Old Foes and Similar Challenges: The Backfire Process and the 2013 Turkish Uprisings

Abstract:

During an environmental protest in 2013 a group of Turkish activists were violently dealt with by police after occupying a proposed Istanbul mall construction site. A civilian taken photo of a police officer pepper-spraying a nonviolent woman in a red summer-dress went viral through social and international media outlets which was followed by Turkey’s largest civilian uprising in a decade. An account of this transformative effect is presented in this paper through a political process model containing explanatory concepts taken from political discourse theory. This model captures and provides differing insight into what has previously been referred to as the phenomenon of either ‘backfire’ or ‘political jiu-jitsu’ by theorists of nonviolence. Prior to the late May Gezi-Park protest, the ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) faced opposition from varying groups in Turkey that had little coordination amongst one another. The image of a modern woman being attacked by a policeman dislocated the AKP regime by revealing the nature of its increasing repressive and contradictory practices to the general population. These practices were being used to protect an illiberal government that falsely claimed to want to liberalize Turkish society. New protest possibilities arose where coordination social learning occurred through social media outlets, turning attention to the image and resulting in a new focal point of protest.
I. Introduction

In May of 2013 an environmental protest held at Taksim Gezi Park in the Turkish city of Istanbul resulted in the clashing of nonviolent protestors and municipal police where environmental activists were tear gassed and pepper-sprayed by municipal police. Civilians captured the incident with mobile phones and cameras which triggered a trans-national ‘viral’ effect by the diffusion of an image of a young fair skinned woman in a red summer dress being pepper-sprayed by a policeman with a high tech device. This image created public outrage domestically and internationally as the contradictory practices behind the Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) governmental rule were revealed to the Turkish population in a state where there had been a great deal of disconnected political opposition and little civic associational ties previous to the incident. Protests lasted for months and spread to nearly all of Turkey’s 81 provinces. These anti-AKP uprisings were the biggest political uprisings the Erdoğan government had faced since its electoral victory in 2002. Ever since the May 2013 incident, initial plans to demolish the park in favour of a shopping mall were cancelled, police have been put on trial and the AKP’s domestic and international image has taken a significant blow as a result of its repressive response to citizen dissent during the uprisings. A corruption scandal arose and the AKP party lost a major political ally in a rift with the Fethullah Gulen movement. Nearly a year later in March of 2014 a boy who had been in a coma for 269 days as a result of the police violence became the seventh death which ignited further protests and police tear gassing (Zalewski 2014).

The purpose of this paper is to explain specifically how the image of the woman in the red dress being pepper sprayed during a small nonviolent environmental protest dislocated and backfired against the Turkish state, fostering a political crisis that enabled dozens of previously political factions to coordinate and dissent. Such transformative events have been referred to as processes of ‘backfire’ or as acts of ‘political jiu-jitsu’ by nonviolence theorists (Sharp 1973; 1989; 2005; Hess and Martin 2006; Martin 2007). Throughout history these types of transformative incidents involving nonviolent movements and violent state forces have resulted in large scale social change due to a plethora of factors including public outrage, international condemnations, coalition shifts, dramatic increases in mobilization levels and the revealing of what discourse theorists refer to as the radical contingency of the ‘social’
structure behind a given society (Howarth 2010). To the best of my knowledge, the contribution of this work is distinct for these fields of study as it focuses on ideology and the political discourses that are at play behind social change brought about by nonviolent protest. When a given actor or social movement is violently dealt with by an authority as was the case in the Gezi Park pepper-spraying and tear-gassing incident, a political process may ensue that has the power to bring about a social transformative effect by putting the repressor in a worse off political position than previously imaginable. Often times these transformative effects lead to larger revolts and social transitions by enabling a new focal point of protest to be established by dissenters. Notable cases of nonviolent backfire include the Russian Bloody Sunday massacre of 1905, the Gandhian Salt Marches, the 1960 Sharpeville South African Massacre, the 1960s U.S. Civil Rights movements, the East Timorese Liberation Movement amongst many others.

By drawing from recent developments in discourse theory and political philosophy, specifically the Essex School of Ideology and Discourse Analysis (IDA) (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Howarth 1997, 1998, 2000; Glynos and Howarth 2007) analysis is conducted on the 2013 Turkish uprisings. This is done whilst working out of Jason Glynos and David Howarth’s (2007) Logics of Critical Explanation of Social and Political Theory. Here I categorize the AKP regime as a political discourse through the social, political and fantasmatic logics. The AKP (Justice and Development Party) has controlled Turkish Parliament since 2002 and is a center-right party that has garnered great support from a newly formed Turkish middle class, business ties and has successfully fought off the TAF (Gaurdian State) along with what is labeled as ‘enemies’ of democracy and liberalization. The political discourse of the AKP and more specifically its social logic is rooted in the promotion of neoliberal economic policy, individual choice, democratization and mass infrastructural expansion; much of which is driven by foreign investment, privatization and an authoritative governmental dynamic. This neoliberal backbone of the AKP has manifested alongside a long trend of positive economic growth reports, helping the AKP at the ballot boxes with a wide array of support from conservative rural citizens and the disposed urban poor. To offset political opponents the AKP use commanding tactics by censoring or jailing independent journalists and blocking social media websites. Prime minister Recyp Tayyip Erdoğan effectively utilizes populist strategies of ‘we’
(AK party supporters) versus the common enemy of ‘them’ ‘radicals,’ ‘foreign enemies,’ or ‘terrorists.’ This strategically disconnects formal political opponents from the non-formal and places the latter into the category of radical or foreign. In turn this creates a natural antagonism between any protestor and their ‘morally just’ counterparts who only participate politically through institutional means.

The ways in which the AKP grip their population is explained through the concepts of fantasy and hegemony. Erdogan has effectively constructed a myth and attractive reality of a great prosperous Turkey that by 2023 will be a world power benefiting from the dozens of mega-projects and mass industrialization. This construction is supported by an evident reality of new forms business sectors in Turkey and a significant improvement in living standards. Failure for civilians to participate in this vision and future of Turkey is viewed to be undemocratic and most importantly is against further democratization. These above mentioned logics and social practices are linked to a process model in order to explain and illustrate how the pepper-spraying image and initial Gezi-Park protest dislocated the hegemonic AKP regime and revealed its contradictory governmental practices to the general population. It captures the backfire phenomenon by depicting the preliminary stages of a given uprising when a nonviolent protest group (Gezi-Park environmental activists) meets an uncertain and repressive violent state force (Istanbul municipal police). When such interactions occur there is a high probability of dislocation (a social rupture), explained by what are labeled as ‘discursive forces’ in the process model. Five of these discursive forces (D) are empirically identified in the Turkish case and are shown to have played a role in dislocating the AKP regime, sending the Turkish state into political crisis. These are the forces of 1) social viral, 2) media viral, 3) coordination, 4) social learning and 5) public outrage.

These forces help to explain fascinating aspects behind the Turkish uprisings where protest was driven by social media which was pivotal for the spreading of the image of the woman in the red dress and for the coordinating of the protest strategies of occupation and nonviolent direct action. Here social learning spurred greater solidarity and mobilization through non-institutional channels in a period of heavy state media censorship. The force of public outrage was key for fostering the response to the image and Gezi-Park incident and is explained through reference to semiotics and the Saussurian concept of the ‘sign’ along with Roland Barthes’
extension and application of this concept to non-linguistic entities. Prior to the Gezi-Park incident, opposition groups throughout Turkey were poorly coordinated and to obtain unified action these groups had to concentrate on the potential for large scale opposition and away from the idea that it was dangerous to act because other members of Turkish society (non-radicals) might not do so. The event at issue (Gezi-Park protest) refocused attention because of the possibilities built in the contradictory image of a modern woman being attacked by a policeman to protect an increasingly repressive, illiberal regime that claimed (falsely) to want to liberalize Turkish society. The process model sheds new light on the phenomenon of backfire and protest coordination in our new digital age while at the same time brings us closer to understanding why some unexpected and elementary acts of repression can cause such profound social change, whether it be through image, video or story.

Background of the 2013 Uprisings:

Before turning to both the theoretical and empirical portion of this paper, it is worth to taking time to note significant historical occurrences in the region of what is now modern Turkey. Perhaps no other country has experienced as much external influence both religiously and philosophically as Turkey. It’s history as a nation itself is frequently questioned by both domestic and international observers and the meaning of the term ‘Turk’ has been widely debated by politicians and academics alike (Saatci 2001). This is due to the geographical and historical positioning of Turkey on the Black Sea, caught between Europe and the Middle East, between Christianity, Judaism and Islam. French Geographer Nicolas De Nicolay joined ambassador Henry the II on a journey to Istanbul and wrote in 1585 about the wonderful cultural diversity and richness of the Ottoman Empire in comparison to the religious and ethnic atrocities that were plaguing continental Europe (Nicolay 1968). Nonetheless, Turkish history, especially the final period or collapse of the Ottoman Empire was extremely violent where the social and political exclusion of minority groups from the dominant Turkish Sunni-Islam social category was customary (Yegen 1996). A major figure and entity that has shaped political trends and regularities in Turkey over the last century is Mustafa Kemel Pasha (Ataturk) who came to establish what was then and now considered to be ‘modern’ Turkey (Volkan and Itzkowitz 1984). The surname of Ataturk itself stands for ‘father of the Turks’ which is an ideal fit for the legacy he left behind with the articulation of an entire
discourse and system of knowledge commonly referred to as Kemalism. With Kemalism Turkey was transformed in all facets of its existence by reordering the Ottoman governmental structure into what was designed to be a ‘Western’ resembling democratic republic. In Ottoman times policy generally was for conquering armies to allow their victims (villages, tribes, etc) to keep their faith (usually some form of Christianism) for exchange of servitude do the Sultan (Shaw and Shaw 1977).

During the post World War I period what arose was a distinct intertwining of political values and a governing fixation centered on the modern nation state of Turkey that was pushed by Ataturk and company to be compatible with democratic rule through a framework labeled as ‘Republicanism’ (Lewis 1968). Here citizens were encouraged to elect those who they believed would serve Turkey under its principle values, specifically those that were prescribed under the wisdom of Ataturk and upheld by the guardian state. The Turkish Armed forces are a distinct form of military that serve to ‘protect the state.’ The TAF participated in noteworthy wars and conflicts such as the 1950s Korean War and the initial period of the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in the early 2000s. A significant proportion of Turks trust the military over a given incumbent regime. However, as scholar Tanel Demirel (2004) argues, the Turkish guardian state since its conception has actually never been a worthy protector of civil liberties and liberalism due to a failure of soldiers to fully accept principal civilian freedom between them and civil society. This is due to a further ‘intrinsic’ value that exists within elite circles of military actors and governmental servants that from all their knowledge are put into government for the purposes of upholding an almost godly entity in the Turkish secular republic. The incumbent AKP regime has successfully fought off criticisms from the TAF (Guardian State), enabling itself to alter the Turkish political landscape with less opposition than previous parties had faced from the Guardian state.

In the 1960s and 70s Marxist and other left wing movements arose in Turkey along with the notable Western counter-movements of that time. Surprisingly, with this violence and political instability the Turkish state was able to ensure some form of democratic elections over the years, albeit with numerous coups and coups attempts by the military (Aydinilin 2009). The 1980s in Turkey were filled with economic distress and near civil war as a Kurdish insurgency against the Turkish state began
in 1984 for the hope of establishing an independent Kurdistan. Then Prime Minister and at one point President, Turgut Ozal led the country into a transition period where what historian Carter Findley calls a period of ‘export led growth’ ensued and drastically transformed Turkey’s economy (Findley 2010: 374). This change in economic policy favored privatization and liberalization. To little surprise, many familiar problems arose including the accumulation of massive foreign debt, inflation, poor regulation on the part of government agencies and frequent economic crises which occurred arguably in five different years spanning from 1980 up until the early 2000s. The 1990s saw more economic instability and in 1999 Turkey had agreed to a deal with the IMF where a program was proposed and accepted with the purpose being to settle down and soothe Turkey’s faltering economy (Bakir and Onis 2010). A decisive historical epoch emerged in the early 2000s when the 9-11 attacks on the United States created a massive change in international affairs placing Turkey in a relevant position due to its IMF ties and previous support of the U.S. in its military interventions. In 2002 the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) got elected into Turkey’s parliament which was followed by a sceptical reaction by observers as another pro-Islamist party gained enough domestic support to obtain governmental rule. Since then Turkey has progressed forward on nearly every democratic indicator and has hosted some of the most impressive mega-projects in terms of infrastructural development and the AKP has claimed credit for this great leap in material well-being. Most importantly, Turkey has experienced an unprecedented amount of economic growth that has occurred alongside low inflation and effective fiscal management policies in comparison to many other developing economies of similar type (Onis and Senses 2009)

The dislocation that set off the 2013 uprisings occurred on May 28, 2013 where a relatively small sized protest group of around forty to fifty activists had set up an encampment around Gezi Park in the major metropolitan city of Istanbul. Adopting nonviolent protest strategy, these activists were protesting the bulldozing of the one of the last remaining parks in Istanbul where a large-scale shopping mall (an exemplary feature of modern Turkish economic development) was intended to be built. A Turkish protestor and academic by the name of Ceyda Sungur was present on the 28th when the municipal police began to fire tear gas and pepper-spray into the crowd in attempt to disperse the protestors (Harding 2013). Ceydur, dressed in a
red summer dress was captured being pepper-sprayed by a well-equipped and technologically geared policeman by dozens of civilian handheld mobile phones and cameras. This image went viral and was spread around the globe both in print and electronically by major newspapers from the Washington Post to BBC. The social media platform of Twitter was used where microblogging went rampant with tweets being sent by hundreds of thousands of individuals with the use of the #direngezipark, #gezipark and #occupygezi hashtags to encourage mobilization in response to the unjust pepper-spraying and tear-gassing act.

Twitter statistics reveal that communication and coordination between protestors contributed to this viral effect. These statistics will be provided in the latter portion of this paper and will help to illustrate this specific effect and forces that went into making this image a catalyst for a revolutionary atmosphere across Turkey. In total, the uprisings left over 4,000 injured and over a dozen dead. The power of this image is in the effect that it had in dislocating the Erdogan regime and enabling a new form of coordination to occur based around its contradictory nature.

**Political Discourse Theory:**

To explain this complex transformative effect that had occurred in May of 2013 I turn to political discourse theory which has to do with a post-structuralist mode of inquiry where social structures are assumed to be incomplete and contingent systems of meaning that are made meaningful by actors in a given context. In the end, I hope to
illustrate how the meaningful practices of the AKP government were revealed as contradictory as a result of state inflicted repression onto nonviolent protests. Moreover, for political discourse theorists, all objects ‘are objects of discourse, in that a condition of their meaning depends upon a socially constructed system of rules and significant differences’ (Laclau and Mouffe: 107). Applying these assumptions to social and political phenomena is done in attuned to the problem or puzzle under examination. The methodological guidelines of political discourse theory are rooted in Glynos and Howarth’s Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory which themselves were coined in attempt to incorporate post-structuralist discourse theory closer into the mainstream of social science with the goal being to retroductively and critically explain social phenomena in a manner relevant to both policy and academia. A vital assumption in this school of thought has to do with the fundamental ‘lack’ that is assumed to be present in a given social structure, hence the ‘post-structuralist’ label. A given system of knowledge, social structure or discourse is never stable and is always contingent upon those actors and practices which enable it to exist. Thus, the openness of the structure of the social (a human-based form of societal organization, most cases this is categorized as a practice, state or regime) is filled by the discursive articulation of meaning by actors and political groups who create their own views of social and political reality, which in this case has been effectively accomplished by the AKP.

**Logics of the Turkish State:**

The logics framework enables us to ‘characterize and elucidate the transformation, stabilization, and maintenance of regimes and social practices’ (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 133). Beginning with the social logic, this type of logic can be conceptualized as a ‘repertoire of rules’ and sedimented social practices that form a given discursive structure. Discourse theorist Ernesto Laclau has explained how the ‘social’ logic has to do with a system of rules and the entities that go into enabling that given system of rules to exist (Butler et al 2000). Implementing this theoretical tool involves a procedure and act of ‘characterization’ on the part of the researcher in order to interpret the discursive meaning of the context under analysis. Social logics can be related to regimes which are often referred to as ‘historical blocs’ or ‘epochs’ (Howarth 2010). Examples of regimes can be found in both of the Reagan and Thatcher regimes who shared many common features. In Turkey the Erdogan
regime has controlled Parliament since 2002 and can be viewed as a regime rooted in its own historical epoch. The social logic of the AKP government and its historical rule contains two important components. These are 1) a Western-supported (IMF) neoliberal economic expansion scheme that operates at all levels of state and infrastructural development. This coincides with a 2) well constructed and catchy articulation of a viewpoint of what it means to be a Turkish citizen in this new prosperous Turkish society where individualism and economic freedom are championed. Importantly, this viewpoint is used to defend any governmental wrongdoing and unjustness. Recyp Erdogan and the AKP have garnered a significant amount of support due to an effective articulation of these principles. In terms of the AKP, this party is originally connected to various Islamist factional parties of the 1990s and itself arose in 2001 and has combined a wide array of different interests and demands into its political platform. From the outset articulated a very effective and well-constructed vision of the nation of Turkey that rests in a prosperous future that with it only can bring positive change. The following is a direct AKP party doctrine statement.

“One of the main principles of our Party is the proverb, 'unless everyone is free, no one is free'. Our Party considers as one of its most important tasks, the assurance of democratization by placing the individual at the center of all its policies, and to provide and protect fundamental human rights and freedoms.\(^1\)

Democratisation, individualism and the progression of Turkey into its long-wanted path of European Union membership formulate the wide spectrum of meaning that the AKP fit into their view of social and political reality. The AKP frequently claim to be the only capable political party that can serve under the name and values of the Turkish state itself given it provides the most economic opportunity for individuals. This has almost been a self-fulfilling prophecy during this ongoing AKP-led historical epoch as there has been a significant improvement in material conditions throughout Turkey. Moreover, Recyp Erdogan consistently stresses that the AKP government operates upon a ‘universal’ form of Islam that is 1) democratic and 2) can be practiced and can exist alongside the other faiths of Turkey and importantly the Christian and Judaic faiths of the European Union. When spotting regularities in speech making and televised appearances Recyp Erdogan likes to refer to Turkey and its residents as ‘we’ and as a people that have been prevalent in world affairs,

\(^1\) [http://www.akparti.org.tr/english/akparti/parti-programme](http://www.akparti.org.tr/english/akparti/parti-programme)
using religious references such as ‘time of Noah’s ark’. Recyp Erdogan and Abdullah Gul strategically include the whole of Turkey when they give political speeches or interviews in a very similar fashion as a classical liberal-democratic politician would in his own given context by mentioning things having to do with emergent political challenges and equality, freedom of expression and the beneficial nature of this new hegemonic Turkey that is a top ten global economy. Major magazines such as The Economist and The Times frequently were mentioning the AKP led Turkish state in a positive light as a developing liberal democracy with great future prospects prior to the 2013 uprisings. Since the uprisings the AKP’s image has taken a significant blow internationally. A speech given by Erdogan at a 2010 AKP group meeting regarding governmental service programs meeting puts on display this dynamic:

‘Distinguished friends. We are talking about a well-appointed hospital with 167 rooms. I am asking for the love of Allah, did we have such hospitals and scenes in Turkey before? The quality of our public hospitals is also increasing.’

Frequent references of ‘we’ is a significant political tactic used by Erdogan and the AKP to portray themselves as a party that is one of Turkey’s most competent entities historically to ever have governed, next to the great Ataturk. These statements exemplify the discourse of the AKP that is deployed on a daily basis. In terms of the Kurdish question, Recyp Erdogan and the AKP have progressively enabled Kurds to gain greater social and political rights which makes clear the effectiveness of such their political strategy of incorporation. Early on the AKP did not give great attention to the Kurdish issue but as Kemal Kirisci points out, the external influence of the Bulgarian acknowledgment of minority Turks and the granting of new cultural rights to Turkish minorities living in various Southern regions of Bulgaria put a form of pressure on the AKP to incorporate the disconnected and historically oppressed Kurdish population living in Turkey into the political realm (Kirisci 2011 :36). Indeed, the AKP’s loosened position on the Kurdish issue has helped it gain support from the electorate as far-right political factions and parties in Turkey do not acknowledge Kurds to such an extent. With this in mind, Erdogan and the AKP’s dominant social practices have been questioned by a great number secular members, groups and associations of Turkish society due to what is argued to be an underlying business and religious conservatism that underlies the preferences of the AKP. Upholding

2 http://www.akparti.org.tr/english/haberler/full-script-of-prime-minister-erdogans-speech-at-the-ak-party-group-me/25717#1
these practices of ‘moving’ towards democratization has come alongside great repression and illiberal governmental practices which has left political opponents trailing. This brings us to the political logic.

**Political Logic:**

Having taken into account the social logic underpinning the discursive structure of the AKP government it is now time to turn to the political logic. As Glynos notes, ‘political logics attend to processes of institutionalization, contestation, restoration or de-institutionalization.’ They can function ‘so as to embed, challenge, disrupt, displace, reaffirm, consolidate, or restore social logics. Political logics can be mobilized under conditions of crisis, giving rise to a moment when, in Lacanian terms, the Real intrudes and ‘a sense emerges, however, localized or diffuse this may be, that “things are not quite right”’ (Glynos et al 2012). In other words, political logics explain how the social logic gets both defended (by the incumbent regime) and challenged by formal and informal political opponents. The AKP has garnered a wide array of political support (Türköne 2013), and for this to have happened its general discourse and ‘repertoire of rules’ had to have first been accepted as a viable hegemonic project. The immediate striking aspect of the AKP is that Recyp Erodan and Abdullah Gul have both effectively created a populist type of rhetoric that is almost classical in its similarity to other populist regimes. Formally, repressive use of police force (including pepper-spraying and tear-gassing which led to over 10,000 citizens needing medical treatment during the uprisings according to the Turkish Doctors Association\(^3\)) are the most common of tactics used by the AKP. However, the AKP have been ‘repressive’ not only using physical means but have quarreled dissent through a variety of classical authoritarian tactics such as attacking the sheer existence of independent journalism.

The Turkish Journalists Union (TGS) reported that the greater portion of journalists that had covered the initial protests at Gezi-Park and the uprisings which followed immediately thereafter had been forced to quit or were fired by media heads. What’s more is that the Turkish RTUK (Radio and Television State Authority) over the years has politically manipulated the information made available through these outlets to the public, especially on issues having to do with the Kurdish population and

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fundamentalist movements (Demir and Ben-Zadok 2007). After the dislocation brought about by the environmental activists at Gezi-Park, the AKP banned state media outlets from covering the protests which affected the entire country. As of 2012 there were 97 journalists, publishers and distributors in Turkish state jails (Bilefsky 2012). This number has increased since. Regarding social media, post-uprisings in early 2014 Erdogan banned Twitter to only see millions of tweets being sent denouncing the banning from proxy websites by both politicians and protestors.

While such formal suppression of political opposition exists in many different governmental systems to varying extents, there are other significant tactics that run deeper than the censoring and political bullying tactics noted above. Here the *Ideology and Discourse Analysis* framework truly sheds light on the phenomenon of populism. While I will not deploy Laclau’s specific framework of Populism (2005), I will draw insights from the general post-structuralist traditions such as Saussure’s ideas of a signifier (term, object, image, etc) and signified (its relational meaning); both of which make up the concept of a sign. This is within Saussure’s larger framework or system of structural signification where language is not assumed to be of substance but of form (Saussure 1959; 2013). A discourse ‘consists of a system of signifiers without positive terms, in which the identity of each element depends on its differences with others’. Here it is possible to specifically explain how the AKP offsets and defeats political opponents by its tactic of differentiation or by a logic of difference. A given political regime or social movement articulates social demands often times for the purpose of creating a common identity in order to negate opposing political factions. This is accomplished by distinguishing binary opposites between given terms, social practices or rules. Language and the properties drawn from languages are assumed by discourse theorists to translate or carry over and hold in ‘meaningful’ structures throughout a given discourse. As is the case often in politics, when binary opposites are articulated by political leaders they are very effective and even threatening in many cases as they bring subjects to face or contemplate the ‘other’ or unknown.

There have been many cases in recent history especially in the Thatcher and Reagan regimes where economic freedom and democracy were staged against their binary opposites and external threats of communism or socialism. Individual economic entrepreneurship was matched against laziness and the abusers of the
welfare state. Such constructions often get put into play during public debates and especially when a given regime first gets into power and has a chance to articulate its political discourse and vision of the world. Recyp Erdogan makes sure to differentiate the AKP and its ideal form of individual between any muhalif (regime opponents) that are challenging the AKP either through institutional or non-institutional means. For example, in response to the uprisings Erdogan made many public speeches. The following is an excerpt from one of them in reference to the dissidents,

‘They attacked daughters who wear headscarves. They entered Dolmabahce mosque with their beer bottles and their shoes.’ (Los Angeles Times 2013)

Such differentiation tactics have helped the AKP gain acceptance to sustain their hükümet (government) for over a decade. Specifically, Recyp Erdogan frequently refers to radicals and general civilian uprisings against his government as ‘foreign-backed coups’. Various other dissent groups and activists ranging from university professors to medical union members have been labeled by Erdogan as ‘illegal organizations’ or even ‘terrorists’ which implies that these counter-political movements do not abide by the Turkish state’s institutional means or more importantly they do not abide by the set of social logics that the AKP has so convincingly articulated through myth and fantasy. The famous Ergenekon trials which were officially launched in 2007 to attack a secret (military-tied) organization were done so for the purposes of taking out the terrorist labeled organization. Since then there have been hundreds of arrests and charges made against this ‘terrorist’ labeled organization. The AKP offsets its political opponents through reference to its constructed binary oppositions. If a given individual opposes the AKP through non institutional means not only is that individual seen to be opposing democracy and individual choice but he or she opposes the principles of the modern Turkish state itself. Individualism, democratization, and free-market enterprise are linked into a manifest form of economic advancement that is argued to have the power to propel Turkey into a world power by the AKP. Not participating in this vision and political construct may result in a given subject being labeled as potentially a revolutionary, radical or some form of terrorist. Perhaps no other better example can put on display the tactics deployed by the AKP to offset political opposition than the rift that arose between long time Erdogan ally and Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen sometime in
Gulen is a greatly influential scholar, cleric and educator who often champions the compatibility of Islam with a democratic social order. His establishment of followers and institutions are composed of influential businessmen, private schools, mosques and many different forms of community-based associations. ‘The Gulen Movement’ as it is often referred to, turned on the AKP sometime in 2009-2010 and this decision was solidified when Gulen condemned Erdogan and the AKP government for their repressive response to citizen dissent following the Gezi-Park incident. Erdogan responded immediately by lashing out against Gulen and by quickly making the distinction between Gulen’s ‘higher’ purpose or covert (suspicious) role in comparison to the AKP’s moral form of governance that exists to serve Turks and the principles of modern Turkey. Erdogan blamed Gulen for the emergence of the late 2013 corruption scandal along with a ‘foreign coup’ attempt that was argued to have long been in the making. Gulen and his followers after their change of position are foreign enemies and Islamic radicals, the opposite of Turkish democracy, secularism and individualism.

Fantasmatic Logic:

Fantasmatic logics are an additional explanatory tool to account for the complexities of social and political change. ‘The role of fantasy in this context is not to set up an illusion that provides a subject with a false picture of the world, but to ensure that the radical contingency of social reality – and the political dimension of a practice more specifically – remains in the background’ (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 145). In terms of state stability, the presence of a military that’s role is to enforce and protect the modern democratic principles of Turkey creates a form of material stability in the Turkish state itself, disregarding any given relationship the TAF have with an incumbent regime. An additional factor of stability in Turkey is due to a great amount of foreign capital and internationally rooted institutions that have come to exist in the since Turkey’s deals with Western institutions (IMF), lucrative Russian investment capital firms and the European Union (2004). The Turkish construction sector is also prominent in the Arab region now garnering a large amount of foreign-construction contracts to build infrastructure. Such trade and business ties have given the AKP stability for the greater duration of their reign yet as the dislocation at Gezi Park goes to show, the contingency and contradictory practices behind the AKP regime’s rule had yet to fully be exposed until the Gezi-Park incident and the mass circulation of
the pepper-spraying image. The point here is that for most of the above mentioned institutions and entities to have In the first place signed contracts or deals with the Erdogan-led Turkish government there needed to be a level of cooperation and trust established between groups. The AKP with the persuasive skills of Recyp Erdogan have established formal links via trade deals and business expansion with the support of international firms but it is the ways in which the AKP grip subjects through a fantasmatic construction that needs to paid attention to. Erdogan frequently highlights the social benefits that have arisen as a result of the mass expansion of industrial and technological sectors Turkey has experienced since the beginning of AKP tenure in parliament. The power of this construction is that it emphasizes an already established reality of high economic growth and most importantly a massive increase in trade, entrepreneurship and a new middle class. The growth of the middle class is significant as the per-capita income in Turkey had gone from $1300 (1985) to $11,000 (2008). Turkey was hit by the economic crises of 2007-8 but its economy and especially its financial sector has well-recovered since. Interestingly, on June 3 (the beginning portion of the uprisings) the Istanbul stock exchange fell 10.5% which was the biggest dip in over a decade (Ellyatt 2013). Moreover, from 1985 until 2002, privatization in Turkey had generated a mere $9.5 Billion USD but this total tripled in the periods from 2002-2012 when privatization led to over $30 Billion USD, driven by the sectors of telecommunications, energy, tobacco, amongst others (Bank and Karadag 2012: 10). With this privatization new support for the AKP arose from businessmen and unions given such a form of economic growth really had yet to be experienced in Turkey throughout its history. In turn, this has also enabled previously non-participant Muslim business groups to participate in policy making processes (Atli 2011).

Imagery that puts on display this rapid development can be found on the AKP website (and on political campaigns) where dozens of high definition photos illustrate mega projects and the improved material life that these projects are bringing to every-day people. The AKP's 'plan for 2023' is extensive, involving dozens of large-scale projects. Here tourism plays a crucial role as Turkey has developed into a top-ten tourist market internationally during the reign of the AKP (Arslanturk and Atan 2012). While foreign travellers have been passing through Turkey for centuries, it is safe to assume that the amount of these travellers now surpasses any other point in
Turkish or Ottoman history. Such developments have undoubtedly strengthened the fantasmatic grip or hegemony the AKP has over its population. As one female Turkish columnist put it following the 2013 protests and late corruption scandal,

‘You simply cannot tell these people that you’re going to yank away the economical rug they are standing on without putting forward a viable and compelling alternative. You cannot, as a main opposition leader, stand in front of them and say, ‘Look! There are leaked tapes about these people, therefore you should vote for me.’ (Ozbudak 2014).

Dams, water projects, Rail and urban transport, bridges, highways, the construction of artificial islands amongst many other modern marvels feed into the AKP’s fantasmatic construction of great prosperity and inevitable economic growth that only the AKP itself can make possible. This is gripping for many Turks and especially for the newly arisen middle class. A corruption scandal or a given form of governmental mishap often times brings about political dissent but since dissenters have presented no long term hegemonic political project to combat the power of the AKP’s fantasmatic construct and political vision they have found themselves trailing since the land-slide electorate victories the AKP has won since 2008.

**Discursive Process Model of Backfire**

When governments respond to nonviolent protest with repression it may result in either a continuation of repression, dissolution of mobilization, an increase of mobilization or in the most dramatic of cases repressive outlashes targeted at nonviolent protests may actually backfire and put the repressor in a worse off political position than previously imaginable. The latter was the case after (the Erdogan regime) sponsored police reacted violently towards nonviolent environmental protestors at Gezi Park. There have been frameworks put forward that explain the different types of outcomes of repression that may arise across a variety of contexts and governmental systems (Koopmans 1997; Earl 2003; Hess and Martin 2006). However, the specific form of repression under examination in this paper is episodic and rooted in the concept of a transformative event which differs from long bouts of contentious dissent such as revolutions⁴. Transformative events have occurred in relevant periods of historical revolt such as the nineteenth century

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⁴ For a full review of transformative events brought about by nonviolent protest along with nonviolent social transformation see Gene Sharp’s (2005) *Waging Nonviolent Struggle.*
English Peterloo Massacre, the 1905 Russian Bloody Sunday massacre, the Gandhian 1930 Salt March, the 1960 South African Sharpsville Massacre, the 2011 Occupy University of California Davis Pepper Spray incident. All of these cases have caused profound transformative changes in their given contexts as was the case in the Turkish setting.

The reason for labeling this process model as 'discursive' is due to the application of this model specifically to the 'discursive structure' of the Turkish state and AKP regime. As Ernesto Laclau notes, ‘a discursive structure is not merely a cognitive or contemplative entity; it is an articulatory practice which constitutes and organizes social relations’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 96). The discursive structure of the Turkish state is composed of the AKP’s articulation of social, political and economic realities as was the situation in the other cases noted above with their own respective discursive systems. In the process model, the discourse theoretic concepts of discursive forces, dislocation and organic crises function as central components. These components follow the interactive sequence that contains an episodic nonviolent protest that is met by violent state sponsored response. The diagram below captures the political process that may ensue from the clashing of nonviolent protest movements and repressive state forces.

Diagram 1:
Beginning with the first two segments of the figure above: the interactive sequence between a given protest movement that deploys nonviolent strategy and a state force makes up the first portion of the model. It is vital to understand that this first interactional sequence in the case of the 2013 Turkish uprisings specifically involves the initial environmental activists at Gezi Park and the municipal police who responded, these were the two actors that clashed in a brutal encounter involving tear gas and pepper-spray. Similar interactions have occurred between nonviolent protest groups and state security forces throughout history in notable waves of dissent such as the Gandhian Salt March against British Colonialism, the 1960s U.S. Civil Rights movement, the recent 2011 Occupy Wall Street and 2013 Ukrainian movements amongst many others. Brian Martin (2005) conducted an interesting case study of the backfire phenomenon in the Rodney King beatings in Los Angeles, California that sparked great social upheaval in the form of regional riots and international media attention. Backfire may occur from both individual or group
interactions with violent state forces and discursive forces help clarify how the political regimes or social structures get dislocated.

The conditions under which the initial encounter between nonviolent protestors and violent state forces occur have to do with the observance of publics on the sidelines and in asymmetric positions (international public opinion) not yet deciding to participate in collective action or whether to unilaterally give sympathy or direct support to a given movement. Backfire may occur under any general conditions involving a nonviolent actor or group and violent state force but has a higher probability of occurring in a media-heavy followed protest context. By heavily followed I mean any type of nonviolent movement or occupation that is at its peak or in its greatest period of political operation and is being observed by non-participants. There are other issues that have to do due with differences in technological and logistic infrastructure that exist across different nations. Take the modern nation of India for example. According to a 2013 World Bank report, India has 300 million people living without electricity. The probability of an act of state sponsored repression onto a lightly-observed nonviolent social movement backfiring would be very low in a rural area of India when compared to a highly followed movement in an urban area such as New Delhi where millions of smart-phones and cameras constantly capture daily events. With this in mind, a great deal of technology is not required for backfire to occur as we have seen dislocations brought about by nonviolent protest in time periods where only newspapers, the post and word of mouth were communicational outlets. Those cases where a nonviolent protest is already being heavily observed in its campaign against a repressive state are especially important as they operate in an empirically fruitful environment for backfire to occur. The literature in political science regarding violent and nonviolent coercion indicates that when regimes use violent coercion against protestors it is more costly in comparison to nonviolent coercion (e.g. Francisco 2004) and that even if a regime does respond to nonviolent protest with repression, quantitatively mobilization tends to increase in the second and third days regardless of the heinousness of the repressive act.

Next is the most important part of the process model, the ‘discursive forces’ segment. The purpose of a discursive force is to precisely explain how transformative events and general social change may arise as a result of dislocation.
Here it is crucial to analyze specifically 1) how the contingency behind the political discourse of a given regime gets revealed to populations and 2) how the fantasmatic grip a regime has on its population may weaken due to dislocation. This requires accounting for and mapping out the logics that underpin the regime under examination which in this case is the AKP regime. The discursive force then can account for varying types of dislocations. As Howarth notes, the political discourses of Thatcherism and Reaganism shared many common traits and empirically valid similarities within their historical epoch. Analogous political contingencies may be exposed in political discourses that are composed of familiar logics especially in our digital era protest context where alternative media outlets are being increasingly used for coordination of protest. Turning to the first out of five discursive forces, labelled as the ‘social viral’ force (D1): this force captures specifically when non-traditional forms of media such as Twitter, Facebook, Google+, Tumblr amongst others are used to spread awareness of a given political occurrence. Protestors immediately tweeted and sent images from the Gezi park tear gassing and pepper-spraying. To explain how this occurred I turn to a fascinating new form of data analysis that has been carried out extensively in New York University’s Social Media and Political Participation where Twitter statistics have been collected. For the Turkish uprisings around 22 millions tweets were tweeted with the hashtags of #occupygezi, #direngezipark and #gezipark being the most frequently mentioned phrases used by protesters and importantly, around two to three million tweets were sent within Turkey after the tear gassing and pepper-spraying of the Gezi park activists. In the entire first half of the month of June, especially in the first five days there were millions of tweets were sent within Turkey mainly in its urban areas and in the focal point of Istanbul. This coincided with the previously mentioned media ban that was enforced by the Turkish state on mainstream media. As the report from the SMaPP states, 90% of the tweets were coming from within Turkey and half from Istanbul. Comparatively, in the 2011 Egyptian uprisings only 30% of tweets came from within Egypt (Starbird and Palen 2012). The social viral force is significant as it is purely a modern phenomenon that has arisen with the internet and improved internet access from mobile phones. Retweeting or electronically re-circulating other public users’ tweets was needed in order to spread the word about the unjust act of

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5 http://smapp.nyu.edu/reports/turkey_data_report.pdf
repression at Gezi Park and most importantly the image of the woman in the red dress was retweeted and easily visible through any smart-phone. Shirky (2011) has explained how the network (specifically social) can bring about more opportunities to enhance ‘public speech’ and importantly social networks can increase collective action by providing previously disconnected public groups to communicate. As will be shown with the force of coordination, the social network played a crucial role in the 2013 Turkish uprisings.

A second discursive force can be found in nearly the same phenomenon described above and can be labeled as the ‘media-viral’ force (D2). Indeed this force has operated in other notable cases of backfire such as the Russian Bloody Sunday massacre of 1905 where foreign diplomats sent out cables back to their through diplomatic embassies in order to report the atrocities enacted by the Tsarist regime on nonviolent woman, children and workers. The point here is that instead of non-traditional forms of media functioning as necessary components of the viral effect, here traditional forms media pick up a given unjust act and circulate the story. A simple Google search will still (nearly a year removed from the pepper-spray and tear gassing incident) reveal the popularity of the pepper-spraying image and its poster boy or in this case, ‘girl effect’. The technicalities behind the international news media are well known. Since the 1990s the CNN effect has caused a 24-7 never-ending news cycle to fill the airwaves (Robinson 2005). With the spreading of high-speed internet it is plausible to assume this effect has boomed tenfold given the amount of smart phones available to consumers that have access to mainstream news such as BBC, Reuters, RT, CTV News, etc on their mobile phones with any given data connection. This alongside ever increasing communicational capabilities of pocket computers (smart-phones), electronic watches, and tablets creates a digital arena where political participation has a high probability of flourishing in places where non-traditional forms of media had been absent in times past.

A third force is that of ‘coordination’ (D3). A major reason so much of the Turkish population seized the political contingency that was revealed following the pepper-spraying of the woman in the red dress even in times of great media censorship was because of effective coordination. Examples can be found in dozens of cases throughout civil societies such as those small shop and store owners near Gezi park that enabled their Wi-Fi networks to be publically accessed whilst on the borderline
with the clashes between occupiers and police. This was done by removing the restrictions from their networks by making the Wi-Fi network accessible without a password which in turn enabled a significant amount of coordination to occur that really could not have been possible in any previous point in human history. For example, in a report by Jennifer O’Mahoney for the British *Independent* newspaper an activist noted how the creation of private groups on the social networking site Facebook enabled different protest organizers and activists to coordinate their precise locations of safe gathering hubs. These gathering hubs would often persist in underground venues and basements, especially in urban areas where access to information regarding the locations police brutality and crackdown were occurring was made available to civilians (O’Mahoney 2013). Coordination would occur through a plethora of decentralized hubs throughout Turkey but the central hub was that of Taksim square where the Zuccotti Park type features of portable mini-libraries, child care facilities, home-cooked food and even medicinal assistance stands were available. Another form of coordination comes into play that has to do with the following force of social learning. There are specific protest guides that have been translated from English to dozens of other languages (mainly by Gene Sharp and his Albert Einstein Institution) that literally teach civilians how to rebel against their governments. Sharp’s (2003) *There Are Realistic Alternatives* provides insights into occupation strategies where the taking over of government resources and access points to power such as transportation, natural resources and government buildings are encouraged. Two of these three were occupied by the recent Ukrainian Euromaidan movement in its successful overthrowing of the Yanyukovich regime. The spreading of such information is extremely easy for any who have access to public WIFI. Those that purposely want to keep such information may in accordance to strategy and contextual location (underground or public venue). Coordination was crucial for the 2013 uprisings as Turks saw a new opportunity to dissent following the dislocation.

Fourth is the ‘social learning’ (D4) force. This is different from the previous discursive force as coordination simply captures the sheer logistic characteristics of the ways in which the diffusion of citizen dissent transpires after the initial ‘backfire’ moment that occurs in the beginning two segments of the process model. Coordination by protestors often turns into material organizational entities such as
those noted above. The social learning force differs. In these uprisings and in the various uprisings that have occurred in our emerging digital age form of protest ranging from around the year of 2000 and booming in the post-2007 Facebook era, there has been a type of civic associational link that gets established between previously disconnected segments of a given society when protest strategy is encouraged through decentralized civilian hubs that specifically have no affiliation with state agencies. Tufekci and Wilson (2012) observe how social media in Tahir Square (Egypt, 2011) was significant as more individuals gathered information from social media than traditional and were more likely to participate in the protest if they had been using social media. Just as with the force of coordination, hubs are crucial for social learning in the form of nonviolent civilian movements as they exist in public places such as parks and well-known focal points such as squares. The state media was heavily restricted following the dislocation at Gezi Park. CNN Turk on the days following the pepper-spraying of the lady in the red dress was broadcasting a penguin documentary while hundreds of thousands if not millions were on the streets protesting against the state (Oktem 2013). A great deal of Turks utilized new forms of media and learned with the use of new public outlets that had never before been available. This relates to what Carter Vaughn Finley argues is a historical trend of a closed or lack-of access to civic life and a lack of public attendance that many Turks experience (Findley 2010). For the first time arguably in Turkish history, Turks were able to learn from one another in public spaces on a massive scale that had yet to be experienced. Social learning then is a valuable and pivotal force for any given uprising and especially for those uprisings that transpire in areas with high technological development. Access to electricity, mobile phones and most importantly internet creates the opportunity for protestors to gather information from one another without any sort of regulative restraint.

Lastly is the crucial ‘public outrage’ (D5) force which of all forces is most common in cases of backfire and contains two important components that make up the public outrage force in the case of the 2013 protests. To explain these components I turn to the semiotic works of Saussure and linguistic concept of the signifier and signified. There are three specific influential components Drawing back to the fanstasmatic logic and Saussure, ‘fantasmatic logics may be articulated by means of a narrative in which an external obstacle or enemy is deemed to be a threat to an already existing
fullness and harmony. For example, a Marxist or Communist threat, allegedly orchestrated by the Soviet Union and Cuba, was presented by military strategists as a direct threat to Christian Values and Western Freedoms’ (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 151). If we are to look once again at the pepper-spraying image below:

![Image of pepper-spraying](image)

It is possible to draw theoretical insight from Saussure’s framework of the sign and its signified and signifier. The image itself may appear to many Turks or international audiences as a battle between oppression (the police) and freedom (the woman). Delving deeper, a supplemental extension of Saussure’s concept of the sign was put forward by Ronald Barthes (along with others such as Levi-Strauss) expanded Saussure’s theory from not only the linguistic ‘text’ but to other entities such as objects, foods, tastes, smells, images among others (Barthes 1993). Meaning is created through the creation of a ‘sign’ that may vary according to whether that sign is a text, sound, taste, image, object or smell. A signifier (S) is the image (in this case) and the signified (S1) is its relation or concept of (S). Here it is possible to put forward suggestion regarding the ways in which both subjects within the AKP regime’s structure domestically conceived of and interpreted the image when first seeing it and how international and external audiences perceived the image. Beginning with international audiences, in the image itself there are can be two possible signifiers, the police man and the woman in the red dress. When we perceive, experience or are exposed to phenomena, a given signifier will send us into a process of interpretation which leads to the signified.

Non-domestic observers might have perceived the unjustness in this image to simply stem from the sheer heinousness of it where a clearly nonviolent young woman who most likely was not doing anything wrong is being wrongly treated by the state. This
type of view is important on the international setting where the average international
watcher has a low probability knowing the historical cleavages of Turkish politics but
may give their inner sympathy due to the despotic nature of the photo. Domestically,
the signified could lead one to identify the police officer not just as a single police
officer but as the repressive Turkish state or the Gaurdian state that had violently
intervened in a great deal of civilian affairs throughout Turkey’s history. On the other
hand, if viewing the woman in the red dress as a signifier, the signified interpretation
may lead one to identify the many different instances of democratic progress that
has arisen in Turkey since its founding such as women getting equal rights and
individuals being given the most liberal-based entitlements out of any modern Islamic
country comparatively. The fair-skinned woman in the red dress represents the
‘liberal’ and secular subject that the AKP regime has championed so heavily as a
culprit of their political doctrine. But then how can the Erdogan regime treat its own
secular and liberal subject that it champions in positive light with such atrocious
brutality? This is an interesting dynamic and perhaps the overriding factor in
explaining domestic public outrage as it illustrates how the AKP severely undermined
its own rule and discourse.

These five discursive forces mesh in no distinct order and form what is labelled as
the crucial ‘dislocation’ segment of the process model. The concept of a dislocation
originates from Lacanian psychoanalytic tradition and can be summarized as the
following: a dislocation ‘signifies the presence of the real in the symbolic order, which
can be characterized as a moment when a sense emerges, however localized or
diffuse this may be, that things are not quite right, whether this is registered by the
researcher or the subject affected by the dislocatory event’ (Glynos and Howarth
2007: 143). The use of the concept of dislocation in the framework advocated
throughout this paper is for the purposes of explaining social change brought about
by nonviolent protest. Dislocation then is an extremely important concept that may
be used for explaining social change and is of great use for the spheres of social
movements and social conflict studies. Following the discursive forces and
dislocation segments we finish with the ‘organic political crisis’ stage which captures
what is generally referred to as a ‘mass civilian movement’ by conflict scholars and
political scientists.
The purpose of this discursive process model has not been to explain why or when the Turkish uprisings failed, but instead to illustrate how the uprisings got triggered by extraordinary means and how Turks utilized new forms of strategies and tools to form the largest movement their nation had seen in over a decade. Chenoweth (2013) defines a mass civilian resistance movement as ‘the application of unarmed civilian power using nonviolent methods such as protests, boycotts and demonstrations’. Nonviolent civilian resistance movements have achieved greater success than their violent counter-parts over the course of the twentieth century and continue to do so today. The organic crisis segment entails this broader type of uprising that ensues after dislocations brought about by the initial stages or portions of a given nonviolent protest which was the case in the 2013 Turkish uprisings.

**Conclusion:**

Throughout this paper a theory and framework has been put forward to explain how the 2013 Turkish uprisings were triggered and more broadly how this specific transformative effect known as backfire can dislocate a political regime and foster a mass civilian resistance movement. Backfire is complex, diverse, varying and episodes of backfire continue to play key roles in major uprisings and social transitions today. For the first time in this millennium, the contingency behind the AKP’s strong-handed neoliberal doctrine that has been driven by Western economic and diplomatic support was fully revealed to domestic and international audiences as a result of the dislocation. The adoption of the *logics of critical explanation* and political discourse theory help to explain how this transpired and give new insight into the theoretical dimensions of nonviolent social transformation. Even though the end goals of the general anti-AKP protests that ensued did not achieve their goals of overthrowing the AKP government and the social media platform Twitter has since been banned, the opposition have established new forms of civic ties and garnered mass support in the process.
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