

How conspiracy theories feed political fragmentation

June 29 2017, by Turkey Salim Nefes

Conspiracy theories are all the rage these days. Barely a day goes by without someone accusing someone else of engaging in fake news, post-truths, witch hunts and organised political skulduggery.

But they have been with us for a long time, influencing public opinion and major historic events. The Nazi regime continuously resorted to [anti-Semitic conspiracy theories](#) in its vile mission. More recently, President Bashar al-Assad suppressed [protests in Daraa](#), which he saw as a conspiracy, triggering the Syrian Civil War.

Everyday use of the term "conspiracy theory" is a pejorative one. It generally describes what we consider to be a false belief held by strange people. So how do they have any influence on public opinion or political events?

To try and find out, I [examined the impact](#) of official conspiracy theories on the [Gezi Park protests in Turkey](#). This wave of demonstrations and violent rebuttals in May and June 2013 began as a small resistance to the attempt to demolish the Gezi Park in Taksim, one of the few green areas in central Istanbul.

On May 28, around 50 protesters camped in the park as part of a group effort to prevent its demolition. Police raided the camp twice and [burned the protesters' tents](#). This aggression in turn provoked a dramatic spread of the protests, which brought together a wide range of political and civil groups and many more people.

The protests had immediate consequences for economic and foreign affairs. The Turkish stock exchange [fell 10.5% in one day](#). The German government moved to delay a new round of [EU membership talks with Turkey](#).

The reaction of the Turkish government was a concerted attempt to discredit the social movement as a foreign conspiracy. The then prime minister (now president) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [claimed the protest](#) was the result of a conspiracy by foreign financial groups attempting to hinder Turkish economic progress.

To understand the effect of this argument on [public opinion](#), I analysed online conversations about the interest rate lobby on the most popular discussion website in Turkey, [Ekşi Sözlük](#), and their interpretations of the conspiracy account.

Most of the contributors who agreed with the official conspiracy [theory](#) idea simply expressed their belief that the government was correct in identifying a foreign plot.

Those who rejected the government's argument either argued that the government was wrong, or was inventing the conspiracy for political ends. One commented that it was "a good example of inventing an imaginary enemy".

But then looking at the online commentators' previous postings, I discovered that political stance provided a solid prediction of how they would respond to the official suggestion of a conspiracy. In other words, if the online users were pro-government before the protests, they tended to believe in the official conspiracy account. If they were critical of the government, they tended to reject the conspiracy rhetoric.

Fuelling the fire

Conspiracy theories are not just harmless irrational beliefs. They have serious impact, and can be used entirely rationally to justify political views. And because people are likely to interpret conspiracy theories in line with their political values and interests, this can increase political fragmentation. As [conspiracy theories](#) blame certain groups for wrongdoing, they can embolden existing political divisions between groups.

In the Turkish case, this was clear. The official conspiratorial frames concerning the [Gezi Park protests](#) have contributed to national political fragmentation by adding to disagreements between government supporters and opponents.

This fragmentation is plainly visible in the Turkish government's current attempt to clamp down on anyone they choose to blame for conspiring in the failed coup attempt of July 2016. Judges, teachers and journalists have all been arrested for alleged sympathy with the coup.

Whether it's in Hitler's Germany, Assad's Syria, or contemporary Turkey, the official use of [conspiracy](#) rhetoric is a powerful political tool. It increases tensions and deepens division. Conspiracy theories are not just for crackpots and people with vivid imaginations – they are far more serious than that.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: How conspiracy theories feed political fragmentation (2017, June 29) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-06-conspiracy-theories-political-fragmentation.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.