

# The wrath of Erdoğan

**Dani Rodrik** argues that in coming down hard on the Gezi protesters the Turkish PM was more concerned about his 'loyal opposition' than any new liberal political force.

The events that took place in and around Istanbul's Taksim Gezi Park marked the end of an era in Turkish politics. For the first time, actions spawned cross-cutting coalitions among groups that had previously been hostile or at least viewed each other with suspicion. Images of nationalists, secularists, Kurdish activists, environmentalists, liberals, soccer fans, gay and lesbian rights supporters, and even some Islamists making common cause against an authoritarian government and a callous police force have left an indelible mark on the Turkish political consciousness. They may not result in an immediate political realignment – Turkey's political parties remain entrenched in old divisions – but they offer a vision of what is possible once the traditional cleavages of Turkish politics are bridged.

Equally important was the complete loss of legitimacy of prime minister Erdoğan as a democratic leader. Opposition to his heavy-handed ways had already been mounting, but his reaction to the protests revealed Erdoğan's essential sectarianism like nothing else before. Unlike Brazil's Dilma Rousseff, Erdoğan refused to accept the protests as an expression of dissatisfaction and frustration on the part of large segments of Turkish society. Instead, he painted the protestors as hooligans and putschists who were making common cause with remnants of the old regime in order to topple him. Rather than conciliate, he polarised the nation further by appealing to divisive, Islamist themes to mobilise his own base. Erdoğan

and his inner circle spun surreal conspiracy theories that placed responsibility for the protests on financial speculators and western powers jealous of Turkey's success under his leadership.

So bizarre at times was Erdoğan's behaviour that many wondered if he had lost his political touch. He could have chosen to empathise with the protesters at least a little, instead of unleashing his wrath (and the police) on them. That might have avoided the escalation, the rupture with domestic liberals, and his estrangement from the west.

However, there may have been a deeper political calculation in Erdoğan's polarising response to the Gezi protests. It is impossible to understand Turkish politics today without appreciating the significance of the growing rift between Erdoğan and the Gülen movement. The Gülenists – followers of the influential Pennsylvania-based Turkish preacher Fethullah Gülen – are a potent social force, particularly well represented in the media, police, and judiciary and other parts of the government bureaucracy. They had played an instrumental role in Erdoğan's consolidation of power and, most critically, they had been the guiding force behind the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer coup plot trials which, surreal as they were, effectively dislodged the secularist old guard from power.

Once the common enemy – the military and its allies in the bureaucracy and media – was brought to heel, there was little to hold the coalition together. Erdoğan began to worry, not without reason, that he had become too dependent on Gülenist police and prosecutors, who could deploy their dirty tricks on him some day. The Gülenists fretted that Erdoğan was becoming too powerful, that he was impossible to control. The conflict broke into the open in a sensational fashion early last year, when a prosecutor tried to bring Erdoğan's intelligence chief in for questioning on charges related to Kurdish terrorism. Erdoğan reacted strongly, sensing that he was the intended target, and his

supporters have since referred to the incident as an attempted coup.

Erdoğan knows that the secularist political opposition is weak and does not pose a threat to him. Similarly, the Gezi protestors and the liberals remain largely unorganised for political action. The US and Europe need his support in Syria regardless of his domestic policies. So the only real danger comes from the Gülen movement, which could not only throw its support behind other leading members of the AK Party but, more seriously, could move to exploit the vast trove of intelligence it possesses on corruption among Erdoğan's cronies.

So it is a fair bet that when Erdoğan mapped out the strategy for his response to Gezi he had his sights set as much, if not more, on his 'loyal opposition' than on the protestors on the ground. The Gülenist leadership is closely attuned to western public opinion and tries to maintain strong ties to the Turkish liberal intelligentsia. But the social strata from which the Gülen movement draws its adherents are essentially indistinguishable from the religious and socially conservative groups on which Erdoğan relies for support. By emphasising Islamist symbols and working up anti-western sentiments, Erdoğan adroitly mobilised his base. He also left Gülenist opinion leaders in a quandary: if they opposed Erdoğan too strongly then they would risk alienating their own base.

In the short term, the course of Turkish politics will be determined less by the liberal demands of Gezi protestors than by the highly illiberal infighting between Erdoğan's close circle and the Gülen movement. But the Gezi movement offers Turkish society a glimmer of hope that a future, post-Erdoğan polity might move beyond the traditional Islamist/secularist divide and espouse instead the values of a truly free society.

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## Pepper-spray and penguins

**Zeynep Tufekci** reflects on the causes and consequences of Turkey's Gezi protests, a thoroughly modern movement sparked by social media but ultimately limited by a lack of organisation and infrastructure.

The Gezi protests took everyone, including the protestors themselves, by surprise. 'This wasn't what I had planned to do in June at all,' said a man in his early 30s to me as we sat in the small grassy area in front of his tent where he had been staying for more than a week. His wife nodded as she fiddled with her smartphone. I asked her what she was looking at. 'Twitter,' she said, 'I'm just getting the hang of it.'

The protestors in Gezi were also getting the hang of being tear-gassed – as we would be later that day. Over the last few years, watching online, I had seen innumerable protestors – from Occupy in New York or Oakland to Bahrain and Tahrir in Egypt – attacked with tear-gas. This time, I was the one tweeting about it, and the international fraternity of the tear-gassed responded with sympathy and advice.

While each movement in the wave of protests we have seen since 2011 has had its own characteristics, they also share many elements that feature in both their success and failure.

Unlike their western counterparts, Gezi protestors were not focused on austerity (although corruption came up often). This is because the AKP government has bucked global trends and actually expanded the reach of social services in Turkey during its 11-year reign. Although critics say this expansion often works as a form of indirect patronage, whereby taxpayer-financed services are presented