As Turkish riot police use tear gas around Taksim Square this morning, nearly two weeks of anti-government protests have exposed a number of long-dormant fault lines in Turkey's complex political landscape. But even as the appeal of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (also known by its Turkish acronym, AKP) is beginning to erode, it will remain a powerful force in Turkish politics for some time to come, with its still-significant base of support throughout the country and the lack of a credible political alternative in the next elections, according to a recent Stratfor analysis.

The foundation for the current unrest was laid May 28, when a small group of mostly young environmentalists gathered in Istanbul's Taksim Square for a sit-in to protest a planned demolition of walls, uprooting of trees and the perceived desecration of historical sites in the square's Gezi Park. The initially peaceful demonstration turned violent the night of May 30, when police tried to break up what had grown to more than 100 protesters.

The environmental protesters were joined the next day by high-level representatives of the Justice and Development Party's main opposition, the secular Republican People's Party (known as CHP). The message of the protests soon evolved from saving Gezi Park's trees to condemning Erdogan and his party for a litany of complaints. Anti-government chants included "Down with the dictator," "Tayyip, resign," and "Unite against fascism."

The protests grew rapidly when the weekend began, with more than 10,000 people gathering in Taksim Square on June 1. Many of these made their way to the square from the district of Kadikoy, a Republican People's Party stronghold on the Asian side of Istanbul, by walking across the Bosphorus Bridge banging pots and pans in defiance of laws against pedestrian use of the bridge. Some reportedly threw Molotov cocktails, fireworks and stones at police, prompting the use of tear gas and water cannons on the protesters. However, this quickly drew condemnation, leading the government to temporarily withdraw police at the cost of allowing more protesters to gather.

Erdogan's response was defiant. While admitting excessive force by the police and ordering an investigation of the matter, he said that he would not give in to "wild extremists" who belong to an "ideological" as opposed to "environmental" movement and that he would bring out a million supporters from his party for every 100,000 protesters. The same night, riots broke out and some 5,000 protesters threw stones at the prime minister's office in the Besiktas neighborhood in Istanbul.

On the morning of June 2, heavy rains kept protesters away from Taksim Square save for a few dozen who huddled around bonfires. More protesters made their way back to the square in the afternoon while Erdogan made another defiant speech blaming the Republican People's Party for the unrest and vowing to proceed with the development plans. There have been arrests and injuries since, but this has been the status quo until this morning.

Erdogan's Limits

The size and scope of the protests must be kept in perspective. By the end of June 1, protests had reportedly spread to Izmir, Eskisehir, Mugla, Yalova, Antalya, Bolu, Adana, Ankara, Kayseri and Konya. Many of the areas where protests were reported are also areas where the Republican People's Party would be expected to bring out a large number of supporters. Konya, Kayseri and Ankara, strong sources of support for the Justice and Development Party, were notable exceptions. The largest protests, in Istanbul and Izmir, brought out predominantly young protesters in the tens of thousands. The protests would be highly significant if they grow to the hundreds of thousands, include a wider demographic and geographically extend to areas with traditionally strong support for the ruling party.

The protests so far do not indicate that Erdogan's party is at serious or imminent risk of losing its grip on power, but they do reveal limits to the prime minister's political ambitions. Erdogan is attempting to extract votes from a slow-moving and highly fragile peace process with the Kurdistan Workers' Party to help him get enough support for a constitutional referendum. The referendum would transform Turkey from a parliamentary system to a presidential system and thus enable Erdogan, whose term as prime minister expires in 2015, to continue leading Turkey as president beyond 2014, when presidential elections are scheduled. The sight of protesters from the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (known as the BDP) joining Republican People's Party supporters for the June 1 protests does not bode well for Erdogan's plan to rely on those votes in the constitutional referendum. Though the Justice and Development Party, which remains highly popular with Turkey's more conservative populace in the Anatolian interior, so far does not face a credible political contender for the October local elections or 2015 parliamentary elections, Erdogan's political maneuvering to become president will face more resistance.

The ruling party's main secular opposition is alarmed at Erdogan's policies that compromise the core founding principles of the state as defined by Kemal Ataturk. From social measures that ban the sale of alcohol after 10 p.m. to foreign policy measures that have Turkey trying to mold

and influence Islamist rebel groups in Syria, these are policies that directly undermine the Ataturkian mandate that Turkey must remain secular and avoid overextending itself beyond the republic's borders. But the growing dissent against the party is not a simple Islamist-secular divide, either. A perception has developed among a growing number of Turks that the party is pursuing an aggressive form of capitalism that defies environmental considerations as well as Islamic values. Within business circles, frustration is building over the number of concessions handed out to Erdogan's closest allies.

Rising Dissent

The polarization of the state could be plainly seen in the reporting of the Gezi Park protests. The protests appear to have emboldened once critical newspapers such as Hurriyet to reassume an anti-ruling party stance unseen in the recent years of Erdogan's media taming. Hurriyet has broadcast Erdogan's "defeat" with headlines such as "Erdogan no longer almighty." On the other end of the political spectrum, the state-funded news agency Anatolia is reporting the protests as a "brawl" between police and firework-throwing youth extremists, while stressing a democratic message that the government permitted the Republican People's Party to demonstrate in Taksim.

Far more interesting is reporting from the Justice and Development Party's traditional sources of support. Yeni Safak, a newspaper close to the ruling party, has condemned the park project and sympathized with the protesters. The same was seen in Zaman newspaper, run by followers of the moderate Islamist Gulen movement. The Gulenists form a crucial component of the ruling party's broader support base but also keep their distance from the ruling party. The movement has been increasingly critical of Erdogan, strongly suggesting that he and his party have become too powerful. Editorials from the newspaper admonished Erdogan for his "excessive" behavior and sided with the protesters.

Though dissent is rising, Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party still have a substantial support base, and the opposition continues to lack a credible political alternative (local elections scheduled for October likely will indicate how much support for the party has waned). At the same time, Turkey is pursuing a highly ambitious agenda abroad, from negotiating peace with Kurdish militants and developing oil pipelines in Iraqi Kurdistan to trying to fend off Syrian-backed militant attacks. Turkey was already highly constrained in pursuing these foreign policy goals, but they will take second place to Turkey's growing political distractions at home as Erdogan prioritizes the growing domestic challenges and as foreign adversaries such as Syria try to take advantage of preoccupied Turkish security forces to try to sponsor more attacks inside Turkey.

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