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Protests in Turkey: the straw that broke the camel's back: an open letter from five concerned Turkish citizens

Opinion piece

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Protests in Turkey: the straw that broke the camel's back

Protests in Turkey: the straw that broke the camel's back

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Increasing monopolisation of power, patriarchal approach to government and a feeling of disenfranchisement by a significant portion of society in the absence of proper public deliberation and dialogue on a number of critical issues have caused massive public outrage. An open letter from five concerned Turkish citizens

On-going protests in Turkey represent a popular outburst against gradual encroachment of civil liberties and suppression of dissenting views by the Islamist-rooted government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The culmination of the following issues have created discontent among sizeable portions of society and led to spontaneous uprisings comprising people from every walk of life and a wide range of political affiliation.

Freedom of speech and media: The number of jailed journalists in Turkey tops China and Iran. Moreover, a growing culture of self-censorship in the mainstream media resulting from sustained government pressure and a prioritisation of corporate interests over those of the public has meant that mainstream media outlets have lost their independence and credibility. At the height of the events, Turkish TV channels were running their regular broadcasting.

Monopolisation of power: There are growing concerns over the independence of the judiciary following what appears to be politically motivated appointments to key judicial positions by the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP), as well as an expressed desire by Prime Minister Erdogan to create a 'super presidency' that undermines the democratic separation of powers for the sake of political efficacy. Utilising its numerical majority in the parliament, the AKP passes laws without recourse to public debate or engaging in meaningful dialogue with other political parties. Democracy has been reduced to elections.

Imposition of a conservative morality: An openly articulated mission to mould society in the party's own vision of a conservative Sunni morality threatens civil liberties, pluralism and the accommodation of different life styles. Recent cases in point are the controversial education reforms that emphasise religious instruction, growing curbs on the sale and use of alcohol, suggested limitations on abortion and public announcements in subway stations to 'obey the rules of morality'.

Unrestrained development drive: Signs of a slowdown in GDP growth has led the AKP government to rely heavily on mega-infrastructure and construction projects to sustain growth rates. These include

the construction of an artificial canal next to the Bosphorus Strait, the world's largest mosque on Istanbul's highest hilltop, a controversial new bridge over the historic Golden Horn that has drawn criticism from UNESCO, hydroelectric dams that threaten to destroy sensitive ecosystems and submerge hundreds of villages and cultural heritage sites, as well as countless urban regeneration projects that destroy historical neighbourhoods, cause mass displacement and environmental degradation. Of growing concern to many citizens, such plans are routinely developed, tendered, contracted and carried out without due public consultation or scrutiny.

On May 29, on the same day with the ground breaking of the third bridge over the Bosphorus that risks decimating Istanbul's shrinking green belt, Prime Minister Erdogan's announcement that plans to raze Gezi Park, one of the last public green spaces in Istanbul, to make way for a shopping mall would go on unabated despite sustained opposition proved to be the straw that finally broke the camel's back.

At dawn on 31 May, as a peaceful sit-in entered its third day in Gezi Park, police raided the grounds with excessive force using tear gas and pressurised water to disperse the sleeping crowd. Coming on the back of a long series of incidents involving police brutality against unarmed citizens, the raid has triggered a public outrage that has quickly turned into the most dramatic upheavals in modern Turkish history.

Social media penetration in Turkey - among the highest in the world - allowed the protesters to mobilise at a dizzying pace. In a matter of hours, protests spread to more than 30 cities across Turkey. Hence, in an interview on Sunday, Prime Minister Erdogan said "(t)here is now a menace which is called Twitter, the best examples of lies can be found there. To me, social media is the worst menace to society".

The prime minister was quick to label the protestors as marginal groups and radicals. On the contrary, the protests have brought together an exceptional mix of people from diverse political backgrounds, including liberals and socialists, environmentalists and LGBT activists, secularist Kemalists, Turkish nationalists and Kurdish activists, not to mention the large number of previously apolitical citizens enraged by the physical and political suppression of legitimate demands.

Solidarity between the demonstrators and general public has been impressive with stories of public bus and garbage truck drivers blocking roads to prevent a police assault on demonstrators, pharmacies handing out liquid solution against tear gas, volunteer medics attending to injuries, luxury hotels, humble cafes as well as ordinary people offering safe haven to protestors fleeing from police violence.

Worryingly, Prime Minister Erdogan's uncompromising and defiant response to the demonstrations so far has encouraged further use of excessive force by the police whilst fuelling the protestors' anger.

Increasing monopolisation of power, patriarchal approach to government and a feeling of disenfranchisement by a significant portion of society in the absence of proper public deliberation and dialogue on a number of critical issues have caused massive public outrage.

We hope that you will find this text informative during this conflicting reporting from Turkey.

Yours sincerely,

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The opinions expressed in the letter are solely those of the signatories and do not represent the views of any organisation or institutions that signatories are affiliated with

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