

People, Flags, Bridges: Transformation through Resistance

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The public sphere has never been as densely and diversely occupied as it has been in Turkey's recent history. The summer of 2013 was marked by Gezi Park protests and the undeniable presence of alternative lifestyles (›apolitical youth) as well as by police brutality with theirs tear gas and water cannons. Three years later in the summer of 2016 the people of Turkey witnessed an intervention of crowds to a military coup on the night of July 15th. Hundreds of citizens were killed in clashes, the bombing of the Parliament, and the ›democracy watch‹ rallies for the following 25 nights in response to the President's call.

Gezi Park protests started as a bottom-up citizen initiative against the government's plan to reconstruct the historic military barracks with a renewed commercial function in Taksim, Istanbul. The protests were sparked by the violent intervention of the security forces against a small group of activists occupying Gezi Park. This was rapidly transformed into nationwide anti-government protests backed by left-wing and Alevi groups as well as football fan groups and marginal communities including LGBT and anti-capitalist

›revolutionary Muslims.‹ It is worth noting that the Gezi Park protests were preceded by the commencement of the historic ›resolution process‹ by the Turkish government and the Kurdish political leadership in early 2013. The resolution process had been disapproved by the left-wing Alevi groups in particular and interpreted as a threatening Sunni ›coalition.‹

On the other hand, July 15th 2016 evolved into a centrally mobilized nationwide resistance of predominantly pro-government conservatives and nationalists against a military coup announced in a Kemalist rhetoric appealing to the anti-government sections of the society. The statement broadcasted, in the name of »Peace at Home Council«, declared the purpose of the intervention as reestablishing the constitutional order and the secular democratic state. A former ally of the government, the Gülen movement, both a religious interest group with a global network of schools, businesses, banks and media outlets, and a clandestine organization with a decade-long buildup of followers in the Turkish state apparatus was held responsible. Tens of thousands were purged in the military, judiciary, security forces, bureaucracy, public schools and academia.

Against this background, I conclude that what characterizes the public sphere in Turkey today is transformation through resistance. Perhaps it is time to ask questions rather than implementing well-known solutions:

- Is replacing one group with another, in state bureaucracy, a sustainable solution to well-established practices of power abuse? As put ironically by a commentator: Wouldn't hiring civil servants through lottery have resulted in a more impartial and diversified task force?
- Is development through top-down mega projects, coupled with superficial historicist revivalism, compatible with the emerging public demand for local transformation through participation?
- Do we have an alternative to embrace the emerging of a hybrid public as opposed to favoring a core one over another on the brink of a civil war?

