ERDOGAN FACES GROWING UNREST

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By Tanya Talaga, Istanbul, The Toronto Star, 16 May 2014

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When Erdem Gunduz staged a silent, peaceful protest last June against the Turkish police's heavy-handed tactics in Taksim Square, he became the figurehead of a movement to rein in Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's increasingly authoritarian rule.



"When I stood still," recalls Gunduz, "I saw a small candle in my mind. I thought I was the small, one light. Hope grows if you share it."

That hope turned to anger on Thursday as Turks took to the streets across the country, mourning the death of at least 282 miners at a coal mine in Soma due to lax safety standards.

The rage intensified after pictures exploded onto social media showing one of Erdogan's staff violently kicking a cowering mourner, while police officers looked on.

In an all-too-familiar scene, water cannons and riot police squared off against protesters in Istanbul's Taksim Square, the capital of Ankara and the coastal city of Izmir.

It has been one year since the Taksim protests revealed to the world the troubled state of democracy in Turkey. Last May and June, 8,000 were injured and nearly one dozen killed in demonstrations over the re-development of Gezi Park.

"The system has to change here or the problems will never go away. The Turkish people have to change," says Gunduz, who spoke to the Star in late March. His simple act of staring silently at a giant portrait of Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern, secular Turkey, earned him the nickname "Standing Man" in the international press. He became a media sensation and is credited with helping to kick-start a democratic awakening in Turkey.

The Erdogan government may have called the demonstrators anarchists, criminals, even terrorists, says Gunduz, but the world is now aware of his iron fist.

In the past year, Erdogan has banned YouTube and attempted to ban Twitter, a move that was

eventually reversed by the constitutional courts. He was caught in a massive corruption probe, divorced his most powerful political ally, whom he now accuses of trying to stage a coup, fired thousands of police and prosecutors, and imprisoned journalists. He has even written new laws giving him more power over the court system.

The economically sick European Union has had big plans for Turkey, an emerging economy of 80 million people.

But lately, the EU has watched what has happened in the republic in dismay.

Turkey was supposed to be the prize of democratic, western-styled reform in the Islamic world, the EU's link between the West and the Middle East, opening up markets such as Iran and other Arab states.

Accession talks between Turkey and the EU began in 2005 but they have started and then stalled for a variety of reasons — chief among them Turkey's human rights problems and its failure to solve the border dispute with EU-member Cyprus.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel is not a fan of Turkey's admission into the EU and she continues to be in no rush to admit the country to the German-dominated club. Meanwhile, the Turks act as if membership is something they can easily do without.

When Turkey was heavily criticized for its tactics during the Gezi crisis, Turkey's former EU minister, Egemen Bagis, famously said: "The EU needs Turkey more than Turkey needs the EU. If we have to, we could tell them, 'Get lost.'"

But as Turkey falters amid protests and strong-armed government tactics, it may need Europe more than it thinks.

Turkey's main export and trading partner is Europe. Last year, $151.9 billion in exports left Turkey and 42.6 per cent of those goods went to the EU, or $62 billion, followed by 27 per cent to the Middle East. Turkey's main exported product is automotive cars and parts.

The Republic of Turkey used to be the darling success story of emerging markets, alongside Brazil and India, but lately it has become a cautionary tale.

Last year, the Turkish lira fell 15 per cent against the U.S. dollar, one of the worst performances of two dozen emerging markets, reports Bloomberg. In the same period, the Istanbul stock exchange dropped by one-fifth and, as the political unrest mounted, Turkish central bankers hiked interest rates to stop the lira's slide.

Erdogan has tried to convince the outside world that Turkey is a democratic state, like Germany or the United States, but the world isn't fooled, says journalist Emre Kizilkaya, who works at the Turkish news service Hurriyet. Located on the outskirts of Istanbul, Hurriyet shares an office tower with CNN Turk, the Wall Street Journal and other foreign news organizations.

Turkey is one of the most restrictive countries in the world to practice journalism, reports the Committee to Protect Journalists. Court cases can't be reported on until they are over. If journalists try to cover government corruption cases, they are often charged by police, tried by judges with no juries and then thrown into jail.

"Everything is up to the state of mind of Erdogan or the judges," Kizilkaya says.

Those coming of age now have grown up in the era of the Internet, television and free speech. They know what democracy is and won't stand for living in a restrictive state, he says.

However that youthful discontent did not translate into recent regional election results. Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) won a majority of regions across the republic.

The true test of Erdogan's influence and the people's willingness to change will now take place on Aug. 10, the date of the general election. It will be the first in Turkey where the people directly vote for president, a largely ceremonial office currently held by Abdullah Gul.

It is expected Erdogan, who has served three terms as prime minister — the maximum under Turkish law — will run.

If he wins, no one expects him to sit back and be a figurehead. "You can never anticipate his next move," says Kizilkaya.