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What inspires Turkey's protest movement?

Elected government has delivered strong economic growth but activists think prime minister Erdogan has a hidden agenda.

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Istanbul, Turkey - Nobody predicted that a minor sit-in protest, launched to prevent the demolition of trees in a park in the heart of Istanbul, would soon turn into unprecedented country-wide demonstrations and riots against the Turkish government.

Use of force by the police against peaceful protesters in Taksim's Gezi Park, combined with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's escalating statements about the incident, have been the last straw for many Turks frustrated with the policies of the self-defined conservative

Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Nine days after the initial sit-in, the protests have reportedly spread to at least 48 Turkish cities with two deaths and hundreds, if not thousands, of protesters and police officers injured.

How it began

It was a sunny and busy spring day in Istanbul on May 28 when about 100 activists started a sit-in protest in Gezi Park. The goal was to prevent authorities from dismantling one of the only green areas in the heart of the city for the sake of an urban development project.

Raiding the park on the morning of May 30, the police used tear gas and water cannons to force the peaceful activists out of the area. This was followed by the burning of activists' tents and belongings.

The activists, most of whom were students, called for help through the internet. Hundreds of supporters rushed to the area and helped re-gain control of the park. The police raid that followed the next morning caused thousands of protesters to pour into the streets leading to Taksim. They were met by police barricades keeping protesters from entering the square.



Following mostly peaceful demonstrations, some clashes and the use of much tear gas continued through the night; the police let the protesters enter Taksim Square on Saturday afternoon.

The demonstrators included some members of left-wing groups and nationalists, but the majority were middle-class, secular Turks. Some arrived at the protest area wearing helmets and goggles and carrying medical equipment to avoid the effects of tear gas.

"The police has surpassed itself in the level of violence," Emma Sinclair, a senior Turkey researcher of Human Rights Watch, told Al Jazeera, saying authorities had used excessive force.

Opposition 'weakness'

The government, for its part, apologised for the initial police raid on the camp, saying police officers had indeed used excessive force.

Hatem Ete of the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research, a think-tank close to the government, links the riots to the weakness of the opposition parties in Turkey. According to Ete, some groups in Turkish society see themselves as negatively affected by the events of the last 10 years, as certain military, judicial, media and business circles lost ground.

"They also perceive some policies of the AK Party as a threat to their lifestyle, and this threat creates an opposing identity," Ete told Al Jazeera. "Given the opposition parties are far from shifting these concerns to the political arena and far from matching against the AK Party, the concerns of this part of the society keeps growing."

Youth on the streets

Turkish youth, who have often been regarded as apolitical since a military coup in 1980 and its subsequent restoration in 1983, have flowed into the streets, clashing with police across the country.

"It is the first time I join a demonstration and I am not affiliated to any political group," Kerem Gencay, a 28-year-old marketing employee, told Al Jazeera. Like many demonstrators, he stressed that he joined the protests in an individual capacity. "I came here on Friday after the police crackdown on people who were passively resisting to demolition of Gezi Park. I am happy with what it has evolved into because it is right; the government seeks to interfere with people's lifestyles."

Another protester, 26-year-old publicist Nihan Dinc, said she is worried about the direction of the country under the governing AK Party. "We are here for our freedom, for a space to breath. We are here to be able to kiss in public, consume alcohol, read without any censorship. We are here for a life without any pressure from the state," Dinc said.

Others say the prime minister, who was democratically elected with a large mandate, is acting like an authoritarian. "Prime Minister Erdogan thinks that he is a sultan, he does not listen to anybody, consult with anybody," said Yesim Polat, a 22-year-old student. "He thinks he can do whatever he wants."

Those views are shared by most protesters. A recent poll by Istanbul Bilgi University researchers who talked to 3,000 activists revealed that the demonstrators' anger is directed strictly towards Erdogan, not his aides nor his political party; 92.4 percent of the participants said that they have taken to the streets because of Erdogan's "authoritarian" attitude.

Fuat Keyman, a professor of political science at Sabanci University in Istanbul, told Al Jazeera that the recent social backlash was specifically directed at the prime minister. "Five or six years

ago there was social reaction against the AK Party. Today Erdogan is the only target," he said, adding the riots have broken out because there was no response to democratic action and that media has a responsibility in the outcome.

How did it come to this?

Before the protests erupted, recent developments had worried and frustrated many secular Turks. Erdogan has publicly criticised the content of some TV shows, made frequent statements opposing alcohol consumption, and spoken out against public displays of affection.

He recently called all people who consumed alcohol "alcoholics" but then changed his definition to "the ones who drink on a regular basis". The prime minister also supported an announcement calling on young couples to act "in line with moral values" and not to kiss at a subway station in Ankara.

Following the adoption of recent restrictions on alcohol, shops entitled to sell the drinks must close by 10pm. The new law also forbids advertising alcoholic products, and prohibits alcohol licenses for businesses within 100 metres of places of worship or education. In the past, the government also proposed outlawing adultery and abortion, but stepped back after public uproars.

Erdogan has disregarded the protesters, calling them "looters" and dismissing them as "marginal" or "ideological" groups.

"No one has the right to increase tensions with the excuse that trees are being demolished," Erdogan said in a recent public address.

In his references to the issue, he often referred to the economic and environmental success of the government, calling himself "the servant of the nation".

In its almost 11 years of AKP governance, Turkey has achieved unprecedented economic success, transforming a crisis-hit economy into a quickly growing one fuelled by trade and foreign investment.

'Message has been taken'

Meanwhile, other voices in the government as well as Turkish President Abdullah Gul tried to ease tensions. Gul asked the protesters to go home, saying: "The message has been taken. Democracy is not only about [the] ballot box."

Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc apologised for the police's actions against the initial protests in Gezi Park, though he added the government did not "owe anything to those causing harm".

Erdogan frequently makes remarks about his party's legitimacy and the fact that it won 50 percent of the votes in 2011 elections.

Despite the president's and deputy prime minister's conciliatory remarks, Erdogan has stood his ground - and the demonstrations have shown no signs of abating. Turkey's social crisis looks set to continue.