Ayşe Kadıoğlu
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Ayse Kadioglu reads the protests in Istanbul as a sign that people demand more than representative democracy. Indeed, it is the citizens' search for participatory democracy that, for the first time in years, may mean Turkey really does become a model in its region.

A few years ago in an interview about Istanbul, when asked if I could describe Istanbul with one word, I paused. Up until that moment I had not thought about this but to my own surprise, I had an immediate response. I answered: "heartbeat." Istanbul has always been a pulsating city; in the last few years its pulse has become too fast to endure. People refer to the city as a lover that takes away all you have and abandons you in a lone corner. It is beautiful and imperially arrogant. These days, Istanbul has really become the heartbeat city to the point of giving its citizens continuous palpitations of the heart. Gezi Park with its radio, two television channels, live broadcast from the channel Revoltistanbul and a daily newspaper became a true public square for free expression.

As the smoke from tear gas disappears from the skies around Gezi Park, in Istanbul’s Taksim square, one demand becomes more and more visible: the demand to voice opinions and participate in decisions. Gezi Park resistance began about ten days ago in order to save the trees in the park that were about to be moved elsewhere in yet another neoliberal construction policy of the government. In his distinctively analytical piece "Turkey, from Tahrir to Taksim", Kerem Öktem portrays how the AKP government that owed much of its success to a “balancing-act between neoliberal readjustment and the extension of welfare” eventually succumbed to “the logic of neoliberal capitalist exploitation”. Gezi, though small, is one of the last remaining green pieces of land in the area. The area was supposed to be turned into a shopping mall. What began as a peaceful protest against the demolition of trees exploded into massive resistance against the AKP government and more specifically its leader, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The brutal police reaction to a peaceful protest and excessive use of tear gas augmented the pressure that exploded on the evening of 31 May 2013 in Istanbul. Since then, it spread to many other cities that are still suffering under big clouds of tear gas and police
brutality.

When the police withdrew, the scene at Gezi became peaceful. Thousands are still camping there in tents in an attempt to guard not only the trees but now also their right to free speech. I believe the crackdown on freedom of expression was one of the gravest of all violations of rights in Turkey. This became quite apparent with the escalation of the Gezi resistance. In the early days of the resistance and immediately after its escalation, the press and media failed to report the events. The crackdown on freedom of expression and self-censorship of the media was not new. It has been going on for a few years. Several columnists lost their jobs when they chose to listen to their conscience rather than the instructions of the media bosses. By way of an expression used in Turkey, in the aftermath of the Gezi resistance, the absence of a free press in Turkey was “heard even by the deaf Sultan.” But, was it heard by Prime Minister Erdogan who was pictured as a Sultan on the cover of the *Economist* holding a traditional “tesbih” (worry beads) in one hand and a gas mask in the other? Given the unrelenting hardliner speeches he gave one after the other during the protests, the answer appears to be no.

The Gezi resistance will go into history as a unique resistance as happening in a country at the zenith of economic development. In the aftermath of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, Turkey was portrayed as a model to the Middle East not only in terms of economic development but also a Muslim country with a secular state. In September 2011, in a speech in Tunisia, Erdogan himself said that “a Muslim can govern a secular state in a successful way. In Turkey, 99 percent of the population is Muslim, and it did not pose any problem. You can do the same here”. It is ironic that almost two years after presenting Turkey as a model in Tunisia, Erdogan went there again for an official visit in the midst of the Gezi resistance in Turkey. His return to Istanbul on the evening of June 6 was a troubling sight. He was greeted by what he called the “majority” who chanted, “hey minority, do not be a fool, do not test our patience.” Many who watched these scenes could see the spectre of an unprecedented conflict and held their breaths...

One of the most important analyses of the resistances in Turkey is expressed in the title of a *New York Times* article by Daron Acemoglu: “Development Won’t Ensure Democracy in Turkey.” Yes, while the good old Seymour Martin Lipset argument, pointing to a positive correlation between economic development and democracy, is still viewed as valid by many academics, the Gezi resistance threw that idea into the dustbin of history. It clearly showed the undeniable importance of such indicators as free speech and the existence of channels of participation in measuring democracy.

Several years ago, in the very first paragraph of my first book *Cumhuriyet Iradesi, Demokrasi Muhakemesi* (“Republican will, democratic reason“) I argued that: “according to one understanding the aim of politics is not to make people happy because happiness is a subjective phenomenon. The purpose of politics is to create the channels through which people can seek their own happiness.” I had written this sentence in order to criticize Turkey’s one party-era in the 1930s, when the Kemalist political elite were telling people what they should wear and what type of music they should listen to – in sum how to be “proper” citizens. This is at the heart of what the academics and public intellectuals mean today when they say that AKP has become a Kemalist party. That is, a party eager to engage in social engineering with the Prime Minister telling people how many children they should have, that abortion is murder, that consuming alcohol is not
good and those who do so are alcoholics... and so on. The political party that had a critique of Kemalism at its very core has surrendered to a Kemalist style of governing in the last few years. In the face of which, one is tempted to say the recent protests are a resistance against “Kemalist social engineering”. Nevertheless, they have also embraced some Kemalists and even a militarist language. Some who marched towards the Gezi Park on the first night of the uprising were waving flags and screaming that they were the soldiers of Mustafa Kemal. So, could it be that Turkey is moving towards a participatory democracy or at least demanding it by using (albeit intermittently) a Kemalist language? I think it would be unfair to say that all the language you hear is Kemalist and militarist. Especially now that the peace has settled at Gezi Park, one hears increasingly more peaceful, non-militarist and non-sexist language. Feminist groups have been painting over the sexist, homophobic and curse-ridden slogans on the walls in the site of the resistance. Even the hearts of those of us in their 50s are beating too fast at the sight of this. Our beating hearts are filled with hope; there is a lot of positive energy in this city. Nevertheless, there is always that “what if” (what if this gets hijacked by militarists or nationalists?) question at the back of our minds because, as opposed to the young people who are leading this movement, we have seen past military coups, the tactics that led to those coup-d’états in this country and we tragically remember them. What could this really mean? Could it be that the ones who make history are the ones who do not know or remember the past? If yes, we can only support them and learn from them for they speak a language we may have forgotten because of the tragic past. I am not writing this to uphold oblivion for I believe that Turkey can only internalize democracy if and when its citizens remember and come to terms with its past involving especially its Armenian and Kurdish citizens. But there is hopeful energy in those whose courage has not been arrested by past military coups. The generation that experienced military coups and was forced into submission and passivity have raised their children as active citizens. Lucky are these young ones who are courageous, and have a sense of humour in their resistance. This is the time to be on their side in an attempt to spare this resistance from the shadow of nationalism, militarism and looting. Instead of fearing that this resistance will be hijacked, it is time to make sure it does not happen. It is time to be active citizens rather than fearful subjects. Those students who were cleaning their looted and tear-gassed park on the day after the clashes, those who were standing against the harassment of the devout women wearing the headscarf, those who were trying to explain the meaning of LGBT to the more conventional, elderly protesters were speaking the language of participation.

Nilüfer Göle made a wonderful remark when she wrote in the website T24 that this is a “rehearsal for a new citizenship”. What we have expressed in academic terms has found life in these protests: people who have joined these protests come from very different ideological backgrounds. Some of them were not even on speaking terms with one another. Yet, they found themselves united in a common cause. They do not think that democracy is all about elections. There is no doubt that elections are a very necessary component of democratic regimes but they alone are not sufficient. These protests can be read as a sign that people demand more than “representative democracy.” They demand “participatory democracy.” They do not want to succumb to majoritarianism and a government that patronizes them in the name of the majority. They ask for legitimate channels of participation. They want to freely express their choices through these channels. They do not want to settle in the parameters of happiness defined for them. They demand to pursue their own happiness through these channels. Strangely enough, I
may agree with the Prime Minister: through such a relentless search for participatory
democracy by its citizens, for the first time in years, I think Turkey may really be a model
in its region. From where I sit (at Gezi Park) the scene could be summed up as a demand
for “participatory democracy or bust!”

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