

Tuesday, 4 June 2013

Istanbul United: Protests bring rival fans together, for now



Days of anti-government protest in Turkey have achieved one feat that has eluded the authorities for years: uniting the fiercely rival and sometimes violent supporters of Istanbul's "Big Three" football clubs.

Besiktas, Galatasaray and Fenerbahce fans have come together in new-found solidarity during five days of demonstrations against Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's government.

The mood has been immortalized in a once-unthinkable photo doing the rounds on Twitter and Facebook - three fans in rival shirts marching arm-in-arm under the slogan: "Tayyip do you know Istanbul United? Since 31 May 2013."

Another photo shows a man in a blue-and-yellow Fenerbahce shirt with a Besiktas scarf wrapped around his face to protect against the tear gas frequently fired by police.

At times the atmosphere among thousands of young protesters in Taksim resembles a football stadium more than a political demonstration. Fans sing and bounce up and down in unison, occasionally booing police helicopters circling overhead.

"Go on spray, go on spray, spray your pepper gas. Take off your helmets, put down your truncheons and let's see who's the tough guy," sang the fans, taunting police with a Besiktas chant which has become popular with the demonstrators.

There are tales of Galatasaray fans coming to the aid of Fenerbahce supporters trapped by the police, or of fans rushing down the hill from Taksim to the aid of rival supporters in the nearby Besiktas district on the shores of the Bosphorus.

"We are normally enemies, but this has really brought us together. It's never happened before," said university student Mert Gurses, 18, wearing a black-and-white Besiktas scarf and chatting with friends

It is a remarkable transformation in mood among fans more usually soured with animosity which sometimes spills into violence, tainting the image of Turkish football.

Just three weeks ago, a Fenerbahce fan was stabbed to death at an Istanbul bus stop by someone wearing a red-and-yellow Galatasaray shirt after an end-of-season derby match.

Fans' groups have also sought to stem the outbreaks of violence, with Besiktas fan group Carsi meeting police in a bid to halt clashes in the district, where Erdogan has offices.

Football pundit Bagis Erten said the influence of the fans was comparable to that of supporters of Cairo clubs Al Ahli and Zamalek during the Egyptian protests in Tahrir Square in 2011.

"It's very clear that even if Gezi Park [protests] achieve nothing else, they have still brought peace in football," Erten wrote in the Radikal newspaper. "At least for now."