



Book Review

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Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment, Ahmet T. Kuru (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

“Why do Muslim countries exhibit high levels of authoritarianism and low levels of socioeconomic development in comparison to world averages?” (i). This is the question that Ahmet Kuru sets out to answer in his latest book, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment*. With the help of a plethora of data, ranging from governmental documents and global indexes to interviews he conducted with Islamist politicians and bureaucrats in Egypt and Tunisia, Kuru first confirms the validity of this claim. He then goes on to explore the historical roots of current-day troubles in most Muslim-majority countries. After a detailed comparative historical analysis, Kuru points to the ulema-state alliance, formed in the eleventh century, as the main culprit behind the many problems experienced by Muslim-majority countries.

Kuru opens the introduction with a provoking formulation of the main question: “Why are Muslim-majority countries less peaceful, less democratic, less developed?” (1). Aware of the danger of essentialism such a formulation might bring in, he immediately complicates the question by drawing attention to the scholarly and socio-economic achievements of Muslim-majority countries between the eighth and twelfth centuries when “Islam was perfectly compatible with scholarly flourishing and socioeconomic progress” (2). According to Kuru, it was only through a gradual reversal process that started in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and took off especially between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries that the Muslim world became stagnant and fell behind Western Europe. Via such clarification of his research question Kuru aims to fight the two main essentialist arguments about Muslim-majority countries: First, by highlighting Muslim-majority countries’ past achievements and the periods they implemented separation of religion and state he pushes back the anti-Islamist view that the current situation in these countries is a product of Islam *per se*. Second, by tracing the reversal process’ roots back to as early as the eleventh century, with a peak in the sixteenth century, he

challenges the mainstream Islamist view that Muslim countries' problems result from Western colonialism, which only took place in the nineteenth century.

To elaborate his argument, Kuru structures the book in two main parts. Part 1, entitled "Present," delves further into the current day situation in Muslim-majority countries. In three chapters, it analyzes the institutional and ideological bases of the contested relationship between Islam and violence, authoritarianism, and socioeconomic underdevelopment and the cyclical relationship between the latter three. While acknowledging the role played by structural factors such as rentier economy (especially in MENA countries) and Western colonization and exploitation, this first part also highlights the importance of numerous actors in the entrenchment of authoritarianism and exclusionary policies in Muslim-majority countries. Bridging institutional theory with the role of ideas, it underlines the strength of the ulema-state alliance and the lack of an independent bourgeoisie and influential intellectuals as the main obstacles hindering cultural and socioeconomic progress in the Muslim world.

Part II, entitled "History," looks at the complex background of these power relations and the historical construction of "anti-scientific, anti-philosophical attitudes among Muslims" (105). Through a meticulous historical analysis covering the time period from the seventh to twentieth centuries, it narrates the developments in Muslim-majority countries in four chapters, titled "progress," "crisis," "power," and "collapse." According to this account, after a rapid progress between seventh and eleventh centuries, characterized by military, commercial, and intellectual achievements, and a certain level of egalitarianism, Muslim-majority countries experienced a critical juncture in the eleventh century.

The financial and political independence of the ulema and the intellectuals, supported by an independent merchant class, started to fade away and was replaced by an emerging alliance between the military state and the ulema. Kuru thinks that the main factor enabling this alliance was the militarization of the land regime, namely the *iqta* system, which led to a decline in the position and status of merchants and transformed the ulema into either state servants or benefitters of *waqf* lands. Coupled with the influence of certain Sasanian political ideas, especially the four-fold social stratification that prioritizes clergy and rulers, the shift in class relations proceeded fast. Meanwhile, the partial completion of Sunni orthodoxy and the establishment of the Shiis as the common enemy led to the sidelining of groups with alternative interpretations of Islam, such as Mutazilis and Ismailis, as well as of philosophers and intellectuals. Of particular importance in this process were the writings of Mawardi, and

Ghazali, who not only declared 'heterodox Muslims' as "infidels punishable by death" (117), but also prepared the ground for the weaving of religion and state as "inseparable twins." Epitomized by the Seljuk dynasty where the Nizamiyya madrasas played a vital role in the spread of orthodox Sunni ideas and in the consolidation of ulema-state alliance, these developments shaped Muslim political thought for centuries to come.

The ensuing events, between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, are the subject of Chapter 5, "Crisis." Kuru suggests that the invasions of Mongols from the East and of Crusaders from the West and the accompanying need for survival and safety triggered even more militarization of the state during this period, which in turn resulted in the continuation of the marginalization of merchants and intellectuals, the amalgamation of ulema-state alliance, and the stratification of the sociopolitical structure, especially in the Mamluk Sultanate—the most important Muslim state of the time.

While this period still continued to produce important Muslim intellectuals like Ibn Khaldun and Ibn Rushd, it mainly witnessed the replacement of philosophy by Sufism, which promoted a spiritual hierarchy and an anti-rational stance. It was also during this period that Ibn Taymiyya whose radical views "have been influential in the formation of contemporary Salafism" (146), lived and wrote. In the meantime, Western Europe was undergoing a profound transformation. Developments in commerce, the increasing importance of merchants and artisans, and the establishment of universities went hand in hand with the institutional diversification exemplified in the power balance between the Catholic Church and the monarchs.

Chapter 6, "Power," scrutinizes the three Muslim empires—Ottomans, Safavids, and the Mughals—during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Kuru concludes that, even at the peak of their military power, these empires maintained the hierarchical class structure and the suppression of intellectuals and creativity. Moreover, they also turned a blind eye to the vital European advances of the time like the printing press, geographical discoveries and the scientific revolution, all products of "the combination of political decentralization with other factors, such as a creative scholarly class and dynamic merchant class," along with "the exploitation of American, African and Asian resources and people" (185).

The domination of most of the world by Western Europe continued full speed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when they colonized most of the Muslim world and other world regions. Kuru looks at this period in Chapter 7 "Collapse." This was also the time when "important

transformations such as the Enlightenment, the American and French Revolutions, and the Industrial Revolution” put Western Europe and North America ahead of Muslim-majority countries (224). The nineteenth century witnessed important Westernization and modernization reforms, especially in the Ottoman Empire. Several Muslim reformists, like Syed Ahmad Khan, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh “defended Muslims’ adoption of rationalism and modern sciences” (219). Neither the structural reforms, however, nor the reformist intellectual mindset proved effective in solving the problems Muslims have inherited from preceding centuries. Despite the weakening of the ulema-state alliance and the emergence of relatively independent intellectuals, the statist outlook, the influence of absolutist rulers, and the continuing lack of an independent bourgeois, Kuru contends, have “hindered the success of political and socioeconomic reforms in the Muslim world” (225).

In concluding the book, Kuru recommends that the solution to Muslims’ problems lies in the establishment of competitive and meritocratic systems, building on “substantial socioeconomic and political reform with ideological and institutional dimensions” undertaken by “creative intellectuals and an independent bourgeoisie, who can balance the power of the ulema and state authorities” (235). It is only through a critical historical analysis of Muslim history that one can construct a more progressive relationship between Islam and the state, Kuru argues.

As convincing as Kuru’s argument is, it suffers from overgeneralizations at certain points. One important reservation I have concerns the curious omission of a detailed discussion of Southeast Asia from his account. Long neglected by scholars of Islam as “the periphery,” as opposed to the Middle Eastern “center,” Southeast Asia is currently home to more than 250 million Muslims (about 14% of the world’s 1.8 billion Muslims) and is labeled by some as the “Muslim Archipelago.” Considering that Southeast Asia’s Islamization was well underway by the 13th century one cannot help but wonder why Kuru has included it in his narrative only marginally.

At different points in the book, Kuru states that his main focus will be on the emergence and the establishment of Sunni orthodoxy. For example, in Chapter 6, he justifies his focus on the Ottoman Empire (to the detriment of the Safavid and Mughal Empires) by the fact that it “was more likely to represent Sunnis, who have constituted the vast majority of the Muslim population” (166–7). As such, it could be speculated that Kuru’s allocation of less space to Southeast Asia stems from its relatively little role in the formation of Sunni orthodoxy in comparison to the MENA region. Still, I believe that an in-depth discussion of the Southeast

Asian interpretations of Islam—a combination of Shafi Sunnism, Sufi mysticism and pre-Islamic local (for example, Javanese) rituals—as well as the structural and ideational factors in that region might have enriched Kuru’s overall argument and contributed to the production of a less generalizing account of Islam.

A second criticism concerns Kuru’s portrayal of Western Europe, which is too simplifying at times. While such a macro-scale comparative approach inevitably calls for some generalizations, especially the case of Spain could have been used to complicate the overall narrative, I think. In Chapter 6, Kuru highlights how Spain differed from the British Empire and the Dutch Republic and resembled more the Muslim-majority states at the time: a strong alliance between the Catholic clergy and Spanish monarchy, repression of diversity and freethinking—infamously embodied by the Inquisition—and a rentier economy based on the riches looted from the Americas. Yet, what set Spain apart was the willingness of its rulers to patronize geographical explorations. Though the case of Spain demonstrates the validity of Kuru’s theory on “religious elite-state alliance,” the role Spanish rulers played in advancing geographical discoveries demonstrates the path-dependency of Kuru’s argument and the role of agency in historical processes. Yet, rather than problematizing the Spanish case and using it to fine-tune his theoretical framework, Kuru presents Spain as part of his grand narrative about “Western progress.”

Kuru’s book is an important and bold intervention in a vital question that has received scholarly attention for a long time. Spanning thirteen centuries and a vast geography comprising Indian subcontinent, Central Asia, Middle East, North Africa, and the Iberian Peninsula Kuru refutes “the essentialist view that presents Muslim and Western cases as dichotomous entities,” and provides a detailed class-based historical account of why Muslims could not maintain their role as pioneers of intellectual, scientific and technological progress (227). Above-mentioned criticisms aside, I would recommend the book to anyone interested in the transformation of the relationship between Islam, economy, and politics through centuries.