

Protests in Turkey Amid a Global Shift to the Right

Written by Bulent Gokay

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BULENT GOKAY, MAR 30 2025

As we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, our world finds itself caught between the introspective old hegemonic powers, namely the US and European states, and the hesitant new emergent ones, such as China and other rising powers. This situation creates systemic chaos and uncertainty, one result of which is the surge of right-wing authoritarianism in world politics. This authoritarian outbreak is not rooted in the personalities or psychologies of Trump, Putin Modi, Erdogan or Orban, but in underlying conditions, long-term historical factors that affect the world economic system and the changing power balance. Trump, Erdogan and others in the 'ring of autocrats' are less the creators than the outcome of protracted economic, social and political processes.

Of course, in all these countries, there are local and/or national conditions that prepare the ground for such right-wing authoritarian surges. However, in the final analysis, all these right-wing shifts are the results of an increasingly more volatile and chaotic international situation, which is the direct consequence of a process of what Giovanni Arrighi called 'hegemonic transition' within a period of systemic chaos, where 'the incumbent hegemonic state (or group of states) lacks the means or the will to continue leading the system of states'.

Turkey's Erdoğan is the only far-right leader within a competitive electoral landscape who has maintained an unbroken 23-year tenure rule. He has faced several electoral victories, uprisings, and coup attempts against him, all of which failed to unroot his regime. He annulled the electoral victories but still kept the game competitive afterwards. The Taksim Gezi protests of 2013, recognised as the most significant uprising against Erdogan's regime to date, failed to establish a cohesive leadership or a unified agenda to offer a real alternative to replace the existing regime. While the ongoing protests are not yet as large as the Gezi Park demonstrations, they showcase the people's resilience. They also remind the global community that the struggle can continue, even after 23 years of far-right leadership.

Popular mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, Erdoğan's most likely rival, was imprisoned over unproven corruption allegations linked to the running of mayor's office in Istanbul, and the government's aim remains to prevent him from participating in the upcoming presidential elections in 2028. This would spell disaster for Turkey, not due to İmamoğlu radically altering everything if elected to be the next president, but because it would indicate the cessation of all avenues to contest Erdoğan via electoral means. The Turkish population understands the importance of electoral competition, so they are protesting to protect this critical aspect of formal democracy. Similar to the Taksim Gezi protests, which began as an environmental movement and evolved into a broader nationwide uprising, the current situation holds significant potential. Currently, university students lead the protests, and the pressure from students and the general public compelled the normally quite cautious opposition party to agree to organise public demonstrations on the streets.

While there is currently no unified agenda, the activists who disrupt orchestrated speeches and advocate for a general strike, along with their lengthy and well-crafted social media posts and press interviews, suggest aspirations that exceed merely ensuring electoral competitiveness. İmamoğlu and other current opposition leaders lack a clear vision to steer the country away from the disastrous course it has been on for 45 years, characterised by profoundly unfair neoliberal development. Erdoğan's regime did not deviate from the policies that aggressively promoted neoliberalism in Turkey since 1980; instead, he intensified them.

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Neoliberal restructuring in Turkey began in 1980 with an economic stabilisation package, commonly known as the 'January 24 decisions.' This package, created by Turgut Özal in consultation with the IMF, marked a significant turning point in Turkey's economic history, and Turkey's economy was opening up to global influences with this package. Consequently, Turkey adopted neoliberal restructuring with export-focused, growth-oriented strategies and external borrowing. These policies aimed to shift state revenues away from public services benefiting working people and redirect them towards international creditors, transnational corporations operating in the area, and local allies within the ruling elite.

As expected, popular protests and widespread unrest arose against these policies, leading to violent suppression by the state. Eight months following the introduction of the reform package on January 24, 1980, a military coup eliminated the democratic process, dissolved all political parties and unions, and seized complete control on September 12 to facilitate the rapid execution of neoliberal reforms by quelling all dissent. The military's rule from 1980 to 1983 forcefully advanced these neoliberal reforms. General Evren explained in 1991 how he saw the role of the coup with respect to the 24 January decisions:

If we had not intervened after the 24 January stabilisation package, I have no doubt that none of the economic reform proposals could have been implemented. Only when we, the army, intervened and provided stability did the conditions become ready for implementing the programme.

In social terms, the neoliberal restructuring was paired with state-supported Sunni Islam and religious education to counter the surge of leftist movements and trade union activism in the late 1970s. From the mid-1980s onwards, Islamist right-wing parties consistently grew their share of the vote in elections.

Many protesting students recognise that replacing İmamoğlu with Erdoğan won't resolve the structural issues. The opposition's recent "Erdoğan's enemy is my friend" strategy has proven ineffective due to its lack of a coherent economic plan and foreign policy direction. However, if Erdoğan manages to silence the opposition totally, preventing all opposition from standing against him, it will create an environment where no one else can thrive. Turkish democracy was already struggling when the main challenger to Erdoğan, Istanbul mayor İmamoğlu, was arrested on what many believe are fabricated charges. This incident is, however, significant in its own right. This situation has intensified as it has sparked large-scale protests in Turkey, reminiscent of the Gezi Park protests of 12 years earlier.

Several political scientists and sociologists argue that in the second decade of the AKP regime, Turkey transitioned from a tutelary democracy to a competitive authoritarian regime. These studies, based on Levitsky and Loxton's framework that highlights the catalytic role played by the election of populist leaders in the rise of competitive authoritarianism, describe hybrid regimes where democratic institutions are still viewed as the primary means of obtaining and exercising power but are abused so often and to such an extent that electoral competition is nearly non-existent. There were 35 competitive authoritarian regimes in 2010, according to Levitsky and Way's work *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*. Some adopted democratic practices, others descended into authoritarianism, and some continued as competitive authoritarian regimes. 'Some competitive authoritarian regimes democratised (including Peru, Slovakia, and Taiwan), while others hardened into full-blown authoritarianism (such as Belarus, Cambodia, and Russia). Still others (including Albania, Benin, and Ukraine) careened back and forth between democracy and competitive authoritarianism'.

It is now evident that the liberal international order faces significant challenges. The foundational structures of this order are undergoing substantial shifts, making restoration efforts largely futile. The collapse of this system is distressing for the Western elites who constructed it and have reaped various benefits from it. Trump, Modi, Orban and Erdogan are less the creators than the outcome of protracted economic, social and political processes. It would be a mistake to think that the so-called liberal order is in trouble solely because of Trump's, Orban's or Erdogan's rhetoric or policies. In fact, more fundamental problems are at play, which accounts for why these autocrats have successfully challenged an order that enjoys almost universal support among the foreign policy elites in the West.

The problem for Turkey at this critical point in history is structural and historical. The current juncture represents a particularly dismal chapter in Turkey's history that displays all the traits of economic crisis and political exhaustion.

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The problem is not just the AKP or its leader, Erdogan. The opposition bloc's appeal, 'anyone but Erdogan,' sounds clear and straightforward, but it is not only simplistic but misleading, reducing Turkey's deep structural problems to a simple personal one.

About the author:

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