

SPECIAL REPORT

THE TURKISH PROTESTS REVEAL A COUNTRY ON THE VERGE OF MAJOR TRANSFORMATION

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Enough time has passed since the Turkish protests began in late May to evaluate the direction in which they may lead Turkey in the medium- to long-term. We know now that a new generation of well educated, well connected young people with a more global outlook on life is emerging. They are the future elites, and it seems clear that whether it is through public demonstrations or other means, they will continue to press for policies that support both economic progress and democratic institutions.

To recap the brief history, it all started with a small protest movement against government plans to build a mosque in Gezi Park adjacent to famed Taksim Square in Istanbul. This mini-protest might have passed with scant notice were it not for the brutal overreaction of security forces, which had the unexpected effect of stirring up long-buried forces in Turkish society, creating a far larger, more powerful protest movement.

As so often happens in such situations, both sides misjudged and mishandled subsequent events. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoan responded first with angry denunciations and further security crackdowns, followed by half-way attempts at reconciliation. On their part, as their rallies grew in size and spread across the country, the protesters were emboldened to refuse the prime minister's opening and escalated their demands, ensuring a prolongation of the standoff.

Whether the protests will continue at the same level of intensity is an open question, since Turkey is entering the summer holiday season and Ramadan begins July 8. But whatever the exact course of events, the process of change is now underway. What began as a small green movement has turned into a basic cry for the establishment of greater democracy. A new generation that had previously been regarded as apolitical has proved to be extremely well brought up, intelligent and very aware of politics. It has even exhibited an impressive sense of humor as it advances its progressive political message.

This makes the situation in Turkey very different from the Arab Spring. Unlike the mass demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt, the Turkish protests have not sought to overthrow the government. Instead, they reflect a desire for a more pluralistic democracy and less government interference in personal freedoms.

These developments are consistent with the Maslovian "hierarchy of needs" theory, which holds that once your basic requirements are satisfied (such as housing, adequate income and personal security) you begin to strive for more quality in your standard of living. This is best achieved when there is participatory democracy, a healthy economy and minimal government interference in one's personal life and belief system.

It should be no surprise, therefore, that the Turkish protests came after a series of regulatory changes introduced by the Erdoan government affecting such highly sensitive subjects as the sale of alcohol, contraception and even religion. Erdoan’s “my way or the highway” attitude has only worsened the situation, triggering an unfortunate “us vs. them” populism.

Still, Turks are masters of adaptation. Despite the unrest, there are good reasons to believe that over time the country’s younger generation will demonstrate the motivation and sophistication to continue advancing Turkey into the ranks of the world’s successful economies while enjoying their individual freedoms and the benefits of democracy.

But for this to happen, the recent advances in Turkey’s economy must find their counterpart in its politics. The Erdoan government must stop taking the easy way out by blaming others and begin to see the bigger picture. In the same way, the international community needs to recognize and support a new generation of Turks that has the desire and the capacity to equal the progress that Turkey has made economically in the political realm.