04 2025

Strike, Resistance, Boycott. The Current Protests in Turkey

Alp Kayserilioğlu

The latest protest movement in Turkey arose in response to the arrest of Istanbul mayor Ekrem Imamoğlu by Erdoğan's henchmen on March 19. The arrest did not actually come as a surprise: Imamoğlu is considered the most promising candidate to run against Erdoğan in the upcoming presidential elections. Numerous political court cases have already been initiated against him. Mid-March was actually also a very good time: the USA under Trump is pro-Erdoğan anyway and even portals such as *Euractiv* or *Politico* reported that Erdoğan did not have much to fear from the EU - after all, the Turkish arms industry and Turkish troops are needed as part of the EU's rearmament and potentially as "peacekeepers" in Ukraine. The battle of "democracy against authoritarianism" seems to only exists against Putin. But it was also a favorable time in terms of domestic politics: negotiations with the PKK are underway; the next elections are not due for another two or three years.

The really surprising thing was therefore something else, namely the broad reaction against the "coup of March 19", as it is now known in opposition circles. The largest mass movement in Turkey since the Gezi uprisings in the summer of 2013 emerged in a very

short space of time; hundreds of thousands took to the streets every day and demanded all sorts of things: the resignation of Erdoğan and the government, the release of Imamoğlu, early elections. How was that possible? And what keeps the momentum going?

Between the lectern and the road

If it were up to the main opposition party in Turkey, the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), to which Imamoğlu also belongs, the protests would probably have died down relatively quickly. For two decades, the CHP has been conducting opposition in a form that is always doomed to failure: a few indignant speeches, appeals to the courts, perhaps 1-2 rallies controlled by the CHP, a bit of nationalism - then waiting for the next elections. That's it.

That would certainly have been the case this time too. Originally, the CHP had called for demonstrations in front of Istanbul City Hall and in the adjacent Saraçhane Park. But the people of Turkey, led by the youth and students, did not adhere to bans, warnings or limits. As early as March 19, tens of thousands of students from almost all of the country's elite universities - from ODTÜ and Bilkent in Ankara to Boğaziçi, Marmara, Istanbul University and Istanbul Technical University - led by left-wing revolutionary youth organizations mobilized for independent marches and rallies, often starting from their respective campuses. And they have been doing this day in, day out since March 19. At the same time, young people with diffuse nationalist convictions - partly on their own initiative, partly under the leadership of far-right nationalist groups - have also been mobilizing in their tens of thousands, day after day. All over the country, from conservative strongholds in central

Anatolia to the equally conservative coastal regions on the Black Sea, demonstrations formed, some spontaneous and some organized by local CHP branches. In Istanbul, the protests eventually spread to various districts, such as Kadıköy, where tens of thousands of people raised their voices - parallel to the daily main rally at the city hall.

Once again, the youth became the spearhead of the popular uprising, pushing it beyond itself and unleashing a social creativity and energy that branched out in all directions. The demonstrations once again bore the carnivalesque features we know from Gezi: Banners with tongue-in-cheek slogans such as "Dear police, no tear gas please - my mascara gets damaged"; IT students trying to disprove Erdoğan using functional equations; and people dressed as Pikachu walking along in the front row. There's a protester imitating a fish under the jets of water cannons, while the tough guys compete to do the most push-ups in front of the heavily armed police line, and couples in love whisper tender proposals to each other right in front of the police line. In the midst of tear gas, a dervish in a gas mask dances his Sufi semazen, while collective folk dances, choirs, the banging of pots and honking cars accompany the polyphonic song of the uprising - this is the mosaic of resistance that is recreated day after day.

The CHP did not ignite this fiery stream of mass protests itself - nor was it able to steer it effortlessly in its direction. But this time the young people achieved something that was denied to my generation during the Gezi uprisings in the summer of 2013: after initial hesitation, the CHP leadership opened up to the dynamics of the street. Özgür Özel, the chairman, called for police barricades to be traversed and threatened to march on the symbolic Taksim Square if the police violence did not subside.

Another significant achievement of the mobilizations is directly related to this. Erdoğan miscalculated, at least in the short term; he and his henchmen did not expect such a huge mass reaction. Instead, they assumed that the resistance would be limited to the CHP and a few rallies in front of Istanbul City Hall - an assumption that did not seem so far-fetched given the CHP's previous resistance. This time, however, it did not work out. Anger and indignation, especially among the oppositional sections of the population and the youth without prospects, erupted in a mass dynamic in which collective discontent inexorably spilled over, manifested, reproduced and materialized. What thing is the last straw that breaks the camel's back at such historical moments is unpredictable by nature - a fundamental characteristic of mass "events" such as the one we are experiencing in Turkey today. It was similar with the Gezi uprising in 2013.

Without this mobilizing and spreading mass dynamic, the anger would have shrunk to atomized frustration, depoliticization and apathy - as has often been the case in the past. If the CHP had merely protested symbolically and made an attempt at the Constitutional Court, this is exactly what would have resulted. But the movement - albeit on a smaller scale - has moved real mountains. Erdoğan had to withdraw two projects at once: To appoint an administrator, controlled by him, with authority over the Istanbul city administration, and one with authority over the entire CHP as a party.

Furthermore, a third achievement of this mass dynamic is evident: it has manifested a shift in opinion. In Turkey, the results of elections are almost sacrosanct - a fact that is problematic from the point of view of theory of democracy, because a bourgeois democracy consists not only of elections, but also of the separation of powers, fundamental rights and similar institutions. In general,

democracy should be much more than a bourgeois democracy. But even the elements of bourgeois democracy in Turkey are either severely weakened or exist only in a stunted form; the elections are not fair and often not really free. Nevertheless, Erdoğan may do what he wants - his actions ultimately depend on securing his electoral position. Although Erdoğan and his followers actively use illegitimate and unfair means to influence the election results in their favor, he does not always succeed despite all the repression and unfairness.

The disregard for election results does not trigger equal outrage everywhere. In the Kurdish regions, for example, the results have long been trampled underfoot - a fact that is often only perceived with lukewarm interest in the rest of Turkey. For the Kurds, on the other hand, this is of fundamental importance; this is where the country's racial line runs. However, there are moments when electoral fraud or the ignoring of election results also cause fierce outrage beyond this line - especially in Istanbul.

Already in the local elections on March 31, 2019, the attempt to suppress Imamoğlu's victory through the use of political justice failed. In the repeat of the election in Istanbul on June 23, 2019, Imamoğlu won by an overwhelming margin. Imamoğlu's lead grew even further in the 2024 local elections.

In view of these circumstances, it was a risky undertaking from the outset to attempt to violently suppress such a clear election victory. However, the momentum on the streets carried the collective anger far beyond the protesters and manifested itself as a massive awareness of injustice and legitimate resistance. All polls to date are clear in this regard: a very large majority of the population finds the protests legitimate, the arrests on the other hand unjust; a large majority is also calling for early elections.

Strike, boycott, resistance!

The real challenge begins now: it will be imperative not only to maintain the level of mobilization, but to build on it. Erdoğan cannot be brought to his knees in two weeks, and he is not sleeping: he is promptly unleashing the power of the political judiciary under his control everywhere and threatening the "street terrorists" with violence and repression; he has also extended the Eid holidays by almost a whole week in order to bring about a slowdown in the uprising's momentum. Without a sustained presence on the streets, the intimidating power of the repressive apparatus threatens to remain unbroken, while at the same time the courage of the people and their sense of injustice could gradually fade. This is why we need new, creative forms of protest and action that go beyond symbolic gestures and have a concrete political impact, while at the same time generating new energy and unleashing new potential.

In this sense, the CHP's move to launch a nationwide signature campaign for new elections is a good idea. The aim is to collect more signatures than Erdoğan received in the last presidential election – i.e. around 27 million. The first steps in this direction have already been taken: with spontaneously convened solidarity ballots, it was possible to obtain 15 million signatures nationwide for Imamoğlu as the presidential candidate. 27 million is an ambitious but potentially transformative threshold. If such a mass can be mobilized, the pressure on Erdoğan would increase enormously. In combination with ongoing demonstrations, a complete crushing of the movement would hardly be realistic even for Erdoğan and his entourage.

In this context, May Day is a marker: a demonstration march to the historic Taksim Square, where the Gezi uprising began in 2013, must take place by then at the latest, accompanied by protests throughout Turkey. In the meantime, large demonstrations could be organized on a regular basis or protests could be held in individual districts. The CHP seems to be pursuing this approach, at least to some extent - albeit in cautious doses: a rally every Wednesday in a district of Istanbul, a larger gathering every weekend in different cities. But this alone will not be enough.

At the same time, economic boycott measures are strengthening the mobilization. The CHP had initially called for an all-out boycott of government-related companies. The students, on the other hand, looked around and found what they were looking for in the struggles in Serbia. If a handful of students get together in person or virtually and discuss a nationwide boycott in normal times, nothing happens. In extraordinary times, however, sparks fly and social fireworks can suddenly erupt. Once again, the students became the driving force behind the expansion of the boycott beyond the circle of companies close to the government. After all, Turkey's biggest capitalists benefited the most from the neoliberalism of the AKP era, even if they are now white washing by taking the side of democratization. So why get involved in a culture war, urbanist Aslı Odman rightly asks, which is based on the antagonism between "bad" conservative capitalists and "good" progressive capitalists? After all, both participate in the exploitation of labour power and colonize social patterns of life. So general boycott!

And indeed, the first general consumer boycott was carried out on April 2 without being planned or centrally coordinated beforehand. Here, too, the resistance was not only characterized by the negation of the existing, but also by the blossoming of alternative

practices: In spontaneous boycott cafés and swap bazaars, people met on boycott day for alternative forms of togetherness beyond commodity relations, and this side of the communal recapture of the public sphere and society. Boycotting does not mean retreating into the individual and private sphere but rather getting out into society - as could be often read and heard. Why not boycott-restaurants, boycott-bars, boycott-concerts on the streets, on corners, in parks and squares in the future? A general strike may seem difficult to carry out but strikes at educational institutions and perhaps also in sectors where trade unions and the left are more organized would be very powerful means of radicalizing the protest from the production side. Here, too, students are leading the way: They are already consistently striking at universities. Academic staff and their trade union representatives are joining in.

The current protests in Turkey are manifold, creative, spontaneous and organized at the same time. This is precisely their richness and their power. Without a consolidation of opposition forces, the protests will not be able to break Erdoğan's institutional armour and the remnants of his hegemony; without the mosaic of diverse social dynamics, they will not develop any magic, any charm, which is needed not only for the broad popularization of the current dynamics, but above all for the creation of a fundamentally different vision of society. Both will be needed - to topple Erdoğan, and that is realistic and possible; but also, to lay the foundations of a very different Turkey.