

The Old “#New” Game: Politics and Social Media in Turkey

Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

On May 31, 2013, a non-violent demonstration in the center of Istanbul against plans to demolish Gezi Park, a green space in the heart of Taksim Square, was harshly repressed by the police, triggering the most serious and sustained social protest against the Turkish authorities in recent memory. Initially, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan dismissed the protestors offhand, declaring that “no matter what you do, we have made a decision and we will implement it.” In order to bypass state-controlled media, demonstrators turned to uncensored social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook. This use of social media for the purpose of large-scale mobilization marked a major development in relations between Turkish authorities and civil society. Unlike previous political demonstrations against government policies, the ongoing Gezi Park confrontations brought about the most unusual alliance in Turkish political history: Green movements, communists, socialists, nationalists, Kemalists, Kurdish and women’s rights activists, workers’ unions, anti-capitalist Muslims and even the supporters of three leading Istanbul sports clubs. The broader context was the Erdoğan government’s increasingly authoritarian behavior and fears for the future of Turkish democracy, particularly among Turkey’s secular middle and educated classes.

These fears have been stoked by a number of controversial positions taken by Erdoğan, including advocating the banning of abortions and optional caesarean births, and support for a new law aimed at discouraging alcohol consumption by limiting purchasing hours. Steps such as the ban on celebrating national secular holidays in public locations, e.g. stadiums and plazas, seemed to confirm the fears

that the secular nationalist foundations of the ninety year-old Turkish republic were being undermined. The measure resulted in clashes between secular Turks and police forces in Ankara on Republic Day, October 29, 2012. Similarly, the removal of the Turkish Republic's (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti – TC) initials from the Ministry of Health's logo was deemed to be designed to alter the Turkish state's national character. This particular act resulted in the first important social media backlash against the authorities when Turkish Facebook users added "TC" to their names.

Unlike western Europe's aging population, Turkey's population is very young. Turks spend a good deal of time surfing the web. Today high-speed internet has penetrated 19 million people's homes. This rate is higher in Istanbul and western Turkey than in the eastern or landlocked regions. Furthermore, people who do not own a personal computer can surf the web at internet cafés or via their smartphones. According to the Turkish Communications Ministry, approximately 11 million people use their smartphones to surf the internet while 39 million people have the infrastructure to surf in 3G.

Although a democracy, Turkey engages in internet censorship. Today approximately 1,874 internet addresses are blocked due to law number 5651, which bans the surfing of pornographic, pedophilic, gambling, and prostitution-related sites. YouTube has also been the target of Turkey's tough internet policy: in 2007 and 2008, access to it was blocked on several occasions for periods of time due to a video that depicted Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of modern Turkey, as a monkey, which was deemed to be unacceptably offensive. YouTube became fully accesible only after a private agency bought and removed that particular video from the internet in 2010. During the period of blockage, Turkish internet users began to use proxy IP numbers or websites like the famous "ktunnel," which allowed users to circumvent Turkish censorship.

In May 2011, the Erdoğan government's Informatic Technologies and Communications Committee (Bilişim Teknolojileri ve İletişim Kurulu, BTK) issued a new regulation for internet usage. BTK introduced three packages that would be applied to all internet providers and users in Turkey: standard (uncensored), children (no social networks, only educational sites), and family (social networks enabled but no gambling, pornography, etc.). With this regulation, the government intended to keep records of people's internet usage as well as limit Facebook and Twitter usage among teenagers. With consciousness having been raised by the YouTube episode, a mass

demonstration was held in Istanbul in which protestors proclaimed “Do not touch my internet” (İnternetime Dokunma). However, despite this and accompanying efforts to bring about a court order to change the regulation, it was approved in November 2011.

In its usage of Twitter, Turkey is 8th in the world,¹ and Turkish Facebook use tops that of European nations.² These high numbers manifested themselves in the Gezi Park protests. Thanks in part to smartphones and Twitter, the protests quickly spread across Turkey. Erdoğan named Twitter and other social networks as a “menace” to all societies in general and to Turkish society in particular. Ironically, and notwithstanding such criticism, Erdoğan himself has almost three million followers on Twitter. In fact, Erdoğan and his supporters have formed their own Facebook and Twitter accounts and have been confronting the protesters in the virtual arena. By creating new hashtags with creative names, parties on both sides of the debate attempted to expand or to halt the ongoing demonstrations. One of the most prominent affects of Twitter was seen in the case of the “Standing Man” (Duran Adam). A protestor named Erdem Gündüz went to the Taksim Square and stood there for hours to protest the government and the police’s brutality. In few hours “#duranadam” became the most trendy Twitter topic in Turkey and all significant Turkish public locations saw similar protests by “standingmen.”

Turkish police have acknowledged the importance of social networks and launched an operation against those who tweeted information in support of the riots. Prosecution due to social media use also occurred in the recent blasphemy case of the internationally renowned pianist Fazıl Say. After having tweeted criticism of religious people, Say was sentenced in April 2013 to ten months’ imprisonment for “humiliating Islam.” The sentence was suspended provided that Say does not commit the offense again.³

The Turkish media’s self-censorship has further contributed to the burgeoning use of Twitter and Facebook. During the Gezi Park confrontations, Turkish

¹ Arda Kutsal, “[16.6% Turkish Internet Users are on Twitter!](http://en.webrazzi.com/2011/05/30/turkish-twitter-user/),” Webrazzi, May 30, 2011, <http://en.webrazzi.com/2011/05/30/turkish-twitter-user/>.

² “Facebook’ta Avrupa lideriyiz,” Sabah, January 27, 2012, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/Teknoloji/Haber/2012/01/27/facebookta-avrupa-lideriyiz>.

³ “Fazıl Say’a Hayyam twitinden 10 ay hapis,” BBC Turkish, April 15, 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkce/haberler/2013/04/130415_fazil_say_karar.shtml.

newspapers and the leading TV news channels—CNN Türk of Doğan, NTV of Şahenk, and Habertürk of Ciner Group—ignored or downplayed what was going on in the streets in order not to provoke the government, for fear that the owners’ business interests would be targeted for retaliation by the government or pro-government groups. The highest degree of absurdity was reached when, during the most important moments of the protests, CNN Türk broadcast a documentary film about penguins. The decision came to symbolize the Turkish media’s self-censorship. Following vociferous protests, however, these channels began to broadcast the unfolding events.

The Gezi Park riots have opened a new page in Turkish political history, thanks in no small measure to Twitter and Facebook. Due to the difficulty of censoring social networks and the public’s overcoming of a fear of demonstrating, Erdoğan and his future successors will have to tread carefully before imposing their own will in the face of an absence of consent by significant factors in society. Ultimately, the implications of the Gezi Park confrontations may be far-reaching. In a society in which the state is traditionally glorified at the expense of individual and civil rights, the protests and accompanying employment of social media offer evidence that individuals and civil society associations are attempting to increase their influence in society and on the government’s decision-making processes. This fact on the ground has added a “#new” twist to the old game of Turkish politics. What this will mean for Turkish politics in the long run remains to be seen, but will surely bear watching.

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