

Chapter 56

Turkish Youth's (Re) Construction of their Political Identity in Social Media, before "Resistanbul"

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the political potential of social media widely used as a means of communication by Turkish young people and examines how they perceive social media as alternative social environments, where they can manifest their political identities. In addition, the study conducted aims at understanding whether the political situation in Turkey before the "Resistanbul" events, beginning toward the end of May 2013, created fear among young people that could cause them to hesitate to express their political thoughts or feel the need to veil their political identities. The results of the survey reveals that Turkish young people, despite having a high sense of freedom, tend to be politically disengaged in social media, and they seem to be hesitant to reveal their political identities in this alternative democratic social space, but they do not mind "others" manifesting their political identities.

INTRODUCTION

The motivation behind this study conducted derived from the growing authoritarianism that the state practices in society, and the current policies that restrict the freedom of expression and freedom of assembly of young adults who want to pronounce their criticisms concerning the state and the ruling party Justice and Development

Party (AKP). On December 18, 2012, prior to the Prime Minister's arrival on the Middle East Technical University (METU) campus, where he went to watch the launch of a Turkish earth observation satellite into the orbit aboard a Chinese rocket, students had gathered to protest the new government policies that affect higher education in Turkey. The peaceful protesters who were chanting slogans against the government were met by 3,000

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police officers and approximately 100 armored vehicles. Police forces fired tear gas and water cannon to disperse the protest at the university. The rector declared that the university supported their students' freedom of expression and freedom of assembly and put the responsibility of the excessive police force targeting the students and the faculty on the police forces' and the Internal Affairs Minister's shoulders. On December 20, the academics at METU boycotted classes to protest police violence on METU campus. On December 21, 12 students were arrested, and then they were released. Following the Prime Minister's statements saying "What a shame! Shame on the professors who raised those students! Instructors first have to teach their students how to be respectful" targeting METU students and academics and the initiation of investigations by both the police and the Higher Education Council, the rectors of several universities including Galatasaray University, Istanbul Technical University, Yıldız Technical University, Mimar Sinan University, Marmara University, and Hacettepe University condemned the "student violence" at METU. As a response, students and faculty members in many of these universities protested their rectors, issued public statements and press releases in support of students and academics at METU, condemned their own rectors' statements as unrepresentative of their university. Academics from some other universities like Ankara University, Bosphorus University, and Istanbul Bilgi University issued declarations to express their concerns regarding the violations of the right of freedom of speech in Turkey mainly through social media. University students protested the violation of their rights of freedom of expression in universities in different cities like Adana, Mersin, Eskisehir, Izmir, Trabzon, and Kocaeli. The labor unions like KESK, Sosyal-Is, some branches of Turkish Bar Association, the Association of Academics condemned both these some rectors' and the government's approach to the events at METU. Also, the METU Academic Personnel Association, the METU

Alumni Association Council, the Education and Science Employees Union and METU students, issued a joint declaration.

The Deputy Prime Minister's statements made on December 27, 2012 on a TV program unveiled the government's approach to universities and students in Turkey: "Such events are likely to accelerate. There is potential danger in universities," (Arinc, "There is danger in universities" 2012) which foreshadowed the recent "Resistanbul" events. The events accelerated, and on May 31, 2013 when a peaceful protest that started to stop the demolition of Gezi Park in Taksim Square, the only remaining green area in the heart of Istanbul, was met by excessive police force, it triggered the ongoing nationwide protests. Hundreds of protesters including mainly university students, academics, white-collars chanted, "Everywhere is Taksim, everywhere is resistance," "Together against fascism," "Tayyip resign." And yes, the Deputy Prime Minister was right; there was a potential danger for *them* because things would not be as easy as they were before. There are now thousands of people marching against the government in the streets.

During the events in METU, social media played a fundamental role in the communication of news because the mainstream visual and print media were censored. The event was significant in the sense that the public could largely witness how the government could manipulate media corporations and make people see and believe what the authorities want them to. News about the protests in different universities nationwide to support METU students and academics, letters from protesters, petitions, political jokes and cartoons in defense of students' rights of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly were posted and shared on social media Websites after the events while the government's growing political pressure on mainly the opposing groups was protested. Today, it is unfortunately seen that the government's being increasingly authoritarian still leads to public unease in Turkey; the excessive

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