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Turkey

Riots and police violence in Turkey

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The spontaneous movement that started in Istanbul has taken on an unprecedented dimension in the history of the country and now touches sixty-seven of the eighty-five major cities in Turkey.

It all started when a group of citizens decided on a peaceful occupation, maybe for only some days, to express their opposition to the redevelopment, including uprooting the trees, of Gezi Park in Taksim Square in the centre of Istanbul. Gezi Park, according to explicit statements by the Prime Minister Erdogan, would be the object of a development project including rebuilding, as a luxury shopping centre, an Ottoman artillery barracks that had been demolished following a Restorationist rising against the Young Turks Revolution of 1908 and definitively cleared in 1940. This plan has also been criticized by many specialists including town planners, architects and ecologists.

On Friday May 31st, the very same day that an Istanbul administrative court decided to suspend the rebuilding of the barracks, the police attacked the peaceful occupiers of Gezi and evacuated them. The police aggression provoked a massive reaction by the inhabitants in solidarity with the occupiers, and after violent confrontations the police finally moved back from the park on June 1st and 2nd and lost control of Taksim. The street fighting continued day and night in several districts of the centre of Istanbul.

The authoritarian turn of the Party of Justice and Development (AKP) – in power for ten years – that excluded all those who are not in its camp, as well as the reactions, especially by broad segments of youth, to its neoliberal policies, provided several subjects of conflict as elements of a spontaneous explosion that was set off by the spark of the police intervention in entering the park to brutally evacuate people with their children and set fire to their tents,

The AKP, which has a comfortable electoral base of fifty percent, has suffered a first defeat, and from a popular mobilization. This party, which is seen as having brought about important changes for half the population, had just sat down at the negotiating table with the Kurds to find a peaceful solution to the national question. Its policies were up to now contested only by militant but not very influential sections of the left, but suddenly a heterogeneous and not easily definable set of people conquered the centre of the city after courageously facing the police.

The majority of the demonstrators are, alongside the left groups, people of 20-30 years old participating for the first time in a political struggle although there is a sizeable participation in the demonstrations of secular Kemalist currents opposed to the AKP government. It should also be underlined that young women occupied the front ranks in the confrontations with the police. The proximity of poor districts to the centre made it easy for young people from these districts to participate. People from all over the city went to the centre. At dawn a massive crowd crossed the bridge over the Bosphorus on foot and joined the other demonstrators. Although it remained limited, certain members of the far right MHP party took part in the demonstrations, but the party leadership immediately ordered them to leave.

There is a mixture of young headscarf-wearing girls, “anticapitalist Muslims”, fans of football clubs, LGBT groups, Kurdish, Kemalists and especially of those who said, standing up against Tayyip Erdoğan, “we are here too, we exist”. The important slogans were “Tayyip resign”, “shoulder to shoulder against Fascism”, “It is only a beginning, the fight continues”, however there was no clear demand from the mass. Even if the Taksim Initiative has formulated the demand for the resignation of the minister of the interior, this demand is not yet very widespread in the masses.

What is more important than discussions about the possible appearance of an opposition which could extend from “We are” with “We will be”, is the fact that, for the first time, hundreds of thousands of people are independently going to public places without being directed by a known centre (left, trade union or State) in order to oppose to the policies

of a government which is taking a more and more authoritarian turn. Even if social demands have not yet emerge, it is quite obvious that the implementation of neo-liberal policies is provoking the indignation of the masses.

The revenge of May 1st or wars of memory

On May 1st this year the government had, on the pretext of work in progress, closed to demonstrations the symbolically important Taksim Square, paralysed maritime and road transport and deployed police officers everywhere in order to prevent May Day demonstrations. Following the adoption by the government of the Putin method in order to choke off the social opposition the city was paralysed.

There is a war of memory between the left and the government over Taksim Square which is known as May Day Square. Faced with the left which wants to perpetuate both the memory of 42 people who fell here on May 1st 1977, as well as working class ideals, the government would like, by rebuilding the artillery barracks, to both “revive history” and, by transforming it into a shopping centre, create its own historical legitimacy.

By humiliating the demonstrators whom it stigmatizes as “marauders” and agitators, Erdogan revealed how “consistent” he was when he opposed to Israeli repression in Gaza or when he criticized Assad in Syria. Municipal and parliamentary elections will take place during the next two years, as well as the presidential election. According to many analysts, it is almost certain that Erdogan will be elected president. Erdogan would like a constitutional amendment that would enable him to constitute a Putin-style presidential regime.

However these recent events have been an unexpected defeat for him.

What we need now is new mass movements.

3rd June 2013