

Special Lecture on November 22nd, 2018

The Gezi Park Protests and Post-Protest Political Organization in Turkey

Guest speaker: Esma Özkan, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies

Short Bio: Ms. Özkan is currently pursuing her PhD studies Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. She defended her master's thesis with the theme: "The Aftermath of a Protest Movement: The Gezi Park Protests and Post-Protest Political Organization in Turkey" in 2017. In her research, she is attempting to bridge sociology and political science using the case of Turkey.

Lecture Summary: The lecture consisted of two parts: in the first part, Ms. Özkan provided the context about protest movements using her MA thesis findings, while the second part of the lecture focused on her research process and challenges she faced. Before starting her research on protest movements, Ms. Özkan participated in a major movement in Istanbul in 2013. This movement called the Gezi Park movement can be seen in a broader context as a part of the Arab Spring, Occupy the Wall Street movement, anti-austerity movements in Greece and a wave of protests in Brazil and Hong Kong. She sees the following similarities between these movements in their motivations, form and democratic practices:

- 1) they are directed against neoliberalism, austerity and authoritarianism
- 2) they make wide use of social media to organize and diffuse information
- 3) they occupy public spaces
- 4) they are non-hierarchical and leaderless
- 5) they make use of prefigurative politics and promote radical democratic practices
- 6) they are aware of other protest movements and learn from each other.

The Gezi protests started on May 28th 2013 as a small group protest against the demolition of the park in central Istanbul. When the police brutally suppressed the peaceful movement, it resulted in moral shock and emotional reaction in social media. This caused more people to come and join the protesters and spread from Istanbul to other cities later in June. The government made highly polarizing statements about the movement which reinforced the feeling of frustration at the rise of Islamist policies (ban of alcohol, meddling into people's private life). Those were the first signs of the authoritarianism then, and the situation has gotten much worse now after the involvement in Syrian civil war, bombing and coup d'état attempts.

Ms. Özkan mentioned that since 1980s, the Turkish were largely depoliticized, and the Geza Park protests mobilized them to become politically active again. Another impressive feature of the movement was unification of opposition forces, including Turkish and Kurdish nationalists. She raised several discussion questions:

- 1) Unlike some other protest movements that turned into political parties (e.g. Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece and 5-star in Italy), Gezi did not institutionalize. Does this mean it had no impact on the political landscape in Turkey?
- 2) Can movement outcomes be restricted to achievement of its immediate goals? What are unintended effects of the Gezi Park Protests on political organizations in Turkey?
- 3) What are the indirect effects of the movement on political parties and organizations?

She analyzed her case by overviewing all the major political parties in Turkey starting with the ruling party AKP (Justice and Development Party) and mentioned "condescending remarks of the PM" and his divisive discourse referring to some protesters as "the marginal" and to others as

“the innocent”. The image of the party as a democratic role model collapsed internationally, and its “power bloc” with the Gulen Community ended. Another party involved with the protests is CHP (Republican People’s Party) which supported the protest but did not organize nor steer the movement. The party was unable to learn from the criticism as “ineffective opposition” and as a result, young people in Ankara occupied the headquarters of the party demanding change in accordance with values from the Gezi. Next, the HDP (People’s Democratic Party) was pro-Kurdish but was able to remodel itself around the Gezi discourse to appeal to non-Kurdish voters. As a result, they passed 10% threshold and got into the parliament for the first time causing AKP to lose their parliamentary dominance for a short time. As for the MHP (Nationalist Movement Party), they were inconsistent in their criticism of the government and protesters. As a right-wing party, they are not likely to challenge the status quo. Finally, parties of the socialist left were reinvigorated and attempted to unite (e.g. “United June movement”). She concludes that the Gezi Park protests have had broad and long-lasting impacts on political parties and political organizations in Turkey, and that the protest movement outcomes can not be limited to immediate goals. They have wide implications for political, social, institutional and cultural change.

After this, Ms. Özkan shared more about her research process including choosing the topic, deciding on research methods (including field research) and use of secondary sources. She talked about risks of studying social movements under authoritarian regimes, both for the researcher and participants.

Q&A Session: The lecture inspired students to ask as many as sixteen questions about Ms. Özkan’s research. They were curious if the recent tightening of the state control in Turkey could be seen as a response and consequence of the protest movement, what were the risks of studying protest movements, why she chose to focus on organizational level instead of political regime and how she ensured being an objective researcher while being herself a participant of the movement. Other questions related to the role of Turkish media during the movement and cultural impact of the movement, comparative perspective of the Gezi movement with protest movements in other countries and with Turkish protest movements in the 1970s and 1980s and unification of the opposition forces during the movement. Yet other students wished to understand mechanisms of transforming an ecological movement into a political, the reasons why the government decided to attack the protesters so brutally and how Ms. Özkan’s research can help improve political environment in Turkey. Some students also commented on similarities in their home countries, such as: cultural legacy of Occupy the Wall Street movement in the United States and ways of accessing news by Taiwanese young people as opposed to the older generation.