

Review - Contesting Pluralism

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VENKKAT G. KRISHNAN, MAY 7 2025

Contesting Pluralism(s): Islamism, Liberalism, and Nationalism in Turkey and Beyond

By Nora Fisher-Onar

Cambridge University Press, 2025

It was during my first visit to Istanbul, Turkey, for a conference last year that I got to personally experience the existential dilemmas of a country at a crossroads in its eternal quest to define and redefine itself. The contradictions were evident and appeared as stark binaries -- night clubs serving alcohol, burqa-clad women walking right past them, jersey-wearing teens cheering for the Turkish national football team, and Syrian refugee moms with kids, begging for their survival. But in the midst of all these apparent contradictions, there somehow was a sense of mutual conciliation and harmony that kept the pluralistic nature of the city alive and thriving.

It is this puzzle that Nora Fisher-Onar attempts to make sense of in her recent book, *Contesting Pluralism(s)* (2025). The book challenges the conventional wisdom that a binary contest between 'Islam' vs. 'democracy' or 'secularism' is the driving force in Turkey's politics. Pointing out the limitations of such hard, identitarian binaries in explaining real-world outcomes, she introduces the two cross-camp coalitions built around 'pluralizers' (who strive for greater pluralism in society) versus 'anti-pluralists' (who espouse the desire for a more unitary national project) as an analytical framework to trace the evolution of the political trajectory in Turkey and beyond. This is established through the use of rich empirical data of the history of political contests, starting from the late Ottoman period all the way to the present. The book evaluates the Turkish political narrative as a series of cross-camp coalitions of 'pluralizers' that periodically take on the 'anti-pluralists' -- who want the 'Others' to "look or speak, love or believe like they do" (Fisher-Onar 2024:1).

Fisher-Onar starts off with the story of the 2016 military coup and the cross-party coalition that came together in support of the democratically elected leader of the AK Party Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Pointing out the growing discontent with the frameworks espousing hard 'Islam' versus 'Western' binaries, both Orientalism and Occidentalism alike, she proceeds to examine the three 'waves' of intellectual engagements within inter-disciplinary Turkish studies to evaluate these binaries and their limitations. The first wave, which the book terms "pursuit of parity", closely aligns with the social engineering initiated during the initial decades of the Turkish Republic under the umbrella rubric of 'Kemalism', which sought to transcend Orientalism by performing 'Westernness' and downplaying its Ottoman-Islamic inheritance. Disillusionment with this approach soon gave rise to the second wave towards the second half of the twentieth century, termed "recognition of difference", which manifested in the form of 'post-Kemalist' attempts to rediscover Turkey's Ottoman-Islamic past, and emphasised its 'authentic' cultural differences with the West, closely resembling the ideological strain of Occidentalism (Fisher-Onar 2024:194).

Fisher-Onar (2024:21) classifies her work under the third category of literature, which involves "making sense of complexity" by rejecting both the Orientalist/Occidental binary tropes definitive of the initial two waves. She reiterates that the terms 'secular' and 'Islamic' have increasingly become "empty signifiers" --misappropriated in one's search for hegemony and power consolidation amidst Turkey's turbulent political climate (2024:23). According to her, since the late Ottoman period, only rarely have the political contests in Turkey actually pitted Islamists versus secularists. Rather, political change is driven by shifting alignments of 'pluralizers' and 'anti-pluralists' across inter- and intra-camp alliances, and betrayals. To be sure, Fisher-Onar (2024:35) uses the term 'pluralism' bereft of any

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cultural baggage as attached to the debates within Western political theory -- rather, pluralism is simply defined in terms of a “basic willingness to share space with one or more Other(s)”. Fisher-Onar (2024:32) calls for a more “pluralistic approach to pluralism”, going beyond the conventional theorizations built on the model of Western liberal democracies -- a bottom-up approach that strives to close the gap between theory and practice as proponents of “new pluralism” insist.

The book further proceeds to delineate the twin analytical toolkits developed to aid a comprehensive re-reading of Ottoman and Turkish politics as a tale of ‘contested pluralism(s)’. The first toolkit maps the pluralizing/anti-pluralist orientations (x-axis) vis-à-vis the role of public religion (y-axis) (see Fig 2.1, p.38). Within this, while the various strands of ethno-religious nationalism are placed towards the anti-pluralist end of the spectrum, Islamo-/secular-liberalism is placed towards its pluralizing end. In the second toolkit, the book adopts institutionalist approaches to map the complexities of the political system formed through an interaction amongst the ideational, agential, and contextual/structural parameters conceptualized (see Fig 2.2, p. 47). This framework, in addition to the reductionist attribution associated to the causal force of ideas alone (such as Islamism, liberalism, and nationalism), also takes into account the role of actors (within institutions such as political parties, bureaucracies, militaries, businesses, civil societies, etc.) and the regional and global structures (*micro* – such as electoral rule; *meso* – such as a country’s political regime; and *macro* –such as global capitalism) that shape political outcomes.

The book proceeds to retell Turkey’s story from the late Ottoman period to the present as a tale of competing pluralizing versus anti-pluralist coalitions. It starts off with what it terms the “long nineteenth century”, which saw pluralizing coalitions of Islamo-liberalism in its Tanzimat and Young Ottoman expressions between 1839 until 1868, followed by a third pluralizing coalition of disparate Young Turks who attempted to restore constitutionalism and multicultural Ottoman patriotism from 1908 until 1913 (Fisher-Onar 2024:61). This was interspersed with periods of anti-pluralist tendencies in the form of Hamidian pan-Islamism between 1878 to 1908, and the Young Turk triumvirate’s pan-Turkism between 1913 and 1918. The phase of the “short twentieth century” soon followed with the establishment of the Turkish republic in 1924, which initially saw the emergence of an ethno-nationalist regime under the banner of Atatürkism. While the shift towards a multi-party democracy in the 1950s paved the way for the possible emergence of a pluralizing coalition, Turkey’s politics was thenceforth interspersed with intermittent phases of anti-pluralist coalitions formed under various strands of ethno-religious nationalism or Turkish-Islamic Synthesis.

Fast forwarding to the twenty-first century, the book traces initial attempts at forging an Islamo-liberal pluralizing alignment during the AKP’s first term in government between 2002-2007, by gathering moderate religious and secular actors with the overlapping goal to align Turkey with economic globalism and the EU’s project of political liberalization. Towards the end of the initial decade however, the more anti-pluralist faction within the AKP gained prominence –culminating in Erdogan’s pivot from a ‘EU-niversalist’ frame of reference to that of ‘neo-Ottomanism’ around 2013 (Fisher-Onar 2024:178). While the initial trends of religious populism still provided moderate spaces for realizing ethnic plurality, a series of events such as the intra-Islamist clash of the early 2010s, and the collapse of peace processes with the Kurds, led to an evident shift towards ethno-religious nationalism by 2016. This alliance of Islamist and secular nationalists, which Fisher-Onar (2024:254) coins “Turkish-Islamist Synthesis 2.0”, has entrenched Turkey’s illiberal turn towards an anti-pluralist incumbency at the time of writing. However, she asserts hope in the book’s framework by implying that under the right conditions, ideas and actors may coalesce into renewed coalitions for pluralism.

That being said, it is important to note that attempts to locate the so-called ‘pluralizing’ coalition between ‘Islamoliberals’ and ‘secular-liberals’ within the same ontological plane under the ambit of pluralism would inevitably lead to the re-invention of hegemonies of the ‘one-world’ assumptions of Western modernity -- in stark contrast with the decades of decolonial ‘many worlds’ critique that have come about. This was precisely what Ahmet Davutoglu talks about in his 1993 conceptualization of the differences between Western and Islamic *Weltanschauungs* as being paradigmatic in nature, rather than merely historical or institutional, with the ‘ontological proximity’ of the former contrasted with the ‘ontological differentiation’ of the latter. Similarly, due caution has to be taken when applying the conceptual framework of ‘pluralism’ to an Islamic context. Instead, it is more appropriate to acknowledge an alternative logic of pluralism rooted within the Islamic tradition as traced by its hermeneutical interpretations when questioning with the “Other”, as noted by SherAli Tareen (2023: 35).

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With these caveats, I believe that *Contesting Pluralism(s)* is a timely intervention in dismantling both the hegemonic Oriental and Occidental binaries that have pitted Islamists versus secularists in Turkey, as well as in the Muslim world in general -- which has, in turn, facilitated misappropriation by actors across both camps in their own attempts at power consolidation centred around a unitary political identity. Instead, Fisher-Onar's framework of cross-camp coalitions built around 'pluralizers' versus 'anti-pluralists' offers a much more nuanced conceptual lens to capture the complexities surrounding the operation of political outcomes through an interplay between ideational, agential, and structural parameters in the case of Turkey and beyond. This is particularly significant, given that Turkey is set to play a greater role in regional politics with the recent overthrow of the Iran-backed Assad regime in Syria by the Turkish-backed fighters belonging to the Syrian National Army and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) -- throwing open the debates surrounding ethno-religious nationalism in Turkey to a whole new dynamic.

References

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