

Mass protests shake Turkish government

Alex Lantier
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Protests in cities across Turkey shook the Islamist government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Friday and over the weekend, amid rising discontent with his domestic policies and his support for the US-led proxy war in neighboring Syria.

The protests grew rapidly after police crackdowns on Friday morning at Istanbul's Gezi Park and then in Taksim Square. The sit-in had begun Tuesday, as lawmakers and officials of the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), subsequently joined by the bourgeois opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), protested Erdogan's plan to remodel Gezi Park, which is adjacent to Taksim Square. The sit-in initially gathered dozens and then hundreds of people.

Erdogan plans to build a mosque in the area and to rebuild an Ottoman Empire-era barracks, destroyed in 1940, to be used as a shopping center, while destroying a nearby cultural center named after Turkish bourgeois nationalist leader Kemal Atatürk.

The remodeling plans were provocative, given Taksim Square's historic association with working class or popular protest. The 1969 Bloody Sunday massacre of demonstrators protesting the deployment of the US Sixth Fleet to Turkey took place nearby, and dozens were killed in the square in the repression of an International Labor Day march on May 1, 1977.

On Friday, police initially cracked down on protesters, pushing them into Taksim Square, and then brutally attacked them again. As the demonstration swelled, helicopters and police squads fired intense volleys of tear gas into residential areas and into the public transit system; one video shows a police armored vehicle hitting a protester as it charged a barricade.

"Police are everywhere, and helicopters are monitoring our movements. Whenever police see us march, they come and gas us... We were gassed, we dispersed, and then gathered again," one protester said.

Solidarity protests spread across the country, with thousands gathering in Kugulu Park in Ankara and over 10,000 reported on the marina in Izmir.

Protesters chanted "Everywhere is Taksim" or "Chemical Erdogan"—a reference to the widespread teargassing, but also implicitly criticizing Erdogan's promotion of false claims that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons, in order to provide Washington with a pretext to directly attack Syria.

According to a report by Interior Minister Muammer Guler on Saturday, 939 people had been arrested in over 90 separate demonstrations across the country. Medics reported treating over 1,000 injured protesters in Istanbul, and several hundred in the capital, Ankara. Amnesty International reported that two protesters had been killed.

On Saturday, tens of thousands of protesters again clashed with police in Istanbul and Ankara, with protesters chanting "shoulder to shoulder against fascism" and "government resign."

In a nationally televised speech Saturday, Erdogan endorsed the police crackdown. He said, "Taksim Square can't be a place where extremist groups hang around," while cynically admitting to "errors in the actions of the security forces, especially with regard to the use of pepper gas."

He vowed that plans to remodel the park would continue without consulting opposition parties, adding: "Where they will gather 100,000, I will bring together one million from my party."

Police withdrew from Taksim Square late Saturday, however, as state officials tried to bring down popular anger at Erdogan's violent repression of the protests. The Turkish Interior Ministry announced plans to "investigate" excessive use of tear gas, while Turkish President Abdullah Gül called for calm.

Yesterday tens of thousands of people protested in Turkey's four largest cities—Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir

and Adana. The Interior Minister announced that 1,700 people had been arrested, and that 235 protests took place in 67 Turkish cities.

The development of mass protests against Erdogan and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has rapidly exposed the weakness and unpopularity of his government, as well as the hypocrisy of the pretexts advanced to justify the ongoing US-led war in Syria.

Washington and its allies seized upon the repression of protests in Syria in the summer of 2011 to launch a proxy war for regime change in Syria, but they are now merely issuing mild, pro forma criticisms of Erdogan's bloody crackdown in Istanbul. The US State Department expressed concern in its statement over the number of injuries, while the European Union (EU) said it would "condemn all excessive and disproportionate use of force."

Behind the flagrant contrast in the US and EU reaction stand the imperialist interests driving the policy of the major powers in Syria and Turkey. While the Syrian regime has emerged as an obstacle to the imperialist drive to restructure the Middle East, centered on US-led regime change in oil-rich Iran, Erdogan has functioned as a key US ally.

Syrian officials pointed to this contradiction, demanding Erdogan's resignation after his brutal suppression of the protests. On Saturday, Syrian television quoted Syrian Information Minister Omran Zoabi: "The demands of the Turkish people don't deserve all this violence. If Erdogan is unable to pursue nonviolent means, he should resign." Zoabi said Erdogan's brutal repression of protests showed that he is "detached from reality."

Just over two weeks ago, on May 16, Erdogan met with US President Barack Obama in Washington and held a joint press conference at the White House. The main topics at their meeting were reportedly the war in Syria and US-Turkish economic ties.

US officials declined to address the hypocrisy of their alliance with the bloody Erdogan regime, while pursuing a foreign policy based around a supposedly "humanitarian" war in Syria.

US Ambassador to Turkey Francis Ricciardone told CNN Türk, "Of course, no one could be happy to see those saddening images. I am not happy either. I wish a speedy recovery to all those injured. But if you are asking me about US foreign policy, as you know,

freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and the right to have peaceful protests are fundamentals of a democracy. I am not going to say anything further."

Erdogan has enthusiastically backed the Syrian war, in defiance of mass opposition in Turkey. Only one-quarter of the Turkish population supports Erdogan's policy of arming the far-right Islamist opposition fighting the Syrian regime, according to recent polls.

There is deep disquiet in Turkey—particularly among the Alevi minority, many of whose members attended the protests—over the consequences in Turkey of Erdogan's collaboration with the far-right Sunni Islamist opposition in Syria. CHP officials have already charged that the recent car bombing in Reyhanli, Turkey was carried out by Al Nusra, an Al Qaeda-affiliated element of the US-backed Syrian opposition (See: "Reports suggest Syrian opposition involvement in Turkish bombings").

The Erdogan government blamed the attacks on the Syrian government, further raising the danger of war. These charges have since been exposed as lies, as Turkish hacker group RedHack published Turkish intelligence documents showing that cars involved in the Reyhanli car bombing were being prepared for operations by Al Nusra.

The Erdogan regime has responded by cracking down on the leak. Turkey's Interior Ministry has confirmed that a member of a gendarmerie unit who allegedly provided the document to RedHack has been detained.

Erdogan's increasingly right-wing Islamist legislation in Turkey also is affecting daily life in the country and provoking opposition. Last week, the parliament approved legislation banning the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.



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