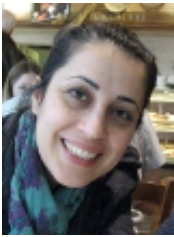




Turkey's protests have stirred debate about democracy and the unchecked power of governments that have an electoral mandate.

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*What do the protests of the past two weeks mean for democracy in Turkey? **Zeynep N. Kaya** and **Matthew Whiting** argue that they represent the clash between the desire of the Prime Minister, Recep Tayip*

Erdoğan, for a majoritarian politics with few checks on power, and those who wish for government to consult widely in its decision-making. While the current protests are damaging for Turkish politics in the short-term, in the long-term, they may be beneficial if they cause a shift towards greater engagement with opposition concerns.

There is a tendency to see the Gezi Park protests of the past two weeks in Turkey as representing a clash between the autocratic tendencies of the Prime Minister, Recep Tayip Erdoğan, and a student-led movement intent on protecting Turkish democracy. This is seen as mirroring the divide between an encroaching Islamification of Turkish society and **Kemalist** defenders of secularism. Yet this characterisation overlooks a broader political dimension to the protests and perhaps they are better understood as a clash over the vision of democracy that should be the basis for the future of politics in Turkey.

On one side of this debate is Erdoğan who is intent on preserving a

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majoritarian form of politics that allows the democratically-elected ruling party to govern with relatively few checks on their decision-making. On the other side are the anti-government protestors who can be seen as calling for a form of democracy that takes into account as broad a spectrum of opinions and views as possible during decision-making. This is a particularly vital debate for Turkey given the government's plans to introduce a new constitution next year and the ongoing fragile negotiations with Kurdish radicals and how much their separate identity should be acknowledged within the Turkish state. Seen from this perspective the protests may be beneficial for Turkish democracy in the long-term (depending on the government's response), even if they are destabilising in the short-term.

The ruling AKP's (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – The Truth and Justice Party) early years in office after 2002 offered hope to some observers that they were intent on liberalising



Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan By Senat RP/Polish Senate [CC-BY-SA-3.0-pl], via Wikimedia Commons

Turkish democracy to make it more inclusive. For example, they reined in the power and influence of the military over politics; they promoted the religious and linguistic rights of individuals in the public sphere in line with EU accession requirements; and, more recently, they embarked upon attempts to engage the Kurdish militants of the PKK (*Parti Karkerani Kurdistan* – The Kurdistan Workers' Party) in negotiations. However, after 11 years in power and with little sign of losing their position as the most electorally popular party (in part due to an ineffectual opposition party



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fraught with infighting), these reforms now look like an attempt to centralise power in their hands and establish an electoral hegemony. From this perspective granting religious rights is seen as the creeping Islamification of the public realm; negotiations with the PKK are seen as potentially leading to the consolidation of the AKP's support base in the electorally crucial southeast of Turkey; and constitutional reform is seen as a drive for extending the personal power of Erdoğan. Alongside this has been the marginalisation of dissent through pressure on the media to engage in self-censorship and through the arrest and imprisonment of a relatively large number of journalists.

Indeed, the view of the AKP as intent on using their electoral majority to cement their power and marginalise dissent is evident in their response to the protests. Erdoğan has defended his response and handling of the protests with reference to his electoral mandate, citing the 49 percent of the vote share won in the 2011 election, more than double that of the opposition CHP (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* – The Republican People's Party). He has attempted to undermine the protestors by labelling them as a small minority that are not representative of the majority of Turkish opinion. Erdoğan initially blamed the opposition CHP for provoking the protestors and subsequently laid the blame with the 'interest lobby' (by which he refers to some private banks and entrepreneurs). He also accused unspecified foreign powers of stoking the protests. Most importantly, as the protests spread across the country, Erdoğan threatened them with the 50% of the population that were awaiting his orders to smash the protestors. This rhetoric had a strong polarising impact and was intended to give the message to the protestors that the majority (or a plurality at any rate) supports the government and gave him a mandate to rule and, therefore, the other 50% just has to get on with this.

Yet Erdoğan's portrait of the protestors does not stand up to close inspection. The protestors are a heterogeneous group, including students, liberal professionals, trade and manual workers, anti-capitalist Islamists, Kurdish groups, socialists and secularists. Interestingly, some previous AKP voters are also among or supporting the protestors as they are also disturbed by AKP's increasing encroachment upon the private sphere in Turkey and the restriction of social freedoms. Many of the groups among the protestors were the electoral losers at the last election or the rising liberal middle class whose faith in the AKP is waning. From this perspective, the protests are about a desire to have an input into

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political decision-making outside of election times and an ability to have some ongoing influence over the policy-making of a government. It is a push to introduce limits to the unilateral power of ruling party against a wider political backdrop of anxiety about the AKP's potential to cement their central position in Turkish politics going into the future.

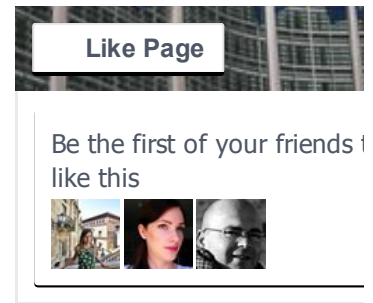
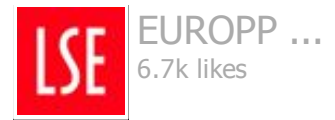
There can be little doubt that the protests are damaging and destabilising Turkish politics in the short-term. This is most evident in the increasing polarisation of the citizens, the damage to the reputation of the impartiality of the police, and the negative impact on the Turkish economy. It is also potentially damaging to attempts to negotiate with the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, and undoubtedly undermines any attempts by the AKP to give assurances about protecting the minority rights of Kurds in Turkey. However, in the longer-term the effect of the protests is not clear and they could yet cause a shift in the substance of Turkish democracy. It seems highly unlikely now that Erdoğan will be able to unilaterally impose his desired constitutional changes next year, establishing Turkey as a (semi-)presidential system with himself as the first president.

It is also opening a debate about what Turkish democracy should mean and how much unchecked power should be granted to the government on the basis of an electoral mandate. There appears to be tensions within the ruling party over how to respond to this challenge, with the president Abdullah Gül and some others more willing to engage constructively with the grievances of the protestors than Erdoğan. Depending on which course of action is followed – the marginalisation of dissent in the name of majoritarian politics or the engagement of opposition concerns within the ongoing decision making process – could lay the foundation for a profound change in the future vision of Turkish democracy.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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