

THE GEZİ PARK PROTESTS AND YOUTH IN TURKEY: PERCEPTION OF HÜRRİYET COLUMNISTS

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Abstract

This study aims to evaluate how the columnists of *Hürriyet* (Liberty), one of the most sold national dailies in Turkey, characterized the role of youth in the *Gezi Park protests*. The protests started on May 28, 2013 in Istanbul. The protesters initially stood up against an urban development plan that would have resulted in the park's demolition. However, the protests, fueled by a disproportionately aggressive response by the police, soon turned into an anti-government movement all around the country with no centralized leadership. Youth served as the locomotive of the protests, using social media extensively for organizational purposes. Their main concern was to fight against intrusions on their lives. This research focuses on the first three weeks of the so-called 'Gezi Park protests'. All the *Hürriyet* columnists, except four who are usually preoccupied with subjects other than politics, wrote more than 50 percent of their articles on the Gezi Park protests. However, 32 percent of these made no mention of youth in these writings, and only 12 percent mentioned youth in half or more of their writings. Quantitatively speaking, columnists did not place significant emphasis on the position of youth. The protests constitute an urban movement, started by young people, and supported by the middle class.

Key Words: Gezi Park protests, Turkish politics, Turkish youth, JDP

JEL Classification: D74 - Conflict; Conflict Resolution; Alliances

1. INTRODUCTION

This study aims to evaluate how columnists of the *Hürriyet* (Liberty) daily perceived the role of youth during the three first weeks of the *Gezi Park protests*. These protests, which began towards the end of May 28, 2013 in Taksim Square, Istanbul, spread all around Turkey and had shown no sign of stopping as of July 2013. The protests took their name from *Gezi Parkı* (“Promenade Park”), as they were initiated at the park by city residents who stood against the park’s demolition on environmental grounds. However, the protests, fueled by a disproportionate police response (i.e. usage of pepper spray, water cannons), soon turned into an anti-government movement throughout the country with no centralized leadership. Protesters gathered in different parks and squares in their own city. Those who could not get on the streets banged pots and pans on their balconies to declare their support to the Gezi Park protests.

The party being protested is the JDP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party). The JDP declares itself to be conservative and democratic. It has been Turkey’s ruling party since 2002, having also won 47 percent of the popular vote in 2007 and 50 percent in 2011 (Seçim 2011, <http://secim2011.ntvmsnbc.com/>). The protests took form when members of the public, particularly youths, took to the streets in May 2013 in response to the latest in a long line of environmentally irresponsible plans put forward by members of the JDP government, but the frustration was not limited to environmental policy. This is what made the renown Turkish sociologist Emre Kongar say that “an innocent environmentalist movement turned into a movement of democracy and liberty”, a protest “against the totalitarian attitude of” the JDP (Kongar & Küçükkaya, 2013: 10, 20). According to Nilüfer Göle, another Turkish sociologist, “the park signifies the physicality of the public sphere”. “Moralizing intrusions” on people’s lives, such as restrictive regulations on the sales and consumption of alcohol and the “warning issued to a young couple kissing on a subway in Ankara” were among the elements that made the protesters say “enough” to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Göle, 2013: 7-14). Nationalist journalist Nihat Genç defined the Gezi Park protests as “the revolutionary solution that put together people with different problems” (Genç, 2013: 11). Last but not least, Slovene philosopher Slavoj Žižek was one of the international figures who took a stand during the protests. Žižek described “the

anti-capitalist drive” behind the protests as “the existence of discomfort and dissatisfaction” with “the commercialization of a public space and religious authoritarianism” (Zizek, 2013: 6-8). During the Gezi Park protests, the JDP government seemed to be more criticized than supported, particularly because of its disproportionate police response.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan viewed the Gezi Park protests under a different light. According to him, “domestic extremists and foreign powers were behind the Gezi Park demonstrations”. “Interest rate lobbies” conspired to threaten and weaken the government “by making speculations in the stock exchange”, while “those who call themselves journalists, artists, politicians, have, in a very irresponsible way, opened the way for hatred, discrimination and provocation” (Hürriyet Daily News, June 7, 2013; Today’s Zaman, June 22, 2013; Hürriyet Daily News, June 9, 2103). In fact, according to Prime Minister Erdoğan what the protesters did was against the interests of their own country. He underlined that “the police did their duty. These protests (...) had turned into vandalism” (Hürriyet Daily News, June 7, 2013). Some researchers and columnists supported Erdoğan’s view. Yasin Aktay, sociologist and member of the Central Decision and Administrative Board of the JDP, not surprisingly, agreed with the prime minister. According to Aktay, there is certainly sociological basis for the discontent of some factions of society and for what motivates them to take advantage of any opportunity to protest. On the other hand, Aktay also believes that we need to ask why even bankers, who live on interests, supported the Gezi Park protests. He answers his own question declaring it to be the product of conspiracy (Aktay, June 22, 2013). Conservative dailies and their columnists also seemed rather to sympathize with Erdoğan. For instance, Ekrem Dumanlı, editor in *Zaman* (Time), argued that “some people are so anti-JDP and anti-Islam that they take advantage of every opportunity to make provocations”. Duman emphasized that in reality, those participating in the protests were not really there in the interest of Gezi Park itself (Dumanlı, June 3, 2013). Abdurrahman Dilipak from *Yeni Akit* (New Act) argued that “this event is an insurrection trial, a rebellion, an Ergenekon-esque phenomenon” (Dilipak, June 3, 2013). By “Ergenekon-esque”, he meant “an illegal initiative to topple the government”, a view adopted by Prime Minister Erdoğan (Yınanç, June 4, 2013). According to this view, all anti-JDP elements formed an alliance, dragging the whole country

down with its conspirational scheme. Provocation and protests that affected the entire country emerged as a result of this conspiracy.

The Gezi Park protests that started at the end of May 2013 in İstanbul and that spread throughout Turkey may be the largest public movement in the Republican history. It is a recent event that seems to continue intermittently. Its results have not clearly emerged yet, though there will be no endpoint after which the meanings of this resistance movement will become easily digestible (Sancar, 2013: 13). In this heated atmosphere, this paper aims to contribute to an understanding of the protests and particularly the role of the youths in the movement. In this paper, the Gezi Park protests are evaluated through the eyes of *Hürriyet* columnists, and particular emphasis is given to the place of youth in the uprisings. The youth of Turkey had been publicly criticized in recent years for being “apolitical and indifferent” roughly since the coup d’état of 1980. However, in 2013, they proved these critics wrong with their wholehearted support of the Gezi Park protests. Some even died defending their cause. This is what makes the protests worthy of a close evaluation.

2. THE POLITICAL POSITION OF YOUTH BEFORE AND DURING THE PROTESTS

In Turkey, ever since the 19th century, youth have been perceived as a generation the entire nation could depend on. They would solve the problems of the country and rescue the people. The founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, also gave a particular importance to the country’s youth and reminded them of their duty to protect it no matter how difficult. The so-called ‘68 Generation has always been perceived as “the legendary youth” of the country, as opposed to the youth of the 2010s, who had been viewed as politically indifferent until the Gezi Park protests began.

One well-known academic who has been working on political perceptions of youth in Turkey is sociologist Demet Lüküslü. Lüküslü, who based her Ph.D. thesis on eighty face-to-face in-depth interviews between 2001 and 2004, had always defended the notion that, contrary to popular opinion, youth in Turkey are not apolitical. According to Lüküslü, youth are interested in political affairs but preferred to stay out of traditional and institutional politics, perceiving it as a dirty

arena that was almost impossible to change. They therefore avoided getting involved in a hierarchical system where they could not survive as individuals (Lüküslü, 2005).

Lüküslü's view was mirrored in the work of her fellow contributors to a collection of articles published in 2011. This collection emphasized that young people's engagement with political life happened through social media rather than through formal institutions (Telli-Aydemir, 2011). They are searching "for new politics in Turkey" and have been active in "an alternative social sphere". For instance, they e-participate in public debates through blogging (Saka, 2011: 331-342). Also, they are part of urban youth movements. For instance, they are active on several websites, such as *Ekşi Sözlük* (Sourtimes), *Genç Siviller* (Young Civilians) and *Yüzde 52* (52 percent) (Lüküslü, 2011: 48-67).

The recent activity by youth on social media is particularly important, because the Gezi Park protests were organized mainly through virtual networks such as Facebook and Twitter. Protestors used their mobile phones to let each other know where clashes with the police were taking place, where to take shelter, how to cope with tear gas and so on. Having seen the role of the social media in the protests, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan named social media and particularly Twitter "the worst menace to society" (Katik, June 4, 2013). Also, Prime Minister Erdoğan described the protestors as *çapulcu* (literally 'looters' or 'marauders'), prompting the protestors to reappropriate the term with pride (Mocoş, 2013: 115). Social media users have added the prefix *çapulcu* to their account identifications (Harding, June 10, 2013). The protestors have begun using *çapulcu* as part of their online handles, and the derivative *chapulling* has given it new meaning, to imply combat for democracy. Since this generation is most familiar with new technologies, the anti-government protests became associated with the country's youth.

According to sociologist Emre Kongar, the Gezi Park events are proof that the country's youth are familiar with its problems, and that they are interested in their "interests and liberties". They are shouting "Get to know me", "Respect me, (...) do not intervene with my life style". Kongar, who usually underlines the importance of grand historical revolutions such as the agricultural and the industrial revolutions in his works, believes that what happened in Turkey in the

summer of 2013 is “an informatics revolution based on the ideology of democracy and human rights”. According to Kongar, “the forerunners [of the informatics revolution] are naturally the youth” (Kongar & Küçükkaya, 2013: 65, 91, 53, 55). In the summer of 2013, the youth of the 2010s proved wrong everybody who had perceived them as apolitical and egocentric.

3. THE FOCUS OF THE RESEARCH AND MAIN RESULTS

This study focuses on how *Hürriyet* columnists perceived the role of youth in the Gezi Park protests. *Hürriyet* has been chosen in particular for this research, because it is one of the top three most sold national dailies. It has a daily circulation of 390,000 and is publicly known as the *amiral gemi* (literally the “admiral boat” or a leading figure) in the Turkish media. Its columnists are drawn from a relatively large spectrum of political backgrounds, some with roots in extreme left-wing movements, and others in Islamist movements.

In this study, all the columnists of *Hürriyet* except the sports columnists and those who write for the supplement have been taken into consideration. Twenty-three columnists -five women and eighteen men- were read and evaluated in between May 29, 2013 and June 20, 2013 in order to understand their perceptions on youth during the protests. Excel spreadsheets were prepared to reveal patterns numerically.

According to the table below, all *Hürriyet* columnists except four wrote more than 50 percent of their articles on the uprisings during the first three weeks of the protests. Those four columnists write usually on other subjects, such as literature (Doğan Hızlan), economics (Vahap Munyar and Erdal Sağlam) and other aspects of the daily life (Melis Alphan).

The protests were a popular topic. However, quantitatively speaking, there was no significant emphasis on the role of youth. For instance, 32 percent of the columnists made no mention at all of youth in their coverage of the ongoing events shaking Turkey. Only 12 percent of columnists made mention of youth in half or more of their writings. The fact that there is no quantifiable emphasis on youth participation confirms several sociologists’ perceptions of the protests. According to Nilüfer Göle, this is “an urban movement, started by young people,

supported by the middle class” (Göle, 2013: 7-14). According to Sencer Ayata, the movement has several components, but it is mainly young and middle class, and the youngsters “play the role of locomotive” (*T24 Independent Internet Daily*, June 11, 2013). According to Emre Kongar, young people and environmentalists are at the center of the movement (Kongar & Küçükkaya, 2013: 41). In fact, the youth involved are doing what is socially expected from them, while the older generation does not leave them alone. As *Hürriyet* columnist Ayşe Arman put it, in contrast to the '68 generation, the '13 generation took to the street with the support of their parents (Arman, June 6, 2013).

Figure 1. Articles that appeared in *Hürriyet* between May 29, 2013 and June 20, 2013

23 <i>Hürriyet</i> Columnists	Total number of articles	Number of articles on the Gezi Park Protests	Number of articles mentioning youth	Percentage of total articles on Gezi	Percentage of articles mentioning youth among articles about the Gezi Park protests
Ahmet Hakan	17	13	4	76	31
Ayşe Arman	16	9	3	56	33
Cengiz Çandar	11	9	3	82	33
Doğan Hızlan	18	2	0	11	0
Erdal Sağlam	9	3	0	33	0
Ertuğrul Özkök	20	12	7	60	58
Fatih Çekirge	13	11	2	85	18
Gila Benyamor	6	5	1	83	20
İsmet Berkan	12	10	1	83	10
Kanat Atkaya	9	7	0	78	0
Mehmet Yılmaz	20	16	1	80	6
Melis Alphan	11	4	1	36	25
Nilgün Tekfidan Gümüş	3	2	1	67	50
Noyan Doğan	4	2	0	50	0
Rauf Tamer	23	14	1	61	7
Sedat Ergin	17	13	0	76	0
Şükrü Küçükşahin	7	5	0	71	0
Taha Akyol	18	12	0	67	0
Vahap Munyar	14	2	0	14	0
Yalçın Bayer	29	16	1	55	6
Yalçın Doğan	17	11	1	65	9
Yılmaz Özdil	16	13	1	81	8
Yonca Tokbaş	10	9	5	90	56

All *Hürriyet* columnists proclaim the rightness of the youth protests and express respect for their mode of expression. Many among the columnists went to Taksim Square both to see what was happening first hand and to show their solidarity with the cause. The experience of Fatih Çekirge is particularly meaningful. Çekirge, a “sixty-eighter”, who went to the Gezi area, shared with readers about witnessing some young people kicking an NTV live broadcast vehicle. He asked them why they did this and learned that they were angry at the lack of television coverage of what was going on out there. He seemed somewhat sympathetic to this behavior, noting instead that it was marginal groups who masked their faces and burned cars that were the real vandals. He thinks that when the masked faces appear on the streets “festival-like solidarity gives way to “marginal hours””, and when he saw this happening, he left (Çekirge, June 4, 2013).

Here are some other examples to how “the sixty-eighters” perceive the youth of the 2010s. This generation, also called “the digital generation”, “the internet generation” or “Generation Y”, is being characterized as “heroic”, working for the democratization of their country. According to Cengiz Çandar, who is known to come from the radical left and particularly from the Maoist tradition, the youth of Istanbul are “heroes”. (Çandar, June 2, 2013). Ertuğrul Özkök, a sociologist and also the former editor of the newspaper, who had previously believed that Prime Minister Erdoğan represented a New Turkey with a liberal approach, thinks that “the children of Gezi” “will comprise the missing link of Turkey’s democracy” (Özkök, June 4, 2013). He compliments them and declares them more savvy, humane, peaceful, cooperative, humorous and creative than his own generation (Özkök, June 6, 2013). Fatih Çekirge thinks that “children sitting on sidewalks are not the type of children who would normally go onto the streets and scream”. According to him, “there is a festival-like solidarity”, “a festival of saying ‘In this country, there is me as well’” (Çekirge, June 4, 2013).

The above-mentioned articles show that columnists from the ’68 generation have tended to underline the goodwill of the youth participating in the protests. Other columnists also venerate the youth and their pioneering steps in the protests, who they described as taking a stand against intrusions by the government on their lives. They do not want to hear about how they should

“behave, live, talk, wear, think, what to eat and drink” (Hakan, June 4, 2013). The others did nothing, the children did everything (Hakan, June 6, 2013). Afraid of neither pepper spray nor water cannons, they show complete solidarity with others “through looks” (Tokbaş, June 1, 2013). The young fan group of İstanbul’s Beşiktaş football club, known as Çarşı, have particularly appropriated the protests and the fight for rights (Alphan, June 10, 2013).

4. CONCLUSION

After the coup d’état of 1980, some depoliticization processes took place in Turkey, and as a result, youth have come to be criticized for their indifference to political events. However, as relatively recent publications have demonstrated, the ’13 generation has been politically active on social media and has demonstrated this through its use of technology in organizing the Gezi Park protests. According to Turkish sociologist Emre Kongar, who is preoccupied with grand historical revolutions such as the agricultural and the industrial revolutions, what happened in Turkey in the summer of 2013 is “an informatics revolution led by the youth”.

According to Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, interest rate lobbies conducted a plan of conspiracy and managed to convince some people to protest the government in the summer of 2013. The police did their duty in suppressing the chaos, but the manipulated masses did not want to see the reality. Many right-wing thinkers agreed with Prime Minister Erdoğan. However, *Hürriyet* columnists are among those who did not see things the same way.

Hürriyet is one of the most heavily circulated dailies in Turkey and has a special place among all the Turkish medias as a leading figure. *Hürriyet*’s columnists come from a broad spectrum of political views. While some have roots in extreme left-wing movements and others in Islamist movements, all seem to support the Gezi Park protests and to criticize the JDP government. However, quantitatively speaking, columnists did not place significant emphasis on the position of the youth. Only 12 percent mentioned youth in half or more of their writings. This lack of emphasis could be linked to the fact that the youth started the protest movement, but the middle class supported them. That is, the perception is that the accomplishment of the youth was that they convinced others to join. In

fact, in contrast to the '68 generation, the '13 generation was backed by others and especially by their parents.

The Gezi Park protests constitute an urban movement, started by young people, and supported by the middle class. The '13 generation, for better or worse, has become as legendary as the '68 generation.

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