

CIVIL SOCIETY IN TURKEY'S SHRINKING POLITICAL SPACE

Since 2007, there has been a tangible shrinking of the political space for those who do not support the AKP government in Turkey, which in turn, has had a negative impact on traditional grassroots organizing. The author identifies the May 2013 Gezi Park protests as a complex turning point in this sense. The protests revealed widespread popular discontent towards the government, as well as how far the AKP was willing to go to suppress dissent. According to the author, the post-Gezi experience has yielded contradictory impacts; on the one hand, the government has created fear of organized action, but on the other hand, previously disconnected grassroots groups in Turkey's civil society are forming new alliances. This development, according to the author, is an important and valuable experience arising from the Gezi protests and one that can provide new opportunities for mobilizing grassroots activism.

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A growing body of evidence from over the last decade reveals that the pace of democratization, which has been used as one of the main political justifications for the consolidation of the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) power, was mostly rhetoric rather than a genuine political agenda. Various groups constituting the political opposition have become the target of governmental scrutiny and oppression; in parallel to this, there have been serious attempts by the government to curb existing human rights norms; women's rights, right to free speech, freedom of the press, as well as efforts to politicize the judiciary. Despite the fact that these backlashes have been pointed out in reports by international bodies such as the European Commission, the Council of Europe, and the UN several times, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan continues to give provocative speeches on these issues, which in turn has deepened public discontent.

Even though in the eyes of the international community the state of fundamental human rights drastically deteriorated during the *Gezi* protests, when we turn our focus to the situation before June 2013, we see that the trend of oppression and shrinking of political space in Turkey did not start with *Gezi*. Following its second electoral victory in 2007, with the consolidation of its power, the AKP started to move away from its "all-embracing democratic approach" as has often been underlined in their election propaganda, and started to openly crack down on fundamental rights – mainly freedom of expression. Political opponents faced oppressive measures such as arrest, detention, and arbitrary trials. Human rights defenders, grassroots activists, and opposition journalists began to fear being subject to intimidation, arrest, or physical harm just for speaking out for what they stood for. Political space for grassroots politics began to be constricted through limits imposed by the ruling party on the freedoms of assembly, demonstration, and expression. Moreover, Islamist sensitivities became much more apparent in Erdoğan's discourse, from 2007 onwards.

As a result of the abovementioned causes of public unrest, prior to the eruption of the *Gezi* protests, dissent against AKP had already surfaced. However, the events of 2013's *Gezi* protests – also referred to as the June Resistance – were marked as one of the biggest anti-government movements in Turkey's political history. Towards the end of October 2012, the government declared its intention to destroy *Gezi* Park in order to reconstruct historical Ottoman artillery barracks to be used as a shopping mall and residence. The reaction from environmentalists and concerned citizens was countered by a harsher response from then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Petition campaigns and small-scale demonstrations started to rise up against AKP's neoliberal policies on public spaces as well as their broader gentrification agenda. With the fast spread of mobilization following the destruction machines' entrance into the park, people started to gather at *Gezi* to reclaim the park. One of the first

brutal encounters with the police occurred on 30 May 2013 when police forces burned protesters' tents and used tear gas and water cannons to expel protesters from the park, thus sparking the resistance movement.

Beginning as a small protest, by early June the resistance had spread across 79 of Turkey's 81 provinces. The police estimate that 3.5 million people took part in the protests. The reaction of the authorities to this democratic civil initiative was far from compromising and very brutal. Police repeatedly used abusive force including tear

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gas, water cannons, and beatings to prevent and disperse peaceful demonstrations. Figures from Amnesty International's report are self-explanatory regarding the June Resistance: approximately 640,000 people participated in the demonstrations; the largest protests took place in Istanbul, with reports of more than 100,000 protesters. Approximately 6,000 demonstrators were put on trial on charges such as joining unauthorized protests, resisting the police, damaging public property, administering health services to the injured, sharing information or opinions about the protests on social media, and even for terrorism offenses. An estimated 3.5 million of Turkey's 80 million population took an active part in demonstrations across Turkey connected with the original *Gezi* protests; 11 people were killed and more than 8,000 were injured, many critically.¹

During *Gezi*, people not only resisted the physical destruction of parks for the government's economic gain and occupation of the streets by police, but also stood up against the idea of being deprived of spaces in which to express ideas, opinion, anger, and dissent publicly. German philosopher Axel Honneth's definition of the public sphere as the “place of social struggles and conflictualities and not as a homogeneous and unified space,” reflects the state of public space in Turkey during the *Gezi* resistance. It is therefore important to see that the struggle throughout the June Resistance is also the struggle for the reclaiming of the public sphere through grassroots mobilization.

Even after the protests ended, state authorities continued to punish this unprecedented grassroots organizing through various means. I will explore the ways in which political space in Turkey has been shrunk by the still-ongoing undercover war against civil

¹ “Adding Injustice to Injury, One year on from the *Gezi* Park Protests in Turkey,” *Amnesty International*, 4 June 2014, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/for-media/press-releases/adding-injustice-injury-one-year-after-gezi-park-protests-2014-06-04>

society and grassroots organizing, and, counter intuitively, how this shrinking of political space has paved the way for newly built alliances in grassroots activism.

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It is worth emphasizing here that the term “shrinking” is applied in this article in both a concrete and symbolic sense, as the oppressive measures introduced by the AKP government have impacts on varying levels and not all of them can be assessed in a tangible manner. On the one hand, the use of physical force by the police, depriving people belonging to opposition groups from their freedom with arbitrary custodies or arrests, or the destruction of public spaces for neoliberal urban transformation projects have immediate and tangible consequences resulting in the narrowing down of political spaces.

The Physical Shrinking of the Political Sphere

The extent of violence revealed by the figures cited indicates the shrinking of the political sphere in a very concrete sense of the term. Following the massive brutality against protestors, the government continued to restrict the right to freedom of assembly, and then-Prime Minister (now President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan did not hesitate to aggravate the situation with his threatening messages insinuating that police brutality would continue with the support of the government. Erdoğan’s glorifying statement on police forces’ “heroic” actions was the most obvious instance of this support.² The use of abusive force by law enforcement officials has continued in the aftermath of *Gezi*. Subsequent demonstrations met with police crackdowns: student protests at Middle East Technical University in Ankara (October 2013), the funeral for Berkin Elvan – who was hit in the head with a gas canister while out to buy bread and died after being comatose for nine months – in Istanbul (March 2014), May Day in Istanbul (2014), the Soma mining disaster protests (May 2014), and Kobani solidarity demonstrations (6-7 October 2014) to name a few. Flooding the streets with tear gas for hours cannot be explained with the intention to disperse the protesters, but rather to propagate a sense of fear among people and introduce *de facto* curfew orders.

² “Prime Minister Erdoğan blesses Turkish police for ‘heroic’ action during Gezi unrest,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, 24 June 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-prime-minister-erdogan-praises-polices-intervention-in-gezi-protests-as-heroic.aspx?pageID=238&nid=49356>

In addition to these events, the closing of *Taksim Square* – with its historical and symbolic importance in the collective memory of political opposition in Turkey – to all sorts of peaceful protests, restraining meetings and demonstrations to remote places of the city, and declaring all other gatherings unlawful provide further examples of the physical shrinking of public space. These policies also introduced a physical divide between “good citizens” and “bad citizens” according to the government. The bad citizens continued to insist on *Taksim Square* for their demonstrations, while good ones gathered in the *Yenikapı* coastal area. This divide among citizens is essential to the AKP’s way of practicing politics: seeking not only to sustain its power but also to institutionalize its authority by creating polarization within society.

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The Symbolic Shrinking of the Political Sphere

As pointed out at the beginning of this article, not all restrictive measures contributing to the shrinking of political space yield tangible impacts. By tangible, I mean those situations having immediate consequences and concretely narrowing the political field. Symbolical shrinking refers to limitations on the accessibility of ways to become politically engaged, and can result from diverse factors. From the *Gezi* protests onwards, the authorities have continued to carry out witch-hunts by targeting the movement’s supporters with unreasonable investigations, arbitrary detentions, and unlawful arrests. Many of the victims of these deterrent and punitive efforts were accused simply of participating in protests. While the protest movement and its supporters have been punished with highly aggressive measures, despite thousands of injuries and criminal complaints against the excessive use of force, police impunity is predominant in almost all cases. This impunity also contributes to the shrinking of political space by destroying the sense of justice among people and diminishing their willingness to engage in politics.

It is also crucial to mention that a few months after the *Gezi* Protests, Erdoğan openly revealed his intention to block Twitter across the country, implementing this right away. During *Gezi* he had repeatedly labeled social media sites – one of the most vital means of communication and organizing for the protesters – “the worst menace to society.”³ The post-*Gezi* ban on social media was a serious attack on

³ “Social media and opposition to blame for protests, says Turkish PM,” *The Guardian*, 3 June 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/02/turkish-protesters-control-istanbul-square>

“Once [the new domestic security bill] passes through Parliament, police use of excessive force will no longer be arbitrary but legitimate.”

freedom of expression, but the tone adopted by Erdoğan was even more aggravating. At a campaign rally prior to local elections in March 2014, Erdoğan stated: “We now have a court order. We’ll eradicate Twitter. I don’t care what the international community says. Everyone will witness the power of the Turkish Republic.”⁴ This ever-harsher manner of his speech started when he

argued that the June Resistance was the outcome of an international conspiracy, the protestors were merely a bunch of “looters,” and the banners that hung on the Atatürk Cultural Center were just “rags.” At this level, it is important to notice that Erdoğan puts himself in a position of authority, labeling the opposition, and thus, promoting the increasing violence against it. This manipulation of people’s perception of the *Gezi* protests was intended to trivialize as well as criminalize the movement – and served as a very strong tool of the symbolic shrinking of political space.

The most common accusation used by Erdoğan and his followers to denigrate the *Gezi* movement was that protestors are trying to destroy political order. I find it helpful to resort to American political scientist Mark Kesselman’s understanding of political order. He points out:

The concept of political order is not neutral: it places the burden of disorder on subordinates who challenge elites. (...) Disorder that results because of the rulers and ruling institutions who exert coercion falls outside the definition. Yet authorities may disrupt the status quo more than subordinates and may create (or help perpetuate) a status quo that defies elemental requisites of the political community.⁵

By defining what falls in the political order and what (and who) is left outside of it, Erdoğan attempts to set the boundaries of political space without taking into consideration people’s agency in contributing to the making of political order. The excessive use of force by the law enforcement officials was obviously not counted as something destroying this “order.”

4 “Turkey blocks Twitter, after Erdoğan vowed ‘eradication,’” *Hurriyet Daily News*, 20 March 2014, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-blocks-twitter-after-erdogan-vowed-eradication.aspx?pageID=238&nID=63884&News-CatID=338>

5 Mark Kesselman, “Review: Order or Movement?: The Literature of Political Development as Ideology,” *World Politics*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (October 1973), pp. 139-154.

Another major factor contributing to the shrinking of political space is the ambiguity of legislation regulating fundamental democratic rights. Even after so many deaths and injuries occurred throughout Turkey, very little has been done to prevent repetitions of the systematic human rights violations that occurred during and after *Gezi*. The government has not taken any steps to bring the existing law on meetings and demonstrations in line with international standards, for example. On the contrary, the new draconian domestic security bill was brought into agenda by the government. Despite the fact that the right to peaceful assembly, which is embraced by international human rights conventions, is also guaranteed in Turkey's constitution, the right to freedom of peaceful assembly continues to be denied and excessive use of force by police carries on. As a result of this, the perception that the government was protecting the perpetrators of the violence – i.e. the police – prevailed throughout society. A Kadir Has University report on Social and Political Trends in Turkey reveals the extent to which confidence in law enforcement officials greatly dropped following the police's use of violence during the Gezi protests: the percent of respondents that distrusted the police forces rose from 26.3 percent in 2011 to 38.6 percent in 2014.⁶

Even more aggravating is the new domestic security bill expanding the power and authority of the police force, which is a clear sign that efforts to ensure democratic rights and freedoms are fading and a security approach to political struggles is taking hold. Once this bill passes through Parliament, police use of excessive force will no longer be arbitrary but legitimate, as it will have a legal basis in the newly introduced bill. With this bill, the police can search any vehicle and person they deem suspicious, and the 24-hour detention period would be extended to 48 hours.

Detainment following participation in mass events may be increased up to four days through prosecutorial order, and house searches and wire-tapping will be carried out more easily. In sum, this bill would grant law enforcement officials “war entitlements,” as the citizens according to this bill would fall under the category of “enemies.” The process of criminalization of the entire society through the legal measures to lead Turkey in the direction of becoming a police state is the ultimate point of narrowing the democratic political space. This legal regulation constitutes a great threat to freedoms and political liberties, sending a strong message

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⁶ “Türkiye Sosyal-Siyasal Eğilimler Araştırması” [Research of Social and Political Trends in Turkey], *Kadir Has University*, 20 January 2015, <http://www.khas.edu.tr/uploads/pdf-doc-vb/news/TSSEA20OCAK2015.pdf>

to grassroots movements and the wider public that in Turkey no one is safe before the state and any person can be treated as a criminal and taken into custody at any time.

The End of Politics as We Know it: What Can We Learn from the Grassroots Movements?

Oppression and violence (both physical or through deprivation of fundamental rights) as political tools that strongly influence our collective memories have become the leading causes of the symbolical shrinking of political space in Turkey. There is a clear correlation between fear and surrender; thus, the intimidation propagated through both discourse and actual policies of the AKP government always aimed at weakening the resistance and sending protestors back home. Yet at the same time resistance and solidarity became the counter-weapons to keep the struggle going. This section turns to the opportunities simultaneously opened with the shrinking of the political space and the newly built alliances in grassroots activism that emerged as a result.

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June 2013 remains in our collective memories with so many striking moments that could not have been expected. These are also clear signs that the *Gezi* protests were more than a mere aggregation of individuals, but also a shared identity and sense of “we-ness” that emerged spontaneously and unpredictably. The most remarkable moments of this heterogeneous “we-ness” are those that happened during police attacks. People started to resist side by side in quickly growing numbers, and

the fear stemming from tear gas and water cannons brought them together and made them care for each other. It was a common practice among protestors to bring extra equipment or medication to help out other protestors. Another very concrete sign of solidarity was that in all of the police attacks to disperse protestors, no one ever trampled on top of anyone to save oneself. During the resistance days, working in makeshift infirmaries and refectories, collecting garbage, and patrolling guard duty became the new grounds of collectivity. The alliances between different groups started to emerge in these very instances.

These examples of solidarity became the routine and unwritten code of conduct of the *Gezi* movement. Grassroots movements taking part in the resistance have

shown that it is possible to resist collectively and initiate change, moving from minor achievements to bigger gains. The solidarity that began around the defense of a few trees – this argument would also be used by government authorities to belittle the essence of the protests – prevented the destruction of *Gezi* Park and culminated in a major raising of awareness nation-wide.

The surge of struggle not only raised many questions about how to foster a solid ground of political participation at the grassroots level, but also brought closer different components of the struggle that had previously been quite distant from each other. While democratic tools and grounds of political engagement were being taken away from the opposition – i.e. the collectivity of all the various groups constituting the resistance movement – new alliances and solidarities were born. Contact between different social movements intensified. Alliances that did not exist between political groups before came into being. This constitutes a very important experience that remains from the June Resistance.

Along with other groups, LGBTIs reclaimed the public sphere, joining the struggle to take back the park from the very first minute. It would not be misleading to say that there also existed a parallel struggle on behalf of LGBTI groups to gain recognition and acceptance in a largely homophobic and transphobic society.

LGBTI individuals who were on the streets, at the barricades, and gathered around the LGBT Block experienced political space in a new way, together with people who had no idea of who LGBTI's are and what they stand for. After the first few days, the LGBT Block became one of the most well-known gathering points in the park, and many columnists and media people acknowledged the “courage” of LGBTIs in the protests. The presence of often derisively termed “faggots” at the first ranks of the resistance, sitting in front of police trucks together with football fans had an equalizing impact among different groups of protesters. This was also the moment when hate speech and homophobic and transphobic attitudes began to fade away out of the park and resistance slogans to a considerable extent.

It is also important to note that several people from different groups approached the LGBT Block not only to start a dialogue with their fellow grassroots activists but also to apologize for their pre-judgmental attitudes and the existing homophobia and transphobia towards the LGBT community in society that they had previously been a part of.

Young people from the Anti-capitalist Muslims group spending the night together with people from the LGBT Block demonstrates how the encounter in the park

made the former groups of protesters realize their pre-judgments about LGBTIs. Members of a large soccer fan organization, *Çarşı*, also visited the LGBT Block to apologize for their homophobic and transphobic slogans.

Just like protestors as a whole were labeled and marginalized by state authorities during the *Gezi* protests, the LGBTI community have been treated the same way for years and portrayed as “threats” to public order. Erdoğan’s discourse propagating a sense of otherness actually brought different “others” of the country together. The narrowing down of political space automatically brought different elements constituting the grassroots political movement closer together. Marginalization and exclusion from the “public order” made all the “looters” come together, and strengthened their will to stand with all the “others” against the hegemonic discourse. These encounters meant not only getting closer to each others’ lives and struggles but also countering all the tough moments of resistance all together.

Conclusion

For the grassroots groups that had never come together or acknowledged each other’s struggles before *Gezi*, June 2013 was the starting point of an eye-opening process. The newly established alliances opened up a space for different groups to build relationships among each other and make the issues of other groups part of their agenda. Political alliances forged during and in the aftermath of *Gezi* created a very precious opportunity through which people began to see what could be achieved with solidarity. This new awareness also created a push for civil society; park forums continued in different neighborhoods widening the outreach of the grassroots mobilizing which started through *Gezi*. Although the vivid enthusiasm from the June 2013 resistance gradually lost its intensity, the quest for a more inclusive and pluralistic way of doing politics has remained as a tangible goal and still exists in grassroots activists’ memories. What needs to be derived from the experience of the *Gezi* protests is that the hope generated by bringing different groups together needs to be kept alive in order to expand and deepen new alliances. This seems to be the only way to reclaim the democratic political space and challenge the government’s oppressive measures to shrink it.