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Flames of Resistance and Hope in Turkey

by TARIQ ALI

6/18/2013

Zeynep Bilgehan: You released a solidarity message for the protestors from Ankara. First of all how long have you been in Ankara and what's the purpose of your visit?

Tariq Ali: I was in Ankara for three days to give a public lecture at the invitation of the Cankaya municipality that had been agreed several months ago. Naturally I observed what was going on in the evenings. Unprovoked attacks on peaceful demonstrators, the constant use of tear gas and water visited the Park and talked to the young people there.

ZB: What do you think about the recent incidents as a whole? From your point of view what happened or is happening in Turkey?

Tariq Ali: The mixture of a sharp intelligence, fearlessness and the rebirth of hope that I witnessed was very inspiring. It reminded me to a certain extent of Europe (Paris and Prague) in 1968, much more than the Arab spring. What is happening in Turkey is very clear. An elected authoritarian government, committed to neo-liberalism and war, imagined that it could do anything it wanted because of its democratic status. This was a foolish mistake.

When I was in Istanbul a few months ago, it was difficult not to detect a pall of depression that had enveloped activists and oppositionists. The closure of one of the city's oldest cinema on Istiklal had led to mild protests. So mild that the government imagined it could accelerate its select and destroy mission. They miscalculated badly. The Prime Minister, in particular, a veritable Sultan of the building industry refused to retreat and embarked on repression. This was the breaking point. People unconcerned with the proposed destruction of Gezi now came out to

protest and in huge numbers. The more the repression, the more the protests grew, spreading to virtually the entire country apart from four Kurdish-dominated towns. A campaign to save a park had become a national uprising against an obstinate and thuggish regime.

ZB: You say, Turkish protestors ignited hope in Europe. In what sense did they ignite hope?

Tariq Ali: In the sense that what is happening in Turkey is part of the crisis of neo-liberal capitalism. In Spain, Greece, Portugal there have been general strikes, demonstrations, etc. Even as Erdogan was using the repressive machinery of the state to promote the building industry, the Greek coalition had closed down State television and radio in order to sack journalists. The courageous Turkish citizens opened up a new front at an important time. And their example might well spread to France and, who knows, perhaps even Britain and Germany in the months ahead.

ZB: What do you think will be the outcome of this protests?

Tariq Ali: What is crucial as I said in my solidarity message is that the government has discredited itself with the help of a tame and servile Turkish media which ignored, underplayed and slandered the occupiers in Taksim during the first weeks. Journalists who collaborated should hang their hands in shame. As to how the new opposition regroups it is difficult to say. But if a new democratically structured political movement is formed (like, for instance, Syriza in Greece) it could give a permanent voice to the people from below. A monthly public assembly in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Bodrum, Antakiyya and other cities to discuss the situation at home and abroad and report on the building of a new movement would create something permanent and make the clearing and re-clearing of the squares a bit meaningless. This is my hope.

ZB: In your message you briefly mention that 'In the long term the Turkish politics will be transformed' Could you elaborate this? What will happen? How will Turkey change?

Tariq Ali: Turkey has changed. This is clear in what we are witnessing. As I said above the key now is how to institutionalise this change so that Turkish democracy is enhanced. Real Democracy as opposed to actually-existing democracy is a delicate flower. It has to be nurtured and cultivated but not with the blood of its citizens or regular surveillance (reminiscent of, but technologically on a higher—and therefore more debased— level than the former Stasi in the dead East Germany) or drones and torture or the imprisonment of those who speak the truth. Neo-liberal capitalism is hollowing out democracy. Those who fight the capitalist onslaught are also strengthening democracy.

ZB: In our previous interview we had talked about the Arab Spring. You said "The spring has turned into winter". Can you compare what's happening in Turkey with Arab Spring? What is similar and in what sense it differs?

Tariq Ali: The similarity is in the scale of the uprising, but otherwise the situation is different. As I've already said Turkey in its intellectual life and its political culture is far closer to Europe. One has only to look at the books translated from European languages, at the university and school curriculums, etc to realise this and the style and instinct of the demonstrators confirm all

this, at least, in my opinion. Military dictatorships have existed in Spain, Portugal, Greece and Turkey. In the current period where the United States has moved away from dictatorships in its client states, Turkey has benefited. But the new regime and, in particular, the big bullying Prime Minister think they can rule in the same old way. Erdogan's project is to build himself as the anti-Ataturk using the language of NATO in the garb of 'moderate' Islam. We have noted the 'moderation' in recent weeks. The notion that Islamist conservatism can solve the real problems with Turkey as a model now appears like a sick joke in Turkey, leave alone Egypt and Tunisia.

ZB: Can we call this movement a Turkish Spring? Why?

Tariq Ali: Why bother using that phrase. It has already turned sour.

ZB: Any chance this movement will also turn into a winter? What should be done to avoid this?

Tariq Ali: History teaches that it is impossible to maintain a movement at the same level indefinitely. So one should not even accept such a possibility. The real question is how to move forward after the first phase. And here I have made a few suggestions already. Organisation from below to create a new politics. A broad and united movement will need a political platform, something that can be fought for in the years ahead.

ZB: How will this movement effect the Middle East?

Tariq Ali: When the Syrian Foreign Office recently advised its citizens not to visit Turkey because of the turbulence and repression, this was official satire at it best and answers your question. In Ankara the personality cult of Erdogan reminded me a bit of Mubarek and Assad.

ZB: Finally in your message you say "Take the initiative to tone down the occupy but get together to show you're stil there". Could you elaborate this? How should the protestors continue?

Tariq Ali: What I meant was that its always better for the movement to decide on a temporary retreat which is not political but tactical.

ZB: Do you think a political movement can arise from this? Should it arise or should this movement stay as a civil resistance?

Tariq Ali: As I've said above, the birth of a new political movement would be the best way forward. Turkey is a land without a real opposition since both conservative Islamism and conservative nationalism are agreed on neo-liberalism, on NATO, on a tight control of the media, on imprisoning jouranlists (Turkey has the gold medal on this front), etc. So there is a vacuum. The time is auspicious. Erdogan's demagogy has alienated some of his colleagues.

Socially conservative, politically unscrupulous, economically beholden to special industries and militarily NATO's favourite Islamists, the party in power ignored the voices on the street. The truths being shouted in city after city may be unpalatable to the government but they are worth more than the honeyed tones of mercenary columnists, TV anchors of the official media. And

whatever happened to the 60 'wise men' chosen by the regime. Has their collective conscience died