After Gezi Park Protests: Rethinking Turkish Politics and Political Culture - 8th Annual Turkish Studies Symposium

This year’s Turkish Studies Symposium, organized by the European Union Center, focused on reevaluating politics and society in Turkey after an event that shook Turkey and the rest of the world, and called for a change in the perceptions of this key U.S. ally. After Gezi, the paradigm of Turkey as a model Muslim democracy for the Middle Eastern region could not be used in the same manner anymore.

Professor Fatma Müge Göçek from the University of Michigan discussed the increased role of market forces and consumerism in contemporary Turkey, especially visible during the almost twelve-year rule of the AKP. Dr. Göçek emphasized that the prioritization of business affected various areas of life, including human rights and democracy, and, in particular, groups that do not have as many stakes in business and consumerism, such as the youth and women. These two groups were quite active in the protests in Istanbul; the government called them “çapulcu,” meaning “plunderers” in Turkish, a label young people accepted and wore with pride ever since, in a sense changing the very meaning of the word. The speaker also stressed the importance of the spaces where the protests took place and where they found support: the cities and the Turkish diaspora, which generally strongly supported the protest movement. On the other hand, she argued that the two most important spaces for the AKP government have been mosques, the places of worship, and shopping malls. The name of the party translates to Justice and Development Party, where justice is not the justice that relates directly to human rights or an independent judicial system, but justice as seen through a religious lens. At the same time, according to the AKP, increased consumption signals that society as a whole has developed. Dr. Göçek pointed out that the shopping malls have remained sanitized and secured spaces, largely unaffected by the mass protests. She concluded that life has become increasingly hard for anyone who is not a consumer or a believer, but she hopes that it is precisely in the two spaces mentioned earlier, cities and the diaspora, that we will see the “seeds of change” for Turkey.

Ph.D. Candidate Avital Livny from Stanford University gave an extremely interesting presentation on a number of surveys done with the participants in the Gezi protests, which focused on determining what is the state of political participation in Turkey and where the protests fall in terms of this important question. In general, prior to the Gezi events, Turkish citizens have not been particularly active in the country’s political life. Ph.D. Candidate Avital Livny from Stanford University gave an extremely interesting presentation on a number of surveys done with the participants in the Gezi protests, which focused on determining what is the state of political participation in Turkey and where the protests fall in terms of this important question. In general, prior to the Gezi events, Turkish citizens have not been particularly active in the country’s political life. Out of these newly politically active people, a large portion are women, along with religious people with traditionalist views. It is also interesting to look at people’s motivations for taking part in the protests: 50% of the people came to protest because they were aggravated by the disproportional violence used against the initial, green protest; 19% said they were protesting because of the destruction of trees and nature, while 14% had been motivated by Prime Minister Erdoğan’s divisive rhetoric and speeches. While the very active participation of young and educated people can be seen as a continuation of an existing trend, the exceptionally high participation rate of women and the more active participation of religious people can...
be seen as a new trend directly tied to Gezi.

Dr. Sinan Ciddi’s presentation focused on an overview of Turkish political life, in particular with regard to the recent local elections and the upcoming presidential elections. The speaker underlined the fact that religion has also played a central role in formulating AKP policies, noting the fact that the party has only recently been one vote away from being banned as a political movement because of its religiously oriented agenda. Mr. Ciddi also touched upon the theme of increased consumption and a growing number of shopping centers being seen as proof of intense development. He stressed that perhaps the main reason for the consistent support for the current government is the perception that it has largely performed rather well in terms of: a significant growth of the economy; the large and well maintained highways; and large construction projects, including the project for a third bridge across the Bosphorus, something that, as the speaker in jest noted, would hardly be noticed in a country like the U.S. Additionally, Dr. Ciddi observed that one major reason for the limited costs for the government and the relatively low decrease in support is the fact that Turkey is a country where it is extremely difficult to establish a new, grass-roots political movement. Even if the registration and monetary problems are overcome, it would be a formidable challenge to rise up against an established political force like the AKP, which is currently in power.

Dr. Bill Park from Kings College London closed the symposium with some aspects of Turkey’s engagement in the Middle East and the Kurdish issue, expressing his concerns that the recent opening towards Turkey’s Kurds may not end in bringing the desired peace, but rather further complications in the issue. While Dr. Park expressed a general pessimism with regard to the future and possible results of the domestic opening towards the Kurds, he also stressed that Turkey and the surrounding region are really in the midst of a period of very potent developments, and there is no way to tell for sure what the near future holds. His feeling is that dramatic changes may be in store.

Overall, this was a wonderful symposium dealing with current events in Turkey and offering different points of view on the significant changes that have happened over the course of recent years. The Gezi Park protests that took over the entire country last June apparently signal many upcoming changes not only in Turkish politics but, quite likely, Turkish society as a whole. They definitely call for a reevaluation of the dynamic developments that we have seen with modern Turkey during the almost twelve year-long AKP rule.

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