

# COMMENTARY

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## **The Battle for Taksim, a Battle for Turkey's Soul**

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**M**ilitant supporters of Istanbul's top three soccer clubs added muscle to thousands of trade unionists, leftists and government opponents in May Day clashes with Turkish police in what has become a battle for control of the city's iconic Taksim Square.

With 40,000 men on duty, 20,000 of which were stationed on and around Taksim, police fired tear gas and rubber bullets to prevent protesters from reaching the square. Clashes erupted in various parts of the city, including Besiktas, home to Carsi, the widely popular militant support group of Besiktas JK. Turkish media reports said 51 people were injured and 138 arrested.

The significance of Taksim to both the government and its critics was highlighted by the fact that the government banned May Day celebrations on the square on alleged national security grounds but assigned an area on the outskirts of the city where the unions and others would be allowed to mark Labour Day.

Taksim, Istanbul's historic venue for May Day demonstrations and other gatherings, has been contested territory since the eruption last June of the largest mass anti-government protests against Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan since he was first elected in 2002. Militant soccer fans played a key role in those protests. The government has since banned all demonstrations from the square.

Underlying the protests in what has become a deeply polarized country is a widespread sense among Erdogan's opponents that power has gone to his head and that he since the brutal use of the police during last year's protests has become increasingly authoritarian, using a power struggle with Fethullah Gulen, a self-exiled Muslim preacher who heads one of the world's largest Islamist movement to muzzle the media, give Turkey's intelligence service powers similar to those of the secret services in Arab autocracies and subject the judiciary to government control.

Few deny that Erdogan deserves credit for significantly growing Turkey's economy, positioning it as a regional power at the crossroads of Europe and Asia and bridging the gap that long segregated secularists from religious segments of society.

In fact, the very nature of the debate underlying the battle for Taksim highlights significant changes Erdogan, an Islamist politician who served prison time for citing what authorities at the time viewed as a subversive poem, has brought to Turkey

Criticism of Erdogan's focuses on his haughty style of government, his more recent refusal to constructively engage with his opponents, his refusal to allow due process in what is the most serious corruption scandal since he came to office, and authoritarian moves that threaten to curtail Turkish democracy. It does not focus on Erdogan's Islamist credentials.

That is a far cry from the 'us and them' discussion of almost 20 years ago when the country's economic elite moved vast sums of money out of Turkey for fear that then newly elected Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan would turn it into an Islamic republic. The elites at the time cheered Erbakan's removal in a silent military coup and the banning of his Refah Party from which Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) emerged.

The battle for Taksim reflects that change. It is a battle for the soul of a Turkey in which all Turks have an equal interest. It is a battle that is as much about sheer power as it is about the nature of Turkish democracy. It is a battle that is in part being fought on the soccer pitch evidenced by the participation of soccer fans as well as the banners they carried and the slogans they chanted during the 1 May demonstrations.

The stakes are high for fans and go to the heart of the struggle for Turkey's soul. In Istanbul and other Turkish cities fans denounced the government's e-ticket system that would give it access to their personal details against the background of an effort in the past year to portray protest as a precursor for terrorism and an attempt to criminalize militant soccer groups. Twenty members of Carsi were last year charged with belonging to an illegal organization.

Several Turkish clubs have said they would refuse to implement the e-ticket system. Executives of Fenerbahce SK, Turkey's foremost club, said they would implement their own e-ticket system that would legally free them from the obligation to provide the government with fans' personal data. In an indication of resistance to the system and Erdogan's policies, fans of Galatasary sang during the 1 May demonstrations in Besiktas, the territory of one of their arch rivals, a song of Fenerbahce, another arch rival, commemorating Ali İsmail Korkmaz, who was killed in last June's protests.

The stakes are particularly high for Fenerbahce whose president, Aziz Yildirim, has been sentenced to prison on match fixing charges. Yildirim, who has consistently denied wrongdoing, was expecting to be detained after 1 May because the government feared that an earlier arrest might fuel the 1 May protests.

The Fenerbahce case is at the centre of a political battle between Erdogan and Hasim Kilic, the head of Turkey's Constitutional Court. Yildirim's last hope to avoid serving further time in

prison is a pending appeal to the court on procedural ground. In a highly unusual twist of events, Kilic recently met privately with Ali Koc, one of Turkey's foremost businessmen and one of Erdogan's bête noirs, who is closely affiliated to Fenerbahce. In a public speech several days later, Kilic frontally denounced the government's efforts to undermine the judiciary's independence, sparking a public row between the court and the prime minister's ruling AKP party.

**Note:** This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced with the author's permission. Web link:

<http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2014/05/the-battle-for-taksim-battle-for.html>

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