



NMES

New Middle Eastern Studies

ISSN: 2051-0861

Publication details, including guidelines for submissions:

<https://journals.le.ac.uk/ojs1/index.php/nmes>

Review of Sumantra Bose, *Secular States, Religious Politics: India, Turkey, and the Future of Secularism*

Author(s): Sevinç Doğan

To cite this article: Doğan, Sevinç (2020) “Review of Sumantra Bose, *Secular States, Religious Politics: India, Turkey, and the Future of Secularisms*”, *New Middle Eastern Studies* 10 (1), pp. 129-131.

Online Publication Date: 18 December 2020

Disclaimer and Copyright

The NMES editors make every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information contained in the journal. However, the Editors and the University of Leicester make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness or suitability for any purpose of the content and disclaim all such representations and warranties whether express or implied to the maximum extent permitted by law. Any views expressed in this publication are the views of the authors and not the views of the Editors or the University of Leicester.

Copyright New Middle Eastern Studies, 2020. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, transmitted or disseminated, in any form, or by any means, without prior written permission from New Middle Eastern Studies, to whom all requests to reproduce copyright material should be directed, in writing.

Terms and Conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

Secular States, Religious Politics: India, Turkey, and the Future of Secularism

Sumantra Bose

Cambridge University Press, 2018, 388 pp., \$ 39.98 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-1108454865

REVIEWED BY SEVİNÇ DOĞAN

PhD, Koç University, Turkey. Email: sevincdogan18@ku.edu.tr

Sumantra Bose's *Secular States, Religious Politics* examines the origins and trajectories of secularism in India and Turkey as major examples of non-Western secular states. Coming from a prominent Indian political family, Bose provides deep insights throughout the book by adopting a historical comparative perspective.

State building in India and Turkey was constitutionally based on the principle of secularism in the 20th century, rendering these countries different from other non-Western states. Nonetheless, in the 21st century, India and Turkey experienced a radical political transformation as anti-secularists assumed the helm. From the 1980s onwards, these countries had started to lose their secular features due to the rise of anti-secular movements: In India, the nationalist Hindutva movement, and in Turkey, the Sunni-Islamist movement surged and their successors Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Justice and Development Party (AKP) have come to power. The book tackles the dynamics underlying the downfall of these secular states.

Bose firstly reveals the peculiar nature of secularism in India and Turkey through a nuanced and context-sensitive perspective (Chapter I). He underlines that the Turkish and Indian models of state-secularism were not based on the “wall-of-separation principle”, which corresponds to the ideal-typical separation of church and state in the West. He argues that, in contrast, India and Turkey were activist and interventionist states in religious matters, with Turkey employing institutional, legislative and even military means, and India interfering on the pretext of social welfare reform. Both countries shared a strong modernizing vision: State had to fully control all spheres of society for a transition from poverty to prosperity, from obscurantism to enlightenment.

Throughout the book, aside from such similarities Bose also points out the differences between the state characteristics and secularism experiences of India and Turkey. In particular, he underscores two salient disparities: The Kemalist regime established secularism with a view to attaining “Western civilization”, adopting a radical, pro-Western brand of secularization. And, from the beginning Turkish secularism was promoted by a deeply authoritarian state (p. 39). In comparison to Turkey, Indian secularism was not inspired by the desire to imitate the West, but rather by the urge to preserve the Indian tradition of coexistence and mutual tolerance. Although the Indian republic has not been free from the

virus of authoritarianism, it has nonetheless maintained a functioning albeit flawed democracy.

For grounding the difference between Turkish and Indian experiences on a historical perspective (Chapter 2), the author utilizes the concept of “Westoxication” to depict Kemalist secularism. In comparison with India, he suggests that Turkish state secularism had two major weaknesses: a) rupture from the cultural and traditional heritage, and b) a base limited to an elite within society (p.70).

Bose also discusses the paradoxical effects of secularization in Indian and Turkish societies (Chapter 3). Although in principle, these secular states had to treat all confessional communities without preference or discrimination (p.81), they failed to live up to the standard of impartiality. The status of Muslims in India and that of Alevis in Turkey reveal that in fact the national identity of these states is built on the political ideology of majoritarianism. However, the secular state has been criticized by the majority population as well: Hindu nationalists vehemently argue that the core identity of the nation is Hinduism, and claim that the secular state, for pragmatic concerns, disregards the priorities of the majority community to favour the Muslims. And the non-elite, non-metropolitan Sunni majority has always kept a distance to Kemalist secularism projects. Both of these anti-secular movements clashed with the state for religious practices: e.g. the headscarf issue in Turkey, and the ban on cow slaughter in India.

Closing in on Indian and Turkish political history, Bose examines the reasons for the triumph against secularism of Turkish Islamists who would evolve into moderate conservatives, and of Hindu nationalists who would later give rise to what he calls Hindutva 2.0 (Chapter 4 and 5). He establishes parallels between the Hindu nationalism and Kemalist legacy (Chapter 6) by pointing to the obsession with homogeneity of the nation, militaristic ethos, a centralised state, and the Kashmir / Kurdish problems (p.273).

Following these historical discussions, Bose examines the current-day political conditions marked by the evolution of the Erdoğan regime and the ascendancy of the populist leader Modi and his party BJP, before making projections about the future (Chapter 7).

Here Bose argues that R.T. Erdoğan and N. Modi have two faces: Their first face is socio-economic progress and development, and the other is an ideological commitment to Sunni-Islamism or Hindu nationalism, which includes the use of coercive methods against opposition. Through populist projects and discourse, Erdoğan and Modi have managed to establish personality cults. Due to Erdoğan’s position as the ultimate decision-maker, Bose characterizes the current era in Turkey as a neo-sultanic regime, and argues that Kemalist secular authoritarianism was simply replaced by a new form of authoritarian hegemony, which is plebiscitary and based on Sunni-Hanefi majoritarianism. This new authoritarianism bears continuities with Kemalism: state-centrism, winner-take-all politics, and a strongman cult (p.329). Bose claims that the Turkish secular state is now dead, and that the Erdoğan regime will prevail in the near future since democratic characteristics have always been very superficial in Turkey.

On the other hand, the future of the Indian secular state is relatively indeterminate. Today BJP appears as the only party, which can claim to be nationwide, and has in Modi the strongest charismatic leader in the country. The Hindu nationalism may evolve towards the so-called “ethnic democracy” seen in Israel: Hindus may try to impose a *de facto* second-

class citizenship to Muslims even if democratic paraphernalia all remain in place. However, according to Bose, this is not easy, because India is a much more diverse country, its democratic tradition is institutionally far stronger than Turkey's, and secular ethic is stronger among the populace.

In summary, Bose provides an interesting comparative-historical perspective on the political trajectories of India and Turkey. Given its immense historiographical, empirical and conceptual wealth, the study could be further enriched by an analysis of ethnographic studies. While arguing that in Turkey secularism is dead and Islamic values are on the rise, the author could distinguish between the macro-political level and the grassroots social sphere. Because, in today's Turkish society, the erosion of religion is a hot topic among not only dissident but also Islamic, conservative circles. The spread of deism among Muslim youth is a point in case. Over the years, AKP has come to represent the rising new middle class, whose lifestyle steeped in consumerism and vanity is criticized as prodigal by large swathes of society. AKP does not represent a fresh traditional and indigenous perspective against the Kemalist model. AKP is destroying the urban heritage with its mega projects, selling off the historical edifices of deep-rooted universities, damaging historical mosques during urban infrastructure projects, and annihilating the natural riches of the countryside. AKP's Ottoman symbolism does not go beyond a superficial political discourse.

The Kemalist brand of secularism may indeed be dead. Nevertheless, as suggested by AKP's loss of all major metropolitan municipalities in the latest local elections – which occurred after Bose wrote this volume – the future of the religious hegemonic politics promoted by the government is ambiguous. Today Turkey is standing at a crossroads as the society harbours immense discontent in the face of economic hardship, polarisation and social favouritism.

The Kemalist brand of secularism may indeed be dead. Nevertheless, as suggested by AKP's loss of all major metropolitan municipalities in the latest local elections – which occurred after Bose wrote this volume – the future of the religious hegemonic politics promoted by the government is ambiguous. New parties, namely DEVA and Gelecek, have emerged from among the Islamic and conservative circles to defy Erdoğan and AKP. With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the government's economic and healthcare policies have come under increased criticism. Today, Turkey is standing at a crossroads as the society harbours immense discontent in the face of economic hardship, polarisation and social favouritism.