

Well-known Turkish writer Ahmet Altan, whose novels have been published in 23 countries, has remained behind bars in Silivri Prison in Turkey for the past four years. Ahmet Altan is a Turkish novelist, journalist and founder of the now-defunct newspaper Taraf. He is the author of the smuggled-out-of-prison memoir "I Will Never See the World Again."

In court, he was charged with spreading "subliminal messages announcing a military coup" based on a television appearance. He was also charged with attempting to overthrow constitutional order, interfering with the work of the national assembly and the government through his published articles.

Turkey currently has more writers and journalists in jail than any other country in the world. Turkey has also been accused of destroying more than 300,000 books.

On May 24, 2020, Ahmed Altan's lawyer was able to bring out a statement from him and I will read some excerpt for you:

"These days being in an actual prison while everyone else is confined inside their homes feels like sitting in a fish tank at the bottom of the ocean.

I can see (by reading the old newspapers the guards give us and watching some of the channels we're allowed to watch) that you're worried to death. Well, I'm 70 years and I'm in a prison where covid-19 cases are spreading fast.

We're witnessing the world break along a gigantic fault line that is making life itself tremble. This rupture promises us a hopeful future. In a few months, this disaster will be over and humankind will arrive at a new era. This disaster has shown us many truths we've long ignored; it has also given us directions to our destination. I think the 21st century will begin once this pandemic is over.

The pandemic got out of control because of the blunders states and their administrators made out of greed for power. If China had not lied in the first place, and if the leaders of other countries had not remained unconcerned, the affliction would not have achieved such enormity.

We saw yet another truth: The ability to win elections and the ability to lead a society are entirely different skills. Elections are often won by those who lie the most, those who play

the epic soundtrack louder than others. But those same people cannot lead with wisdom. We have seen many examples of this phenomenon during the pandemic.

This disaster has also been the dress rehearsal of a major change in history: workers stepping out of their traditional place in the chain of production. We are grasping the inevitability of change as we live through this episode, discovering a new economic order.

We are learning that some people having more money than they can spend while others remain penniless and without shelter can create a “common” disaster. If you can’t save a market worker in China, you can’t save the prime minister in Britain.

This could lead to a major mutation. If you want to protect yourself, you have to protect others. Selfish acts will kill you. People have realized perhaps for the first time and in such clear consciousness that they are part of a great flow called humanity.

This virus not only knocks down old men like myself but also all kinds of aged concepts, beliefs and ideas. We are painfully crossing the threshold of a new world and, even more important, a new kind of human being.

In the midst of this great trauma, I am optimistic about the future. I believe what I’m saying will happen, and I know I won’t be around to see it happen. I’m writing this as I await in a prison cell the fierce attack of a virus that kills people my age. I am not optimistic for myself, but for the humanity of which I am a part.

In November, we were given a radish along with our meals at lunchtime. My cellmate put that radish in a paper cup and left it beside the iron bars at the window. The radish began to rot. Recently, a green sprout emerged from it. It grew and grew. Little white flowers blossomed at the end of the sprout. Each morning, I get up and look at those flowers. I witness that great cliché: The radish is dying and becoming alive at the same time. A miserable radish creates flowers out of its own decay. Without giving up its optimism, it reaches out to the future as it dies.

Perhaps I will have fallen sick by the time you read this. But what difference does it make? If a radish dying in a paper cup can blossom, an old man in prison can be optimistic.

We aren't going to be more despairing than a radish now, are we?