



Interview: Author Burhan Sönmez on the Lack of Freedom in Turkey



By [Olivia Snaije](#)
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Burhan Sönmez photo Sevgi Can

[Burhan Sönmez](#) was born in Central Anatolia and grew up speaking Kurdish and Turkish, and later moved to Istanbul to study law. His first novel *North* was published in 2009 and his second novel [Sins & Innocents](#) won the 2011 Sedat Simavi Literature Prize. *Istanbul Istanbul*, his third novel, was published in 2015. His books have been published in more than twenty countries and languages. For political reasons he lived in exile in Britain for ten years and returned to Turkey in 2010. He lectures in Literature at the University of METU and is currently working on a new novel.

Following the recent attempted coup, the Turkish government closed down a number of newspapers, television channels, news agencies as well as 29 publishing houses. The Turkish Publishers Association issued a [press release](#) (translated from the Turkish) denouncing these moves. Burhan Sönmez, who is an active member of PEN Turkey, English PEN and a founding member of the PEN International Writers Circle kindly answered questions for Bookwitty in a telephone interview published below:

In a recent article for the German newspaper, Die Zeit, you describe how as a child, you saw your father burning books in the garden in order to protect your politically active brother from being arrested following the military coup in 1980. You just witnessed an attempted coup and at the same time the Erdogan government has used a state of emergency law to crack down on freedom of expression. Can you explain how this situation is different and yet the same?

Three weeks ago there was an attempted coup that, had it been successful, we would have had martial law, torture etc. Erdogan won. But when you look at Erdogan, he is using the same practices. We now have a state of emergency and people are being tortured. 70,000 people have been dismissed from their jobs. The government is targeting all kinds of people, even stage actors in Istanbul, with no valid explanation. In Turkey these two powers involved in the clash are the same, they have the same ideology. In practice they believe in dominance over society, they don't respect diversity in society, they demand power with an ideological Sunni Islamic interpretation. We are recognized as a secular country but perhaps this is just on paper. The government wants to get rid of this slowly.

You were terribly beaten by the police in the past and moved to Britain as a political refugee. When you returned, did you ever think the situation would come to this again?

Yes it was not surprising, thanks to our politicians, they never had any good alternatives and worked hard to give us bad or worse options for our future. When I returned to Turkey, Erdogan was already in power and then the energy around the Gezi Park [protests] began. This was the result of ten years of Erdogan's government. But I don't want to only blame Erdogan. The former governments weren't any better. But this one is ideologically different. It's more pro Islam and this is demonstrated

openly now, because the government feels it is in control. These are two [the government and the Gülen movement] Islamist parties clashing who used to be allies. Suddenly they began fighting, but they are no different. They felt they didn't have a strong opposition.

What do you believe is necessary for the situation to stabilize?

It's not difficult to find solutions. We need tolerance and a peaceful way to political solutions. The government shouldn't follow its single policy of a Sunni majority. We are diverse; religious language shouldn't be used in politics. We should move to another platform with a tolerant language. Erdogan likes to divide society. He always says "my people" and "the other people". We should be all-inclusive: Sunnis, Alawites, Kurds, secular people. I don't mean we will be able to just get rid of problems, we will always have problems, but it depends on which tools we use [to solve them].

Often during difficult times readers are more interested in non-fiction and essays in order to try and understand the situation, rather than fiction. What is your experience and how can fiction contribute to people's understanding of politics?

Our role is two-fold: in daily politics we have to speak up. People are very involved in politics. We should be involved in our literature but sometimes in life other priorities come and take you in a different direction, but we should still use our own language of literature. I think in fiction we shouldn't try to write books as if we were writing sociology. We can put the emphasis on individuals, their memories, failures and dreams. We can see the nature of a society through a character. For example, in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, we meet Raskolnikov, rather than following Russian society, but we get the whole idea of what is happening in society by looking into his soul.

You will be appearing at [English PEN in September](#) 2016. What will you be telling the audience and what do you hope the outcome will be?

I had an event in London two months ago. It will be more or less the same although in between we had this attempted military coup. The problem has gotten bigger. We need to talk about these problems with people involved in literature. In Turkey we have people in the literary world acting individually and in groups. It is very dynamic

which is good. To see all these different voices means we have varying approaches towards literature. The question is, how to bring everything that we are doing together. International Pen Turkey has released statements, so have unions of journalists and writers, but most don't appear in the foreign media. But we are living in a global world and as people or a society we don't belong to one single country. I'm European, I'm Asian, I'm African; if something happens there I feel it is my problem. We have to show universality.

In your last novel *Istanbul Istanbul*, you describe four people who are in prison and you write about political problems in contemporary Istanbul. What was your inspiration?

It reflects different generations of Turks. They are tortured in prison. They tell stories to each other to pass the time. All the stories are about Istanbul, but there are several Istanbuls. One is an underground place of pain and torture, and the other one is above ground. I had this story in my mind for many years, it was something I personally experienced as a university student when I was detained. We told stories to each other in prison. It was just after a military intervention. It was different, but the same.

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