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Turkey

# The “New Turkey”

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**This analysis was written a couple of days before the elections of last Sunday.**

There are a couple of days left for the municipal elections in Turkey. On Sunday, 30th of March, 52 million people will vote for the mayors, district and neighbourhood municipalities and their councils. However, each day it becomes more like a referendum than local elections. This atmosphere is fuelled particularly by Prime Minister Erdogan.

Since 17 December, when an extensive corruption scandal in the government erupted by means of leaked telephone conversations, the political scene in Turkey has become as polarized as it has never been before since at least the coup of 1980. Stimulated by a crack in the power block ruling Turkey for more than 10 years, the leaked tapes and the repressive measures of the government against any kind of opposition escalated a highly tense pre-election medium. The corruption scandal erupted in the midst of an already eventful political agenda. The Gezi movement that started in May 2013 and survived with greater or lesser intensity until today and the years long Kurdish struggle and the peace process that it led to have constituted the contours of the political discussions and have succeeded in breaking the mainstream media blockade.

Despite the alleged accusations to the Kurdish movement of not actively supporting the Gezi movement or the Gezi movement to be a middle class, “non-political” movement, the riots of summer 2013 intensified the connections of struggles all over Turkey. This is not only a spatial connection linking the west of Turkey to its east, but also a temporal connection linking the years old struggles of the politically organized working class neighbourhoods with the newly politicized participants of the summer riots. Twitter messages indicating the empathy of the participants of the Gezi movement with the Kurdish movement after facing the media blockade were very symbolic. They stated that this made them aware of how their channels of information regarding the eastern part of Turkey were blocked.

However, it was not only the Kurdish struggle that could not make it to the mainstream media. There have been struggles in the working class neighbourhoods in the centre of Istanbul, which have been under attack of urban transformation for years. These neighbourhoods, particularly Armutlu, Okmeydani, 1 Mayıs, and Gazi have been under police siege since 1990s. There have been clashes between the locals of the neighbourhoods and the police that would systematically harass and attempt to exert control on the highly organized inhabitants of these neighbourhoods. These are not only working class neighbourhoods but also neighbourhoods populated by Alevi, Kurdish and leftist people. This is not surprising as a short review of the contemporary history of Turkey, marked by systematic suppression of the ethno-religious minority groups and forced migration, clarifies the link between class and ethno-religious identities in these neighbourhoods. Moreover, the locals of these working class neighbourhoods have been struggling with drug dealer gangs who are operating in neighbourhood under police surveillance. It is not the police but some leftist organizations that are supporting their cause and fighting with them. The March 1995 massacre where 23 persons died in the clashes between the police and the protestors in Gazi neighbourhood during the protests after three coffeeshouses were shot by automatic rifles by “unknown” people is an important milestone in the histories of police violence in these neighbourhoods.

Today when we are speaking of Gezi movement it is not only the riots that were aimed to protect the Gezi park that we are speaking of. It is the process of interconnectivity of struggles against oppression, police violence and corrupt relations everywhere in Turkey. Among the eight young people who have been killed since summer 2013 during protests, three are from these neighbourhoods and all of them are Alevis. This is not a coincidence; it does not point to a conspiracy theory but to a sociological reality. Berkin Elvan’s funeral in Okmeydani on 12th March, who died after spending 269 days at coma as a result of being shot from his head with a teargas canister was attended by hundreds of thousands of people from various walks of life and the march towards Taksim was attacked violently by the police. Berkin was on his way to buy bread in the morning when he was hit with the teargas canister. He was a

young activist at the age of 15 born and raised in Okmeydani. He was at the age of Alexis Grigoropoulos who was killed by police in Athens during riots in 2008. The neighbourhood entered the horizon of many people living in Istanbul with his funeral.

Prime minister Erdogan did not give a message of condolences to his family and called him a terrorist in the election rallies he participated. Erdogan is fighting in various fronts these days. Against the Gulen movement who have burnt the bridges with AKP and the people protesting on the streets despite the heavy usage of tear gas and water cannons. The tapes that are leaked illustrate not only corruption but also his obsessive personal control on media, on football, on the sale of social housings among others. Although it is a municipality election, he is much more on the scene than the municipal candidates and escalates the tension each day at the rallies. It is not only a fight with words, tear gas, and water cannons but also a fight fought in the realm of law by not only discharging the ones who are interrogating the corruption cases, but also changing internet laws by a “bag bill” of take it all or leave it. There is everything in the bag, forests, hunting, import of LPG, cooperation of state and private sector in health and internet among others. In fact, this way of legislation has become a norm during the rule of this government. This change in the internet law enables the Communication Directorate under the ministry communication to ban sites in 4 hours due to ill-advised content. Quite a number of sites have already been banned and the sites that have been actively used for disseminating the leaked tapes, twitter and youtube are added to this list recently.

It is not only Erdogan who has turned the local elections into a referendum but also the main political opposition party CHP, the People’s Republican Party. Candidates shown by CHP in major cities are far from being leftist or social-democrat. In fact, CHP acts like a catch all party. They are well-known names coming from years long experience in district municipalities and employ a populist discourse. Apart from the usual electorate of CHP, and more liberal segments of the right, a group of people who are not supporters of CHP are campaigning to vote to it for being able to block AKP. The other significant party in the elections in the major cities is the newly found HDP, the Democratic Party of the Peoples, which is a sister party to the BDP, the party active in the Kurdish struggle. They claim to be built on the experience of Gezi movement and embrace all the peoples of Turkey.

Despite all the tapes, corruption scandals, and the furious tone of the Prime minister, the polls early this week show an increase in the votes of AKP. According to a 23 March poll by well known KONDA research company, which is conducted with the participation of 3 thousand 67 people AKP gets the 46 per cent of the votes, CHP 27, the per cent Nationalist Action Party, (MHP) 15 and BDP 7 per cent. In the previous local elections AKP had 38 per cent of the votes.

There are only a couple of days left to the elections and if the poll results prove to be correct, given the attitude of the government, the new term that will start from Monday onwards will be much more authoritarian and the opposition will be under severe repression. However, the temporal and spatial ties that the struggles have knotted with each other on the streets from Istanbul to Diyarbakir, from Okmeydani to Kadikoy since summer 2013 cannot be subsumed by these elections, and what Erdogan repeatedly coins as “New Turkey” is in fact a Turkey that will be remade by these knots. Thus it will not be surprising to expect a new wave of riots while approaching the first anniversary of Gezi movement.