

Joining the debate on protests in Turkey:

A discussion with Professor of International Relations at Kadir Has University Soli Ozel, Bertha F. Cohen Professor at Lehigh University Henri J. Barkey and Deputy Director of Istituto Affari Internazionali Dr Nathalie Tocci for ELIAMEP website

• *Real causes of discontent expressed in Istanbul and other Turkish cities*

**Soli
Ozel**

Turkey's immensely successful Prime Minister Erdogan is now being taught one of the lessons that follows absolute corruption of power. He faces a massive popular mobilisation. This is mainly in reaction to his arrogance, autocratic tendencies, intolerance and abrasive/condescending style.

**Henri J.
Barkey**

This is about the governance style of Prime Minister Erdogan and the AKP and it is not against the system as we saw in the Arab countries. The increasingly authoritarian style of governance where the prime minister interferes in every aspect of society, decides on his own what and when will be built, when and how people will consume alcohol or how many kids a family should have had startled to rattle a lot of people. The demonstrators are not necessarily hard core AKP opponents rather they belong to a class and group that sees itself more in tune with the values of the rest of the world. It includes supporters of the KP or at least people who voted for the party in past elections. The other very important aspect of this crisis concerns the opposition. This current state of the opposition parties is lamentable; had there been an effective opposition to the AKP then there would not be any need for these demonstrations. It is the frustrations with the opposition that has driven the young 25-35 year olds to the street.

**Nathalie
Tocci**

Causes include Alevi discontent, environmentalist concerns, secularist fears and nationalist preoccupations. What unites all is the concern about Erdogan's leadership style and majoritarianism.

- ***Impact of the domestic crisis on the AKP and Prime Minister Erdogan***

**Soli
Ozel**

Erdogan's initial reactions suggest that he will not hear the message or heed the lesson. For the protestors it is all about Turkey's future identity. It is about creating a genuinely secular, democratic republic that is comfortable with all the constituent elements of its identity and the institutionalisation of the rule of law, independence of the judiciary and respect for citizens' private lives. Although the electoral popularity of Erdogan will hardly be affected, he will be scarred. If global markets react furiously it will shake his business constituency. Some are suggesting that he might go for early elections if he does away with the three term rule. We will have to wait the end of the month to get clear picture on these. It is not yet clear that the prime minister will hear the message or heed the lesson.

**Henri J.
Barkey**

Erdogan is on track to become president; there is no one in Turkey who can stand against him. He may find that some of his support has waned but the lack of alternatives is what drives the process. Again it goes to the disarray and poverty of the opposition. Were elections to be held tomorrow, AKP would still win comfortably. Some people argue that President Gul will challenge Erdogan. I do not see that happening. Whatever his faults, and they are many, Erdogan is the dominant personality. Turkey is a one party, one man system and Erdogan is the man.

**Nathalie
Tocci**

A turning point is unlikely now. Yet, there are deeper implications of the protests. A significant challenge, for instance, is related to a new civilian constitution. The snag here is that the AKP does not have the parliamentary numbers to go it alone. With its 326 seats in the Turkish Grand National Assembly, the AKP is a handful of seats short of the 330-seat majority required to put the draft constitution to referendum. Reaching agreement with the CHP and the nationalist party MHP is unlikely, particularly if the AKP insists on a presidential system in the new constitution. Dialogue and consensus-building are now required that the AKP government must come to terms with.

- **Consequences on the reconciliation effort with the Kurds**

**Soli
Ozel**

There is no real reason for that to be adversely affected.

**Henri J.
Barkey**

This is quite complex. Perceptions is what guides people's behaviour. To the extent that Erdogan will feel hurt by these events and feel the need to compensate for them he may make mistakes. This is the great danger. Similarly others (including Kurds and even neighbouring countries) may also interpret a sense of weakness in Erdogan, which may or may not be true, and act accordingly. The Kurdish peace process is still far more resilient than what people may think. Both sides have real reason to pursue it; it is in both of their short-, medium- and long-term interests. The consequences of failure are too calamitous to contemplate in my view.

**Nathalie
Tocci**

Also in this case, dialogue and consensus-building are required for the AKP. The final die in the arduous road towards reconciliation has not been cast and many are the pitfalls along the way. Prime amongst these is what the AKP is actually willing to concede in terms of Kurdish individual and collective rights in the new constitution and whether these will meet the Kurdish red lines.

- ***The day after for Turkey's international image and regional role***

**Soli
Ozel**

The conflict in Syria has already negatively influenced both Turkey's international image and its regional role.

**Henri J.
Barkey**

Turkey's and certainly Erdogan's image have suffered. This is especially true because he decided to go ahead with the trip to north Africa. A trip to Arab countries would certainly have amplified the coverage and interpretation of events in Turkey among Arab audiences. If the trip was to eastern Europe for instance, these may not have resonated as much. Still let us not forget that Turkey is an economic giant next to the Arab world; it is a society that works and where the state has become quite efficient. More importantly, notwithstanding it is still a democracy. The demonstrations are about inclusion not overthrowing despotic regimes. Syria, Iraq, Hezbollah and Iran will interpret (and emphasis here is on 'interpret') events incorrectly I assume. They will think that Erdogan has suffered a near mortal blow. This is not the case, but Assad will be acting on his interpretation and therefore will likely be taking Turkey less seriously.

**Nathalie
Tocci**

Turkey's democratic consolidation will be seriously threatened.
