

Turkish clashes continue as Erdogan brands protesters “extremists”

Bill Van Auken
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Tens of thousands of demonstrators poured once again into central Istanbul’s Taksim Square Monday night, as protests that began over the government’s plans to bulldoze one of the city’s few parks and erect a shopping mall in its place entered their second week.

Thousands also demonstrated in the Turkish capital of Ankara. In both cities, protesters were met with intense barrages of tear gas and attacks by riot police.

What began with a few dozen environmentalist protesters late last month has now drawn hundreds of thousands into the streets across the country to confront a violent crackdown by Turkey’s security forces.

Seemingly oblivious to the continued confrontations, Turkey’s Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan began a four-day tour of North Africa Monday with a press conference in Morocco. “The situation is a lot calmer now and reason seems to be prevailing,” he asserted. “I think things will return to normal. These demonstrations are not all over Turkey, just in some big cities.”

The first confirmed death in the protests was reported Monday. Mehmet Ayval?ta?, a 20-year-old member of the Socialist Solidarity Platform (SODAP), was run down and killed by a car while participating in a demonstration in Istanbul’s working class Ümraniye’s 1 May neighborhood. Some reports suggested that he was deliberately targeted by a right-wing supporter of the government.

In response to the killing, the Turkish Doctors’ Union (TTB) issued a statement Monday demanding an end to the police repression and a release of all those jailed by the government. It indicted Erdogan additionally for creating an atmosphere of intimidation and violence with his threats to unleash the supporters of his Islamist ruling party against the demonstrators.

At least five other injured protesters are reported to be in critical condition, fighting for their lives. One, Ethem Sarisuluk, received a gunshot wound to the head.

According to a Turkish human rights foundation, doctors have declared him brain dead.

As of early Monday, the doctors’ union has recorded 1,480 people wounded in Istanbul, 414 in Ankara and 420 more in the coastal city of ?zmir. Izmir was the scene of one of the largest protests Sunday and saw some of the most intense clashes, with demonstrators setting fire to the offices of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), and protesters set upon by gangs of pro-government thugs wielding nail-studded sticks.

Despite the prime minister’s sanguine view of developments, according to Erdogan’s own interior minister, Muammer Guler, there had been as of early Monday 235 separate protests in 67 different Turkish cities. Guler also reported that 1,730 people had been arrested in protests Sunday evening.

This may be a considerable underestimate. A Turkish opposition member of parliament, Aylin Nazliak, reported that she witnessed over 1,500 people in detention Sunday night in Ankara alone, with more busloads of prisoners being brought in.

Police in the Turkish capital raided shopping centers where demonstrators had taken shelter and rounded up everyone, including many passersby. “There were about 1,500 in custody,” she told the *Hürriyet Daily News*. “While we were there [in the police department], nine other buses arrived.”

She said that those detained were beaten with police clubs and otherwise roughed up as they were forced onto buses. Many of them were bleeding from plastic handcuffs that were tied tightly around their wrists. Once in police custody, they were denied access to lawyers, photographed, had their cell phones confiscated and were pressured to sign statements acknowledging that they had been arrested while breaking the law.

Before leaving for his tour of the Maghreb, Erdogan issued a public statement in which he made the time-worn

charge of all besieged autocrats that those who had taken to the streets were an “extremist fringe,” and that his intelligence agencies were investigating unspecified “foreign links.” He went on to denounce Twitter as a source of “lies” and to declare all social media “the worst menace to society.”

Erdogan also tried to portray the mass protests as the work of the opposition CHP, or Republican People’s Party, because of its refusal to accept defeat at the polls. This is nonsense; the Kemalist CHP has proven incapable of mobilizing mass opposition to the Erdogan government and is widely distrusted because of its historic ties to the military and the country’s secularist elite. When CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu attempted to address the protesters, they drowned him out with singing.

Underlying the eruption of the mass protests sparked by the plan to destroy Gezi Park is deep-seated popular anger against an increasingly autocratic government that rules in the interests of a layer of crony capitalists that forms its core constituency, while attempting to maintain a popular base by appealing to more backward sections of the population with Islamic-based social policies.

The scheme to plough under Gezi Park and build a shopping mall is only one of a number of major “urban renewal” projects developed behind closed doors by the government. Those directly benefiting from these projects are politically connected capitalists—including Erdogan’s son-in-law, who is the owner of a major development company, and the mayor of Istanbul, the owner of a retail chain who stands to profit handsomely from turning a park into a mall.

With another major construction project, the building of a third bridge over the Bosphorus, Erdogan and his AKP have managed both to enrich their capitalist cronies and inflame sectarian tensions. They are naming it after a 16th century Ottoman sultan notorious for massacring tens of thousands of Alevis, believers in an offshoot of Shiite Islam who are today the country’s largest religious minority.

The continuous introduction of religious-based policies in Turkey, which is formally a secular state, has alienated broad sections of the population, including minorities such as the Alevis and the Kurds, and large sections of secular Turks. This has included the imposition of tight restriction on the consumption and sale of alcohol and a bid to ban abortion.

Also deeply unpopular is the Erdogan government’s backing of the so-called rebels in Syria with arms, money and logistical aid and its alignment with United States

foreign policy as a NATO ally.

The Obama administration has treated the repression in Turkey with kid gloves. White House spokesman Jay Carney told a press briefing that “Turkey is a very important ally.” Referring to the massive state violence in Turkey, he commented, “All democracies have issues that they need to work through.”

At the heart of the mass protests are the issues of social inequality that are deeply felt both by sections of the young urban middle class, who make up a large share of the demonstrators, and the working class. Erdogan’s “urban renewal” programs have been carried out to benefit the rich with luxury housing and businesses, while driving sections of the poor and the working class out of central Istanbul.

Meanwhile, the so-called Turkish “miracle,” touted as testament to neo-liberal capitalist economic policies and a model for the Middle East, has stalled. GDP growth has fallen from 9 percent three years ago to virtually nil today. At the same time, there has been a 5 percent reduction in employment in the so-called formal sector, reflecting massive job losses in industry and public services.

The spontaneous eruptions across Turkey reflect the fact that those opposed to the government’s policy can find no viable means of political struggle against it within the official political setup, or, for that matter, within the trade union movement.

One Turkish trade union federation representing public sector workers has called a two-day strike beginning June 4 in protest against “state terror” by the Erdogan government. The walkout by the 240,000-member Confederation of Public Workers’ Unions (KESK) is expected to shut down schools, universities and public offices across Turkey.

Earlier, the Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions of Turkey (DISK) called upon its members to join the protests, but announced no independent industrial actions.



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