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No “Turkish Spring” – but an end to the “Turkish Model”?

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The Current Column

of 24 June 2013

No “Turkish Spring” – but an end to the “Turkish Model”?

Bonn, 24 June 2013. The government’s harsh reaction to the current wave of protests is undermining Turkey’s standing as a regional democracy, and with it its ability to influence other, less democratic states in its neighbourhood.

Over the past years, Turkey has become a model for other states, notably since the eruptions in the Middle East that became known as the Arab Spring. Its remarkable economic rise, its success in reigning in the generals that had dominated Turkish politics for so long, and its seeming ability to marry western-style democracy with political Islam are held up as achievements that others would do well to emulate.

Its newly-won prestige certainly gave Turkey much new influence in its region. For the first time in many years, Turkey was able to step out from its Ottoman shadow and to put its relations with neighbouring states on a new footing. Its “zero-problems” foreign policy paved the way for the regional expansion of the Turkish economy, but it also helped to burnish Turkey’s new image as a modern, tolerant and open-minded country that was prepared to tackle its own challenges (the Kurdish problem and the treatment of journalists both come to mind: Turkey currently keeps more journalists in jail than Iran or China). Perhaps more important than anything else, the “demonstration effect” of the transformations inside Turkey made the country a beacon for all those in the Middle East eager for similar changes in their own countries.

The government’s heavy-handed response to the current wave of protests puts all these achievements at risk. What started as a localized demonstration against the conversion of a public park into a shopping mall has quickly become a country-wide revolt against the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP). In a broad-based social movement that crosses many boundaries – although fuelled mostly by younger, well-educated and secular urban dwellers – Turks are coming together to voice their dissent with the increas-

ingly autocratic leadership of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and a political style they see as polarizing, overbearing, and paternalistic. Coming on top of recent frustrations – over a new law limiting the sale of alcohol, urban development schemes that have wreaked havoc with historically-grown city centres, or the regime’s penchant to glorify controversial figures from Turkey’s past – the current protests also signal a growing rift between those groups within Turkey’s population that remain wedded to traditional and religious ideals and other, more secular and modern ones, many of whom have benefited from Turkey’s recent transitions and now demand a greater say.

Those who see a “Turkish Spring” in the making are missing the point: apparent similarities between Taksim and Tahrir Square are but skin-deep. Turkey remains a democratic state, despite its shortcomings and unresolved issues. But the regime’s harsh, almost hysterical reaction to the protests – including accusations of meddling by foreigners – raises some troubling questions, especially if it cannot simply be attributed to an increasingly autocratic leader who has lost touch with the changing reality in his country. Does it signal a hardening of the regime and a decreasing willingness to accommodate dissent? If so, Turkey would be going backwards, en route to joining the ranks of those countries where democracy remains stunted and underdeveloped. Or is the vitality of the protests an indication of a growing and increasingly assertive civil society in Turkey, not unlike those in western countries? If so, the current turmoil would just be growing pains on the way to a fully-fledged democracy.

There is much riding on these questions, for Turkey itself as well as for the region it inhabits. Arab rulers, for one, will watch carefully if Turkey’s model democracy can live up to its promise, absorbing and channelling the concerns of the protesters in a peaceful manner. If not, they may conclude that repression is preferable to the long and

often messy process of building democratic institutions in the first place. For the population of these countries, the behaviour of the Turkish state will be a gauge of what to expect from their own governments. If the protests in Turkey remain unsuccessful, they might conclude that pressing for change by peaceful means is pointless and instead opt for more violent ways of contestation.

Contributing to such polarization cannot be in Turkey's interest. The country would be better off demonstrating that its system works, that peaceful contestation is part of any living democracy, and that the results achieved are ultimately superior to those of any authoritarian system. Indeed, Turkey could be more proactive in nudging others towards more democratic forms of governance, no longer just hoping that some of its success will rub off on surrounding countries but taking a more active role in helping them build democratic systems of their own. Certainly, this would benefit Turkey's own security, stability, and prosperity. It would also enhance Turkey's stature as an emerging power in its region, one that no longer relies on brute force but on persuasion, practical assistance when asked, and the demonstration effects

of its own successful governance model. Sending in the army to quell the protests, as Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç threatened to do, would send the opposite signal. Repositioning the army as an arbiter in Turkish politics, it would be a dangerous move.

Others, too, have a stake in Turkey's success, notably Europe. Those who feel vindicated by its recent troubles, seeing them as further proof that Turkey will never be ready to join the European Union, are wrong. But before, Turkey needs to push ahead with its own, still-incomplete democratization process, finding ways of dealing with dissent in a peaceful manner and of airing and negotiating the different demands of an increasingly complex and vocal civil society. Through their excessive and disproportionate reaction to the Gezi Park protests, the Erdoğan government has made it clear that it is not prepared to take this further step, at least for now. The European Union should insist that it does.

The remarks reflect the personal opinions of the author.



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