



A Different May Day in Taksim 2010

Democratic Policing and Negotiation | Article 5 of 5
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A Different May Day in Taksim

The year 2010 witnessed an important experience in the management of public order in Türkiye. Reopening Taksim Square to large-scale May Day celebrations was more than a change in the designation of an assembly venue. It showed that a day long associated with the expectation of confrontation could unfold differently through dialogue and shared responsibility. Contemporary reports recorded that, 32 years after the last major celebration in 1978, the square again hosted a mass gathering. [1]

At the heart of this experience was a challenge to the assumption that public order could be secured primarily through the use of force. Problems should be addressed through reason, knowledge and empathy. Treating people who articulate democratic demands as potential offenders undermines trust between citizens and the state. Respect for state institutions and law is strengthened more by fair and consistent practices than by fear.

Negotiation-based policing seeks to reduce the risk of confrontation through communication and to make the exercise of rights safer. The 2010 Taksim experience should be examined in that light: the reopening of the square, the responsibilities undertaken by trade unions, and efforts within the police to sustain dialogue converged in the same process.

This analysis considers the written field account of the original author, who states that they served at the time as a deputy branch director in the Public Order/Security Branch of the Istanbul Police Department, alongside published sources. Descriptions of discussions and personal experiences derive from this testimony. [2]

From the Practice of Prohibition to Dialogue

Taksim's symbolic value could not simply be displaced by proposing an alternative square. Restrictions on the location of assemblies and police interventions in preceding years had brought the impact of security measures on freedom of assembly to the centre of public debate. Preparations focused on stopping a demonstration could narrow the scope for listening to the other side even before the event began.

The legal assessment of events in 2008 illustrates this issue. In *DİSK and KESK v. Turkey*, the European Court of Human Rights examined an intervention against a group outside the DİSK building on the morning of 1 May 2008. The Court found that the force used had been disproportionate and that the right to freedom of assembly had been violated. The judgment did not determine the legality of choosing Taksim for every purpose or in every circumstance; it

assessed the intervention at issue. The judgment was delivered on 27 November 2012 and therefore cannot be presented as a reason already available to decision-makers in 2010. [3]

The original account regards the reform environment of the late 2000s and the European Union accession process as a context in which a different approach could be advocated within law enforcement. Central to this interpretation is the idea that decision-makers began to consider not only the consequences of prohibiting an assembly but also those of enabling the exercise of rights.

An important legal distinction is required here. Article 34 of the Turkish Constitution recognises the right to hold unarmed and peaceful meetings and demonstrations without prior permission. References in contemporary accounts to an event being “permitted” should therefore mean that the authorities did not administratively prevent a mass gathering in Taksim and made suitable arrangements for it—not that the right itself was granted as a discretionary favour. [3]

An Account from the Field: Convincing One’s Own Institution First

According to the author’s account, the author and colleagues firmly believed that a peaceful celebration in Taksim was possible. The main difficulty was not only reaching an understanding with trade unions; it was also persuading the chain of decision-making—from the governorate and police leadership to the ministerial level—that such an outcome could be trusted. The square needed to cease being treated as a test of strength for both demonstrators and the state. [2]

This effort was informed by difficult personal experiences. The author recounts that in previous years interventions began while discussions with groups were still taking place, and that the author and colleagues were themselves affected by batons and gas. During an intervention for which the author had no protective equipment, the density of the gas reportedly caused a fear for their life. This testimony is a reminder that coordination between negotiation teams and intervention units is necessary not only for demonstrators’ safety but also for the officers working on the ground. [2]

In the contacts preceding 2010, meetings were held with trade unions, political parties and other participating groups. According to the author, these discussions produced confidence that a peaceful event could be possible through shared responsibility. The next challenge was to convey the trust created and the commitments made to those with decision-making authority.

The account describes a particular bureaucratic concern: disturbances following a ban might be regarded as familiar and expected, whereas even a smaller incident after the square had been opened might bring serious responsibility for those who had approved the decision. The author reports that officers seeking to change this approach faced substantial criticism within their institution. [2]

This observation suggests that democratic policing involves more than the communication skills of individual officers on the street. Personnel who defend reasonable measures facilitating the exercise of rights also require institutional support. Otherwise, prohibition may be chosen not because it provides greater safety but because it appears less risky from an administrative perspective.

Shared Responsibility and Arrangements in the Square

In the author's account, the wish to celebrate in Taksim provided strong common ground for trade unions and other groups. Discussions emphasised avoiding the transfer of tensions from previous years to the day itself, passing calmly through locations with police deployments, and maintaining order in the square. Advance discussions about processions, routes and communication channels are presented as preparations that reduced uncertainty. [2]

One notable example in the account concerns the Communist Party of Türkiye (TKP). According to the author, the party agreed to keep its procession towards the rear of the assembly area, adopting a position intended to reduce tension between police and participants. The original account estimates approximately 3,000 people, but the significance here is the role attributed to the arrangement in the testimony rather than a verified attendance figure. This detail is a participant's observation, not an independently verified operational record. [2]

Cooperation of this kind does not mean transferring the duty of public security to a political party or trade union. The police retain their legal powers and responsibilities, while organisers may contribute to a peaceful environment by communicating with participants. The value of negotiation lies not in substituting one party for another but in making their respective duties and expectations understandable.

For the same reason, exercising a right must not depend on an agreement between a group and the police, or on approval by particular representatives. Communication supports the safety of an assembly; it must not become a prerequisite for participation in a peaceful gathering.

What Did the 2010 Experience Demonstrate?

Contemporary reports emphasised the large processions reaching Taksim, the shared celebration and remembrance of those who lost their lives in 1977. This showed that the expectation of continual confrontation in the square was not inevitable. [1, 4]

The author stresses that security preparations were not abandoned, but police deployment was arranged to produce fewer direct confrontations. In this assessment, the decisive factor was less the number of personnel than the purpose and attitude with which officers approached the gathering. [2]

A study by Kara and Üstün examining the 2010–2012 celebrations also contributes to this discussion. Among 80 members of the Istanbul Police Department's Security Branch who took part in the research, 61.3% considered the conciliatory approach between police, trade unions and civil society organisations to have contributed to the peaceful conduct of the celebrations. This finding represents the perceptions of police personnel; it does not by itself establish a definitive causal explanation for the outcome. [5]

Read together, the published material and the field account bring three elements into focus: administrative willingness to make space for the exercise of rights, advance preparation, and trust-based communication. These are conditions that may help reduce tension. The same methods cannot be guaranteed to achieve identical outcomes everywhere, but the experience is valuable because it shows that prohibition is not the only option.

Why Did the Spirit of 2010 Not Endure?

Large-scale May Day celebrations continued in Taksim in 2011 and 2012, making 2010 more than a one-day exception. However, the renewed closure of the square to mass May Day gatherings in 2013, together with the clashes that followed, showed that the gains had not become a lasting guarantee. [5, 6]

The Gezi Park protests began later that same year, at the end of May. The European Commission's 2013 Turkey Progress Report noted instances of excessive force during demonstrations that were generally peaceful, along with serious problems regarding the protection of freedom of assembly. [6]

In this analysis, the central rupture lies in the failure to protect, against changing political and administrative preferences, an approach that treated democratic demands as the exercise of rights. When broad prohibitions and early interventions take precedence over negotiation channels, trust built on the ground can erode. The significance of 2010 is not that it resolved every problem

that later emerged, but that it demonstrated the practicability of another approach to public order.

The original testimony also regards the dismissals after 2016 as part of this loss of continuity. The March 2018 report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) documented extensive dismissals during the state of emergency and associated human rights concerns. However, these general findings do not, on their own, establish how many members of the 2009–2012 negotiation teams were dismissed or the extent to which the model was affected. [7]

The assessment that the loss of experienced personnel may weaken institutional memory should therefore be retained without turning it into a claim that negotiation capacity disappeared completely. Indeed, a September 2021 announcement by the Aydın Governorate records that a Public Events Negotiation Training Course was held in Didim. The continuation of training does not mean that practice on the ground was invariably rights-based; equally, it does not support the claim that all such activity ceased. [8]

The central question goes beyond whether negotiation retains its name or whether courses continue to be held: to what extent does the approach influence decisions, the timing of interventions and the protection of peaceful participation? Institutional continuity should be assessed through the quality of practice, not merely the number of training courses.

The Rule of Law and Lasting Safeguards

For the experience of 2010 to inform the future, relationships developed in the field cannot remain dependent on individual initiative. Officers tasked with contacting organisers need a clear framework of authority and responsibility. Coordination between negotiation and intervention units is essential, as are the subsequent review of decisions and accountability for the use of force.

Equal protection in the exercise of rights is an inseparable part of this framework. Political proximity to, or distance from, those in power cannot justify different standards for protecting peaceful assemblies. The rule of law requires equal protection for people exercising the same right, irrespective of their political identity.

To regard Taksim merely as “an area to be controlled” is to push its historical memory and the messages participants seek to express into the background. Security assessments must address actual risks while considering the measures through which a peaceful gathering could be made possible. State conduct can either increase or reduce tension.

Ultimately, May Day in Taksim in 2010 was a powerful experience demonstrating that public order and fundamental rights can be protected together. The failure to make this approach permanent does not diminish the value of negotiation-based policing; rather, it shows why political support, institutional memory and legal safeguards must be considered alongside it. The question “Why could it not be like 2010?” remains relevant to democratic public-order management today, well beyond nostalgia for the past.

References

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[2] Written field account titled "A Different May Day in Taksim — 2010," submitted by the original author to SRL Swiss. Unpublished personal testimony; details of meetings and personal experiences are attributed to this source.

[3] European Court of Human Rights, DİSK and KESK v. Turkey, application no. 38676/08, 27 November 2012, particularly §§ 16 and 32–38.

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[4] Bianet (1 May 2010). "Labour Day Finally Back in Taksim Square!"

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