

Ahmet Kuru: Early Muslims more open to diversity, creativity!

We have finally reached the end of Ramadan, the fasting month for Muslims all around the world! Many Muslims consider it a moment of victory. Over what? A month of being hungry from sunrise to sunset and then overindulging when you break the fast?

Idul Fitri, the end of Ramadan, has for the most part been stripped of its spiritual meaning and reduced to being an orgy of consumerism. Is this what being a Muslim has been reduced to?

The other thing that Muslims in Indonesia cannot refrain from doing is the yearly *mudik* (exodus), when urbanites return to their hometowns to be with their families. This year as well as last, due to COVID-19, the government issued a ban on *mudik*. But by hook or by crook, people try anyway, even if it means hiding in a vegetable truck!

How come we Muslims have become so incapable of self-restraint and rational thinking, reducing us to not just being “backward” on a personal level but also as a nation? Even Ma’ruf Amin — our Vice President, who is not exactly known for his scintillating repartee, quick wit let alone progressive views — stated that we are lagging behind because of our narrowmindedness.

“This is one of the reasons why many Muslim countries are still classified as underdeveloped countries and are lagging behind in the fields of economy, education, science and technology and other fields,” he said in February.

I wonder if he’s been reading Ahmet Kuru’s book, *Islam, Authoritarianism and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Development*? Well, it’s been translated into Indonesian, published this year, so Ma’ruf may have read it. From what I hear, his English is at the level of “little-little I can”, at best.

Ahmet T. Kuru is a professor of political science and director of the Center for Islamic and Arabic Studies from San Diego University, who has written a number of important award-winning books. His latest is the one I mentioned above, published in 2019, which has taken the Muslim intellectual world by storm. Besides Indonesian, it’s been translated



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The author of Julia’s Jihad

into Persian, while the Arabic, Bosnian and French versions are in progress.

Basically, his book is asking a question that has bothered — indeed vexed — Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

“Why do Muslim-majority countries exhibit high levels of authoritarianism and low levels of socioeconomic development in comparison to world averages?”

Critics and detractors of Islam say it is because of something inherent in Islam itself. This does not make sense as historically, Islam in its Golden Age — traditionally dated from the eighth to the 11th century, was not exactly a flash in the pan. Furthermore, “Muslims were philosophically and socioeconomically more developed than Western Europeans between the ninth and 12th centuries,” Kuru states.

pet for the National Police, but it amounts to the same thing.

Kuru continues, this alliance “gradually hindered intellectual and economic creativity by marginalizing intellectual and bourgeois classes in the Muslim world”.

One of the things I love about the study of history is how it helps us to understand today’s world. Kuru does precisely that in his book, by linking his historical accounts to the contemporary Islamic world where ulama-state alliance is still a stumbling block to creativity and competition in Muslim countries.

It is true that only one-fifth of the 49 Muslim countries in the world are electoral democracies. Many suffer from socioeconomic backwardness in terms of literacy, years of schooling, low gross domestic product and life

and his ilk, for example.

Kuru also wrote, under the Umayyah and Abbasiah dynasties, state rulers had limited power to sacralize their power. But this gradually changed in the 11th and 12th centuries.

The prominent ulemas Al Ghazali and Al Mawardi promoted a more hierarchical and patriarchal approach. Kuru suggests that their political ideas be rejected today, also because they are almost misogynistic towards women, as well as being exclusionary against non-Muslim minorities.

The power of the intellectuals and ulama waned, followed by a wave of oppression and persecution. There was an obsession with military power and a weakening of science, technology and economic power.

Intellectuals and ulama who did not toe the line were declared apostates or infidels, some were even executed. Thus developed a Sunni orthodoxy that became a tool for repression to punish dissenting opinions.

In the West, the absolute power of the state (in most cases, a monarchy) and the church evolved to become the separation between the church and the state. This allowed universities to flourish and the bourgeoisie and business community to grow, leading to the Renaissance in the 14th century — which was not unlike Islam’s Golden Age.

So, what is the lesson to be drawn from Kuru’s rich and fascinating book? He says, there is no other way than to have an open and democratic society, a competitive economy. This is not westernization, on the contrary, it is totally in line with the spirit of Islam. Muslims just need to remember their history, how we were able to achieve a Golden Age in the past and how we can achieve a Renaissance in this day and age.

“We really need to be open minded, diverse, creative, tolerant.”

Wise words from this brilliant Muslim scholar. Religious dogmatism, persecuting minorities, suicide bombings and forced “jilbabization” is not the way to go.

Oh by the way, Pak Ma’ruf, what would you be willing to do to pave the way for a Muslim Renaissance?

The beauty was that this freedom was not just for Sunni Muslims but also for other streams of Islam, non-Muslims and even agnostics — sounds like diversity, pluralism and hey, even democracy!

Tragically, it ended with the collapse of the Abbasid caliphate due to the Mongol invasion and Crusades.

Was it colonialism that caused the Muslim world’s decline? Kuru argues that even before colonization began, Muslims had already suffered political and economic problems.

So, how did the problem start? Kuru argues that in the 11th century, an alliance emerged between orthodox Islamic scholars (ulema) and military states.

Hmm, why does that sound so familiar? Oh yes! Ma’ruf Amin and President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo’s administration has facilitated what was called the “dual function of the military” that dominated Soeharto’s New Order authoritarian regime (1966-1998). The difference is that Jokowi laid out the red car-

expectancy.

What were the socioeconomic conditions that allowed science and the arts to flourish in Islam’s Golden Age? Ulama and intellectuals kept their distance from state power. Funds came from the business community and 70 percent of the ulama themselves were entrepreneurs anyway. This guaranteed freedom of thought. The beauty was that this freedom was not just for Sunni Muslims but also for other streams of Islam, non-Muslims and even agnostics — sounds like diversity, pluralism and hey, even democracy!

According to Kuru, the freedom of the ulama and intellectuals prevented the monopoly of (religious) interpretation in the hands of those in power, or even a fundamentalist minority who are close to state power. Like Ma’ruf