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Repercussion of Gezi Park Protests at Turkish Universities: Will it Open the Way to More Freedom in the Academy?

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The review I am discussing here aims at examining how universities got involved in and influenced from the Taksim Gezi Park protests taken place in the summer of 2013 in Istanbul. The incidents presented here were taken from the websites of newspapers, universities and other related organizations. Some pictures which show the reflections of university students taken from the graduate ceremonies were also presented here (Pic.1-4).

The protests of *Gezi Park* have started on 31 May 2013 and the aftermath effect is still continuing. It was the Istanbul Municipality's decision and act to cut the trees in the Park for spacing more room for building Ottoman Soldier Barracks (these were fallen down in late 1800s). The would-be new Barracks were planned as a shopping mall inside having the old Barracks' architecture on the face. The first reaction to this action came from a group of young people who then set up tents and stayed there until the decision was withdrawn. On the first morning of the stay in the Park, the tents were given fire by the police or the municipality guards- this has not been clear to the public so far. The following events become more and more complex to explain in such a short analysis. But the protests are spread out all over the country, numbers of groups in each city (in 80 cities out of 81) gathered in or around centres, parks or monuments at 19.00 p.m. every evening supporting people at Gezi Park with slogans, songs and the like. And the protests have insistently taken place for about 3 months. Towards the end of August 2013 the gatherings have been turned into forums in local parks in many cities and towns where people get together in the evenings and make speech. Police violence has been the only response by the Government. Custodies, jailing, surveillances (on the twitter and facebook) are still being used as threat on those who participated in the meetings.

Reasons for the spreadover protests ranged from anti-secular implementations of the Government to interference to private life and thus freedom. Religion and Islamic influences in everyday life can only be one of the reasons of

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the protest and narrowing down the entire problem to religion would end a short-sighted analysis. From a larger perspective one should find many other factors, from sociological to economic, from current political discourse to the behavioural history of the people and the State, leading the protests and the protestors today. An assistant researcher shared his comments on twitter:

“it was seriously moved from the humble protests to a clash between the elected government and the people”.

Although the age range of the protestors of Gezi varies largely, majority were likely to be university students. According to a survey conducted by two researchers from Bilgi University in the first days of the protests, among 3000 who answered an online questionnaire 39.6% of were 19-25 and 24 % were 26-30 aged people and 37 % were students. They stayed at the park while the final exams were taken place in their universities. Some universities, which were subsequently had been questioned and reprimanded by the government administrators, postponed final exams or gave make up right to those who could not take the exams. A private university was warned by the PM not to take part in the events, saying “the University should not forget the fact that its lands were given by the State”. Recently, a newspaper article (Cumhuriyet, 18 October 2013) mentions that a “colleague hunting” at the universities has been encouraged by the Higher Education Council. Those lecturers who did postpone their exams during the Gezi protests are now being reported to the HEC by their colleagues.

It was also claimed that a private university rector was forced to resign as he signed a declaration (also signed by 225 academic staff from the same university) condemning the police violence against the protestors (Radikal, 1 July 2013). Similarly, the dean of the faculty of communication in a private university and a foreign associate professor from the same university were dismissed as they supported the protests at Middle East Technical University and Gezi Park through social media tools (skytürk360.com). A Media Club of the same university condemned the firings in their website on 14 August 2013 saying:

“we condemn the firings of the two professors from the university without a reason. This cannot be explained with termination of the contract. The university claims to adopt European Union principles but this decision does not align with the EU standards”
(<http://www.medyakulubu.com/2013/08/14/prof-dr-sevda-alankus-ile-yrd-doc-dr-lyndon-wayin-islerini-son-verildi-hocalarimizadokunmaieu/>).

Many of the long-honoured universities in big cities have witnessed students and academics’ protests in the graduation ceremonies. The protest included banners, slogans, pictures, and choirs and applause with Gezi Park content. Some of these are *resistGezi*, *resistTaksim*, *OccupyGezi*, *Everywhere Taksim*, *Resistance Everywhere* including anti-government slogans. In one of these ceremonies an assistant professor having worn a t-shirt with Diren (*Resist*) design on, had given a speech supporting Gezi was immediately questioned by the university administration. His speech entitled “it is the time when Law became lie and lie became Law”. His university opened an investigation about him. Afterwards, a

group of academics posted a declaration for signature to support him and condemn the pressure on academy. After investigations and administrative pressures he was found not guilty regarding academic freedom, which was mainly owed to the support from academics.



Pic. 1. Red dresses in a graduation ceremony of a big university in Istanbul represent the red dressed woman being exposed to tear gas at Gezi Park



Pic. 2. A common printing “#resist” on shirts.

A mother whose daughter graduated from a prestigious private university this summer narrates:

“In the graduation ceremony the rector was trying to make the opening speech. But he was interrupted by the students’ slogans to protest the University administration’s silence to Taksim Gezi Park protests. The rector was blamed of not to support the protestors in Taksim Gezi Park. In the hall of 3000 people there were banners and symbols of Gezi Park events. In the banners it said “we don’t want a silent rector”, “Everywhere Taksim Gezi Park, resist everywhere”, “We support Taksim Gezi Park protests”... and so on” (excerpted from the author’s an informal talk during the protest).



Pic. 3. *Graduation ceremony of a university in Ankara: "With this gas we become CEO(!) #resistunemployed"*

It would be a naive standing to think all academic persons in Turkey supported the protests and enjoyed the demands pronounced through Gezi Park events i.e. for freedom of speech, freedom in private life, condemning police violence, etc. The protests were openly decried by many university administrators and academics. In the largest public university of Istanbul the academics who went to Gezi Park were espionaged (by their colleagues) to the Rector and he was asked to stigmatise these academics. The rector's answer was: *"I am happy the academics take part in Gezi Park. We as a responsible university should be there to make observations...this is the biggest social laboratory for social scientists..."* (T24, 4 July 2013)



Pic. 4. *Faculty of Medicine graduation ceremony: "We are not the government's but the people's surgeon"*

Without delay the National Student Loan Fund announced a provision cutting (or not giving) off the loans of the university students who took part in Gezi Park actively.

During the turmoil EĞİTİM SEN (Turkish Education Syndicate) has been the only organized nongovernmental movement criticizing the pressures on academy, police violence and unjust investigations on academic persons through declarations, panels, meetings and marches (egitimsen.org.tr).

Finally, Gezi Park protests found echo in the university; students have relatively freely pronounced their arguments at various platforms while small number of academics could state their opinion though majority remained silent. At the administration level universities were much like state authorities; rigid, cautious and panelising.

The expectation from this process is the Turkish universities become volunteer hosts for diverse voices thus become the engine for academic freedom.

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