By Way of Introduction

Capturing Complexity, Contesting Pluralism

This book challenges the received wisdom that a binary contest between "Islam" vs. "democracy" or "secularism" is the driving force in Turkey's politics. By surveying two hundred years of intellectual and political contestation, and diving deep into decades of Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) rule, I show that binaries are powerful frames that actors use to generate support and justify policies. The same is true for other cleavages used to describe Turkey's politics such as "Turk vs. Kurd" or "Sunni vs. Alevi." To be sure, frictions over public religion and ethnic, sectarian, and other identities shape everyday interactions and contests over the national project. But hard, identitarian binaries explain precious few real-world outcomes. This is because they offer only fragmentary pictures, folding human behavior into what psychologists call "total social identities" that rarely exist in practice.

Via an original analytical apparatus designed to capture – and distill – real-world complexity, this book offers an alternative explanation for contestation in and beyond Turkey. Grounded in extensive empirical research, I show that politics, in fact, are driven by a will to greater pluralism versus the desire for a unitary national project. Participants in these contests do not hail from monolithic groups that espouse fixed ideologies. Rather, they are drawn from *across* camps: groupings whose participants want a more open society, and groupings that want others to look or speak, love or believe like they do. Honing in on the causal mechanisms that determine when, how, and why an (anti-)pluralist coalition prevails, I explain key outcomes from elections and referenda to coups and uprisings.

In the pages that follow, you will find an introductory chapter that unpacks the role of hard binaries and their discontents within interdisciplinary Turkish studies. In the subsequent chapter, I introduce an alternative framework in the idiom of political science and international relations (IR). Its purpose: to capture complexity in

contestation in general, and contests over pluralism in particular. In the historical and contemporary sections that follow, I use the framework to retell the history of political contestation from the late Ottoman period to the present. The story is one of pluralizing, cross-camp coalitions that take on champions of ethno-religious nationalism (i.e., one or another variant of "Turkish-Islamic synthesis"). The conclusion reflects on this project's purchase for the broader relationship between political religion, democracy, and populist nationalism, and how to better learn from each other's experiences. It wraps by wrestling with the implications for living in diversity as we transition from a weakening, liberal world order to what comes next. . .

PART I

Theory

1 Hard Binaries and Their Discontents

1.1 A Coup Defeated: Conflicting Accounts

On a humid, midsummer evening in 2016, the Bosphorus Bridge, which links Istanbul's Asian and European shores, shone red, white, and blue. The lights were a tribute to the victims of a jihadist attack in France the previous night on the anniversary of the storming of the Bastille. But in a hectic city of some 16 million, few noticed the colors of the bridge – or irregular military movements unfolding across the city. As dusk approached, army helicopters circled in clusters, warships plowed the waterways, and troops and tanks deployed across town. By 10 p.m., the iconic bridge in its French revolutionary *tricoleur* had been occupied. Meanwhile, F-16s began low-flying swoops over Ankara, Turkey's capital, and explosions were heard near parliament. At 12:13 a.m., the state television network was seized, and its anchorwoman forced to announce that a coup was in progress.

Within minutes, the private TV channel CNN Türk reached the country's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Looking pale but resolute, the leader called on citizens to resist via FaceTime on live TV. The message was amplified by millions of text messages sent in his name and intensive mobilization across social networks.[1] Supporters were spurred also by the *sela* prayer playing relentlessly from the country's state-run mosques.[2] Pouring onto the streets, some prayed hastily as they entrusted children to family. Opposition politicians, including leaders of Turkey's restive Kurdish minority, likewise declared their support for the elected government. Fierce fighting unfolded in pockets

[1] H. Akın Ünver and Hassan Alassaad, "How Turks Mobilized against the Coup: The Power of the Mosque and the Hashtag," *Foreign Affairs*, September 14, 2016.

[2] The *sela* is recited before Friday prayers or to announce events such as a death. Mosques in Turkey are administered by the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet).

across the country. By dawn, over 240 were dead.[3] Naming Fethullah Gülen, a US-based Islamic cleric as the plot's mastermind, the government declared victory.[4] But it called for continued vigilance, exhorting supporters to continue occupying public spaces.

In shock and trying to make sense of events, many turned to the visual record of "July 15th" – a date that henceforth would resonate with larger-than-life significance. Images from the streets radiated popular, patriotic, and pious fervor. Civilians of all ages had overwhelmed armed soldiers. A grandmother, veiled in head-to-toe black, ferried protestors in a massive truck.[5] Blood-splattered men, wrapped in Turkey's star and crescent flag, clambered onto a tank, seizing the gun turret. A mother in her thirties single-handedly confronted a tank and armed soldiers. The imagery evoked iconic stands for freedom but with an Islamic twist (although, unlike the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, the 1968 Prague Spring, or the French Revolution of 1789, citizens on Turkey's night of reckoning rallied in defense of, not in opposition to, the government).

Troubling images also emerged. Pictures proliferated on social media of mobs beating privates who, like most low-ranking soldiers that fateful night, were unlikely to have known the nature of their orders. Images also circulated – later denounced as doctored – of summary executions of soldiers. In a country where male conscription is universal and military service is revered, these scenes were deeply disturbing. As the dust settled, rumors also circulated of religious vigilantes harassing people perceived to be behaving improperly.

Confronted with this mélange of Islamic and liberal imagery, observers at home and abroad sought answers. Were the events a victory for Turkey's democracy? Or were they a "Reichstag fire,"[6] that is, a

[3] Sources differ on the number who perished with figures ranging from 248 (*Sabah*) to over 300 (*Medyascope*).

[4] On how the once symbiotic relationship between Gülenists and the AKP soured, see Hakkı Taş, "A History of Turkey's AKP-Gülen Conflict," *Mediterranean Politics* 23, no. 3 (2018): 395–402.

[5] The woman was lionized by the country's leadership and media, but the authenticity of her narrative was later challenged. "15 Temmuz'da Kamyonlu Fotoğrafıyla Bilinen Şerife Boz Tartışması: 'Dolandırıcı' mı, 'Kahraman' mı?" *BBC Türkçe*, April 15, 2018.

[6] The term referenced the 1933 arson attack on the German Parliament that enabled Hitler to seize power a month after being democratically elected. Ayşe Kadıoğlu, "Coup d'État Attempt: Turkey's Reichstag Fire?" *OpenDemocracy*, July 16, 2016. For a vivid account of the evening and its consequences, see Ece

pretext for authoritarian consolidation? Were the coup plotters members of an Islamist sect, as the government claimed?[7] And if so, how did the putschists' agenda compare to the religious nationalism of the thousands of supporters who had risked their lives to defend the democratically elected, Islamist-rooted authorities: Erdoğan and the AKP?

Above all, what would be the consequences of July 15? Could the crosscutting condemnation of the putsch across an otherwise polarized society catalyze new solidarities? Erdoğan and the AKP had aligned, after all, with diverse groups over the course of their almost fifteen years in power. Or, was it more likely at this critical juncture that the triumphant authorities would use the opportunity to further entrench the ruling coalition of ethnic and religious nationalists?

Since little was publicly known about the precise drivers of the evening's enigmatic events, few analysts could address these questions from a position of knowledge. Answers thus coalesced around two narratives.

1.2 A Tale of Two Turkeys: Between Orientalism and Occidentalism

One set of responses registered dismay at the coup attempt but was skeptical that democracy had triumphed. This view was informed by the government's illiberal turn in the preceding period. Skeptics included a wide range of people who no longer – or had never – believed the AKP's early claim to model Muslim democracy through its reconciliation of pro-religious politics with political and economic liberalism.[8] In the 2000s, the AKP's claim had been more credible, as it was accompanied by democratizing reforms toward European Union (EU) accession, and an economic transformation that propelled the country into the G20 – a grouping of the world's twenty largest

Temelkuran, *How to Lose a Country: The 7 Steps from Democracy to Dictatorship* (Harper Collins, 2019).

[7] An explanation offered by some pundits at the time was that Gülenists sought to turn Turkey into an imam-led theocracy like Ayatollah Khomeini's transformation of Iran after the country's 1979 revolution.

[8] Binnaz Toprak, "Islam and Democracy in Turkey," *Turkish Studies* 6, no. 2 (2005): 167–186.

economies. Toward the end of the decade,[9] however, democratic backsliding and attempts to Islamize public spaces – that is, to promote legal and social practices informed by Islamic law – undermined perceptions of the AKP as a pluralizing force.

As the larger-than-life face of the party and government, Erdoğan's ambitions, in particular, were increasingly seen as "sultanistic."[10] This view was encouraged by the populist leader's extravagant public performances. These evoked the glories of the Ottoman past, promising to "make Turkey great again."[11] In such displays, Erdoğan was cast as the Sunni steward of an "authentic" Turco-Islamic project. By way of contrast, citizens whose politics or identities did not align were portrayed as "alien."[12] As polarization – and resistance – mounted, the authorities used an increasingly heavy hand. This pattern was consistent with the massive purge that would follow the failed putsch under the umbrella of emergency rule.[13] Skeptics, as such, decided that far from democratic consolidation, the events of "July 15th" were a watershed in Turkey's illiberal turn.

[9] As this book shows, the timing an analyst attributes to the illiberal turn depends on their subject position. Kemalists, for example, were highly critical in the 2000s, whereas religious and ethnic minorities, who were not averse to the AKP sidelining of Kemalist ethno-nationalism, tended to give the party the benefit of the doubt into the 2010s.

[10] An oft-used adjective in popular commentary, "sultanism" bundles in many Orientalist assumptions. Debates about Turkey's illiberal turn in less loaded language inform the rich literature that I describe later in this chapter as a burgeoning "third wave" of scholarship that challenges Orientalism and Occidentalism.

[11] The project predated US president Donald Trump's campaign slogan. In fact, as I will show, Erdoğan's deployment of nostalgia for an imagined golden era helped to write the right-wing populist playbook.

[12] Namely, nonpracticing Sunnis, non-Sunnis, and citizens for whom Turkish is not "mother-tongue."

[13] According to Amnesty International, some 130,000 people were dismissed from government employment in sectors from the judiciary and security apparatus to public academe; wide-ranging human and political rights were suspended under emergency rule; the Kurdish political leadership was arrested en masse; hundreds of academics who had denounced the clampdown on Kurds were fired and blacklisted, with some accused of "abetting terrorism"; over 120 journalists were incarcerated pre- and posttrial (a claim the government rejected on grounds that the journalists were charged with terrorism rather than their journalistic endeavors). "Turkey: Almost 130,000 Purged Public Sector Workers Still Awaiting Justice," *Amnesty International*, October 25, 2018.

This empirical assessment was soon assimilated, however, to a highly problematic and remarkably resilient story in the coverage of Turkey by commentators across the globe. At the core of the story was the notion that Islam and liberalism are *fundamentally* incompatible. Part of a broader Orientalist outlook, for centuries this assumption has informed Christian, European, and Western views of Oriental or Islamic rule as intrinsically despotic (in contrast to presumptively emancipatory government in the West).[14]

In European encounters with the Ottoman Empire, the "Turk," singular and monolithic, was said to embody this Oriental mode of governance.[15] The reading persisted even after European powers eclipsed the Ottomans, militarily and economically. For example, William Gladstone, a prominent liberal and Britain's prime minister several times in the nineteenth century, viewed Islamic/Turkish political culture as incompatible with Western "freedoms." Wherever Turks' "dominion reached," Gladstone declared, "civilization disappeared from view … they represented everywhere government by force, as opposed to government by law."[16] In the historical context of European global hegemony, this narrative rationalized attempts to rule "Orientals," including Muslims, or, alternatively, to exclude them from the West.

After World War I, the Republic of Turkey's secularist founders sought to shed the stigma[17] by distancing themselves from the Ottoman-Islamic heritage. Yet lingering suspicions that Muslim Turks are incapable of meaningful political liberalization continued to shape many strands of political, scholarly, and popular commentary.[18] This historical baggage means that despite the complexities of real-world events – such as the intertwined Islamist and liberal resistance on

[14] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Penguin, 1979).
[15] Noel Malcolm, *Useful Enemies: Islam and the Ottoman Empire in Western Political Thought, 1450–1750* (Oxford University Press, 2019).
[16] William Gladstone, *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East* (Lovell, 1876), 10.
[17] On stigmatization as an impetus to defensive modernization, see Ayşe Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).
[18] Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, "Appropriating Islam: The Islamic Other in the Consolidation of Western Modernity," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 12, no. 1 (2003): 25–41.

"July 15th" – Turkey's experience was uploaded by many a pundit to an Orientalist template.

Meanwhile, back in Turkey, frustration coalesced into a second account of the evening's ordeal. Dismayed by the lack of Western empathy, in the days following the coup attempt, AKP supporters, but also observers across camps who were otherwise critical of the government, expressed anger that unsympathetic reporting missed a major part of the story: citizens of diverse stripes showing great courage to save their democratically elected government.[19] Similarly, the reticence with which Western governments responded – appearing to hedge until the coup failed – contrasted with the swift support that came from non-Western leaders such as Russia's president Vladimir Putin. This disparity reinforced suspicions that the West did not respect Turks' and Muslims' rights.

Such sentiments emanated, much like the skepticism of Ankara's liberal credentials, from the empirical record. Mainstream EU leaders had candidly expressed civilizational arguments against Turkey's EU membership, dampening the accession process. Widespread indifference and hostility in the West to growing numbers of refugees from the Middle East were also read as Islamophobic. For AKP supporters, in particular, double standards appeared glaring, given Western support for authoritarian but secularist regimes across the region.[20] Critics pointed to the selective nature of Western interventions in the Middle East, which, despite trappings of democracy promotion, appeared to prioritize energy and security interests over support for Muslim peoples' democratic aspirations.[21] Western responses to the coup attempt, including American reluctance to extradite the US-based Gülen, were read through this prism. Given the long history of

[19] For example, Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı, "Coup Attempt Unifies Turkey but Could Distance West," *Transatlantic Take*, August 2, 2016; Kemal Kirişçi, "Erdoğan's Real Opportunity after the Coup Attempt," Brookings Institution, July 16, 2016.

[20] See Chapter 7 for US support for an Egyptian regime that brutally ousted the country's democratically elected, moderate Islamist government (albeit after the Islamist president had attempted a clumsy power grab).

[21] Raffaella Del Sarto, "Normative Empire Europe: The European Union, Its Borderlands, and the 'Arab Spring'," *Journal of Common Market Studies (JCMS)* 54, no. 2 (2016): 215–232.

anti-Americanism as a "default ideology of opposition"[22] in Turkey, pundits spun suspicion into conspiracy theories. The claim – as singular and monolithic as the "Turk" of the Orientalist imagination – was that the CIA or "America" had planned the coup. As the editor-in-chief of a leading, pro-government newspaper declared in his column on July 16: "USA Tried to Kill Erdoğan."[23]

Thus, in tandem with the uploading of skeptical perspectives to a meta-Orientalist template, outrage at Western responses was uploaded to a meta-Occidentalist template. According to this frame, the racist West – exploitative to its core – had sold its soul to greed. Therefore, while Western powers dominated the "Rest" in general, and the Islamic world in particular, hegemony would be fleeting. This was because its terms – power at the cost of morality – were degenerative. The torch of humanity, meanwhile, remained with Islam (or "Orthodoxy" or "Asia" as proponents of Occidentalism claimed in contexts such as Russia and China). Occidentalism thus delegitimizes Western condemnation of Turkey's illiberal turn, dismissing criticism as Islamophobic. It serves, moreover, to discount the domestic political opposition as inauthentic minions of the West. Yet, by exonerating illiberal politics Occidentalism inadvertently mirrors Orientalism, bolstering the claim that Islam and democracy are irreconcilable.[24]

The incompatibility thesis has proven highly consequential for at least four reasons. First, it informs support among Western powers for tutelary and authoritarian, secularist regimes in the Middle East (e.g., Egypt) due to the perception that they represent necessary bulwarks against intrinsically illiberal Islam(ism). Second, if and when Islamist

[22] Füsun Türkmen, "Anti-Americanism as a Default Ideology of Opposition: Turkey as a Case Study," *Turkish Studies* 11, no. 3 (2010): 329–345. On "why the alliance persists in spite of diverging perceptions of threat and worldviews," see Didem Buhari Gülmez, "The Resilience of the US–Turkey Alliance: Divergent Threat Perceptions and Worldviews," *Contemporary Politics* 26, no.4 (2020): 475–492, 475.

[23] İbrahim Karagül, "ABD Erdoğan'ı Öldürmeye Çalıştı," *Yeni Şafak*, July 16, 2016.

[24] On Occidentalist responses to being Orientalized, see Dietrich Jung, *Orientalists, Islamists and the Global Public Sphere: A Genealogy of the Modern Essentialist Image of Islam* (Equinox, 2011); on how actors on the ground subvert Occidentalism and Orientalism alike, see Nora Fisher-Onar, "Frames at Play: Beyond Orientalism and Occidentalism," *Islam and International Order*, Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) Papers 15 (September 2015), www.researchgate.net/publication/344178817.