

Learning from Taksim Square (Turkey)

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Neil Faulkner looks at the historical significance of the Taksim protest movement.

Contents

- [A new pattern of mass struggle](#)
- [Erdogan: neoliberalism with](#)
- [City of discontents](#)
- [The new movement](#)

Taksim Square in Istanbul has now joined Syntagma in Athens, Tahrir in Cairo, and Puerta del Sol in Madrid has a global symbol of resistance. Tens of thousands of protestors have been battling riot police for control of the square for more than two weeks.

The battle has repeatedly spread into surrounding streets, as the protestors are temporarily pushed back and forced to seek refuge in buildings and behind barricades beyond the square itself. Again and again they have surged back into the square, renewing the struggle for control of this central public space. Nearby suburbs echo with the clanging of pots and pans from countless apartment balconies – sounds of solidarity with the street fighters below.

The democracy of a new mass movement is contesting the authoritarianism of a regime that has grown arrogant in a decade of unchallenged power. The crowds of young protestors are diverse – socialists, communists, anarchists, and Kemalists; trade unionists, students, and environmentalists; Kurds, Alevis, Sunnis, and Christians; feminists, LGBT activists, civil liberties campaigners, and many others. And they have faced attacks by batons, water cannon, tear gas, and percussion bombs as they contest control of the streets with massed ranks of riot police.

A new pattern of mass struggle

Taksim conforms to a new pattern of mass struggle from below: the sustained contesting of public space between an authoritarian neoliberal state and a radical vanguard of young street protestors. The hollowing out of parliamentary democracy, the weakening of the unions and other popular organisations, and the advance of corporate power and the neoliberal elite have combined to produce widespread alienation from ruling regimes. Social media, on the other hand, have facilitated the creation of loose networks and rapid mobilisations of otherwise atomised individuals. Then, when they come together, the disparate radicals of the counter-culture discover that they are a mass movement.

There are national variations, but this broad pattern has emerged. As well as in the major struggles, it can be seen replicated in a hundred smaller ones, and in a thousand local protests.

The British student revolt of November-December 2010 was triggered by a broken promise not to raise university fees. It then culminated in a pitched battle in Parliament Square, as students

attempted to occupy a public space outside the assembly building where democracy had been overturned.

A year later, Occupy London established a camp outside St Pauls Cathedral, again creating a democratic space within the neoliberal city, this time challenging the authority of the City of London, a gigantic casino and tax-haven for the global super-rich run by a mafia of bankers.

Erdogan: neoliberalism with Islamic characteristics

No-one could have predicted that a violent police attack on a makeshift protest camp in Gezi Park would detonate such a wave of anger and resistance across Turkey. Police rule had gone unchallenged for so long. Violence against protestors had become routine. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, after three election victories and a decade in power, seemed beyond serious challenge. Zero-tolerance of protest had become the norm in neoliberal Istanbul.

But the Erdogan mix of cultural conservatism and corporate power had gone toxic beneath the glitz. Erdogan straddles two worlds. One is that of the typical backward village in remote Anatolia, where lives are blighted by poverty and minds numbed by rural imams; or perhaps the teeming urban slum, where refugees from such places struggle for existence on the fringes of metropolitan capitalism.

The statistics of misery are grim. Turkey ranks second highest (behind Mexico) for social inequality among the 34 more advanced countries of the OECD. One in six Turks lives below the poverty line, and the proportion rises to 40% among those working in agriculture. Discrimination means that less than one in three women has a job (half the OECD average), while there are an estimated third of a million child-labourers in Turkey.

Erdogan's other world is that of the Turkish bourgeoisie – the world of million-dollar mansions and bobbing yachts on the Bosphorus; the world of Istinye Retail Park, a modern glass-and-concrete temple to designer capitalism, with multi-tiered underground car-park and 300 elite stores selling everything from \$1,000 handbags to \$10,000 watches to \$100,000 sports cars.

Symbolic of Erdogan's authoritarian neoliberalism is a succession of mega-construction projects proclaimed from on high. The new shopping mall planned for Gezi Park, one of the Istanbul's few remaining green spaces, is only the latest. Swathes of 'social cleansing' have been necessary to redevelop and gentrify central areas of Istanbul. The poor have been driven out and workers and young people squeezed by rising rents as the city has been colonised by neoliberal capital and the new rich.

City of discontents

Erdogan's AKP (Justice and Development Party) regime has built an electoral base among the most backward sections of Turkish society by waving an Islamic flag and backing token conservative policies like bans on abortion, adultery, and alcohol. This, however, is a green film stretched thin around a hard neoliberal programme indistinguishable in its essentials from that promoted by the rest of the global political elite.

By deregulating the economy, inviting in foreign capital, and securing a succession of IMF loans, Erdogan has turned Turkish capitalism into a manufacturing and exporting powerhouse, with annual growth of around 7% a year for much of his decade in office. Very little of this wealth has benefitted ordinary Turks. With unions shackled by military-period laws, women subject to routine employment

discrimination, and young people's lives blighted by persistent high unemployment and soaring rents, discontent has been building for years.

Erdogan's foreign policy stance is an extension of his neoliberalism. Despite rhetorical support for the Palestinians, the real substance is his pitching for Turkish membership of the EU, with its hard-wired austerity and privatisation, and his alignment with western imperialism in the Syrian crisis.

It is little wonder that former AKP voters – along with many other Turkish Muslims – are among the protestors.

Nonetheless, the street radicals are a fairly small minority of Turkey's 76 million people, even when account is taken of the 50 or so major towns to which the protests have spread. But they give expression to the widespread discontent in the depths of Turkish society. They have reawakening the sense that resistance is possible among millions of working people. And they have pushed the AKP regime – strutting, arrogant, belligerent – into crisis.

The intransigence and police violence of the regime may defeat the current upsurge. But whatever the outcome, it will not resolve the contradictions tearing Turkish society apart, and it will not destroy the mass movement of resistance that has come into being. Turkey will not return to pre-Taksim normality. A new age of protest has begun.

The new movement

Every popular mass movement faces three basic tasks if it is to advance. They can be summed up in three words: unity, democracy, and clarity. Unity is achieved when the greatest possible social forces are drawn into the struggle together. Democracy requires the creation of forms of popular organisation that can give direct expression to the will of the active masses. And clarity of both purpose and direction are necessary to orient the movement, maximise its support, and drive it forwards towards radical change.

The left-wing economist and journalist Paul Mason has compared the Taksim Square movement to the Paris Commune of 1871. The Commune went down to defeat after 50 days. Not the least reason was limited ambition. It failed to enfranchise women and it made no serious attempt to spread the revolution beyond the city. The reactionary Versailles government was able to use an army of peasant soldiers to crush revolutionary Paris.

The current phase of the Egyptian Revolution provides another historical lesson. There, the revolutionary vanguard, the urban mass movement of Tahrir Square, has been flattened (for the time being at least) under a mountain of village votes for an Islamic neoliberal. The revolution has stalled.

To win, a popular mass movement cannot afford to stand still. It must reach out, broaden its base, and draw new forces into the struggle. To do this, it must unite the struggle for democracy in the city with the struggle for social reform among the mass of workers, peasants, and poor people.

History's finest example remains that of the Bolshevik Party in Russia in 1917. The slogan 'Peace, Bread, and Land' crystallised the aims of the revolutionary movement and united the largest possible numbers behind the leadership of the revolutionary vanguard. 'All Power to the Soviets' elevated the workers', soldiers', and peasants' councils, a great network of direct democracy, into an alternative to the old state apparatus. The October Revolution was the realisation in practice of these two slogans.

The formula - unity, democracy, clarity - is yet to be bettered in the struggle to remake the world.

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<http://www.counterfire.org/index.php/articles/analysis/16514-learning-from-taksim-square#sthash.cwVqZhr3.dpuf>