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Turkey's protesters have been let down by all sides

By Dani Rodrik

A political class has turned violent to mask its weaknesses, writes Dani Rodrik

What started as a small demonstration against the planned demolition of a rare green space in the middle of Istanbul has escalated into violent nationwide confrontations involving tens of thousands of disaffected Turks of all political stripes. The protests caught by surprise even those observers who, like me, have been vehement critics of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's authoritarian rule.

Police brutality was the immediate cause of the protests. Turks are used to rough behaviour by police but the images circulating in social media this time caused widespread outrage. The preponderance of head wounds strongly suggests that police may have been firing tear gas canisters directly at protesters' heads. One victim was Ahmet Sik, an intrepid journalist previously jailed on trumped-up charges, whose photo with a bloody head gash was widely circulated.

Mr Erdogan's reaction stoked the fire. He was at his polarising best, threatening to turn his supporters loose on the streets, calling the protesters "bums" and Twitter "the greatest menace to society". But whereas social media simmered, the mainstream television channels have showed great reluctance to cover the events, no doubt under government pressure. During some of the worst clashes, CNN's Turkish affiliate aired a documentary about penguins.

Despite Mr Erdogan's attempt to tar them as extremists, it seems clear that the bulk of the protesters are asking for basic rights: the right to assemble and protest peacefully, have a say against excessive commercialisation of public spaces, and be treated with respect and without police brutality. This is not a struggle between secularists and Islamists, as much of the western media is wont to portray it. It is abuse of power by Mr Erdogan's government, straight and simple, that unites the protesters.

But the protests are also an indication of the weakness of Turkey's opposition parties. Organised along the increasingly irrelevant cleavages that have traditionally divided Turkish society, these parties have been unable to channel and capitalise on the discontent in the streets. Turkey's liberal intelligentsia has largely discredited itself as well, having continued to provide support to Mr Erdogan long after his illiberal tactics had become plain to see.

Many in the west still give the prime minister credit for the performance of the Turkish economy, for having sent the military back to its barracks, and for the recent peace process with Kurdish insurgents. Yet look closely at each of these, and the lustre vanishes pretty quickly.

On the economic front, the best that can be said is that his government avoided big mistakes. Growth is based on unsustainable levels of external borrowing, and has not been particularly distinguished by emerging-market standards. Public works have been marked by widespread cronyism.

Meanwhile civilian control over the military was achieved through a series of show trials involving massive violations of due process – allegedly with rampant use of planted evidence against accused officers. (My father-in-law is among those imprisoned.) Rather than seek a more peaceful arrangement with the military, Mr Erdogan's tactics have opened up new wounds that will continue to fester.

Finally, the Kurdish opening has more to do with Mr Erdogan's efforts to placate the main Kurdish party so he can amend the constitution and ascend to (a more powerful) presidency, than with any genuine desire for reconciliation. As his previous flip-flops on the Kurdish conflict show, he would quickly change tack if short-term political calculations required otherwise.

The main beneficiary of Mr Erdogan's weakness may well be the Gülen movement, the powerful network led by the Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen. Mr Erdogan and the Gülenists made common cause until recently to defeat their common enemy, the military and the

secularist old guard. But with that task accomplished, they have been increasingly at odds.

Supposedly moderate, the Gülen movement has been linked to some of the worst police and judicial abuses in recent years. So there is considerable irony in Mr Erdogan taking the rap for the protests while Gülenists watch with thinly disguised pleasure on the sidelines.

Sadly, there is no organised political movement that can give voice and representation to the protesters that have made their point so loudly and clearly in recent days. So it will be the competition between Mr Erdogan and the Gülen movement, along with developments on the Kurdish front, which define the future of Turkish politics.

Having missed Turkey's authoritarian turn (or turned a blind eye to it), Turkey's friends should know that none of the established players in this drama has strong democratic credentials. The challenge is to avoid facile analyses about a "Turkish spring" and speak clearly against political, judicial, and human rights abuses in Turkey – whatever the source.

The writer is professor of international political economy at Harvard University

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