

# STILL STANDING

With their silent protests, activists in Turkey may be quieter, but their discontent remains. **Anthony Ham** reports.

**W**hen Murat Yavas first learnt of the protests that have rocked Istanbul

for almost a month, he thought little of it. He supported the aim of the protesters to protect Gezi Park, one of the last expanses of green space in downtown Istanbul, and hoped the government would relent on its plans to transform the park into a shopping mall.

"First it was about Gezi Park," he told Fairfax Media, speaking close to Taksim Square, the epicentre of the protests. "Even New York has a large park, Central Park. In Istanbul there is no green space."

Even so, like most Turks he was content to watch from a distance. Yavas was a supporter of the government and had voted for Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the past. "Before in Istanbul there were many problems. When he came, he solved the problems, so we gave him our vote."

But for Yavas, a university-educated

son of a policeman, and indeed for Turkey, everything changed on the night of May 31 when police attacked the sleeping protesters with tear gas.

"It started with a couple of trees, just a few university students. But the police came at 5am. This was the spark."

Overnight, a relatively small environmental protest against an ill-conceived development project became a platform for the growing discontent of a nation. The target of their wrath was the most popular leader Turkey has known in a century, a leader who appeared to have forgotten that his power came from the people.

TAKSIM Square is the chaotic heart-beat of modern Istanbul. Before the protests began, Taksim was a polluted and unruly clamour of incessant traffic and noise. As an iconic open space, it was more Times Square than Tahrir, the vast square where Egypt's revolution was born.

However, as a stage for Turkey's complicated mix of countercultures, Taksim has history. In the 19th century, it was here that poor immigrants to the city first settled. Taksim also sits atop the ruins of an Armenian cemetery that was destroyed in 1939; its gravestones were used to build stairs in neighbouring Gezi Park. In the 1980s, it was the unofficial centre for Istanbul's gay and lesbian community.

"Taksim is where everybody expresses freely their happiness, sorrow, their political and social views," Esin, 41, wearing a headscarf, told *The New York Times* at the height of the protests.

Taksim also lays bare what many consider to be the defining fault line of Turkish society. At one end of the square is a mosque. At the other, draped in Turkish flags, stands a giant portrait of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the father of modern Turkey's secular political state.

It was Ataturk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, who set about dragging the country into the 20th century. As part of his modernising drive, he

preached the virtues of secular democracy and mandated the use of Latin script, European dress and greater equality for women. For almost a century, it was Ataturk's vision that prevailed and whenever Islam strayed into the political realm, the Turkish military stepped in to secure his secular legacy.

By turn of the 21st century, however, Turkey was in crisis. Its political class was in disarray and its economy was in free fall. Into the breach stepped Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the former mayor of Istanbul and leader of the nominally Islamist Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi (Justice and Development Party, or AKP). Erdogan and his AKP won in a landslide in 2002, increased its majority in 2007, and did so again in 2011.

Despite Erdogan's Islamist leanings, the Turkish military remained on the sidelines. That they have done so owes much to Erdogan's popularity – to move against the AKP would have been deeply unpopular.

But Erdogan's longevity also derives from his skilful negotiation of the country's secular-religious divide. Erdogan and his AKP have never sought to introduce sharia law. Nor have they pushed the more extremist elements of Islamist philosophy.

Instead, his government built its popularity around an inclusive coalition that attracted pious and liberal Muslims alike without threatening the secular foundations of the Turkish state. To stay on the right side of the law, Erdogan even abandoned Islamism as the party's official philosophy for one of "conservative democracy".

This combination of wily political ways, an appeal to voters across a broad cross-section of Turkish society and a cleverly constructed version of political Islam-lite all helped to transform Erdogan into the most effective Turkish leader since Ataturk.

And then something happened. Over time, unfettered by effective political opposition and having cowed the mainstream Turkish media into submission, Erdogan lost his calm authority and began to display an



authoritarian streak. At first, he bulldozed through a series of signature development projects – a bridge whose name celebrates an Ottoman-era general who once massacred minorities, a new mosque that commandeered a park – each of which has eaten away at the city's green and open spaces and alienated important sectors of Turkish society.

Then, little by little, he began to push an increasingly conservative Islamist agenda: he banned the sale of alcohol after 10pm and even berated couples for kissing on public transport.

Once it would have been the military who stepped in to curb Erdogan's excesses. This time it was the Turkish people who took matters into their own hands.

IF THERE is an Islamist-secular divide in Turkey, it would appear to owe more to the posturing of politicians than to any meaningful popular division at large in the nation.

It was Ataturk who made secularism the philosophy of power, thereby relegating Islam to the margins of opposition. This neat dichotomy worked first in building, and later safeguarding state institutions that have held firm for almost a century.

But by effectively criminalising political Islam in a country where more than 99 per cent of the population is Muslim, Ataturk disenfranchised an important sector of Turkish society.

Under Erdogan, the roles have been

**Main: Protesters stand silent at Taksim Square and (right) Erdem Gunduz, who inspired copycat protests, maintains his silent vigil. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan (below).**  
Photos: Reuters, AFP

