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Ahmed E SOUAIAIA, *University of Iowa*



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A Turkish Spring even if different from the Arab Spring

by *Ahmed E. Souaiaia**

The wide-spreading protest movement in Turkey is bringing up the irresistible analogy: Taksim Square is for Turkey what Tahrir Square is for Egypt. Considering that Tahrir Square events were the extension of the protest movement that started it all from Tunisia, it follows that the turmoil in Turkey is similar to the so-called Arab Spring. But most observers and media analysts are dismissing Taksim Square movement arguing that Turkey's uprising is not similar to the Arab Spring because Erdoğan and his party are democratically elected and that Erdoğan has governed over a period of unprecedented economic prosperity.



Turkish Prime minister Erdoğan, too, mockingly rejected calls for him to resign saying that he cannot be called a dictator because he was democratically elected. He accused his political opponents of using the street to topple his government. He argued that the protesters are ideologically motivated and threatened that for every 100,000 protesters, he will bring out a million from his party.

While it is true that the circumstances of Turkey are different from those in the Arab world, one could also argue that the circumstances of Tunisia were different from those in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. Yet, each of these countries was affected, in varying degrees, by the protest movements of this decade.

The wave of protest movements ignited by Elbouazizi is about one central theme: dignity. Certainly, in the long run, these rebellions are not about a venter harassed by police officers in Sidi Bouzid in the case of Tunisia or about several trees cut in Taksim Square in Turkey. Those events are simply the sparks that ignite the flames that have been burning underneath. The feeling of being made irrelevant, powerless, and insignificant by an arrogant leader elected, or otherwise, is the real force that breaks the wall of fear and galvanizes people to reclaim their dignity.

Indeed, democracies, like dictatorships, are prone to overreaching and abuse of power. In a dictatorship, it is easy to identify abuse of power because that abuse generally comes from a single source: a dictator or the ruling party. In a democracy, where power is shared, blame tends to be shared as well, making it hard to identify the source of abuse. But in the end, if the people, or a significant segment of society, feel that their dignity is abused, be it on the hands of a dictator or an elected leader, they will rise up.

Erdoğan, though he is elected, has shown alarming authoritarian tendencies. His hubris is appalling and his arrogance is offensive to many Turkish citizens and people in the region. Elected leaders are not immune to hubris and arrogance especially when they have a limited understanding of how democracy works.

Being elected democratically does not grant one unchecked sovereignty and powers, especially when the country does not have strong and established civil society institutions. In fact, since his rise to power, Erdoğan has done all that he could to consolidate power and undermine civil society institutions. He targeted and/or undermined journalists, academicians, artists, judges, human rights activists, and NGOs. When his opponents opposed him, he threatened elections and used demagoguery and his popular base to stifle dissent. Where Arab dictators used tear gas, jail, torture, and guns to silence opponents, Erdoğan used demagoguery and majoritism as tools of oppression. Is there a difference between such a democracy and dictatorship if the outcome is the same: Oppression of minorities, dissenters, and the vulnerable?

Erdoğan and his political party are reducing democracy to a tool of control. They are ignoring the fact that democracy works best when it is adopted in an environment that celebrates dissent and diversity. Without vibrant, free, and thriving civil society institutions, elections are only a path to authoritarianism, especially in a country full of supermajorities and superminorities.

The Turkish Spring is similar to the Arab Spring and in some ways a bit different. While most Arab protesters wanted to overthrow the established order (*Isqat al-Nizam*) because they are corrupt beyond repair, Turkish protesters want Erdoğan to resign, not overthrow the system. It might be in the interest of the ruling party to force Erdoğan to resign to preserve their achievements and to plan for a future of shared governance. Erdoğan's threat to bring to the street a million people from his party for every 100,000 of protesters is divisive, arrogant, partisan, and unbecoming of a leader who is supposed to represent all the Turkish—not his party.

* Prof. [SOUAIAIA](#) teaches at the University of Iowa. Opinions are the author's, speaking on matters of public interest; not speaking for the university or any other organization with which he is affiliated.