

The Class Struggle Behind the 'Turkish Spring'

By [Ian Buruma](#)

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One interpretation of the anti-government demonstrations now roiling Turkish cities is that they are a massive protest against political Islam. What began as a rally against official plans to raze a small park in the center of Istanbul to make way for a kitschy shopping mall quickly evolved into a conflict of values.

The fight appears to represent two different visions of modern Turkey — secular versus religious, democratic versus authoritarian. Comparisons have been made with Occupy Wall Street. Some observers even speak of a "Turkish Spring."

Clearly, many Turkish citizens are sick of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's increasingly authoritarian style, his steely grip on the press, the restrictions on alcohol, the arrests of political dissidents and now the violent response to the demonstrations. People fear that Sharia law will replace secular legislation and that Islamism will spoil the fruits of Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey, who strove to modernize post-Ottoman Turkey.

The current unrest in Turkey is less of a religious conflict as it is a class-based one.

It would seem that religion is at the heart of the Turkish problem. Political Islam's opponents regard it as inherently anti-democratic.

But things are not so simple. The secular Kemalist state was no less authoritarian than Erdogan's populist Islamist regime. If anything, it was more so. It is also significant that the first protests in Istanbul's Taksim Square concerned not a mosque but a shopping mall. Fear of sharia law is matched by anger at the rapacious vulgarity of developers and entrepreneurs backed by Erdogan's government. There is a strong leftist bent to the Turkish Spring.

So, rather than dwell on the problems of contemporary political Islam, which are certainly considerable, it might be more fruitful to look at Turkey's conflicts from another, now distinctly unfashionable, perspective: class. The protesters, whether they are liberal or leftist, tend to be from the urban elite — Westernized, sophisticated and secular. Erdogan, meanwhile, is still very popular in rural and provincial Turkey among people who are less educated, poorer, more conservative and religious.

Despite Erdogan's personal authoritarian tendencies, which are obvious, it would be misleading to regard the current protests purely as a conflict between democracy and autocracy. After all, the success of Erdogan's populist Justice and Development Party, as well as the increasing presence of religious symbols and customs in public life, is a result of more democracy in Turkey, not less.

Customs that the Kemalist secular state suppressed, such as women's use of headscarves in public places, have reappeared because rural Turks have more influence. Young religious women are turning up at urban universities. The votes of conservative provincial Turks now count.

Likewise, the alliance between businessmen and religious populists is hardly unique to Turkey. Many of the new entrepreneurs, like the women in headscarves, are from villages in Anatolia. These newly rich provincials resent the old Istanbul elite as much as businessmen from Texas or Kansas hate the East Coast elites of New York and Washington.

But to say that Turkey has become more democratic is not to say that it has become more liberal. This is also one of the problems revealed by the Arab Spring. Giving all people a voice in government is essential to any democracy. But those voices, especially in revolutionary times, are rarely moderate.

What we see in countries such as Egypt and Turkey — and even in Syria — is what the great British liberal philosopher Isaiah Berlin described as the incompatibility of equal goods. It is

a mistake to believe that all good things always come together. Sometimes equally good things clash.

So it is in the painful political transitions in the Middle East. Democracy is good and so are liberalism and tolerance. Ideally, of course, they coincide. But right now, in most parts of the Middle East, they do not. More democracy can actually mean less liberalism and more intolerance.

It is easy to sympathize with the rebels against Syrian President Bashar Assad's dictatorship, for example. But the upper classes of Damascus — the secular men and women who enjoy Western music and films, some of them members of the Christian and Alawite religious minorities — will have a hard time surviving once Assad is gone. Baathism was dictatorial and oppressive — often brutally so — but it protected minorities and the secular elites.

But keeping Islamism at bay is not a reason to support dictators. After all, the violence of political Islam is largely a product of these oppressive regimes. The longer they stay in power, the more violent the Islamist rebellions will be.

Yet this is no reason to support Erdogan and his shopping-mall builders against the protesters in Turkey. The demonstrators are right to oppose his haughty disregard of public opinion and his stifling of the press. But to see the conflict as a righteous struggle against religious expression would be equally mistaken.

Higher visibility for Islam is the inevitable result of more democracy in Muslim-majority countries. How to stop this from killing liberalism is the most important question facing people in the Middle East. Turkey is still a democracy. It is to be hoped that the protests against Erdogan will make it more liberal, too.

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