

'Without Freedom of Thought, there can be no such Thing as Wisdom; and no such Thing as publick Liberty, without Freedom of Speech.' Silence Dogood, No.8, The New-England Courant (1722).

Click!

My tatty Canon 35 mm camera croaks at the man sipping his crimson tea.

Rewind. Click.

My camera catches a darting street cat, sesame pretzel in her mouth.

I am taking photos with my friends on famous Istiklal Street in Istanbul. It's another sweltering, sun-drenched summer's day and I am preoccupied with a thieving cat, when my country declares war on itself.

Buzz!

I pick up the phone. A moment of total confusion. My mother is frantically screaming, I can only make out fragments. Tanks? Military coup? Don't cross the bridge, too dangerous. They can't pick me up. I can't get home.

Coups happened in history, elsewhere, to others. Not here, not to me. At that instant I realize the illusion of everyday normality can shatter any second.

Everything around me is spiraling, slow motion, into chaos. TVs blaring in nearby cafés, people crowd round, watching images of soldiers. Suddenly I feel suffocated, people pushing and shoving, trying to get to the news, or trying to get home. I can just about make out that Erdogan is urging his citizens "to take to the streets, gather in public squares for our country, for justice, for our democracy."¹

My natural curiosity fights with a rising fear as we hail passing cabs. Turkish hospitality and kindness towards strangers have vanished; it's everyone for themselves. The coup has turned everything in on itself.

I feel paralyzed. I want to rewind the world with my camera and get back to the moments of safety just frames before.

¹ Polat, Prof. Dr. Refik. 2017. "15 July Letters". *Sks.Karabuk.Edu.Tr.*
<https://sks.karabuk.edu.tr/yuklenen/dosyalar/126121201720242.pdf>.

The smell of chicken *pilav* cooking, my grandmother's comforting voice brings us to safety. We take refuge in her house on a hill above the Bosphorus. She had lived through coups before she reassures us. I had only studied them in history class. But now I was living History –a jumble of events, random, with no neat narrative.

Throughout the night, the sound of low flying F16 fighter planes becomes the soundtrack of our impending doom, as each time they pass they inch closer to scraping off our roof. The fear of getting bombed at any second, plagues us awake.

However, it is the second coup unleashed by President Erdogan days after the July 15 failed putsch, that is the most petrifying.

Erdogan's successful coup provided a major blow to the democratic rights of its people by placing a shackle on the judiciary, the economy, and freedom of speech. Erdogan, who was a democracy advocate on July 15, turned democratic processes upside down by purging all his opposition in one fell swoop.

During the state of emergency, the Turkish president sacked or suspended "150,000 judges, academics, military officers, civil servants"². A report from the International Press Institute in 2019 recounted that over 160 journalists were jailed in a politically motivated crackdown against media, making my country a notorious leader in jailing journalists.

Erdogan's crackdown on freedom of speech marks the end of the reality I have carefully constructed for myself. I can no longer fulfil my dream to become a journalist and report the truth in my own country.

Left to bask in the blatant corruption of my homeland, I am forced into a rude awakening.

In the words of President Truman: "Once a government is committed to the principle of silencing the voice of opposition, it has only one way to go, and that is down the path of increasingly repressive measures, until it becomes a source of terror to all its citizens and creates a country where everyone lives in fear."³

The censorship tactics used by Erdogan echoes those of world dictators that came before him. History truly does repeat itself.

² "More Than 120 Journalists Still Jailed In Turkey: International Press Institute". 2019. *REUTERS*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-media-idUSKBN1XT26T>.

³ Truman, Harry S. n.d. "Special Message To The Congress On The Internal Security Of The United States | Harry S. Truman". *Trumanlibrary.Gov*. <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/207/special-message-congress-internal-security-united-states>.

Mussolini in Italy, Hitler in Germany, Gaddafi in Libya, Hussain in Iraq. The common feature of all of them was their disguise of democracy and censorship of freedom of speech. After these power-poisoned leaders seized control all over the world, they left behind immense pain, destruction, and even world wars.

In fact, the attempt to prevent people's thoughts and expressions dates back even further, with the invention of the printing press in Europe during the 15th century. Mette argues that “although printing greatly aided the Catholic Church and its mission, it also aided the Protestant Reformation and "heretics", such as Martin Luther. Thus, the printed book also became a religious battleground.”⁴

Similarly, during the 16th and 17th century the British government used laws such as seditious libel to prosecute critics of the government. “Seditious libel and blasphemous libel were often the same – criticising the monarch amounted to criticising God’s appointment of the King as ruler. The King held absolute power of government through his divine right”⁵

It was this corrupt use of power by the English king that Benjamin Franklin in his quote “Without Freedom of Thought, there can be no such Thing as Wisdom; and no such Thing as publick Liberty, without Freedom of Speech” was arguing for.

Franklin rightly contends that the best defense against the kind of oppression we get from monarchies is freedom of speech. This mirrors the kinds of oppression we get from modern day autocracies like the ones aforementioned.

Click! Rewind.

Erdogan’s crackdown on freedom of speech after the July 15 attempt marked the end of my fragile belief that I was living in a democratic nation.

Witnessing firsthand of the jailing of innocent people who were fighting for the truth, made me realize the importance for holding power to account.

Both my experience and the examples through history show the gravity of the danger we all face when leaders are not open to face criticism. For the sake of democracy, social progress and equal enjoyment we all share a colossal responsibility.

⁴ Newth, Mette. 2010. "The Long History Of Censorship". *Beaconforfreedom.Org*. http://www.beaconforfreedom.org/liste.html?tid=415&art_id=475.

⁵ "Sedition & Seditious Libel - Definition, Origin And Use". 2020. *Netlawman.Co.Uk*. <https://www.netlawman.co.uk/ia/seditious-libel>.

That is why I wanted to become a journalist.

Because I want to do my part.

By Selin Cetin