Authoritarianism, Politics, and Literature in Turkey

by Ece Temelkuran **(/experts/ece-temelkuran)** , Robert Finn **(/experts/robert-finn)** , Soner Cagaptay **(/experts/soner-cagaptay)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

Watch a stimulating conversation with acclaimed Turkish writer Ece Temelkuran, whose latest novel examines the upheavals around Turkey's 1980s coup.

On November 16, Ece Temelkuran, Robert Finn, and Soner Cagaptay addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute to discuss Temelkuran's most recent book, The Time of Mute Swans **(https://www.amazon.com/Time-Mute-Swans-Novel/dp/1628728140)** . *Temelkuran is a distinguished Turkish author and journalist. Finn is a former lecturer on Turkish literature at Princeton University who has served as ambassador to Afghanistan and at U.S. missions in Turkey. Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their discussion.*

Temelkuran's latest novel takes place in Ankara in the three decades leading up to the 1980 coup, the story of which has not been sufficiently told. *The Time of Mute Swans* oscillates between fiction and nonfiction, and the actual events that inspired it are often even more interesting than the fictional stories woven around them.

One of these real stories took place after the coup. The leading general in that plot, Kenan Evren, wanted to build a park in Ankara. Although the city already had many parks, including a famous one that hosted swans, Evren built his

own and moved the swans there. The unhappy swans tried flying back to their original home, Swan Park, but died one by one on the treacherous journey through the city. To prevent this migration, Evren tasked veterinarians with finding a way to limit the swans' mobility. Their solution was an operation that removed a bone from the swans' wings.

Four decades later, when Temelkuran asked Ankara residents if swans can fly, without exception they responded no. This is what the military coup did: it made people forget that the flightless swans were victims of an unnatural operation rather than a natural phenomenon.

Temelkuran spent six months scouring the parliamentary archives in Ankara to research the narrative spun by the 1980 coup. She believes that the seeds of political authoritarianism sown at the time are now flourishing.

To justify intervening in 1980, the military argued that Turkey had been in a state of civil war for years, with civilian deaths, food shortages, and other pressures that only the coup could relieve. Yet this narrative ignored three key points: (1) the middle class was strong in the 1970s, (2) religious discourse did not have a monopoly on the concepts of kindness and generosity, and (3) solidarity and sharing still prevailed rather than a winner-loser divide.

Recently, populism has been back in vogue as a topic of debate for American and European intellectuals. Yet some of these intellectuals act as if populism came out of nowhere. In reality, the historical precedent for Turkey's current bout of populism lies in the 1980s, when the military made people forget that swans could fly. The dominant narrative in American populism must also be interrogated so that the missing part of the story can be recovered and the appropriate cautionary lessons learned.

Neither journalism nor literature is capable of changing the world; words are too fragile. Writing can, however, preserve beauty and remind people of their capacity as human beings. The victory of evil does not occur overnight. It lays a long siege on the mind, forcing people to forget that they can produce, create, imagine, and, most important, remember.

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In the late 1970s, Robert Finn was living as a diplomat in Istanbul, where his wife taught university courses. At night, they were accustomed to hearing gunshots from leftist and rightist groups clashing in the streets. When they left the house for evening engagements, they were often stopped by anonymous men in raincoats who asked for their identification papers. People speculated that once the daily death toll reached twenty, the military would intervene, and this prediction came to pass in 1980.

Since the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2003, the Western press has often encouraged the international community to support him and his government. Yet their coverage of Turkey -- in 1980 and today -- has been severely limited by lack of access to Turkish sources. European and U.S. journalists typically do not speak Turkish, and when they are in the country, they tend to stay in Istanbul. This creates a very biased view of Turkey. Temelkuran is exceptional in her decision to write about Ankara.

In addition to the beautiful metaphor of the swans, she catalogs and records the disintegration of Turkish society in the 1970s in two Ankara neighborhoods, one rightist and one leftist, which lie across the creek from each other. The story is told through children's eyes; they relay the historical events taking place but do not necessarily understand the causes behind them. The reader sees how the relationships of the characters disintegrate in parallel with the crumbling buildings. Temelkuran's novel captures this breakdown in a way that contemporary political reporting never did.

During the 1980 coup, citizens were forced into political choices that implicated them with the right or the left. The militarization and ideological polarization ended political dialogue. There was no middle ground, and today's

situation is Turkey's inheritance from that time.

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While growing up in Turkey, Soner Cagaptay spent his summers in Ankara visiting family, including trips to Swan Park. Until reading Temelkuran's book, he also believed that swans could not fly.

After the 1980 coup, the military wanted to create a new society and enact a sharp break from the 1970s. The takeover resulted in the jailing of half a million leftists (many of whom were tortured) and the destruction of Turkey's vibrant leftist movements. The link between the political left and the economic working class was permanently severed. Party members could not be union members (and vice versa), and unions were banned from donating money to working-class parties. These factions had to become middle-class parties instead, while political Islamists filled the resultant vacuum in working-class districts throughout the 1980s and 1990s. This is where the Justice and Development Party (AKP) emerged.

Another effect of the coup was to allow some religion into government and education in order to inoculate Turkey against leftist movements. The military eliminated the secularist firewall between state and religion. Compulsory courses on Sunni Islam were introduced for all students, and the country's only television network -- the government-run TRT -- began to broadcast shows on religion that favored Sunnism and ignored other religious communities. The secularist military irreversibly opened the gates to Islamizing Turkish society, thereby empowering its nemesis, political Islamists.

Yet another dramatic change post-coup was the splintering of the center-right, Turkey's traditionally dominant political pillar. The generals banned politicians who had run the country in the 1970s, including center-right leader and former prime minister Suleyman Demirel. In his absence, center-right politicians set up another faction, Turgut Ozal's Motherland Party (ANAP). Yet Demirel returned to politics once his ban was reversed and established his own movement, the True Path Party (DYP). This irreversibly split the center-right into two parties. As a country that had been dominated by the center-right since its transition to a multiparty democracy in 1950, Turkey was left vulnerable when these factions cannibalized each other and fell below the electoral threshold needed to enter parliament.

Indeed, this threshold -- 10 percent of the national vote -- is an important inflection point that has allowed Erdogan to establish disproportionate power over Turkey. The highest electoral threshold in any democracy, it was originally put in place by the military to keep Kurdish nationalist parties out of parliament. In the 2002 elections, both center-right parties fell below 10 percent, while the AKP was able to grab two-thirds of the parliamentary seats despite winning only 34 percent of the vote.

Turkey's party system was destroyed in the 1980s and 1990s, and the electoral threshold is one of the most damaging vestiges of that era. It empowered Erdogan with unrepresentative and disproportionate legislative majorities, removed any incentive for him to moderate, and paved the way for his authoritarianism today.

This summary was prepared by Oya Rose Aktas. ❖

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