

## Opinion

# Turkish street demonstrations show a new day has arrived

By **HAKAN ÖZGÜLU**

Guest columnist

Signs held aloft by protesters in the recent Turkish protests said it all:

*"Down with certain things"; "I could not find a slogan to write here"; "I am jealous that some fellow demonstrators have more expensive gas-masks"; "Where are you Spartacus?"; "Hey Prime Minister: may you step on a wet slipper with your sox on"; "I will be back soon, I am taking my final exam at school."*



Özgülu

These samples captured the mood perfectly: thousands of people with hundreds of different agendas turning out to protest the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. What brought them all together was a small thing (protecting a park from demolition) but the real purpose was to vent years of frustration with the prime minister's uncompromising style of governance.

The demonstrations came as a surprise to most Americans who have seen Turkey as a rock of the Mideast, and a mostly loyal American ally. Its neighbors are usually the ones who make the headlines: Greece, Georgia, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. Turkey was the eye, surrounded by the storms. Throughout the world, people wondered if Turkey would go the way of its neighbors, dissolving into riots and revolution.

But demonstrations are nothing new to Turkey. From the formation of Republican Turkey, people demonstrated against the government policies for a wide variety of political reasons. In the 1970s, Turkish youth marched on the streets with a leftist agenda. They were countered with ultra-nationalist demonstrations. After the 1980 military coup Islamists and the Kurds took up the streets showing their own frustrations.

However, the current demonstrations by "the generation Y" (those who were born in the 1990s) represent a new and a powerful force. These demonstrations are unique in that they are spontaneous, decentralized and, quite amazingly, leaderless.

The majority of the initial protesters in this year's demonstrations did not come from any political background and did not know each other. Thanks to social media, the movement spread like a wildfire

through all major and minor Turkish cities as well as diaspora communities in world.

As the movement grew, organized groups with their own anti-government agenda also entered the fray. However, even these political groups could not dilute the individualist character of the protests.

The picture of the Taksim Square just before the last government crackdown on June 15 was very confusing to the naked eye. Leftist, Kurdish nationalist, Islamist, and Turkish nationalist banners were flying next to each other with no visible dispute among them. It is naïve to think that these ideologies have come to terms with one another; yet because of the decentralized character of the movement, they were more inclined to see each other as individual protesters, not members of rival ideologies.

Nothing of the like has happened in Turkey before and this was quite evident from the government's reaction. Erdogan and his inner circle were having the hardest time understanding the true nature of the demonstrations. Erdogan's party, the AKP, attempted to invent an international plot to topple his government; it sank by a simple logic: No international force was mighty enough to mobilize this many "individuals" (2.5 million demonstrated on the streets, many more in their own apartments by clunking pots and pans).

The AKP government feels increasingly cornered and fearful, not of the outcome of the coming elections, but of the long-term effects of Erdogan's unsustainable reaction to those who disagree with him. For the first time in Turkish history, a democratically elected government was imperiled by a massive protest rather than a military coup.

At present, there is much to be both optimistic and pessimistic about the future of Turkey. This experience has proved that people in Turkey are maturing, demanding their political rights against an authoritarian government.

The government in Turkey must recognize the fact that in order to govern effectively, democratic demands of those who did not vote for the current government should not be dismissed. Erdogan must lead by "following" the democratic demands of the "whole nation," not just his electoral base. Otherwise, youth in the Internet age will find many creative and peaceful ways to protest.

*Hakan Özgülu is an associate professor in the department of history at the University of Central Florida.*