



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on June 3, 2013

## Major Anti-Government Riots Engulf Turkey

What began last week as a small protest against changes to a popular park in Istanbul, Turkey, quickly morphed into at least tens of thousands of furious demonstrators out in the streets of major cities across the country. Violent nationwide riots aimed at the increasingly authoritarian rule of Islamist Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his elected government are also wreaking havoc.



Some analysts argue that the riots are a response to government attacks on freedom, even labeling the unrest a “Turkish Spring” similar to the now-infamous “Arab Spring.” Others, however, point to far-left communist agitators in the streets hoping to exploit some of the worst chaos to rock Turkey in decades. For now, at least, the true causes and goals remain relatively unclear.

An estimated 1,700 protesters had already been arrested by Monday morning as the unrest spread to at least 65 cities and towns nationwide. Amid a fierce police crackdown using water cannons and tear gas, according to protesters cited in media reports, over 1,000 people were injured. At least two protesters have reportedly been killed as well, and more than 25 police officers have been injured by stone-throwing mobs so far.

Meanwhile, rioters continued setting fires and destroying property as a group of protesters [drove a bulldozer toward the prime minister’s office](#). Angry citizens have also been setting up “occupy” camps, sparking police raids. As government forces tried to clamp down on the disorder, however, the protests grew, with opposition members of Parliament and prominent citizens joining the crowds as well. Reports of police and soldiers siding with the protesters have also surfaced.

The demonstrators say the Islamist government, re-elected in 2011 with wide margins, is becoming increasingly totalitarian. Among other examples, protesters have cited attacks on freedom of the press and efforts to impose Islamic values on the population such as recent curbs on alcohol. Critics quoted in international media reports also accused the prime minister of ruling like a “dictator.”

The elected Islamist leader, who has been in power for a decade, however, claimed the rising violence and demonstrations engulfing Turkey did not constitute a “Turkish Spring” — a reference to a wave of oftentimes foreign-backed protest movements against dictators that swept through parts of the Arab world in recent years. Instead, Erdogan said that the “undemocratic” protests were organized by “extremists.”

“There are those attending these events organized by extremists. This is not about Gezi Park anymore. These are organized events with affiliations both within Turkey and abroad,” [said](#) the prime minister, whose Islamist-oriented Justice and Development Party (AKP) continues to enjoy support among voters. “The main opposition party CHP [Republican People’s Party] has provoked my innocent citizens. Those who make news [and] call these events the Turkish Spring do not know Turkey.”

More than a few analysts within Turkey, while conceding that the police crackdown has been brutal and should be investigated, largely agreed with the sentiments expressed by the prime minister. Writing in



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the *Jewish Press*, for example, Istanbul-based political and religious commentator Sinem Tezyapar, an executive producer on Turkish Television, highlighted the Communist Party of Turkey's less-than-hidden role in the unrest.

In her analysis, entitled "[It's More Communist Provocation than 'Turkish Spring'](#)," Tezyapar said that communist groups had been vandalizing streets and buildings while spreading "false rumors" to whip people "up into a frenzy." While the protest action may have started off as a demonstration about parks and green spaces, it has since been "hijacked by chronic malcontents" and now has little to do with those issues, she added.

"The Communists number 50,000 at most, out of a Turkish nation of 76 million. Just as the majority cannot oppress the minority, the minority cannot oppress the majority either," the self-described peace activist pointed out in her piece, which featured pictures of protesters holding communist flags. "But some on the political left are engaging in aggression born by the frustrating knowledge that they can never come to power by democratic means. That violent aspect of Communism is deeply offensive."

However, other analysts — both within and outside of Turkey — see something much bigger. In Istanbul, BBC editor and correspondent Paul Mason, who has covered the so-called "Occupy" movement, the Egyptian protests that swept dictator Hosni Mubarak from power, the riots in Greece, and more, [said](#) the Turkish unrest was different than all of those.

"First, it is massive: the sheer numbers dwarf any single episode of civil unrest in Greece," Mason reported, citing a young protester who claimed that "everyone" was participating except Erdogan's ruling AKP party. "Second, the breadth of social support — within the urban enclave of Istanbul — is bigger than Greece and closer to Egypt." If the labor movement gets involved, the Turkish protests could eventually morph into something akin to the anti-Mubarak Tahrir Square demonstrations, he added.

Some analysts in Turkey said the unrest would at least serve as a major wake-up call for the ruling establishment. "Today is a turning point for the AKP," political scientist Koray Caliskan at Istanbul's Bosphorus University was [quoted as saying](#) by the left-wing U.K. *Guardian* newspaper. "Erdogan is a very confident and very authoritarian politician, and he doesn't listen to anyone anymore. But he needs to understand that Turkey is no kingdom, and that he cannot rule Istanbul from Ankara all by himself."

Foreign officials have taken an interest in the unrest as well, with members of the European Union's "Parliament" reportedly claiming that the EU — which is in talks to bring in Turkey as a member state — needed to act. The Syrian dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad, which is facing an armed foreign-backed rebellion aided in part by the Islamist government of Turkey, issued a travel warning to citizens. Amnesty International condemned what it said was the "use of excessive force" by authorities.

The Obama administration, meanwhile, [called](#) on all parties in Turkey to "calm the situation." In a statement by spokesperson Laura Lucas, the White House said it believed peaceful demonstrations are a part of "democratic expression." Turkey's long-term stability is best guaranteed by ensuring "the fundamental freedoms of expression, assembly and association," the administration said, calling on security forces to "exercise restraint." The U.S. State Department said it "certainly" supports "universally peaceful protests, as we would in this case."

Amid the unrest, Turkish markets plunged as much as eight percent while the nation's currency hit a 16-month low. "The risk clearly is that this all just drags on and then the danger is that violence racks up a notch taking this to an entirely different level — further heightening tensions and entrenching



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positions,” Timothy Ash, head of emerging markets research at Standard Bank, [told](#) Reuters. Erdogan’s refusal to adopt a softer line was “not very encouraging,” he added.

Many of the protesters are hoping to force the government to resign ahead of presidential elections scheduled for next year. For now, however, the prospects of that happening appear remote — Erdogan left on a trip to North Africa and has largely dismissed the unrest. If the turmoil does not settle down, though, the implications for the region could be wide ranging.

For one, the Turkish government is a member of NATO. Turkey is also seen as key to the international “regime change” operation currently underway in Syria, which has [received key support from the Obama administration, al-Qaeda, European powers, and Sunni Arab despots](#). While the immediate challenge may be to Erdogan and his government, the global geopolitical significance of the unrest could eventually be enormous.

*Photo of rioting in Ankara, Turkey: AP Images*

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