in

May. Karayilan said they are all "on their way" to Qandil, where guerrillas shelter in oddly picturesque tent camps nestled in lush valleys.

"We have fulfilled our duties in the first stage of the process. If the Turkish government and state want to solve the Kurdish issue, they should do what is required of them," Karayilan said. "The ball is in Ankara's court. The two or three months ahead are very important."

The portly rebel rattled off a list of reforms when asked what he expects from Turkey in the next phase of the process. "There are things that needed to be done for Turkey's democratization prior to now but weren't, unfortunately," he said. First on the list: release the "thousands" of Kurdish politicians, activists, and intellectuals imprisoned on terrorism charges.

Next is a series of legislative changes the government could enact without amending the constitution — "road cleaning," in Karayilan's words. This includes revision of Turkey's notorious Anti-Terror Law, which has been used to punish nonviolent dissent, and reduction of the 10 percent electoral threshold, which has hindered representation of Kurds in Turkey's parliament. "If the government wishes, it can do all of this right away. The fact that it has not done so is thought-provoking," Karayilan said.

But Karayilan was pragmatic, refusing to describe any of these as "red lines" or minimum requirements for the PKK's continued participation in the peace process. Nor did he try to set a deadline for moves by the government. "It's possible that not all of our goals will be immediately realized in the current solution process," he said. "If the political path is opened to us, we can achieve our aims through political means."

In Karayilan's ideal scenario, the PKK's focus will eventually shift from armed to cultural insurrection. He said that a future, legal PKK will leave the electoral realm to the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). "The PKK aims to shape society, not rule over it. It will carry out various projects to bring society to a higher level. The PKK will open academies, carry out cultural and philosophical activities, do ideological work, raise social consciousness."

Will they return to violence if the peace process falls apart? "There's a possibility. We hope there will be no need for that, but if there's a real collapse, we will, of course, defend ourselves."

The last round of Turkey-PKK dialogue took place from 2008 to 2011. Following exploratory contacts mediated by an unknown international guarantor, parallel sets of talks convened in Oslo, where Turkish intelligence officials held meetings with a KCK delegation, and at Imrali prison, where Ocalan is serving a life sentence.

The Kurdish side submitted three protocols for a settlement to the Turkish government in May 2011. It also provided detailed proposals for a new constitution. Karayilan asserted that the government has never "put them into practice nor rejected them" or submitted written proposals of its own. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan later said Turkey cut off the talks due to "insincerity in communication."

There is little indication that Turkey was ever sincere about reaching a negotiated settlement with the PKK. It detained or arrested thousands of Kurdish politicians during the Oslo years. Military assaults on the guerrillas continued. In 2009, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) launched an "opening" that quickly closed with few results. In a diplomatic cable, Doug Silliman, Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Turkey from 2008 to 2011, said Turkish security officials repeatedly described the government's goal for its "opening" as isolating and defeating the PKK's leadership through a mixture of reform and repression.

Ankara moved to get Washington on board with this approach. Ray Odierno, then the top commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, began preparing a common anti-PKK "action plan" with Turkey in February 2010. Odierno described "isolating the true [PKK] ideologues and

rendering them ineffective" as a goal. Turkey presented the United States with two of its own plans it hoped Washington would incorporate into the final. The first aimed at "termination of the armed presence of the [PKK] terrorist organization in Northern Iraq as soon as possible" by disrupting its logistics and communications. The second outlined steps Ankara expected the Kurdistan Regional Government to take against the PKK. Turkey, the United States, and Iraq announced the plan that April, though its terms were obscure. On the political front, Washington imposed personal sanctions on two of the three members of the Kurdish delegation to the Oslo talks. In October 2009, the Treasury Department declared KCK member Zubeyir Aydar a "Significant Foreign Narcotics Trafficker" along with Karayilan. In April 2011, it deemed PKK co-founder Sabri Ok a "Specially Designated Narcotics Trafficker."

The Obama administration's statements in support of the current peace process leave Karayilan optimistic that this time could be different. He hopes the West will use its influence to improve prospects for a solution. "I see a softening. I see the support of the outside world, and especially the U.S.A., as important. I think development of a more active posture on their part would allow the process to speed up," he said. "We want the U.S.A. and European Union to develop policies to solve the Kurdish issue. The most important path for this is to remove the PKK from the list of terrorist organizations."

The KCK leader asserted that Western interests would be served by more cordial relations with the Kurds. "Solving the Kurdish issue will definitely pave the way to democratization and normalization in Turkey. In addition, it will have a similar impact on the Middle East. I think the West has an interest in this," he said.

Karayilan offered Syria as an example. The KCK has influence in Syrian Kurdistan due to its relations with the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the most powerful party there. "Syrian Kurds have the most secular, modern, and democratic policies in that society. The Kurds are closest to the West. But due to Turkey's veto, [the West] doesn't even have relations with them. The armed opposition has a completely Islamist outlook." But he hinted that ties are improving. "I hear that America and Europe are just now looking at the PYD and Syrian Kurds. There are also positive developments on this front. There are warmer contacts, but I think America and Europe are late on this."

Karayilan added that the KCK plans to exploit the nascent diplomatic opportunities created by the peace process. "We want to carry out informational activities in the European Union and America as a first step. Up until now, the American public hasn't learned about us from ourselves; they've learned about us from Turkey. We want to change this. I hope opportunities will be born in the future, and that we'll have more effective projects. We want to carry out diplomacy, but there are obstacles. For example, America won't give us a visa because we are PKK members."

Karayilan maintained that the sides have reached a significant spoken agreement. In a leaked audio recording of a meeting at Oslo, Turkish intelligence official Hakan Fidan is heard saying that Erdogan and Ocalan were in accord on "90 to 95 percent" of their views. Karayilan said the parties have edged closer since: "In terms of our discussions and dialogue, I can say it's even more advanced [today] than it was then. Our leader says he trusts the delegation that's meeting with him. But it's not clear to what extent the state and government power behind the delegation will abide by the discussions."

For now, the PKK plans to wait and see what happens.

"How serious are they this time? I don't know. The PKK isn't a sitting target. We can't just be eliminated," said Karayilan. "If America and Turkey have finally seen this, are truly sincere about a solution, and not planning to approach the process as they did during Oslo, we're ready. Time will show their intentions."

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The enduring frustrations of Turkey's Kurds

By Noah Blaser, October 4, 2013

"After these years of killings, what else can people feel but distrust?" asked rights campaigner Raci Bilici, who was trying to make himself heard over the rumble of a military helicopter flying low across the sky.

The ancient walls of Diyarbakir, the unofficial capital of Turkey's Kurdish separatist movement, loomed overhead as Bilici traced the mass grave of 29 murdered political prisoners that were found here just one year ago. "So much has changed for the better, but this is still a city where nobody wants to know what is buried under their feet."

Hemmed in by military bases and patrolled by rock-battered armored cars, Diyarbakir is supposed to be a city moving toward peace. This week, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced a reform package aimed at expanding rights for the country's 15-million Kurds, billing the measure as a step toward ending a 30-year ethnic conflict that has taken at least 40,000 lives and devastated the country's southeast.

The reform, he declared on Monday, will legalize Kurdish-language education in private, though not public, schools. It will provide state funding for smaller — read Kurdish — political parties and lift a ban on the letters q, w, and x — letters essential to Kurdish that Ankara "banished from the alphabet" in the 1920s. The reform will meanwhile do away with the before-school oath "I am a Turk, I am hard working," which generations of Kurds were forced to recite during primary school. Critically, Erdogan also promised a parliamentary debate on changing an "election threshold" that hinders Kurdish participation in the national legislature.

Those steps seemed far from an open hand in Diyarbakir, where residents who had gathered to watch the reform announcement on TV cleared out of cafes and restaurants in anger, widely decrying the reforms as "empty." "Who has the money for private school?" asked father of six, Omer Koroglu. He said native tongue education — a long-standing demand of Kurds — would remain unaffordable for most residents in the widely impoverished city. Many dismissed hints of inclusive electoral laws as a promise undelivered, while others noted that Kurdish names and letters are already widely in use throughout the southeast.

Kurds had expected more, especially after a historic cease-fire was brokered earlier this year between Ankara and Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdish Workers' Parky (PKK). After a bloody summer of fighting in 2012, Ocalan ordered the withdrawal of the PKK to its base in northern Iraq, securing implicit promises from Ankara that it would make reforms to help steer the conflict to a resolution.

Both sides want an end to three decades of fighting. Sinan Ulgen, chairman of the Istanbul-based Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM), said that even if the PKK was dissatisfied with the pace of reforms, "neither side wants to be the one who starts shooting again." Erdogan hinted at future reforms in his speech this week, though Ulgen warned that advancing reforms piecemeal will see "the Kurdish side getting frustrated and weary."

Frustration goes hand in hand with anguished memories for residents of Turkey's southeast, where the government depopulated and razed over 4,000 villages in the 1990s, both sides deliberately abducted and murdered civilians, and thousands of victims were hastily buried in unmarked graves across the region.

Ankara's security policy in the southeast is another pervasive source of distrust, and many in Diyarbakir this week expected a softening of internationally criticized terror laws that permit arbitrary arrests and indefinite detentions. Many had also expected the release of some political prisoners held by Ankara for years without charge.

"If you want to understand the power of the state," offered

Raci Bilici, head of the Diyarbakir Rights Association (IHD) "you should be asking me about my brother." Bilici's brother has been missing since he joined the PKK in the 1990s, and last month, the government published his name on a list of guerillas that declassified military documents confirm were killed a decade ago. The tragedy, said Bilici, is that "his and thousands of other bodies could be located in 24 hours" if the government questioned the police and military officials that once fought the PKK and used brutal counter guerrilla tactics against Kurdish civilians. But that would require the state to exhume evidence of the very extra-judicial killings committed in its name — when the 29 murdered prisoners were found by chance in Diyarbakir last year, they were found beneath the trash dump of a former police station. There is little doubt they were murdered by government forces. "If I ask someone from the government if they know the location of my brother's body, they'll say it is classified," he said, growing glassy-eyed. "That's how the power of the state hangs on you."

Security policies similarly strengthen perceptions of state impunity. "If the terror are in place we'll never be equal citizens. Imagine sitting in a jail cell for months, knowing you could suddenly be sentenced to 10 years in prison," said Dicle University student Bedri Oguz, who was arrested at a demonstration and detained for six months without a charge filed against him. "Then one day, they simply said 'you can go.' Someone can always exercise power over our lives." Current terror laws allow police to equate attendance at political rallies with membership in a terrorist organization, a policy that is "totally divorced from democratic law," said sociologist at Bogazici University Nazan Ustundag.

Arrests aimed at stemming a government investigation into the Kurdish Communities Union (KCK), a PKK-affiliated organization, have also targeted scores of journalists, academics, and politicians. In many cases, arrests have paralyzed local politics. Local administrators, who already complain of having little power over Ankara-appointed regional governors, complain of being arrested and replaced with government-appointed officials. "It makes residents jaded about trusting the political process at all," said Abdullah Demirbas, the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) mayor of Diyarbakir's historic center. While serving as mayor in 2007, Demirbas was arrested for publishing municipal announcements in Kurdish, Arabic, Armenian, and Assyrian alongside Turkish, and jailed for five months.

Softening security policies or making otherwise conciliatory gestures to Kurds is risky business for Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, however, because it relies on the country's nationalist voting bloc for much of its support. "The government will almost certainly not be making major reforms in five months before the next presidential elections," said Ulgen. "Ankara knows that no side wants to be the one who shoots first. It has time to stay away from fast-paced reforms in order to keep voters satisfied."

Bolder reforms will be needed to win over Rami Sarioglu, a cafe-going pensioner in Diyarbakir who said his faith in the current government was lost two years ago, when Turkish warplanes killed 35 Kurdish civilians near the village of Uludere on the Iraqi border. Turkey's government apologized for the strike in early summer the following year, but has maintained that it mistook the villagers for members of the PKK. Kurds widely believe the government attacked the villagers deliberately. "They wanted to say, we can still hit you," said Sarioglu.

The government missed one landmark chance to win Kurd's trust earlier this year, argued Ayla Demirci, whose husband was abducted during an army raid on her village in 1996. Recently, the government sentenced hundreds of military officers to jail for an alleged plot to forcibly remove the AKP from power. But many of those same officers also served in the southeast during the years of forced disappearances and state terrorism. "They had the right people on trial, and they didn't try to get answers about what they did to us. They didn't even try to give us justice," Ayla said.

The same could be said about the reform package, said university student Bedri. Drafted by AKP officials behind closed doors, "it wasn't something Kurds had a say in," he

said. "We were supposed to watch the TV to see how much democracy we won. That isn't democracy."

Standing in the shade of Diyarbakir's hulking medieval walls, rights campaigner Bilici suggested that, weary of war Turkey's Kurds have just one option left: continue to peaceably advocate for their rights. "The state could help us, maybe they won't," he said. "Either way, I want to find my brother."

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Turkey's strained Kurdish peace process

By Chase Winter, December 11, 2013

Speaking in a discreet village house adorned with Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) flags, posters of imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, and three Kurdish activists killed in an unsolved assassination in Paris last year, Cemil Bayik, the co-president of the Kurdistan Communities' Union (KCK), the umbrella organization that encompasses the PKK and its affiliates, says the peace process in Turkey is over unless the governing Justice and Development Party (AK Party) moves from preliminary talks to a roadmap for a genuine solution to the Kurdish problem.

In a move last year that bred much optimism, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his AK Party entered into direct negotiations with Ocalan to end nearly three decades of conflict. In March, Ocalan declared a cease-fire and the PKK began a withdrawal from Turkey to its bases in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Both the PKK and AK Party agreed to "let the guns fall silent and politics speak," rhetoric Bayik says the AK Party hasn't lived up to. As a result, in early September, Bayik halted the PKK's withdrawal citing lack of progress in the talks. Some of the PKK's guerrilla forces remain in Turkey.

"We are continuing the cease-fire, but if the government insists on its current policies then we will revise our stance," Bayik, a founding member of the PKK, said in an exclusive interview at the PKK's base in the Qandil Mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan.

In late September, the AK Party announced a democratization package it said would advance the peace process. Yet the reforms fell far short of Kurdish expectations, symbolically allowing for the return of village names to their original Kurdish, legalizing the Kurdish

letters Q, W, X, abolishing the pledge of allegiance that forced Kurdish children to say they were Turks, and paving the way for the opening of private schools in Kurdish.

The PKK demands the release of thousands of Kurdish political prisoners including journalists, civil rights activists, and members of the legal, pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) caught up in the sweeping KCK trials. Bayik says the trials against unarmed political activists and elected officials is an example of how the government is not living up to its rhetoric of letting the guns fall silent and politics speak. The trials have been criticized by domestic and international human rights groups.

Meanwhile, demands for full Kurdish education in state schools remain unmet, as do better prison conditions for Ocalan and an independent party to observe the peace process negotiations. And as demanded by the PKK, no legal reform has been prepared to set the foundation for a sustained peace process.

"We want to solve the problem not with war, but with democratic methods," Bayik said, warning that unless the government moves from preliminary talks to a roadmap the cease-fire could end.

With a string of municipal, national, and presidential elections in Turkey scheduled through 2015, few believe Erdogan will further the reform process and recognize the Kurds as a people with natural rights, the primary demand of the Kurdish nationalist movement.

"Are we always going to wait for elections? How long do we have to wait?" Bayik asked. "We undertook the peace process and cease-fire to create the foundation for a roadmap and formal negotiations to solve the Kurdish problem, not to allow the AK Party to easily win elections and take advantage of there being no conflict. The Kurdish problem can't be used for tactical benefit, it can't be sacrificed for election gains and buying time," Bayik said.

The peace process has implications for the broader Middle East, and as the co-president of KCK, Bayik's purview extends well beyond Qandil and Turkey. In Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the KCK's Syrian franchise, has established a de facto autonomous region in the largely Kurdish populated areas of Syria since the regime strategically withdrew in July 2012. Over the past six months the PYD has made headway against al Qaeda affiliated Islamist groups, and is proving to be the best organized and well-armed group in the Kurdish parts of Syria along the border with Turkey. On November 12, the PYD and more than 30 organizations announced the formation of an interim administration in the Kurdish populated areas of Syria, known to Kurds as Rojava.

Bayik accuses Turkey of using the nascent peace process to support jihadist groups against the PYD. "We didn't start the peace process so that Turkey could move the war to Rojava by supporting the al-Nusra Front, Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, and al Qaeda affiliated groups," Bayik said, adding that al Qaeda has made Syria the center of its Middle East strategy. "The biggest bulwark against al Qaeda is Rojava. If al Qaeda takes control in Syria it will be a threat to everybody," he said. "This policy will backfire on Turkey, it already has."

Claims of Turkey's complicity in supporting al Qaeda have been widely reported in the media. Turkey continues to deny active support or an inability to control militants on its territory. Meanwhile, an axis including the Syrian National Coalition, Turkey, and Syrian Kurdish parties backed by Turkey and Kurdistan Regional Government President Masoud Barzani accuse the PYD and PKK of working with the Assad regime.

Bayik denies the charges, arguing the PYD has chosen a "third way" that doesn't take sides and has saved Rojava from sharing the devastating fate of Aleppo and Homs. "Syria doesn't have the power to control all areas. It is good they are not attacking the Kurds. Do we have to be bombed by Assad to prove that the PYD doesn't have relations with the regime?" Bayik asked, pointing out the PYD would fight against any group that attacks the Kurds.

The advance of the PYD in Syria has complicated the

budding relations between Turkey and the KRG, and the Kurdish cold war playing out between the PKK and Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the two main rivals of the Kurdish nationalist movement. In November, Barzani met Erdogan in the Kurdish city of Diyarbakir in southeastern Turkey. More than "historic" as many including Erdogan and Barzani described the visit, the move was an election bid for the AK Party and a direct challenge to the PKK and BDP. Barzani also took a position against the PYD, which has pushed out pro-KDP factions in the Syrian Kurdish opposition much to the ire of the aspiring Kurdish nationalist leader.

"We are not against economic, political, and diplomatic relations between Turkey and South Kurdistan [KRG], this is normal since they are neighbors. We find this to be positive," Bayik said. "What we oppose are relations that have been developed against the PKK. Barzani is taking up Turkey's policies," Bayik said, accusing Barzani of losing his honor and becoming the "lifesaver" of Erdogan's failures.

By enlisting Barzani, Erdogan sought to involve the KRG leader in the strained peace process against the interests of the PKK. This policy could backfire as it threatens to sideline the PKK, the party that ultimately needs to be a part of any peace process in the region.

"The Turkish state doesn't accept the Kurds as a people with natural rights," Bayik said, describing the fundamental problem that threatens to throw Turkey back into conflict. "The Kurdish issue is one of the biggest problems in the Middle East. It's the cause of much instability and conflict. If you want stability and non-conflict, then you need to solve this problem."

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Icarus and Erdogan's corruption scandal

By Henri J. Barkey, December 27, 2013

After monopolizing political power and dominating the public realm for years, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan clearly thought nothing could stop him from flying high. Like Icarus from the Greek myth, however, Erdogan's flight has taken him too close to the sun. Recent mounting scandal and protest have forced Erdogan into a cabinet reshuffle that resulted in the resignation of four ministers accused of corruption. Icarus did not survive his encounter with the sun's rays. It may be too early to count Erdogan out, but Turkey's internal dynamics and relations with its allies have been altered permanently.

Erdogan, like Icarus, has been badly burned by the sin of hubris. In his 12 years of power, he has come to completely dominate Turkish politics in a way that no other leader since Ataturk's one-party state days. He achieved this dominance not just because he was a good politician but also because he faced a hapless opposition unable to challenge him or elaborate a convincing alternative vision. Ironically, early on in his term one of his closest advisors, who is now in the cabinet, confided "Turkey's greatest misfortune was that it lacked a credible opposition."

The current crisis erupted when prosecutors armed with

search warrants raided the residences of three serving ministers' sons and the CEO of Halkbank, a government owned bank that had raised eyebrows in the United States and Europe for having been the intermediary in the gold trade with Iran designed to help Tehran avoid sanctions. The prosecutors found $4.5 million dollars and other currencies stashed in shoeboxes as well as numerous safes and money counting machines. The sons and other suspects were accused of money laundering, influence peddling, and bribery among other crimes. The three sons were those of the interior minister, who had been in office less than a year, the economy minister, and the environment and urban planning minister. A fourth minister in charge of relations with the European Union was also implicated.

Erdogan's current challenge is not simply the loss of credibility that the corruption scandal entails. There are few people in Turkey who had not suspected or gotten a whiff of scandal. But for years the Turkish public had an implicit social contract with the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its leaders: As long as the economic picture improved and more services were made available to the public, the corruption would be overlooked. As extra insurance, Erdogan also made sure that the majority of the press, print and electronic, would be controlled by his allies and he cowed journalists into submission by pressuring their bosses.

So what has changed? In May and June, Istanbul and other cities were rocked by demonstrations against the government that took Erdogan and company by surprise. The size and duration of the protests unhinged the government. It was then that Erdogan made a critical mistake. Instead of searching for a political solution, he decided not just to confront the demonstrators but also to delegitimize them and their demands by inventing a vast external conspiracy as the source of the protests. He and his supporters in the government, media, and elsewhere unleashed a virulent and non-stop campaign backed by imaginary information of how "an interest lobby," the United States, European countries, the German airline Lufthansa, the foreign media, the Financial Times, Reuters, CNN, and the Economist, to name a few, and of course the Jews and Israel together cooperated in this endeavor. The protesters and their allies in civil society and even in some business circles were therefore nothing more than the pawns of this evil cabal.

There were two problems with this campaign. First, Erdogan, possibly misled by his advisors, appears to have not understood the depth of the protests and the extent to which this was about his increasingly authoritarian tendencies. More importantly, the AKP brass came to believe that this strategy solidified his electoral base in advance of the March 2014 municipal elections. Second, it damaged Turkey's image abroad and harmed Ankara's most important international alliances. Indeed, U.S. President Barack Obama, who two weeks before the Gezi protests in May and June had dined with Erdogan in the White House, has allegedly stopped talking to him. Washington and European capitals were understandably shocked that they were blamed for attempting to overthrow him.

Nevertheless, when the most recent scandal emerged Erdogan and the AKP once again unleashed the conspiracy weapon. The pro-AKP press is once again drowning in a sea of conspiracy; the usual suspects have been fingered. This time there is a bit more flourish: The AKP openly suspected the hand of the movement of the religious conservative Fethullah Gulen, once an erstwhile ally and fellow traveler who increasingly became fearful of Erdogan's accumulation of power. There is something to be said about the enmity of the opaque Gulen movement and the AKP. Gulen who has been residing in rural Pennsylvania since the late 1990s when he sought refuge from the Turkish military, has built a vast network of business associations, media properties, and schools. His adepts are said to populate many state institutions, including the police and judiciary. The alliance collapsed with the defeat of the military as both Gulen and Erdogan began to perceive each other as having accumulated too much power. The corruption inquiry is seen as another skirmish in the battle between the two.

The flourish also came with manufactured stories about the U.S. Ambassador Frank Ricciardone and his embassy personnel. Embassy and State Department denials notwithstanding, Erdogan threatened Riccardone with expulsion. One day four pro-AKP government news sites appeared with almost identical story lines if not headlines directly or indirectly calling for the expulsion of the U.S. ambassador. Now they have decided on a common narrative — that this is a coup attempt organized by the United States, Israel, and the Gulen movement.

Erdogan's initial reaction to lock down the hatches by dismissing police chiefs and changing reporting regulations to prevent further investigations into his party and even his own family has struck a raw nerve. The public this time seems far more skeptical of the conspiracy theories. For one thing the images of the $4.5 million, money counting machines, and many safes — almost straight out of a Hollywood movie — are difficult to erase. Furthermore, the explanations have stretched credulity: They range from the foreign conspirators planting the money and equipment to monies collected to build a school somewhere in Turkey or to be donated to a Balkan university — take your pick.

Uncharacteristically, Erdogan this time yielded under pressure and reshuffled his cabinet. While he may recover, he is a much more diminished person at home and internationally. He will suffer losses in the municipal elections, but he has time to recover even if not completely before the presidential and general elections. Still, the Gezi protests have had a cumulative impact on his predicament. At home it is becoming more and more difficult for the public to buy into the fantastical conspiracy theories that target Turkey and Erdogan. Business confidence, a mainstay of the AKP's rule, has been shaken to the core as its currency has plunged to new lows.

Will Erdogan throw all caution to the wind in pursuit of short-term benefits and adopt a policy of confrontation with his real and imaginary enemies? This will further divide Turkey and, especially if the United States becomes a target, the costs, economic and political, in the long run could become prohibitive. The U.S.-Turkish relationship has been severely damaged as confidence in an ally leader who accuses Washington for fomenting a coup against him has been zeroed. The United States will continue working with Turkey; it has no other choice as everyday Turkish and U.S. officials engage in hundreds if not thousands of transactions. They range from exchanges within the NATO alliance to Afghanistan to trade and other economic relations to conversations over Syria and the rest of the Middle East. These are not about to disappear — but Erdogan's hubris has already done real harm to a once close partnership.

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Fire and brimstone:
Turkey's prime minister isn't backing down, corruption charges be damned

By Noah Blaser, January 3, 2014

Threatened by a corruption scandal that has embraced the inner circle of his government, Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is hurling fire and brimstone at long-time enemies, one-time allies, and maneuvering to end a graft investigation that has challenged his decade-plus grip on power. Yet beyond that blind fury, Erdogan is gaining a firm upper hand against the investigation that has exposed his government, cracking down on an influential religious movement opposing his rule, and is almost certain to retain a strong electoral advantage when Turks head to the polls later in 2014.

Turkey's political landscape was rocked by an anti-corruption investigation in December 2013, when police arrested the sons of three government ministers, the head of a state bank, and other figures linked closely with the prime minister. The three implicated ministers soon announced their resignations, an earthquake intensified by one departing cabinet member's call on Erdogan to join them in resigning.

Erdogan has instead doubled down, replacing his cabinet and launching a campaign of partisan denunciations and base-rallying stump speeches. Dismissing the case as "an assassination attempt disguised as an investigation," he and pro-government pundits have variously laid blame on the U.S. ambassador to Turkey, as well as on Israel and murky forces as far afield as the Vatican.

Much of Erdogan's withering criticism has been reserved for his one-time ally. Fethullah Gulen, an Islamic cleric who leads a substantial Turkish following from self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania, once helped underpin the Islamic coalition that brought Turkey's ruling party to power. But after a murky, years-long power struggle, Erdogan is accusing Gulen of using the judiciary and police — which the prime minister and many secular Turks claim are controlled by Gulen — of striking back against his rule. "We will reach into your caverns," Erdogan recently declared, promising to reveal and punish an "illegal gang operating within the state."

As Erdogan searches for enemies within and abroad, however, his biggest enemy is increasingly himself, according to newspaper columnist Cengiz Aktar. "Erdogan doesn't seem to have a plan, he is simply following his instincts, fighting back against everyone," said Akdar. "He's looking more and more alone as this case develops."

But it would be a mistake to discount Erdogan. A keen political street fighter, the prime minister has, in his 11 years in power, survived challenges from Turkey's coup-minded military, weathered a court case which nearly closed his party in 2008, and in 2013 successfully — if brutally — put down countrywide protests against his rule. During Turkey's summer of mass street demonstrations,

Erdogan was roundly criticized for his conspiracy theory-laden, go-for-broke attempt to discredit protesters. But the strategy worked: national support for demonstrators remained low, and polls registered no noticeable decline in support for Erdogan.

The strategy may work yet again, said Murat Sari, managing director of Konsensus Research & Consultancy. "Erdogan remains in a strong electoral position in the coming year. There isn't hard evidence that support for his party is dropping yet," he said, predicting that Erdogan's polling numbers will be threatened only "if there are consistent revelations of corruption over the coming year."

Erdogan, however, appeared this week to be edging closer to halting the graft case in its tracks. On January 2, Erdogan's son, Bilal Erdogan, flaunted a court summons over the investigation, while police remained in open defiance of a week-old court order for a second round of

arrests. On December 27, prosecutors ordered the arrests of Bilal and dozens of other Erdogan-linked figures, and have complained that the prime minister has directly interfered by ordering police not to cooperate. "The moves against this case are in bold defiance of the rule of law," said a representative from Turkey's High Council of Judges and Prosecutors. It may be of little wonder that police are refusing to act: Ankara has removed over 700 police officers from their posts since the beginning of the investigation, reshuffling nearly 300 of them in the last week alone, the Turkish daily Taraf claimed this week.

The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has additionally proposed new legislation that may also impede investigations. One recently introduced bill would deprive the Council of State, Turkey's highest court, of its right to veto an executive order. That measure comes after the court shot down an executive order commanding that Turkey's police notify Ankara before launching a criminal inquiry. Another bill up for parliamentary debate next week seeks to add a new cadre of judges to the Council of State, effectively "court packing" the defiant legal body.

If the prime minister succeeds in containing the judiciary, the Gulen movement — which owns Turkey's largest circulation newspaper, *Zaman*, and other significant media holdings — is likely to battle on. It has fought a long-simmering conflict with Ankara over its turn away from Israel and toward Arab Spring states, its negotiations for peace with Kurdish separatists, and above all, its move to close a vast, Gulen-owned network of prep schools that fund the movement. Last month, Gulen denounced the government for removing police from the investigation, declaring in a sermon, "let God bring fire to their houses, ruin their homes, break their unities."

The confrontation looked set to escalate further on January 2, when the government opened the first official investigation over the influence of the Gulen movement over the country's judiciary. That would heap even more strain on the unity of Erdogan's AKP, which has seen four Gulen-alligned deputies resign in the past month. The conflict has driven speculation that, as elections near, Gulen-aligned prosecutors will leak evidence of government corruption to further discredit the government. "In the coming months, we well see the sewer pipes bubbling up," speculated political analyst Soli Ozel.

Alleged evidence of government wrongdoing already seems well in the public domain. Police claim to have found $4.5 million worth of cash-stuffed shoeboxes in the home of state lender Halkbank's CEO, as well as an undisclosed amount of cash in the bedroom of Baris Guler, the son of Turkey's interior minister. Corruption allegations span from money laundering that enabled $120 billion worth of gold transactions with sanctions-hit Iran, to misallocation of funds in the health ministry, and widespread bid-rigging in the county's massive public housing contracts. Corruption in the latter would almost certainly implicate the prime minister, who personally oversees the state housing authority. The now resigned urban minister, Erdogan Bayraktar, hinted at that possibility shortly after stepping down, telling a state broadcaster that "the majority of construction plans in the current investigation were carried out with the approval of the prime minister."

But there are several reasons the allegations may prove less damaging. In 2013, Bayraktar admitted before parliament that the government's housing authority had already witnessed tens of millions of dollars worth of graft, explicitly implicating KC Group, one government-favored company. The revelation failed to cause public outrage or lead to an official investigation.

Many Erdogan supporters cite corruption as an inevitable cancer of Turkish politics, regardless of the leader. "Corruption is the nature of the state. Power means corruption," said Yakup Erenler, a geriatric who lives in the workaday Istanbul neighborhood of Kasimpasa, where the prime minister spent his own hardscrabble youth. In the Bosporus-side district of Karakoy, Hamdi Soganci said he supports the AKP as "the greatest anti-corruption party in Turkish history." When AKP came to power in 2002, it swept legions of petty "mafia" and extortionists from Istanbul's streets. "Today nobody can take your money just

because you have a business or want to park a car on their street." Politics, he emphasized, is local.

Erdogan's greatest defense may lay in his opponents' lack of offense. Turkey's wooden-headed opposition parties have failed to capitalize on current corruption scandals to gain in the polls, and Gulen supporters are highly unlikely to find an alliance with Turkey's secularists or ultra nationalists.

If Erdogan has a clear rival, it is President Abdullah Gul, who has warned in recent days that the government must have "respect for the rule of law" and defended the rights of an independent judiciary. Both Gul and Erdogan are widely expected to run for president this year, and Gul maintains a higher public approval rating than Erdogan. But if Erdogan thinks he may lose the race, he still has other options, said political analyst Ozel. According to Ozel, the prime minister could annul a party bylaw that forbids him from serving a fourth term as prime minister, rush forward parliamentary elections, and cling to power through the prime ministry.

"It's undeniable that Erdogan is going to face more and more opposition in the coming months," said Ozel. Erdogan, however, is sure to keep a tight grip on the power he has. "This is going to be a battle that is unnecessarily long, bloody, and ugly. In the end, the victim will be Turkey's democratic institutions."

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