

COMMENTARY

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Turkey Moves to Prevent Protests in Stadiums and on Campus

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Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government has announced a series of measures to prevent soccer stadiums and university campuses from becoming major protest venues as the football season and the academic year begins. In doing so, Erdogan is taking a leaf out of the playbook of Egyptian military strongman Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and other Arab autocrats who demonize their opponents as terrorists.

In a series of recent statements aimed at students and militant soccer fans who played prominent roles in the mass Gezi Park protests in June, the government said it intended to replace private security forces in stadiums and on campuses with police forces; banning the chanting of political slogans during soccer matches; obliging clubs to force spectators to sign a pledge to abide by the ban before attending a game; and cancelling scholarships for students who had participated in anti-government protests.

The government said plain-clothes policemen would mingle with militant fans during matches and that their activities on social media would be monitored. It also restricted the consumption of alcohol in stadiums.

The announcements were accompanied by stark statements by Erdogan, his deputy Bulent Arinc and his sports minister Suat Kilic as well as a video issued by the Anti-Terrorism Office and the police warning that protests were the first step towards terrorism.

The 55-second video featuring a young woman demonstrator-turned suicide bomber warned the public that "our youth, who are the guarantors of our future, can start with small demonstrations of resistance that appear to be innocent, and after a short period of time, can engage without a blink in actions that may take the lives of dozens of innocent people." Throughout the video, the words 'before it is too late' are displayed.

The video followed the indictment of 20 members of Carsi, the support group of storied Istanbul club Besiktas JK that has a huge following across the country on charges of belonging to an illegal organization. Carsi played a leading role in the mass anti-government protests in June sparked by a brutal police crackdown on environmentalists protesting plans to bulldoze Gezi Park on Istanbul's iconic Taksim Square to make place for a mall. Carsi joined forces in the protests with supporters of Besiktas' two Istanbul arch rivals, Fenerbahce FC and Galatasaray FC.

The government measures are part of a battle in Turkey for public space. With the banning in early July of protests on Taksim, protests moved to neighbourhood parks across the city. In Besiktas, Abbasaga Park statues of prominent Turkish politicians, journalists and authors wearing gas masks looked down on Hyde Park-style nightly gatherings.

"Taksim is everywhere, resistance is everywhere," was the motto of the nightly meetings. The underlying tone was one that resembled the breaking of the Arab world's barrier of fear. United in a desire for greater freedom, protesters from diverse worldviews and walks of life displayed a humour-laced irreverence of power with jokes, chants and art. Carsi members wearing their club's black-and-white often moderated the deliberations. They insisted that their sole ideology was opposition to repression and inequality, quoting the group's slogan, 'Carsi, her şeye karşı!' (Carsi is against everything!).

Carsi's claiming of Abbasaga Park like the protesters' requester of parks elsewhere constituted a rebuke of the city government's definition of who was entitled to enjoy the public spaces. At a ceremony to mark the reopening of Gezi Park in early July Istanbul governor Huseyin Avnni Mutlu warned that protests would not be allowed.

"We invite our folks, our people, our children, the elderly and families to visit the park," Mr. Mutlu said. His implicit message was that families were the unit in society entitled to claim public space, not sub-groups like gays who had frequently gathered in the park prior to the protests. "If certain groups claim to be the public and argue that 'This Park belongs to us, we're the owners of this park,' we will not allow that," Mutlu said.

In the government's latest salvo, Deputy Prime Minister Arinc said the government measures were in response to information that fans and students were planning mass protests in September. Erdogan warned that any protests would be countered by police in what he described as the necessary manner. Kilic went a step further threatening that "those who politicize the stadiums will pay the price."

The sports minister added that "if some groups try to infiltrate fan groups, they should know that Turkey is not a banana republic. We have fought terrorism for thirty years. We can handle this too. I do not want to be threatening, but you should know that it is not worth risking yourself and your team. Everyone must know that the law will be enforced. I hope that no one will be hurt, but this can happen. I am noting that there will be electronic monitoring in stadiums. Sports prosecutors will watch the games in stadiums, and we are introducing electronic tickets to monitor the seat of every supporter."

The minister had a similar message for students. “They can try Gezi protests in universities. People should not ruin their lives, should not have criminal records,” he said in an ironic twist given that Turkey with its history of military coups and the Erdogan government’s crackdown on the media has scores of intellectuals and journalists with police records. Among those is Erdogan himself, who spent four months in prison for reciting a controversial poem.

Journalist Burak Bekdil reported that Şamil Tayyar, a member of parliament from Erdogan’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), suggested that the government should punish Besiktas if its fan disobey the ban on political slogans by seizing its stadium and turning it into a park. Alternatively, Bekdil said the government could follow rent-a-fan model of the late North Korean dictator Kim Jong-II. Kim Jong II paid Chinese actors to attend North Korean games during the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. “Kim was right. When you cannot win hearts and minds, you can always rent them,” Bekdil wrote.

Turkey’s battle lines are being drawn in various ways. Erdogan broke into tears last week during a television interview as a video was aired with the text of a letter that incarcerated Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammed el-Beltagy wrote to his 17-year old daughter who was killed on Cairo’s Raba’a al Adawiya Square when security forces broke up the group’s sit-ins earlier this month. “I believe you have been loyal to your commitment to God, and He has been to you. Otherwise, He would not have called you to His presence before me,” el-Beltagy, who was unable to attend his daughter’s funeral, wrote. Erdogan said it reminded him of his own children who complained that he did not have time to spend with them.

To be sure, many Turks share the sentiments of Erdogan who has emerged as one of the fiercest critics of the Egyptian military’s coup and crackdown. Like the prime minister, international midfielder and national soccer captain Emre Belozoglu showed the four-finger Raba’a salute that has become symbolic of Raba’a al Adawiya Square after he scored for Fenerbahce in their opening game of the season.

Erdogan failed however to express similar emotion for Ali Ismail Korkmaz, a protester in Eskisehir who was badly beaten on 2 June by men claiming to be cooperating with the police and was kicked several times in the head by a policeman. Korkmaz died on 8 July of a cerebral haemorrhage. His ordeal was documented in a video disclosed by Radikal newspaper.

The government’s tough language follows indications that its hard-handed attempts to fend off further protests are failing. If anything, they may well be fuelling them. Fans of Fenerbahce reminded the government that the battle was not over and may have just begun when they chanted “Everywhere Is Taksim Square! Everywhere Is Resistance!” and demanded Erdogan’s resignation during a match against Red Bull Salzburg. Supporters of Ankara’s Gencerbigli FC sought to circumvent the ban by chanting ‘Political Slogan’ during a recent match.

Writing on the T24 news website, soccer journalist Gulengul Altinsay charged that the government was introducing martial law in the stadiums. Addressing the government, Altinsay suggested that “while you are at it, why not declare in a state of emergency manifesto which slogans are permissible. If that does not work, you can fill the stands with dummies. You have no choice; this nation uses its wits when it is silenced.”

In another twist of irony, the government fears that the one Istanbul stadium named after Erdogan could become a focal point of protest. That is where Besiktas is playing its home games during the coming season while its own pitch is being renovated.

The issue is not purely symbolic. Municipal elections in Istanbul next March are gearing up to be a litmus test for Erdogan's ambitions to swap the prime ministry for the presidency after the next parliamentary election.

"If Erdogan loses Istanbul, his power base could begin to unravel. That is why he is turning stadiums into police states. Sports have become a major battlefield. Besiktas is where it is being fought out. Erdogan is pitting Besiktas chairman Fikret Orman against Carsi who voted him into office. It's the same strategy he used with the media exploiting their financial vulnerability," said a prominent political analyst.

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