

Lessons From Gezi Park

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Throughout the summer of 2013, Turkey witnessed the largest wave of protests in its history. It all started when a small group of protesters began to camp at Gezi Park in Istanbul, in order to protect the park from privatization. After the first night of the encampment, the police viciously attacked protesters which sparked a nationwide rebellion.

Although the protests exploded in reaction to the police violence, they also created a platform for a broader critique of austerity, tightening media censorship, high levels of youth unemployment, anti-women and anti-LGBT+ policies and the ecological destruction the Erdogan administration oversaw since 2002. It also opened the way for ongoing, democratic political breakthroughs in opposition to the regime; opposition, which while experiencing many challenges, would not otherwise have been possible.

Since 2013 the legacy of “Gezi Park” has been attacked and rewritten by President Erdogan and his allies, while the government has imprisoned or forced into exile many faces of the movement. Conspiracy theories tying the protests to George Soros and foreign countries have been spread by the regime and its supporters through mainstream media. Nowadays, the very right to protest on the streets is under threat as the Erdogan government criminalizes peaceful demonstrations and hires neighborhood guards to patrol the streets and prevent spontaneous uprisings. Some were quick to warn those who are currently protesting police violence in the US about “the coming reaction” based on the Turkish experience. Yet Turkey offers other lessons for the U.S. than simply a deepening of authoritarian trends.

Although the Gezi Park protests grew in reaction to police violence, they were not caused by it. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) government was initially welcomed by many in the West as Islamist democrats, but the AKP in power began to show its authoritarian tendencies throughout the late 2000s as it increased media censorship and targeted journalists and opposition figures. At the same time, the AKP oversaw a massive wave of privatizations and a construction boom that destroyed large swaths of the country’s green spaces. The increasing authoritarianism of the AKP

and its neo-liberal economic and ecological policies were the driving causes of the Gezi Park protests.

Just as with the movements of the squares - in Spain, Greece and with Occupy in the U.S. - and reflecting a process of political polarization and radicalization that was seen internationally, e.g. the Arab Spring, the Gezi Park protests had a major impact on all aspects of Turkish politics. In many ways the protests re-shuffled the cards for the major political players in the country. It is in this impact, and specifically with the rise of a multi-national/ multi-racial struggle in Turkey, that there are possible lessons for the U.S.

The largest racialized group in Turkey are the Kurds, a national minority making up 20% percent of the overall population of Turkey. The Turkish state systematically imposed forced assimilation and dispossession policies on the Kurdish populations in order to suppress secessionist tendencies until the 1990s. The forced dispossession policies imposed on Kurdish majority regions led to waves of Kurdish migration into western parts of Turkey, where Kurdish workers were racialized and pushed into working low paying jobs and living in slums. State officials often rejected the very existence of Kurds until recently. Because of the repressive nature of the Turkish state, the Kurds maintained their own political parties and structures that were relatively independent. These parties have been and continue to be criminalized by the Turkish state. The 10% electoral threshold that was imposed after the coup of 1980 also prevented pro-Kurdish parties from gaining ballot access as parties, and forced them to run as independents. The criminalization of Kurdish politics, and the anti-Kurdish state policies and ideology led to widespread denial of the reality of Kurdish oppression and strict opposition to pro-Kurdish parties in the western parts of Turkey where Kurds have been a tiny minority until recently. Many Turks view Kurdish nationalism as synonymous with terrorism even today.

However, there have been major changes to race politics in Turkey since the Gezi Park protests. One of the most recent iterations of Kurdish political parties, the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) played a major part in the Gezi Park protests. The participation of pro-Kurdish groups transformed the way many Turkish protesters perceived Kurdish politics.

The political terrain for the alliance of pro-Kurdish parties and the Turkish radical Left began to be formed during the mid-1990s as segments of the Kurdish movement began to participate in local and national elections as independents. Prior to this, the primary vehicle of Kurdish politics was the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which engaged in armed conflict with the Turkish state in order to build a Kurdish state. The PKK is labeled a terrorist group by the Turkish state, hence an alliance between the PKK and legal parties is not feasible. The local successes of the legal Kurdish parties since the 1990s moved the mainstream of Kurdish politics from Kurdish national liberation initially to strengthening local governments run by Kurdish parties, and eventually towards democratic confederalism which argues for a confederation of autonomous Kurdish entities within the existing nation-state structures, and centers direct democracy.

The Democratic Society Party (DTP) was founded in 2005 around the demands for a democratic constitution, recognition of all racial, ethnic, and religious minorities by the state and increased autonomy and democratization of regional governments. The DTP was banned in 2008 but regrouped through the BDP. Even as the Kurdish movement moved into the boundaries of legality, they have been criminalized over their ties to the PKK. That is why until Gezi, the Kurdish movement remained relatively separate from the Turkish Left as they were viewed as a trojan horse for the "terrorist" PKK. In this context the participation of the BDP in the Gezi Park protests helped reshape the political coalitions in the country in important ways. Gezi Park protests changed the party coalitions in three major ways.

First, the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP) - self-proclaimed social democrats - shifted rightward throughout the AKP rule and since the Gezi Park protests. This was evident in the fact that they nominated a far-right presidential candidate against Erdogan in the 2014 elections, the first elections after the Gezi Park protests, in an alliance with the fascist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The CHP had always been primarily a secularist Turkish nationalist party, but it shifted in a more social democratic direction in the 1970s and 1990s in order to co-opt a militant labor movement. Under AKP rule, as a result of privatizations and changes to the labor law, the labor unions have been weakened significantly which accelerated the right-wing shift of the CHP and moved them to centering nationalism against the Kurds and secularism against the AKP's Islamism. Under these conditions the CHP began allying with the nationalist parties that opposed the AKP from the right.

Second, the ongoing right-wing shift within the CHP and its unwillingness to respond to Gezi through a broad political program created an opening for pro-Kurdish parties as they could become the left-wing opposition to the CHP in the Western parts of Turkey and the party of the Gezi Park protests. The participation of the BDP in the Gezi Park protests increased the credibility of pro-Kurdish parties in the western parts of Turkey.

The alliance between pro-Kurdish parties and the Turkish radical Left materialized in the formation of first the People's Democratic Congress (HDK) and then the People's Democratic Party (HDP) which became a broad coalition of pro-Kurdish parties in the Kurdish majority areas and the smaller left-wing, socialist, and communist parties, supported by many younger Turkish people in the Western parts of Turkey. The politics of direct democracy and democratic constitution pushed by the HDP appealed to many on the far Left as well as those on the social democratic wing of the CHP. Following Gezi, the HDP candidate Selahattin Demirtaş won nearly 10% of the vote in the 2014 presidential elections and the HDP became the third largest party in Turkey in the June 2015 general elections. Since its inception the HDP won a notable percentage of the vote in the western cities of Turkey through winning the support of minorities and the Left.

Third, the Gezi Park protests intensified the infighting within the AKP coalition. Gülenists, a group of pro-US Islamist liberals within the AKP coalition, have been wary of Erdoğan's tightening grip of the Turkish state. Following Gezi Park, as Erdoğan's popularity reached all-time lows, Gülenists began to openly dissent against Erdoğan's leadership through a series of corruption investigations that led to the arrests of multiple Erdoğan allies in December 2013. Erdoğan characterized these arrests as a coup and began to remove Gülenists from the judiciary and the police. The conflict between the Gülenists and Erdoğan reached its climax in the failed coup of July 2016, as the Gülenists in the military bureaucracy attempted to seize power. The failed coup was followed by what some characterized as a "counter-coup" by Erdoğan, as he declared a state of emergency and began to move the country towards a presidential system where he would have near absolute authority. Throughout the state of emergency thousands were purged from the state bureaucracy, members of parliament and mayors were removed from office and the presidential system was established through a referendum and a general election both of which took place under circumstances that were far from democratic.

As the conflict between Erdoğan and Gülenists intensified and the HDP became a major player in Turkish politics following a decline in AKP's popularity, Erdoğan shifted to a more repressive approach towards the HDP. Since 2015, the HDP has faced brutal repression by the AKP government while the CHP and other "opposition" parties enabled this repression. The regime justified the repression using the same anti-Kurdish rhetoric that was mobilized by previous administrations. The opposition to the HDP intensified as it truly provided a new possibility for left-wing politics in Turkey which was an alternative not just to the AKP but also to the other right-wing opposition parties.

Currently thousands of HDP members, including the former co-chairs of the party, are in prison. HDP mayors and members of parliament are repeatedly removed from office over bogus charges. Within the last weeks, two more HDP members of parliament were removed from office and arrested. HDP members also face a media blackout even when the topic of discussion is the HDP itself. However, HDP continues to persist as the largest radical opposition to what now is a one-man rule under Erdogan's presidential system and Gezi Park protests played an essential role in the formation of the HDP. As the mainstream opposition parties continue to enable Erdoğan's authoritarianism and/or oppose him from the right, HDP increasingly appears as the main opposition party in the country.

In the US, the George Floyd protests exploded in reaction to racist police murders. The racialized impact of Covid-19 and the recession it triggered also served as catalysts. Many young black people that are leading the protests have also been further radicalized by the failure of Bernie Sanders' presidential campaigns to gain power and deliver transformative change. Race is a unique aspect of American politics, hence the comparison between the two waves of protests might seem shallow. In contrast to the Kurdish political parties, most racialized people in the United States either have no political affiliation or support the Democratic Party. However, the current moment and the push for police abolition could create new possibilities as the Democratic Party leaders and mayors refuse to defund the police even marginally.

Many large cities in the United States have racialized majorities who experience racialized policing and police brutality as a part of their day to day lives. If the current movement persists it could create the possibility of an abolitionist alternative to the Democrats on a local level. Of course we are currently extremely far from such a possibility, but the HDP model could be even more effective in the US than in Turkey if working class parties could emerge on the local level to provide an independent abolitionist alternative to the police states the Democratic mayors continue to administer in all major cities.

The initial step towards building an alternative to racial capitalism lies in building independent abolitionist organizations through these movements. Only through building our own independent institutions will we build the power to disarm, defund, and abolish the police and also abolish ICE and all other repressive state apparatuses. For the Kurds and the Turkish Left, the possibility of a major political alternative to neoliberal and nationalist parties only became possible through carrying the alliance that was built on the streets back into a new party. Prior to this, Kurdish parties remained only a regional alternative, but their candidates could only run for elections as independents due to the 10% threshold required for them to get ballot access as a party. The alliance of the Turkish Left and pro-Kurdish parties helped the Left defeat the electoral barriers, even as the state continued to criminalize the HDP. A similar process could take place in the US through an alliance built on the streets between abolitionists and socialists in order to defeat the US electoral system which is more restrictive than the Turkish system in many ways.

It is always easier to act as if spontaneous uprisings like the Gezi Park and George Floyd protests end up in absolute failure and brutal reaction. However, these uprisings reshape political alliances and create possibilities for larger political transformations as they persist. It is unclear how far the George Floyd inspired protests will go but it is important to explore the HDP model as it might provide an alternative to the two-party impasse we face in the US by centering justice as the core of oppositional politics.