Arab Spring Has Come to Turkey

Having provided active support to the rebellion in neighboring Syria in conjunction with Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Recep Erdoğan clearly did not expect that the wave of upheavals would eventually come his way. But it happened several days ago when mass demonstrations began in Istanbul over the demolition of Taksim Gezi Park to make room for a shopping center. The protests by “environmentalists” quickly grew into political demonstrations demanding the departure of Erdoğan and his ruling conservative Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP). The events are increasingly beginning to resemble Egypt’s version of the Arab Spring. The protesters are threatening to jettison the ruling party and are using social networks to organize meetings. They are increasingly being joined by lawyers, physicians and members of the intellectual elite. Two demonstrators have been killed, more than 2000 injured and over 3000 arrested. The casualties have included dozens of policemen, who attempted to crack down on the protesters.

“We’ll turn Taksim into another Tahrir Square,” the protesters said, suggesting that the time has come for Erdoğan and the AKP to give up power. They have been steadily leading the country towards Islamization even though most educated Turks favor the secular state whose foundations were laid by Kemal Ataturk nearly 100 years ago. In addition, calls are increasingly being heard for Ankara to stop intervening in the Syrian conflict. Erdoğan gradually removed the military from control of the country after taking power, and since then he has done much to revive conservative Islam in Turkey. He evidently has been guided by the motto of that Turkish nationalism and pan-Turkism theoretician, Zia Gökalp (1876-1924) who said: “Minarets are our bayonets, domes are our helmets, mosques are our barracks, believers are our soldiers.”

Over his 11-year reign, Erdoğan has worked consistently to transform Turkey into an Islamic state. After promising in 2002 to erect minarets throughout Istanbul, where he served as mayor for almost 20 years, Erdoğan became the head of state. He has restricted the consumption of alcohol, mandated the study of Islam in primary and secondary schools and the wearing of the burqa, and even banned lipstick for flight attendants on Turkish Airlines. He has seriously violated the principles of free speech and a free press. According to Amnesty International, there are 72 journalists languishing in Turkish prisons. Members of religious minorities have been severely persecuted under Erdoğan, particularly the Alevi community, which some consider a branch of Shi’ism and others a local Islamic cult holding secular ideas similar to Kemalism.

But he has gone even further, plunging Turkey into the Syrian conflict under the influence of the most conservative regimes in the Arab world — Saudi Arabia and Qatar. As a result, southern Turkey is almost directly involved in it, to the extent that it could spill over onto the regions that border on its northern neighbor. Indeed, they now harbor more than 400,000 refugees from Syria, including both Sunni Arabs and Kurds, Alevi, Christians and Alawis, among others. It is all because Erdoğan decided to bet that the Muslim Brotherhood — a fundamentalist movement of radical Sunni Muslims — would take power in Damascus.

On the one hand, Erdoğan has taken steps towards reconciliation with the Kurds, against which he waged a merciless war to erase their national identity for decades under the banner of fighting terrorism. On the other, he did not do it to stop the discrimination against the Kurdish minority, which comprises almost a third of the country’s population. He did it to enlist their support against the secular opposition and the military in order to pass legislation more representative of Islamic norms and win the 2014 presidential election by a wide margin and then proceed to
more radically Islamicize Turkey. After all, by changing the constitution he wants to introduce a presidential system of
government in Turkey that gives the president the right to dissolve parliament, which would allow him to establish
authoritarian rule and decisively negate the role played by the military. That is, he intends using reconciliation with
the Kurds through Islam against those who advocate preserving Turkey’s foundations as a secular state.

Despite tough actions by the police, the demonstrations in Istanbul have spread to Ankara, Izmir, Antalya and other
large cities where the secular populace is in the majority. However, we have to admit that Erdoğan remains a very
popular leader in the country. Especially since he is supported by the conservative “hinterland,” the religious Islamic
believers, and now also by Southeast Anatolia, which is populated mainly by Kurds. This has enabled him to avoid
giving in to demands of the protesters, who have essentially transformed the environmental protest over the Gezi
Park into an open political demonstration by opposition forces. So far, the army is staying out of it and not
intervening in the conflict. During his years in office, Erdoğan has actually undermined the generals’ political
influence by forcing many of them to retire.

But if the protests flare up with new strength — and the demonstrations are still growing — the military may
intervene anyway to prevent Turkey from splitting and descending into civil strife. After all, they have neighboring
Syria as an example. In any event, the first alarm bell has sounded for the prime minister and his party — as well as
for that part of the Turkish elite that favors Ankara’s active involvement in the Syrian conflict alongside the
Wahhabis. Also, the EU is now viewing Turkey’s aspiration to become a full-fledged member of the European Union
with even greater caution. Especially since the United States and the European Union have already expressed
concern about the government’s use of excessive violence to suppress the opposition demonstrations. Many human
rights organizations in the West have also condemned them. The situation has reached the point that Deputy Prime
Minister Bülent Arınç has apologized to the public for the authorities’ “disproportionate reaction” to the
demonstrations.

Russia has a very specific question —how safe is Turkey currently for Russian tourists, especially if the
demonstrations continue as they did this June in the resort towns on the Mediterranean coast? After all, there is no
guarantee that they will not recur. It happened in Egypt, where the numbers of Russian tourists dropped off
significantly after the locals demonstrated.

In any case, Turkey is facing difficult times, and Erdoğan needs to consider whether it is worthwhile continuing to
Islamicize his country and participate in the games being played by the conservative Arab regimes. Taksim could
actually become another Tahrir. Then the Arab Spring will truly come to Turkey, but it will be secular and
democratic, rather than Islamic.

Alexander Orlov is a political analyst and an expert Orientalist. Exclusively for New Eastern Outlook.