

---

Gokay, B and Shain, F (2013) **The protests in Turkey: urban warfare in 'rebel cities'**, *Open Democracy*, August 26.

## **The protests in Turkey**

### **Urban Warfare in “Rebel Cities”\***

Bulent Gokay and Farzana Shain\*\*

Many mainstream accounts of the recent Taksim-Gezi park protests have made references to the so-called Arab Spring events in Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries. Many asked the same question: Are the Taksim Protests Turkey’s Arab Spring?

The protest in Taksim started small: its initial aim was to stop developers from building a shopping-centre that was to be housed in a replica of a military barracks building demolished sixty years ago. For the protestors the development meant the destruction of much of the Gezi Park, one of the last green spots in central Istanbul. However, the character of the protests changed when the Turkish police attacked protesters with considerable violence, and what started as an environmental protest in Istanbul quickly turned into a nation-wide political demonstration against the policies of Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan and his government. The protests rapidly gained support from a cross-section of society in Istanbul and other urban centres and became diversified. However, the protests were led and dominated by young middle class professionals and their demands for access, freedom and a new kind of urban living. Despite the expanding scope of demands and expectations, issues related to the city and its quality of life remained at the heart of the protests.

It is no coincidence that the demonstrations began and were concentrated in Istanbul, the largest and the most developed urban centre in Turkey. Istanbul has been the centre of large-scale urban transformation and regeneration over

the past three decades. It was in the 1980s, soon after the military coup in Turkey, that the city witnessed the beginning of the neoliberal transformation and the celebration of property rights, in a similar fashion to other metropolitan centres, like New York, London, Madrid, etc. In this sense, the Taksim-Gezi protests share a common ground with a great many diverse social movements focusing on the urban question, from India and Brazil to China, Spain, Argentina and the US. This analysis is in line with David Harvey's reworking of Marxist political theory which places *the city* first and foremost, in terms of its position as a generator of capital accumulation, as opposed to the factory/work place. Harvey, distinguished Professor of Anthropology and Geography, discusses how urbanization plays a key role in social conflicts of today. This is justified by an economic argument around the importance to capitalism of land, rent and speculation more so than straightforward production. "Over the past 30-40 years, where cities try to brand themselves and sell a piece of their history. What is the image of a city? Is it attractive to tourists? Is it trendy? So a city will market itself." ([Interview with David Harvey: Rebel Cities & Urban Resistance Part II](#), 7 January 2013) Just a week before the Taksim-Gezi protests started, David Harvey was speaking about the urban origins of the social movements and referring to Istanbul, saying that "What do we see in Istanbul? Cranes, everywhere." ([SPIEGEL ONLINE](#), 21 May 2013)

### Democracy and "representation"

Some of those hasty proclamations of a "Turkish Spring" concentrate on Tayyip Erdogan's increasingly anti-democratic and authoritarian ruling style, and compare Erdogan's rule with Mubarak's. A certain slogan evoked some sympathy in the crowd: "Taksim will become Tahrir!" To them, the Taksim protests represent the next stage of the "Arab Spring".

Turkey's Tayyip Erdogan has been, by far, the most popular politician in Turkey after winning three consecutive elections by increasing his majority: 34 per cent in 2002, 47 per cent in 2007 and more than 50 per cent in 2011.

His success and popularity is interlinked with Turkey's economic development in the same decade: Erdogan's leadership coincided with an impressive growth spurt for Turkey which placed the country among the top ten emerging stars of the world alongside with the BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. Turkey's per capita income was tripled within a decade under Erdogan's leadership. The annual economic output of the Turkish economy is at \$10,000 per person, about the same level as Brazil or Mexico and has been growing at a steady pace.

Alongside managing a growing economy, Erdogan's government has achieved some other significant successes during its 11 years in office. The AKP regime has actively taken on the coup leaders of Turkey's recent troubled past. A large number of generals were arrested, and one in three generals is now in prison. It was also under Erdogan's leadership that significant steps were taken to calm the decades-long violent conflict with the country's significant Kurdish minority. However, these successes have fuelled Erdogan's sense of his own importance in Turkey's recent economic rise. His use of the state apparatus to establish his power base to such excess has led to accusations that he is indeed governing the country in the same autocratic style for which he had bitterly criticised the secular generals. After 11 years and three terms in power the result is the emergence of an increasingly authoritarian, religiously inspired and obsessively neoliberal system, which is based on a cleverly crafted hegemonic apparatus. This has been quite evident since 2011, with the start of violent repression of public protests, the jailing of journalists on suspicion of conspiring with terrorists, pressure being put upon newspaper owners to sack critical journalists; and the updating of the 1980s' military regime's anti-terrorism laws. ([OpenDemocracy](#), 11 February 2012)

All the above mentioned reactions and policies are characteristic of an administration that has spent too long in power and become far too confident and perhaps complacent about its capacity to maintain electoral power. But none of these justify the placement of the recent events in Turkey in the same category as the so-called Arab Spring countries. Despite the obvious "Tahrir feel" of Taksim, one must acknowledge that the differences are substantial. To start with, Mubarak was a dictator, Recep Tayyip Erdogan is an elected prime

minister. More importantly, the Arab uprisings were mass events preceded by massive economic crises, while the protest movement in Turkey has been mainly led by middle and upper-middle-class youth and young urban professionals -the beneficiaries of much of the economic growth –defending their urban space and lifestyle.

The mainstream terminology employed in media and expert commentaries, and shared by many liberal/secular accounts make the comparisons between Taksim and Tahrir Square referring to the ability of the street to topple a government. [Some](#) have even claimed that “the Gezi Park resistance is a [revolutionary] turning point for the people of Turkey. After many decades they feel their power again”. However tempting, we believe such comparisons represent a gross over-simplification based on a range of superficial similarities many of which ignore the class analysis of the events. The political-economy background of the events in Turkey is very different from that of its war-torn Arab neighbours. Turkey’s protests also need to be distinguished from the expression of discontent in some of its European neighbours, such as Greece and Spain where weak economies have brought the unemployed youth out onto the streets.

### Brazil and Turkey -- Protests Follow Economic Success

It would be more appropriate to make comparisons between the demonstrations in Turkey and the protests in Brazil, which started just a couple of weeks after the protests in Taksim. Despite their significant differences, in particular in terms of the reactions from the Turkish and Brazilian authorities, both Turkish and Brazilian protesters seemed to be coming from similar class backgrounds and ages. And they were making similar demands of urban democracy in similarly innovative ways.

There are a number of other comparisons that might be made of Turkey and Brazil: both are emerging powers with booming economies and dynamic, democratically elected governments; both countries are exerting considerable influence in the regions around them, and often being cited as models; both

have been developing global ambitions. Brazil is one of the BRICS, B of the BRICS, and the largest economy in the Western hemisphere after the US. Turkey is at a critical junction of Europe and the Middle East, and is a key geopolitical player in the Balkans, Central Asia and the Middle East. Both countries pull considerable weight in affairs far beyond their own borders.

There are, of course, some divergences too. The immediate, explicit issues which led to the protests are not exactly the same, but similarly urban: the government's plan to redevelop Gezi Park, an urban park next to Istanbul's Taksim Square in the Turkish case, very much "a right to the city" type of a movement; an increase in public transport fares in Sao Paulo in Brazilian case- for free bus fares tens of thousands of young Brazilians took to the streets to reclaim their city from neoliberal forces. The governments are not at all alike, Turkey having a long-serving popular leader who heads a conservative Islamist party; and Brazil with a relatively new president, a former leftist guerrilla who was imprisoned and tortured in the 1970s during military dictatorship, heading a leftist popular movement. But there is a very important similarity: they are both representative democracies. Not only that, each country has a powerful military that had been involved in politics in the not too distant past. But now, both countries have managed to put their armies in the barracks, and therefore their democracies considered quite stable. Based on their economic progress, development and reasonably stable democracies, both countries are often cited as examples of previously underdeveloped countries able to overcome their troubled political past. In this sense, there is no Turkey Spring as there is no Brazilian Spring. This is not Tunisia, Egypt or Libya. Democratically elected governments in Turkey and in Brazil are far more resilient and their leaders far more popular and secure in their power than the North African dictators swept away by the events of 2011. Despite his increasingly authoritarian policies, Turkey's Erdogan still remains immensely popular among the country's poor and deeply religious majority, even in Kurdish majority areas.

However, as can be seen in many "democratic" countries, democratically elected leaders often come to have an inflated sense of knowing better than their citizens what is best for their citizens, and they have a tendency to favour

prestigious infrastructure projects over the impact these might have on peoples' daily lives. This is exactly what is at stake both in Turkey and Brazil. So, in one sense, both in Brazil and Turkey, participatory democracy was forcefully diluted among an orgy of neoliberal mega-projects, generating dubious profits for a small elite in their respective countries. This also created an inflated sense of self-image around these mega structures for the respective leaders. In the Turkish case, it is the ruling AKP's collusion with powerful business interests in the so-called re-development of Istanbul. In the Brazilian case, it revolves around massive public funds spent for the hosting of the World Cup and the Olympics.

Both Turkey and Brazil have seen a strong period of mass growth, economically and population-wise. Sustained growth brought in enough tax revenues to improve both education and health spending. The boom also allowed the governments to increase minimum wages significantly without any apparent damage to employment. As a result of the governments' extension of welfare, health and educational provision, a large section of people in Turkey, and Brazil, has gained access to better public services.

If we try to make a connection between these economic success stories and the recent protest movements, the first observation would be about how a strong cycle of economic enrichment over the past decade has changed the public's expectations of its politicians. Since the Turkish and Brazilian regimes achieved sustained growth and employment, delivering on growth and employment is no longer enough to satisfy the majority of their populations. Citizens increasingly hold their leaders accountable to improve the quality of public services, and to expand the boundaries of participatory democracy, and listen to their concerns closely. One therefore can consider the protests in Turkey and Brazil as a symptom of radically shifting demands, driven mostly by these emerging power houses' economic success. These are democratic protest movements in societies experiencing rapid change where the public's demand for better services and more democracy at local as well as national levels grow at a faster pace than their governments' ability to provide. Despite the multiplication of the slogans and emerging chaos about the aims of the protesters, it is important to note that the protest of both Turkey's and

Brazil's urban youth are first and foremost a response to the ruling regimes' grandiose neoliberal projects of urban transformation and its associated gentrifying schemes, with the aim of creating high-tech malls, skyscrapers, and expensive giant high-tec stadiums.

### Youth and urban "warfare"

Much like the protesters in Turkey, most demonstrators in Brazil have jobs and are well educated. They are mainly from the country's growing middle classes, which government figures show has ballooned by some 40 million over the past decade amid a commodities-driven economic boom. Unlike countries such as Greece and Spain where weak economies have brought the unemployed out onto the streets, the discontent in Brazil and Turkey has been created by strong economic growth. As standards of living have risen, so have people's expectations for better services and wider participation in decision-making. Brazilian and Turkish youth are not protesting because they want to overthrow a dictator or are angry about massive unemployment. They are upset, and rightly so, about the priorities and the manner in which these have been pursued – without sufficient consultation - by their governments. They demand the right to participate in the planning and distribution of their country's wealth. In both countries, more and more people demand the right to be heard and to be involved, linked to the feeling that they aren't really able to get involved. They want the right to determine their own futures. They are no longer prepared to be talked down to by the government. The protests can in one sense be read as the articulation by those involved of what a fair and just world might be. Turkish and Brazilian youth, rejecting the neoliberal notion that democracy and markets are the same, have not only addressed some of the current injustices while reclaiming their urban space, but they also started to produce new ideas with a new and very imaginative political language.

The whole process is almost a textbook case of what David Harvey describes as "the urbanization of capital":

The reproduction of capital passes through processes of urbanization in myriad ways. But the urbanization of capital presupposes the capacity of capitalist class powers to dominate the urban process. This implies capitalist class domination not only over state apparatuses,... but also over whole populations – their lifestyles as well as their labor power, their cultural and political values as well as their mental conceptions of the world. That level of control does not come easily, if at all. The city and the urban process that produces it are therefore major sites of political, social, and class struggles. (*Rebel Cities*, Verso, p.65)

In the final analysis, we believe that the protest movements in the urban areas of Turkey and Brazil represent the direct responses of youth in the search of “a different way of urban living from that which was being imposed upon them by capitalist developers and the state” (*Rebel Cities*, p.21). In our view, the demonstrations can be connected to a wider discussion developed by David Harvey around “the right to the city” which is a right to democratic control over the process of urbanization. The specific aims of the protesters in Istanbul and Sao Paolo, to keep a green space as a public park and to defend affordable transportation fees for urban public, are in a general sense their attempt to reclaim their city, their urban space. Whatever the initial results, or lack of specific gains, of the recent protests, Turkish and Brazilian youth have already initiated “a platform for what an alternative urbanization project might look like”. ([The White Review](#))

---

\* “Rebel Cities” is a reference to David Harvey’s 2012 book, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (Verso, 2012).

\*\*Bulent Gokay is a Professor of International Relations and Farzana Shain is a Professor of Sociology of Education, both at Keele University, UK.