

FASCISM AND NATIONAL POPULISM

# Before Spring Comes Winter

Ece Temelkuran



Turkish President Erdoğan during his speech at his party's parliamentary group meeting on March 11, 2020. Picture by Justice and Development Party / AKP

Jim Morrison was right; “People are strange when you are a stranger.” Things become even stranger when a foreigner suddenly materializes before you to tell that something terrible is approaching. The reasonable way to treat such a fool is to put on a compassionate smile pretending that you are listening and then you politely say thank you and goodbye. Only when she exists the door you can roll your eyes together and laugh a bit. Probably that was what happened in 2019 after I finished book tour giving talks at universities such as Stanford, Columbia, Seattle, Oxford and several other universities telling people that a confusing new form of fascism is about to arrive to first in Europe than to the American shore and that the matter was bigger than Trump or his ilk. I was warning was in hasty in tone not particularly because of my admiration of the Western democracies, but it was because I believed that the need for universal solidarity against this new amorphous kind of fascism was strictly urgent. Apparently the time was not right then but now, as the American elections got nearer and Boris Johnson’s intentions became clearer, I keep seeing op-eds in international media finding solace in the fact that the US and the UK are still not as bad as Turkey. However when an officially autocratic regime is consistently mentioned to

express the gravity of the matter, that certainly means that the problem is already out of hand.

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After having experienced the perfect form of rising authoritarianism in Turkey for more than a decade, between 2016 and 2019 I compared the similar political developments in several European countries and the US. In countries where rightwing populism was on the rise, people, believing that this is unique to their country, were going through the same maddening and paralyzing shocks that Turkey experienced a decade ago. The countries naturally were different from each other but apparently people like me were losing their country not so differently from each other; watching the moral and political decay with astonishment and confusion. To understand is the only resistance against insanity, I thought. So I detangled the global political mess to find the fundamental logic behind it. Disassembling the political machine to see how it works, I believed was the only way to rewind it together with the help of the global opposition. However understanding in solitude is probably the biggest human tragedy. That is why like a travelling wretched circus I went on a global book tour for *How To Lose A Country- The Seven Steps From Democracy to Dictatorship*.

## The global wave of authoritarianism

In a nutshell the book says, “You might have a mature democracy and seemingly strong institutions but what we are going through is not a temporary madness that your country is immune against. The global wave of authoritarianism is the last defense line of crumbling neo-liberalism and it eventually will get more brutal and insane to hold the brutal system together. So let’s work on this catastrophe together in universal solidarity.” I wanted the Western peoples to fast-forward the period in which they will waste time with laughing, mocking or being confused and get to the point where they realize that this is a problem that can only be overcome through uniting the opposition internationally.

This is not a political accident or a Russian conspiracy that gave the Americans and the Brits their joke like governments, but a global matter resulting from the greatest ever crisis of Capitalism. The political and moral mud we are struggling with today was gifted to us by the neo-liberal flood of 80s. What we need is a global new deal, a new social contract. Those who think and write books repeating the belief that once Trump or Johnson are gone the problem will disappear are simply wrong. By now it must be clear as daylight that democracy could not endure unless there is social justice. By 2020, luckily enough millions of people in Western countries acknowledged the fact and against all odds supported political leaders like Bernard Sanders or Jeremy Corbyn who have been pushed out from the political race in their country by the established opposition. So today another pattern in global politics can

be recognized and pointed out: Not only the authoritarians but also their opponents are acting exactly the same way, which simply is the wrong way.

In countries where the new form of fascism enters the main stage of politics, the opposition and the democratic forces of the country find themselves in a contradictory position. Since the existing political establishment is threatened by the ruthlessness of autocrats the established opposition is pushed to take on two roles that all at the same time: protecting the already corrupt establishment and promising to better it while trying to distinguishing its narrative from the anti-establishment right wing populist discourse. To protect the establishment from the current ruler of the establishment while being in the opposition is almost against the rules of logic. In all countries where the anti-establishment narrative is enflamed the promises of the progressive opposition suddenly begin to sound too domesticated. The established opposition –and sometimes even the progressives outside the establishment- split their political narrative between two opposing vectors; to be against and to be for and to perform these two actions at once. In countries subjected to destructive force of right-wing populism protecting the establishment begins to seem like the priority therefore the established opposition decides to throw its support behind ‘the reasonable option’. In American case it is Biden and France saw it safe to unite behind Macron. We had our own Biden in Turkey. And believe me when I say all the countries that had a Trump were also as brilliant as American Democrats or French progressives to come up or invent a Biden or a Macron of their own. The panic in the air does not allow going for the option that truly mobilizes the public towards a genuine new deal, which probably would shake the established opposition as much as it would hurt the rightwing populism. Needless to say, replacing Bernies with Bidens never worked in the long run in none of the countries that went through the same political calamity. Since the problem is a systemic failure it soon becomes clear that the newly emerging political environment with its fascist and progressive movements continues to reign even if the establishment wins the power to rule with the more reasonable option to fortify the damaged castle of the system. In these painful laboring hours of the new system there is another global pattern that unknowingly play to the hands of the authoritarian inclinations.

The global wave of authoritarianism and the political and moral mud we are struggling with today is the last defense line of crumbling neo-liberalism and it eventually will get more brutal and insane. What we need is a global new deal, a new social contract. Democracy could not endure unless there is social justice

My brother is a filmmaker living in the US, in Atlanta. One of our regular rants centers around the Leftists expressing hatred towards the established opposition more than the do against fascism. It is maddening to see how it happens in the exact same way in the US and Turkey. In British case it is no different. Although they happen in different languages the sameness in the vocabulary is truly striking when it comes to hating the established progressive opposition. And nihilism generated through this hateful narrative has been and still is equally pacifying in these countries. I am not at all to advising the American or

British Left to stop criticizing the Democrats or the Labor Party, but rather calling them to recognize our shared enthusiasm in ranting about the established opposition. It is better to acknowledge that our strange pleasure in hitting hard on the established opposition has a little bit of self-hatred emerging from defeatism. This political and emotional climate does nothing more than self-destruction. I know that no words can shake of the nihilism and reluctance that the progressive left is suffering at this point. We passed the point where the masses believed in words. What truly can activate the human matter in us is the political action. Doing is the only remedy for our disappointments and fears. Action might not always be successful but it is the only way that is known to humankind, which has the power to wither away the sickening inertia. And today, despite the fact that we are going the worst of times the masses know and show that they know this fact.

## Understanding and acting

After being the Cassandra of world politics for a while, now here's a bit of Mary Poppins compassion for you: What we are globally going through –both in politics and nature– surpasses the limits of our imagination about the world and the humankind. It is only natural to feel anger, hatred and massive disappointment. However expressing such emotions from the fringes of establishment is hardly a political action. Understanding and acting, these two aspects of politics has been forced to separate from each other for enough time and now it is time to realize that these are organically intertwined and inseparable actions. As far as I can understand from the pulse of the streets of the globe this reality is becoming clear to more and more people. A certain motion is ripening among the people. It is not Marx's famous *specter haunting Europe*, this hovering spirit is nameless and still lacking direction. However it is bigger in size and more reckless in its action. We saw during Black Lives Matter in the US and in the protests in Hungary were only the pioneering acts of this specter. We all have to take these actions very seriously not only for they were the truth tellers of our times but also because these actions were demonstrated risking death through choking, aka Covid-19. In a time when going on the streets and getting closer to other humans required risking one's life millions of people did not hesitate to take the risk and this means something. This kind of political energy cannot –and maybe should not- be confined within the limits of conventional opposition.

A strange winter is pending. It certainly will be the winter of our discontent. The poverty and starvation will be the first item on the list of global problems. Both the pompous authoritarian regimes and the *reasonable* established opposition will be tested with the biggest economic crisis the human kind have seen in modern times. The furry will be inconsolable. We will be witnessing the birth of the new and the death of the old and it will certainly not be pretty. But as I told above only understanding and action and their inseparable togetherness will help us to survive this bloody winter. The spring will sure be there at the end of the tunnel but this winter for sure will require our attention and effort to pass and to pass humanely. This is a stranger telling you these bloody facts. I hope they are considered gifts from future, not doom sayings.

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Ece Temelkuran is a journalist, columnist and writer. She is the author of *How to Lose a Country: The 7 Steps from Democracy to Dictatorship* (2019), a guide for resistance against fascism, populism, nationalism and the dictatorial temptations of governments. Temelkuran was fired from the Turkish media where she worked, Habertürk, for her critical articles about the government, and has been recognized twice as the most widely read political columnist in Turkey. Her articles have been published in media such as The New York Times, The Guardian, Le Monde Diplomatique and Der Spiegel, among others. She has written a dozen books so far. In 2008 she was awarded the Ayşe Zarakolu Freedom of Thought Award by the Turkish Human Rights Association.