

Unity in Diversity: The June Uprising (a.k.a. Gezi Uprising) of Turkey

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Astonished by the extent of the June Uprising of 2013, AKP’s Minister of National Education, Nabi Avcı admitted in the first days of the uprising that they:

...have succeeded in five days in doing something that the opposition wouldn’t have been able to do in years. And we have made very groups and factions meet each other under the dust, who would have never gotten together under normal circumstances (Bozkurt 2013).

He was right. The June uprising had no organized headquarters, nor a single central organization that could mobilize the masses toward a common target. The protesters were in the streets with their own reasons and values to stand against the government. It can be said that standing against AKP government was the only common denominator that united the protesters. The people, with their deep, and most of the time contradictory, differences managed to unite against the government. The underlying causes of the uprising can be traced back in the history of republic or in the 10 years of AKP rule. But the trigger of this loaded gun was pulled by the government’s attacks over a small group of environmentalists who wanted to save the Gezi Park in Taksim Square of Istanbul from being demolished. The growing masses of people clashed with the police and the demolishers from May 27 to June 1 in day and night. According to the Ministry of Interior, 400 demonstrations and protests were organized in 74 cities of Turkey in just 4 days.

This was the first stage of the uprising and at this phase and all the necessary resources and possibilities were determined with this focus in mind: Gezi Park had to be saved. Wireless connections to spread news, anti-gas solutions against teargas, available spaces and doctors for the makeshift hospitals to give first aid to the wounded, lawyers to defend the detained protesters are all mobilized for this purpose. By the third day of the protests, a call was being made to the shops, offices and households around Taksim Square to share their Internet connections with the protesters. Soon, various shop and office owners located on the side-streets of Istiklal Street, started to send tweets that declared they were ready to host tired and wounded protesters and they shared their Wi-Fi passwords. Such kinds of places become important shelters for the protesters who wanted to take a break from the police violence.

Then, on the 1st of June, the first makeshift hospitals started to appear in the cafes and offices of Istanbul and Ankara - and continued to exist until the end of the uprising. Medical school students, their professors and doctors volunteered to work in there. Professional organization of the doctors in Turkey, Turkish Medical Association issued a declaration on June 1, saying that “the health workers are and will be side by side with those who defend Taksim” and warned the government to stop “this relentless attack against people”. The materials for medical intervention were collected from the citizens who answered the calls for solidarity. Interestingly, pharmacy shops became an important source for masks, Talcid, plasters and other kinds of medical materials (TTB 2013).

Apart from the medical aid, legal aid was another important requirement for the thousands of protesters who had been detained in this first phase of the uprising. According to the Turkey Human Rights Foundation, police forces had detained approximately 4000 people in the first 4 days of the uprising, majority of whom had been participating to such violent protests for the first time in their lives; therefore they had no idea about the detention procedures. Turkish Barr Association and Progressive Lawyers Association made official complaints against the crimes committed by the police forces and prepared their lists of the volunteered lawyers, who played an important role in informing and defending the protesters about the legal proceedings and created a certain confidence in the protesters that they were not alone in any part of the uprising. The support of the famous figures and artists in the early days of the uprising was another important boost. Actors and actresses like Mehmet Ali Alabora, Halit Ergenç, Bergüzal Korel and Erdal Beşikçioğlu who are quite popular with their TV series or programmes made calls for more participation, posted photographs from the resistance on their Twitter accounts (“it's not just a park issue, don't you get it?”). A popular singer named Tarkan openly supported the protesters and condemned the police attacks from his Facebook status and participated to the protests. The first song ever composed for the uprising, “Eyvallah”, came from a popular music band named Duman. Another actress, Leyla Okay was heavily wounded with a tear gas and taken to hospital.

As the social media became the main tool for communication and getting the news about the uprising, the number of Twitter users rose to 3.8 million on May 31 from 1.8 million on May 29. Likewise, the number of tweets doubled up to 15 million by May 31. That was why the Prime Minister Erdogan called the social media as “the trouble maker of the society” on a TV programme on June 2 (Hurriyet Daily News, 2013). Examples of activist journalism were also becoming widespread thanks to the mobile technologies. Protesters with smartphones used their 3G connections to broadcast and the clashes live on the internet. The most preferred websites were Ustream and Livestream.

The fact that the profile of the protesters was significantly diverse was starting to become visible as the uprising unfolded. Flowing from the social media into the computers of millions of citizens, news and images were verifying what the Minister of National Education had said: The people behind the barricades were very different than each other. For example, it was possible to see the adversary political hand gestures like the fist (adopted by the left), and the wolf (adopted by the nationalists) side by side in the same frame. Same for the posters of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Abdullah Öcalan: Two important adversary figures of the Turkish and Kurdish nationalism in Turkey. While the Turkish nationalists and Kemalists chanted the slogan of “We are the soldiers of Mustafa Kemal”, the Kurds were shouting “Long live Apo” on the same square, and then they joined forces to chant “shoulder to shoulder against fascism”, a historic slogan of the socialist left in Turkey.

On June 1st, Gazi, Gülsuyu and Okmeydanı neighbourhoods of Istanbul, well-known Alevi and Kurdish working class districts where the militant left-wing political parties have strong networks, joined the uprising with their own slogans and experienced activist profile. There were some other slogans that gave an idea about the background of the protesters: “You are messing with a generation who beat policemen in the Grand Theft Auto” (a reference to a famous computer game); “Tayyip, winter is coming” (a reference to the TV series Game of Thrones); “Why so Tayyip?”; “S.O.B. Tayyip”; “Solution is Drogba” (a reference to a football player) and a very popular one among the football fans: “Go on, spray, go on, spray. Go on, spray tear gas. Take off your helmet, drop your baton. Let's see who is the real man”. This diversity was conserved until the very last day of the uprising with its internal tensions and richness. However, towards the end of the early stages of the uprising, some attempts were made to develop a common identity for the protesters. Angry speeches by the Prime Minister and the continuous attacks of the police forces helped a lot.

2nd Stage: Occupation

While the clashes went on in other cities of Turkey and other districts of Istanbul, a new stage began around Taksim Square and Gezi Park on June 1 as the police forces were withdrawn from Taksim Square as a result of one day long clashes. Thousands of people crowded the square and the park. It was surprising for the protesters to be keeping the entire square and park police-free and under their control for the first time in the history of Turkey. It was the second stage that would continue until the 14th of June. At the beginning of the month, attempts were made to turn the square and park into self-organized public spaces free from government control. The uprising was now something that went beyond the simple issue of protecting a park. Transforming a city square into a living space for thousands of people and being able to stand united against the potential attacks of the government needed the organized efforts of the protesters. Demands had to be raised and the general will for resistance had to be emphasized. However, there was no such a central organ that could represent them. So an already existing umbrella organization that was established one year before the uprising, the “Taksim Solidarity” was transformed into the spokesperson of the resistance. Taksim Solidarity was now the main coordination and communication centre of the uprising. Same day the components of the Solidarity came together and decided on a 4 article demands list:

Gezi Park should remain as a park. We are not going to permit the construction of Artillery Barracks, nor we will let you pillage our natural and living spaces.

Primarily the Ministry of Interior, Governor of Istanbul, Head of Security and all the people responsible from this violence should resign. The use of gas bombs should be banned.

Our friends under custody because of their participation to the resistance should immediately be released and no investigation should be launched against them.

The bans on meetings and demonstrations should be lifted for all the squares in Turkey, primarily Taksim (Taksim Dayanışması, 2013).

The masses in Taksim made it clear that they were not going to end the occupation until these demands are met. An intense activity began to clear the premises, rebuild the barricades in order to prevent another police attack and construction of an alternative living space slowly came into the agenda. The protesters occupied the square until the 11th and the park until the 15th. In those 10 to 14 days of time, Gezi Park was turned into a habitation zone and a cultural centre for the uprising. Protesters quickly set a makeshift hospital and a kitchen where the visitors of Gezi Park could receive first aid and free food. There was also a “Gezi Garden” in which the environmentalists started to grow organic plants and vegetables. “The Revolution Shop” was established after large amounts of free stuff started to flow towards the Gezi Park and this shop distributed everything for free.

During the first days of the uprising police violence killed 3 people: Mehmet Ayvalıtaş, Ethem Sarısülük and Abdullah Cömert. As I will explain, they and the other two martyrs of the uprising had played an important role in the attempts to create a unified culture of resistance together with Taksim Solidarity. They were transformed into the symbols of the resistance and a monument for the martyrs were also located in the park.

Intersections: Meeting with Each Other

June Uprising successfully brought together people from various class backgrounds, nations, beliefs and political views. It created an environment where the social groups that were formerly perceived to be contradictory or intolerant against each other stood side by side. The togetherness and tolerance of these different groups was one of the important factors that emotionally and rationally reinforced the protesters' convictions that they were doing something legitimate.

Football Fans

One of those encounters occurred between the fans of rival football teams. This might seem strange for an outsider, but the fans of the biggest three football clubs in Turkey, -Beşiktaş, Fenerbahçe and Galatasaray- used to have a long-standing hatred against each other that was expressed in the form of abusive slogans, songs and even clashes. In such a culture, the identity of a Fenerbahçe fan had been constructed against the fans of other teams and when two rival groups met, a clash was unavoidable. The June Uprising quickly politicized the football fans that had a bitter history with the police forces and government. United in front of the barricades to resist together, football fans stopped attacking each other during the Uprising. They were still wearing the uniforms of their own teams, but this time avoiding any offences and aggressive slogans against each other. Particularly, the enthusiastic and joyful presence of a leftist Beşiktaş fan group named "Çarşı" was welcomed by the fans of other teams.

In the following days of the uprising, the pictures of rival football fans hugging each other, chanting slogans and resisting together against the police violence flooded the social media. A logo appeared that showed the football fans crossing the Bosphorus Bridge together: Istanbul United, as they called it. This spirit of solidarity among them excited the protesters and brought a new boost to the resistance. As it has always been the case, the hooligan culture has a patriarchal tone with widespread violent sexist and homophobic insults and slogans. However, when the football fans met with socialists, feminists and LGBT individuals in the streets, they were forced to reconsider their attitude. As soon as the Gezi Park was occupied, feminist groups started to distribute fliers titled "Just think for two seconds when you resist". In these fliers, they called for a stop to the use of sexist language and militarism in the slogans. "Think about the prostitutes who resist with you shoulder to shoulder, when you call Tayyip as S.O.B, how would you feel?" and "Think that you are driving off the resisting homosexuals when you call the police, government or Tayyip as faggots (ibne)," saying these pamphlets.

An observer explains the impact of these attempts to change the attitude of the football fans towards homosexuals as follows:

They [LGBT individuals] approached the soccer fans, Carsi, and asked them not to refer to AKP politicians –or others– as "ibne." "We are the fags and real fags are here defending Gezi Park" they explained to the bewildered Carsi supporters who probably had rarely seen anyone proclaim the identity as a source of pride. However, Carsi had also seen the LGBT folk brave police repression–which the LGBT people explained is part of everyday life for them. Soccer fans, too, had often experienced clashes with the police. An understanding was not impossible.

After some back and forth, Carsi soccer fans countered that they might drop "fag" but they needed good insults. "How about sexist Erdogan?" was a suggestion from the LGBT contingent. So, this all ended with Turkey's ultra-macho soccer fans chanting "Sexist Erdogan" (Tufekci, 2013).

Kurds and Turks Meet

Another interesting encounter was experienced between the mortal enemies: Kemalists or the secular branch of the Turkish nationalists and Kurdish nationalists. Historically, Kemalist nationalism adopted a strictly rejectionist stance against the Kurds, accused the Kurdish struggle of dividing the country after the rise of PKK and turned a blind eye against the state oppression. As a reaction to the oppressive and assimilationist policies of the regime, the Kurdish movement produced an anti-Kemalist ideology that deepened the gap between these two political traditions, making the two groups impossible to tolerate each other. The June Uprising, however, showed us some instances where this gap became smaller than ever. As I have said, in the early days of the protests, when Gezi Park and Taksim Square were occupied by the protesters, it was possible to see the posters of Abdullah Ocalan and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk side by side. In the following days, the residents of Gezi Park witnessed more spectacular moments: Kemalists chanted Kurdish slogans (“Biji pratiya gelan”) together with everybody else; hardcore Kemalist individuals participated to the Kurdish music and dances with their flags and banners.

The corporate media’s undeclared censorship towards the Uprising was one of the factors that created an understanding towards the Kurdish struggle. People were being attacked and wounded by the police, violations of basic human rights by the law enforcement were escalating at night; but the corporate media was broadcasting nature documentaries about penguins. And when they talked about the Uprising, they were only mentioning the physical damages created by the protesters. This attitude of the bourgeois media enlightened the protesters in another sense. By the 3rd of June, some interesting messages started to appear in the social media: “I am very sorry friends. We have been following the Kurdish problem from this media for years”, “I am ashamed of myself for listening the problems of our Kurdish brothers and sisters from this media for 30 years.” etc. The photograph that showed two boys, one with a Turkish flag and the other with the banner of pro-Kurdish party BDP, hand in hand running away from police summarized the encounter.

The efforts to connect with the Kurds and their problems gained a new dimension when a young Kurdish boy named Medeni Yıldırım was murdered in Lice, Diyarbakır by the police on 28th of June. A group of demonstrators in Kayacık Village of the Kurdish town Lice was protesting the construction of a new military post. Gendarmerie forces violently dispersed the protestors by heavy use of tear gas and real bullets. Medeni was shot dead and this incident stirred the country as another victim of AKP’s policies fell. Would the some components of the Uprising remain silent since this incident was seemingly irrelevant with Gezi Park and since Medeni was a Kurd who was killed while defending the rights of Kurdish? Contrary to the expectations, when the BDP and socialists took the initiative to organize demonstrations around the country to protest the police violence and murder in Lice, some Kemalists also joined them, chanting slogans about the sisterhood of the peoples and demanding peace.

Islamists and Seculars

The foreign and domestic corporate media tended to reflect the 2013 Uprising as the reaction of the secular social sections against the Islamization project of AKP. Although this reaction was one of the important driving forces of the Uprising, the existence and impact of Islamists among the protesters obliges us to challenge this doxa. On 5th of June, an Islamist group named Anti-capitalist Muslims declared that they will visit Gezi Park and pray there together with the resisters on Mi’rac Night. In the following days, these prayers led by Anti-capitalist Muslims continued with the participation of religious individuals among the protesters. On 8th and 14th of June, Friday Prayers were held successively in Gezi Park. At that time, the park was under constant police threat, therefore the socialist groups organized a security cordon around the prayers to protect them. These moments were important because of their symbolic connotations. Throughout the history of class struggles in Turkey, the ruling class has used the Islam as a barrier against socialism and there were

various examples where the religious sentiments of the people were provoked against Alevis or communists that ended up with massacres and lynchings. Moreover, the Kemalist nationalists, whose secular ideology considered the Islamists as a reactionary force, also had some unsettled accounts with them, making it difficult to imagine those groups standing together. Therefore, the atmosphere of unity created by this encounter was one of the rare historical moments.

The holy month of the Muslims, Ramadan, began in July when the protests started to calm down. But a call by the Anti-capitalist Muslims gave a new momentum to it: Everybody was invited to Istiklal Street for the first İftar of Ramadan on 9th July. A hundreds of meters-long dinner table would be prepared for those who want to break their fasts. Anti-capitalist Muslims said that this organization would be called as “Earth Meals” against the expensive and ostentatious İftars of the rich people. Religious or not, people were very keen to be a part of anything that was against the government. The first Earth Meal received enormous public attention. Thousands of people crowded Istiklal Street and dined together under the shadow of the security forces and their armoured vehicles. People’s narrations were full of enthusiastic remarks about the event: Atheists, LGBT individuals, religious women and men had sat at the same dinner table; everybody had been sharing their food and all the prejudices had been overcome.

Thanks to the positive feelings fostered by such kind of intersections, the people’s confidence in the unifying features of the resistance grew. More and more people were convinced that when the artificial hostilities were left aside, they could become more and more powerful. The physical aspects of the resistance were important as the basis of the unity and solidarity between different components of the Uprising. However, they were always accompanied by a constant activity of ideological and symbolic production that tried to construct a common identity, common goals and a culture of resistance for the Uprising.

The Concept of Çapulcu: Efforts for A Common Culture of Resistance

As the Taksim Solidarity became the central organ for the protesters through which they declared their demands from the government and solidarity with other parts of Turkey, the Uprising tried to shape common targets, common values, common symbols. The concept of ‘çapulcu’, the symbolism of the martyrs, the songs and the artworks were examples of what might be called as the culture of resistance. ‘Çapulcu’ can be translated as looter in Turkish, and it is used by Prime Minister Erdogan to describe the protesters on the 2nd of June. Same day, the artists came together for a press statement and among them the movie director Zeki Demirkubuz said that “I am leaving aside my 20 year-long directing career and declare myself to be a capulcu.” Next day, a graffiti appeared on the walls of Taksim: “Everyday I’m Çapuling”. This phrase became a buzzword among the protesters as hundreds of Twitter users mentioned it. A TV program host, İhsan Varol, asked about the word ‘Çapulcu’ in his quiz show Word Play, defining the word as “the person who tries to realize his or her thoughts.” On the 4th of June, the English teachers uploaded a video on Youtube in which they gave a short lecture about the ‘English’ verb ‘to chapull’ and its conjugations. On the following days, various songs were composed on ‘capulcu’ and ‘to chapull’ again storming the social media. The word resonated beyond the national borders as a Wikipedia article on ‘Chapulling’ appeared and Noam Chomsky showed up on a Youtube video with a banner that read “I am also a Capulcu” behind him. The word had been appropriated by then and no longer had the former negative connotations for the protesters. To be a ‘capulcu’ became something legitimate and desirable, showing that one was a part in the rightful protests. The Uprising had managed to invalidate the political power’s tactic to discredit the resistance through insults and strengthened the resistance symbolically.

Word ‘çapulcu’ gained other connotations too. A çapulcu was an educated, intellectual and civilized person. He was sensitive and philanthropic. She was creative and collaborative. As the cultural

activities like performances, concerts, workshops and artworks became the daily routine of the occupation in Gezi Park, this productive and caring side of the protesters was made more and more visible. As Barış Yıldırım observed, however, this ‘identity politics’ had its own shortcomings. Çapulcu identity gained its new connotations through a process of differentiation. Most of the time, being a çapulcu meant not being an AKP voter, the 50 percent who were allegedly submissive, reactionary and uneducated Islamists. This attitude ran the risk of alienating large masses of people and making divisions according to status instead of class. This was also the mistake made by Der Spiegel that defined the protests as the reaction of White Turks against the impositions of Black Turks and their government. However, among the 3 million protesters in Turkey and in Istanbul, there were hundreds of thousands uneducated and pious people who were harmed by the neoliberal policies of the government as well (Yıldırım, 2013).

The martyrs of the Uprising were the other unifying symbols of the resistance. Mehmet Ayvalıtaş (21) was killed on 2nd of June, Abdullah Cömert (22) on 3rd of June, Ethem Sarısülük (26) lost his life 11 days after he was shot by a policeman on 1st of June. Ali İsmail Korkmaz (19) was beaten to death by the undercover policeman and he lost his life on 10th of July, after a month comma. A young Kurdish boy named Medeni Yıldırım (18) have been killed by the gendarmerie forces on 28th of June in the city of Diyarbakır while he was protesting the government. Although Yıldırım’s protest had something to the with the Kurdish cause, the uprising included his name among its martyrs, expressing solidarity. Those figures were from different political backgrounds, but despite that they were embraced by all the different components of the uprising. An Ethem Sarısülük mask that resembled the famous V for Vendetta mask was another widespread symbol; and many Twitter and Facebook users used this image as their profile pictures. On 9th of July, a representative graveyard was built inside the Gezi Park as a memorial. These deaths strengthened the sense of common cause among the protestors, reminding them of the prices paid for the uprising. June Uprising showed that it is possible for the people to stand united against the oppressors despite their internal differences and contradictions. It was nothing else but the experience of the uprising itself that was capable of bringing people together. As the slogan goes: “This is just the beginning, the struggle will continue.”

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