

Turkey: What would Ataturk think?

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The father of all Turks and founder of the modern secular Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, must be turning in his grave from the turn of events throughout Turkey and the political implications they usher in.

It all started when a few thousands of Ataturk's unarmed and peaceful sons and daughters took to Istanbul's Taksim Square to protest their government's greed and disregard for the environment as reflected in a lucrative plan to turn Gezi Park (one of Istanbul's last green spaces) into a shopping mall and commercial centre.

That the ambitious project is contracted by Prime Minister's Recep Tayyeb Erdogan's AK Party might be the only reason why the Turkish Police responded in a shocking and unwarranted heavy-handedness against the peaceful tree-huggers. That, coupled with a local media blackout on the peaceful protest and the ensuing violent police response, drove the situation to an all-out protest across the country with people demanding the resignation of Erdogan and his government and even calling him a "dictator."

The Prime Minister and his party have been acting as the masters of Turkey and its only rulers for quite some time. Riding their unquestioned popularity at the polls and pulling the numbers game any time they feel squeezed or pressured. Erdogan's famous quote about protests which he alluded to again over the weekend as he spoke about the latest protests, "you bring one hundred thousand, we bring one million!" This sounds very familiar to those at the receiving end of other Islamists that came to power thanks to the democratic process. Think Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Ennahda in Tunisia, and Hamas in Gaza.

What Mr Erdogan did not count on is that a small environmental protest, which he believed he could totally ignore and intimidate the media into ignoring as well, would end up being the one to expose his dictatorship-style democracy where his own opinions and beliefs are above reproach and where opposition is reduced to nothing and never given the chance to play its natural role. Mr. Erdogan never thought that a simple protest over a green patch would expose his party's inability and unwillingness to listen or negotiate. He never thought the word will get out of Istanbul, let alone to some twenty six cities in Turkey and through social media to the entire world.

A simple march on Taksim Square, which on a regular day would have been insignificant and ineffective, brought out the worst of Turkish Police and brought in the world's attention. When the protests widened and got violent naturally, Mr Erdogan spoke not once but three times on Sunday, trying to appear in control and dismissive of the reach of the loud critical voices. He called Twitter a "bunch of lies-carrying vehicle" and to people calling him a "dictator," he had "nothing to say." In essence doing the same thing his government and his party have done every time they were met with criticism: Playing down the charges, dismissing and discrediting the critics, blaming dissent on the opposition, and moving on with their plans as usual.

Many things should concern anyone looking at Erdogan, his AKP and the future of Turkey as a key player in the Middle East, Europe and on the international scene. Let's mention only some obvious red lights although there are many others: The very charismatic Mr Erdogan, with a large Islamist

voter base, has been rallying to alter the constitution to allow him to become Turkey's first newly empowered president. His plans did not go through at the end of 2012 and earlier this year he seemed to put them on hold for a while. For someone who campaigned hard in 2007 to lift a ban on women wearing headscarves at state universities and made it a priority of his premiership until the ban was lifted, it is very obvious that his Islamist agenda is wrapped nicely into a moderate conservative one. Then the ban on alcohol sale earlier this year, which was introduced, written and approved in two short weeks despite a ferocious opposition and his comment, "those who want to drink can drink at home."

On the same subject, Erdogan has said that the original alcohol law which he overturned was "written by a couple of alcoholics!" One has to wonder if he was referring to Ataturk as an "alcoholic." If so, wouldn't this be considered an "insult" to the father of modern secular Turkey? Because if he meant Ataturk, that would be an offense punishable by law! With an unapologetic statement like this, which went unnoticed, Erdogan's one party rule is well on its way to rolling back Turkey's secularism right under everybody's nose.

For anyone in the free world who applauds Erdogan's Turkey and uses it as a "model" for Arab Spring countries and the Islamic rule within a democracy, let the latest events serve as lessons on how important it is to keep religion and state separate in secular societies and always beware of Islamist agendas disguised as democracies.

I really don't know what Ataturk would think of all this, but if he is rolling in his grave, it is certainly not the first time and, from the way things are going in Turkey, it certainly won't be the last.

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