

The New Turkey and its Discontents, by Simon. A. Waldman and Emre Caliskan, London, Hurst and Co, 2016, 342 pp., £14.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-84904-566-7

Turkey: The Insane and the Melancholy, by Ece Temelkuran, London, Zed Books, 2016, 296 pp., £12.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-783-60889-8

It is a well-known pitfall of writing about so called “moving targets” in contemporary politics that it is hard to know when to stop. There is always another interesting event which has to be included or the volume will be outdated before it even hits the shelves. Those who write on Turkey are particularly aware of this anxiety-inducing dilemma. The fast pace of Turkish politics and foreign policy means anyone concerned with current affairs in this enigmatic and perplexing country is never short of something to write about for long. Turkish politics constantly surprises even the most seasoned veteran – and baffles the casual onlooker with its complicated twists and turns of allegiances.

Moreover, Turkey’s crucial geopolitical position continues to give its domestic politics added resonance. Once upon a time in the Cold War, its geopolitical value gave it a helping hand into NATO and, what is now, the EU. Ankara’s geostrategic stock is once again riding high because Turkey holds the key to stemming the human wave of migration into Europe from Syria and beyond. So how authoritarian can Turkey become before its allies stop overlooking the illiberal misdemeanours for geostrategic reasons such as cooperation in Syria and with the migration issue. Ankara’s behaviour is more Central Asian dictatorship than aspirant EU accession candidate and all of this means anyone writing about Turkey will always want to include just one more thing – it is hard to know when to stop.

The two books under consideration here are a case in point. They are very different. The Waldman and Caliskan offering is a far-reaching volume which uses a process tracing methodology to explain the authoritarian drift which has been going on in this country – under the nose of Brussels – since the heralding of its EU candidacy and the opening of accession negotiations more than a decade ago. Ece Temelkuran’s book, on the other hand, is not an academic tome but a memoir born out of the authoritarian drift explained by the first.

Temelkuran was a journalist who lost her job on a major national newspaper for speaking “truth” unto power – in other words, for doing her job.

Firstly, Waldman and Caliskan attempt to explain how the party of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the AKP (*Adelet ve Kalkinma Partisi* - Justice and Development Party), was able to accrue so much power through neutering the strong Kemalist opposition to the AKP’s religious brand of politics. This book outlines how the military’s influence was stymied by a series of largely sham investigations known as *Ergenekon* and *Balyoz*. Although the evidence for many of the allegations has since been discredited, at that time, 2007, there was enough similarity to past behaviour to be believed by most people in Turkey - and the international community. In this way hundreds of senior military officers were imprisoned between 2007 and 2011 – and replaced by AKP loyalists. As the *Ergenekon* investigations also began to extend to include journalists and academics the AKP was able to clip the wings of all scrutinising institutions in Turkish society – and lay the foundations of its authoritarian power base which is discussed in the following chapters.

This book ties together the numerous strands which have to be understood before Turkish politics can be understood – the metropolitan/rural divide, Sunnis and Alevis, Gulenists and AKP supporters, the Kurdish issue and more recently, the attempt by the erstwhile AKP stalwart Ahmed Davutoglu to re-establish Turkey as a regional neo-Ottomanist power. This policy was gathering speed until it hit the wall of the Arab Spring in Turkey’s near east borderlands. All of these things the book does very well and is an asset to the library of any Turkey student. My only criticism is where the authors have tried to include commentary on the attempted *coup d’etat* of July 2016 which must have been done at the very last minute given the publication date of the book. They present various speculative conclusions as to who was responsible and why as fact – when all “facts” surrounding the attempted *coup* are contested. Who was behind the attempt remains a contentious topic and this should have been acknowledged. Given the moving target nature of research on contemporary Turkey no one would have thought any the less of them for it.

Overall however, this book is an excellent primer for anyone interested in Turkey and complements the Temelkuran volume. A reader of both has the chance to understand the

“facts” of what has happened – and fill in the gaps with an evocative and emotional account of how it feels to be a Turk who does not wholeheartedly support the AKP at the moment – and the high price which is being paid by many for speaking truth unto power.

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