Middle-class rage sparks protest movements in Turkey, Brazil, Bulgaria and beyond

By Anthony Faiola and Paula Moura

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As protests raged in Turkey and were set to explode in distant Brazil, Asen Genov sat in his office in Bulgaria's capital on the cloudy morning of June 14, about to strike the computer key that would spark a Bulgarian Spring.

Only months earlier, public outrage over high electricity bills in the country had brought down a previous government, but Genov saw more reason for anger when the new administration tapped a shadowy media mogul to head the national security service. Furious, Genov posted a Facebook event calling for a protest in Sofia, the nation's capital, though he was dubious about turnout for a demonstration focused not on pocketbooks but on corruption and cronyism in government.

"We made bets on how many would come. I thought maybe 500," said Genov, a 44-year-old who helps run a fact-checking Web site.

But as he arrived in Sofia's Independence Square, people were streaming in by the thousands, as they have every day since, with the snowballing protests aiming to topple the government.

"We are all linked together, Bulgaria, Turkey, Brazil. We are tweeting in English so we can understand each other, and supporting each other on other social media," said Iveta Cherneva, a 29-year-old author in Sofia, who was one of the many people protesting for the first time. "We are fighting for different reasons, but we all want our governments to finally work for us. We are inspiring each other."

Around the globe, this is the summer of middle-class discontent, particularly in the developing world. From Istanbul to Rio de Janeiro, from Bulgaria to Bosnia, the pent-up frustrations of an engaged citizenry are being triggered by a series of seemingly disparate events.

Government development of a park in Turkey has erupted into broad unrest over freedom of expression in a society that, under a devout and increasingly authoritarian leader, is witnessing the encroaching power of Islam. A hike in bus fares in Brazil, meanwhile, has touched off an uproar over official waste, corruption and police brutality. But what do they have in common? One small incident has ignited the fuse in societies that, linked by social media and years of improved living standards across the developing world, are now

demanding more from their democracies and governments.

In the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo, thousands of furious residents across ethnic lines united on the streets this month, at one point blockading lawmakers inside parliament for 14 hours to protest government ineptitude in clearing a massive backlog of unregistered newborns. Public anger erupted after a Facebook posting — about a 3-month-old baby whose trip to Germany for a lifesaving transplant had been delayed by the backlog — went viral.

Thousands of protesters, including an outpouring of middle-class citizens, are expected Sunday in Cairo's Tahrir Square. They return to the touchstone plaza of the Arab Spring in a nation that exchanged a dictator for what many Egyptians now see as a new government unwilling or unable to fix a corrupt bureaucracy and inefficient economy.

Indeed, on the heels of the Arab Spring, Spain's "indignados" and the U.S. Occupy movement, some observers see a new class of protest emerging among the global citizenry. If the 1960s were about breaking cultural norms and protesting foreign wars, and the 1990s about railing against globalization, then the 2010s are about a clamor for responsive government, as well as social and economic freedom.

"These are a group of people who are better educated and more connected through technology," said Robin Niblett, director of Chatham House, the London-based think tank. "In parts of the developing world, this is a new middle class, where the definition of success is not survival. It's about quality of life, about future opportunity and freedom of expression."

Brazil's protest movement: Brazil is experiencing its largest protests in more than 20 years, as more than 200,000 demonstrators flood the streets of Sao Paulo, Brasilia, Rio de Janeiro and four other major cities to rally over a range of social issues.

Solidarity in Brazil

Cecilia Siqueira de Oliveira, a 33-year-old design student living in the teeming Brazilian metropolis of Sao Paulo, had never seen herself as a street protester. Yet she found herself gripped by news this month of the uprising in Turkey. She was especially touched by a photo she'd seen from faraway Istanbul, of a man calmly playing the piano amid a huge throng of agitated demonstrators.

Posting the photo on her Facebook page, she wrote, "Wouldn't it be good if Brazilians did that?"

A few days later, Brazil was on its feet.

A series of protests were playing out on Paulista Avenue, one block from her two-bedroom apartment. What was originally a movement against high bus fares was morphing into mass demonstrations against ingrained corruption, shoddy public services, high taxes and rising inflation.

Like other Brazilians, Oliveira had been disgusted by recurring political corruption scandals, a lackluster transit system and poor public services. She also thought the current and past governments had exaggerated the improvements in Brazilian lifestyles during a now-ebbing era of high growth. What burned her most, though, were the images of violence she was witnessing on television, with riot police firing rubber bullets and gas canisters at the crowds — a response that brought only more demonstrators out.

Finally, on June 17, she decided to join the hordes that were filling the streets.

"There were all kinds of people — the suits, the elderly, young people, families with children," Oliveira said. As she marched, she recalled how emotional she felt watching people throwing shredded paper from their windows and turning their lights on and off as a sign of solidarity with the protesters below.

Three days later, more than 1 million Brazilians were on the streets of cities across the country. In the past, she and her friends had commiserated about how the only things that brought Brazilians together were soccer and Carnival. That had clearly changed.

"People realized it was worth going into the streets," Oliveira said. "It's incredible that in a country mad about soccer, that will host the World Cup, people are not talking about matches on social media. They are discussing politics and economics."

Empowerment in Turkey

Serkan Zihli, a 32-year-old public relations consultant for an array of glamorous Istanbul art galleries and fashion designers, had just landed from a Mediterranean vacation when his smartphone lit up. "Get to Gezi Park," said the text from a friend. "They're coming."

For months, Zihli had been part of a group of activists seeking to block a government plan to mow down the park and build a shopping mall in the only green space left in Taksim, a nightlife district in the glittering metropolis that literally straddles East and West. But this was not just about protecting

trees.

Turkey had seen years of surging economic growth, but a growing number of middle-class Turkish citizens thought it had produced willy-nilly construction that came with zero thought to urban planning, as well as backroom deals with untold levels of graft. Taking a cue from the Occupy movements, protesters entered Gezi Park with tents, intent on blocking the bulldozers.

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The fight was already emerging as a bigger symbol for secular Turks who felt increasingly boxed in by the ruling party of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The government-backed plan called for building a shopping mall inside a reconstruction of a long-demolished army barracks remembered by progressive Turks as a place where, in 1909, religious conservatives sought to stage a coup against reformers.

The plan followed what Zihli and others called a pattern of Erdogan's Islam-tinged and ever-more authoritarian government. Erdogan had railed against birth control while his ruling party floated curbs on legal abortions. Journalists critical of the government have been arrested. Just last month, Turkey's parliament passed sweeping new restrictions on alcohol, banning night sales and liquor advertising. In a country that once prided itself on its secular identity, Erdogan suggested ayran, a salty yogurt, replace raki, an anise-flavored alcoholic beverage, as Turkey's national drink.

As security forces moved in to clear Gezi Park, Zihli — more used to gallery receptions in fashionable Istanbul circles — suddenly found himself engaging in running battles with police. The government response went ignored or underplayed by cowed segments of the Turkish media, leaving word to spread through Facebook, Twitter and other social media, with rage against official repression drawing massive new support for the still-ongoing civil unrest.

Shot by a rubber bullet and doused by water cannons, Zihli kept coming back, feeling more and more empowered. Protesters grew more enraged as Erdogan took to national television, denouncing them as foreign-sponsored rabble-rousers.

"I'm not a very political person, but for the first time in my life, I felt I could

understand what was lacking in our democracy," Zihli said. "Democracy isn't just about having elections. It's about respecting the points of view of all your citizens; it's about freedom and not forcing your will."

Repeatedly, Erdogan, addressing his faithful, sought to paint the protesters as debauched and morally bankrupt, claiming they had entered a mosque near the protest site and drank alcohol there. The allegations were quickly denied by a mosque official, who was then promptly hauled in for six hours of questioning by Istanbul's antiterrorism police.

"All Erdogan does every day is prove our point with his actions," Zihli said. "This is about our love for our country and our love for freedom, and no, we're not going to stop."

Faiola reported from London and Moura reported from Sao Paulo. Juan Forero in Bogota, Colombia, contributed to this report.