

“I only remember fear”: The legacy of the 1980 coup in Turkey

Thirty-five years ago tomorrow, September 12th, 1980 at approximately 4am the Turkish military announced the last full military coup that would take place in Turkey to date.

In many ways, the 1980 coup marked the beginning of a new era in Turkish law, politics, and economics, an era that just now appears to be nearing its end. The current Turkish constitution was drawn up by the military junta that governed the country after the coup. The technocratic politician and economist who was installed by the coup leaders, Prime Minister and later President Turgut Özal, opened Turkey to the global economy for the first time. The coup also left an indelible mark on the lives of the generation of Turks that came of age in its wake. Now in their 30s and 40s, these children of the coup were raised in an atmosphere that rewarded those who remained silent on matters of politics and remained obedient to the nationalistic dogma of the state.

Build-up to the Coup

The 1970s was a time of unparalleled violence in Turkey. A series of uneasy coalition governments were formed amongst secularist, nationalist and Islamist political parties, and led to political tensions that filtered down into the streets. During this period, violence between leftists and ultranationalists resulted in [more than 5,000 deaths](#), or about ten deaths nationwide a day. The violence and instability triggered Turkey's military leadership, which had been all but officially designated the “caretaker” of the Turkish Republic since its founding, to intervene and launch Turkey's last full-blown coup.

The Turkish generals, who planned and carried out the coup, ostensibly wanted to end the cycle of violence and political deadlock that had engulfed the country. However, the cure they prescribed was in some respects worse than the disease.

[Statistics](#) regarding the number of Turkish citizens directly affected by the coup are staggering. In total, 1.7 million people were placed on blacklists, 650,000 were arrested, 230,000 were put on trial, and 14,000 had their citizenship revoked. Of those tried for offenses, 517 people were sentenced to death (of whom fifty were eventually executed), an additional 299 prisoners died under “undetermined” circumstances, 171 died under torture by authorities, and fourteen died during hunger strikes.

This past May, [the death of coup leader, General Kenan Evren](#), stirred up memories among Turks alive during the 1970s and 80s. Many of these individuals publicly shared their reflections on how the coup had negatively affected their lives, and commemorated those who had died or lost loved ones [on Twitter with the hashtag #KötüBilirdik](#). Kötü Bilirdik translates as “we remember [him] as bad,” referring to Evren’s legacy. The phrase is a play on the tradition of speaking well of the dead at Muslim funerals.

Shortly after Evren’s death, [academic Zeynep Tufekci observed in a piece for the New Yorker](#) how the coup impacted her life as a voracious young reader, by strangling the flow of information and creating a drought of available reading material. “In 1980, a military coup plunged Turkey into darkness and silence. Booksellers came under government pressure, and books became a dangerous commodity,” she wrote. Tufekci went on to describe how she literally ran out of things to read, resorting to re-reading the encyclopedias, magazines, and even scrap paper she had meticulously collected.

The Children of the Coup

To learn more about how the 1980 coup impacted individual lives, Muftah spoke to a half a dozen Turks of a variety of ages and backgrounds who, like Tufekci, were children when the coup took place and/or came of age in its aftermath. Some had vivid, detailed memories of how the coup disrupted their lives, while others only had hazy recollections of isolated incidents. In all cases, however, two themes dominated these stories: fear and isolation.

Bilge Yesil, a professor now living in the United States, recalled how her family was alerted to the coup

I was seven at the time and spending the last days of summer with my family in Istanbul (I'm originally from Adana). I remember my mom and dad waking up to a phone call very early in the morning. Then my dad hangs up and tells my mom "Ihtilal olmus" ("Apparently, there was a revolution.") and then they go back to sleep! As a child I knew there was something important going on--one of those "adult" things that you could not/were not supposed to ask about.

Anil*, another Turk now living in the Midwestern United States, was only four at the time of the coup. His father, the chief of police in a small town in western Turkey, was summoned by the district's military commander in the middle of the night, shortly after the coup was declared. As a high ranking law enforcement official, Anil's father was expected to follow any orders passed down by the military and ensure peace was maintained in the coup's initial aftermath. Reflecting on these memories, Anil observed that "the initial summons was scary, especially for my mom. They just didn't know what to expect. I think that was what most people felt. They didn't know what to expect in the aftermath."

The initial anxiety felt by Turks in the wake of the coup would only grow as Turkey's new military leaders tightened their grip, both socially and politically. [General Evren famously boasted](#) that, during the crackdown on political groups, "we [the junta] hanged one from the right, one from the left. In this way, we wanted to prove we were not taking sides." The raids, arrests, and trials of thousands of Turkish citizens created a fog of fear that hung over the entire country. Even minors were not safe from the coup's approach to "rule of law," and a palpable atmosphere of terror existed even among the youngest Turks. One of the most well-known victims of the coup was [seventeen-year-old high school student Erdal Eren](#), who was hanged after being convicted of killing a police officer.

Writer and academic Pinar Tremblay grew up in an apolitical family. She remembers the heavy footsteps of the boot-shod soldiers who came every morning to escort the colonel, who lived in the same apartment building as her family, to work. Though eventually the

sound became routine, Tremblay still remembers the anxiety the soldiers caused her. “To this day, boots are irksome,” she says.

Elif*, who now lives in Europe, told Muftah she does not have many specific memories of the coup, but that she does recall the emotions triggered by encounters with the military state. “I remember how scared I was when armed gendarmerie stopped the car of my parents. I think it was... curfew and they asked us where we were coming from. I was nine-years-old. I only remember fear.”

Children largely felt the coup’s impact through the ways it disrupted and changed their education. Teachers with suspicious politics were replaced, sometimes with little or no warning. Deniz* recounts how, as a twelve-year-old middle school student, teachers would cycle through her classroom. When she inquired about what was going on, she discovered many teachers were being dismissed because of real or perceived affiliations with leftist politics.

As Tufekci described it in her [New Yorker article](#), books took on symbolic importance in the aftermath of the coup, a marker of one’s potentially dangerous political affiliation or “subversive” ideas. One of the first things Deniz’s mother did, after she heard about the coup, was to collect all the books in the house in bags and bury them in a nearby field. Deniz’s children’s books were burned. “I did not understand at the time why books were objects of fear,” she told Muftah.**

Deniz recounts how, years later, when she was a university student, gendarmes (military police) would sometimes pay unexpected visits to dorm rooms and carefully examine a student’s books. “Books once again became dangerous objects in my life. However, this time I understood why. Books were seen as evidence that you were a leftist, terrorist or anarchist,” she recalls.

Bilge Yesil witnessed the arrest of her uncle, who lived with her grandmother, a few months after the coup took place. As a child, she was struck by the fact the soldiers seemed particularly interested in her uncle’s extensive library. (Yesil’s uncle was released safely after a few days). The incident drove her to develop a fascination with her uncle’s particular books, as well as with books in general:

Every time I visited my grandmother and uncle, I would spend hours looking at his books. They had become such a source of mystery to me. I would think, what's in these books that makes soldiers look at them? Was it because of these books that my uncle was gone? Why would books get you in trouble? There were books about Ataturk, Kemalism, Islam, communism, etc, and all politically-charged titles you can think of. There was a big thick one with the word "Gulag" in it and that was the most fascinating one to me. Then there was the big stack of old newspapers from the late 70s my uncle had saved. Headlines about marches, protests, shootings, army, police... He kept them in his closet. I remember spending several afternoons going through these old newspapers and books.

I think the legacy of the 1980 coup for me--personally- has been this fascination with books and the idea that they held some grave information.

While the coup had some positive consequences – for Yesil and Tufekci, for example, state control of written media gave books a more powerful appeal – the coup’s overall legacy is almost universally acknowledged to be negative.

The Legacy of the Coup

In 1982 there was a nominal vote on the new Turkish constitution, drafted by the military junta in the coup’s aftermath; the terror and control exerted by the military government meant that citizens were under a great deal of pressure to vote yes. Deniz’s mother voted “no” in the constitutional referendum, which required a great deal of courage since ballots were not secret. “The color of the card and the envelope [used in voting] made it obvious which way you were voting,” Deniz says. “People [who voted no] were being blacklisted by the junta. Civil servants in particular were afraid of the consequences [of voting no].” In the end, the new constitution passed with 97% of the vote.

Turkey is still governed by this very same constitution, which includes provisions that arguably make it the most nationalist and illiberal in Turkey’s history. Its principles and laws continue to hold back Turkey’s legal and social liberalization to this day. [Article 3 of](#)

[the constitution states, for instance, that the official language of Turkey is Turkish, while Article 4 prohibits this provision from ever being changed](#). As a result of these laws, efforts to give minorities, particularly Kurds, more cultural rights have been hampered. Writing the constitution was but one way for coup leaders to repress diversity. Turkish novelist Kaya Genç, who was born shortly after the coup, eloquently recounted to Muftah how its leadership squashed diversity and individual expression for decades, including after Turkey returned to civilian rule in 1983.

We lived in a country totally isolated from the world. We lived in a continuous present -- talking about history was dangerous, historians were despised. A repressive nationalism demanded from people to repress their individuality, religious and ethnic identity.

The modernist coup was a big project to cleanse public life from "dirty" things like identity, individualism, religious beliefs, expressions of sexuality. With my family I used to travel to London and feel surprised about how, despite being a constitutional monarchy, Britain was a much freer society: they were okay with having a history, veiled women on the street, punks protesting the state, conservatives and leftists in the parliament, etc. Back in Istanbul, it was all clean and military-like and soulless and dead. The coup made us all self-repressors. Only in 2000s did this legacy really changed. Some people are nostalgic about 1980s Turkey: I find this difficult to understand. People might have seemed innocent on streets but that was because they were forced to hide everything from others. There is nothing I miss about 1980s Turkey.

As Genç describes, in recent years, Turkey has finally started emerging from the culturally repressive, nationalistic conformity that was cultivated by the 1980 military junta. Those Turks who have come of age in the past five years were born a decade or more after the coup and, unlike the coup generation who struggled to even find books, have grown up in a Turkey that is socially, intellectually, and economically connected and open to the wider world. This generation has shown, by their willingness to [protest](#),

[embrace diversity](#), [publicize taboo topics](#) and [shun traditional politics](#), that they reject a “repressive nationalism” that forces individual identity underground.

Turkey’s current leadership, which is dominated by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is currently trying to build and reinforce its political power through [appeals to militant nationalism](#) that resemble those used to unite the country in the wake of the 1980 coup. But, [based on the current polling numbers](#), extreme nationalism appears to have lost its ability to rouse the Turkish electorate. It would seem, [despite the current government's best efforts](#), that the coup’s legacy of a population burdened by repression, fear, and isolationism may have finally died with the last of its leaders.

As the country faces an uncertain and likely tumultuous political future, the political awakening of a generation unhindered by the cultural legacy of the 1980 coup provides one of the best reasons for hoping Turkey will weather the current political storm and continue to build a more liberal, diverse, and open society.

** All names noted with one asterisk have been changed to protect the source’s identity.*

*****Quotes from Deniz have been translated from Turkish by the author.***