

Book Review

Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison, by Ahmet T. Kuru

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مراجعة كتاب

الإسلام والاستبداد والتخلف: مقارنة عالمية وتاريخية

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This is an outstanding book written by Ahmet Kuru and published in 2019. The author narrates an interestingly instructive anecdote in its Preface. The summary of the anecdote is that reading a book is not enough to reach a conclusion on any topical issues especially those that are controversial and many sided. The references at the end of the book foreground the fact that it is a well-researched and academically rich book—reading of which students of knowledge, scholars, and researchers should compete for and be proud of. The book is well-timed—it coincides with a period of resurgence of Islamic political activists.

The book, divided into two parts with seven chapters, cuts across many disciplines such that no single discipline can claim a monopoly to its content. Its main title features ‘Islam’, ‘authoritarianism’ and ‘underdevelopment’ which means the book discusses Islam, Political Science, and Economics. It has ‘global’ and ‘historical comparison’ as its subtitle. These are also well captured in the book. It presents before its readers the global map as if about to embark on a worldwide voyage. The book also makes a historical voyage but not for the sake of history itself, rather, it meticulously identifies some milestones in the history of Islam, its rise and fall, and objectively explains their causalities.

Kuru’s approach is both scholarly and comparative. Primarily, he juxtaposes Islam and the Western world to explain different causalities of the former’s rise and fall. In doing so, he walks a tight rope between essentialist explanation of Muslims backwardness and Muslims accusation of colonialism. Hence, he balances his analysis between hurling Muslims’ backwardness entirely on Western colonialism and stereotyping Islam as the major harbinger for Muslims’ backwardness.

In the first chapter titled ‘Violence and Peace,’ he marshals a lot of verifiable evidences to argue that neither Islam nor its text (the Qur’an) encourages violence and authoritarianism that, altogether, lead to underdevelopment. His statistical presentation of verses of violence in the scriptures of the three major religions exonerates Islam as a violent religion. Quoting Tim Barger’s article ‘Bible, Qur’an, and Violence Computerized’ he shows that "Terms for killing and destruction were in 2.1 percent of the Qur’an, 2.8 percent of the New Testament, and 5.3 percent of the Old Testament." Factually, the Qur’an has the least verses of violence (p. 22).

He traces the genesis of the present radical Islamists to some three decades ago which was a reaction to Western colonialism and invasion of Muslim countries especially Iraq. The US, he recounts, played a significant role in the creation of ISIS and invasion of Iraq. In addition, rather than Islam, authoritarian regimes in many Muslim countries fuel radicalism.

He acknowledges that Muslim countries have a disproportionately high rate of authoritarian rule in Chapter two, titled 'Authoritarianism and Democracy'. However, he disagrees with the patriarchal explanation of authoritarianism in Muslim countries. Critiquing Steve Fish's patriarchal thesis on backwardness, he argues and premises his argument on the fact that gender equality doesn't engender democracy but can possibly be its outcome. He says, "Gender equality can be seen as an effect, rather than a cause or necessary condition of, democratization." (p. 35). Patriarchal India remains a democracy by any standard despite its known gender discrimination. Political history in the Western world also affirms patriarchy's co-existence with democracy.

The book's chapter 3 titled 'Socioeconomic Underdevelopment and Development' is loaded with empirically irrefutable facts about the backwardness of the Muslims and Muslim countries. While this has nothing to do with Islam, it has a lot to do with the ultraconservative and anti-progressive posture of the ulema. As he rightly puts it, "The main problem of the ulema, regardless of whether they are Sunni or Shii, is their conservatism and opposition to the idea of progress." (p. 59). The Ulema are critically antagonistic to progressive ideas, material innovation cum invention.

His lamentation on the pedagogical system in Egypt which prioritizes memorization over critical thinking is worth paying attention to. But this is not limited to Egypt, it seems to be a general approach to knowledge in the Muslim world with few exceptions.

The author points that salafi ulema go beyond the mainstream sunnists in their opposition to new ideas without telling the readers the difference(s) between the former and the latter. Quoting Ebrahim Moosa, he asserts that "Muslims discredit the legitimacy of their experience in the present and refuse to allow this experience to be the grounds of innovation, change, and adaptation." (p. 59). This, he argues, results in literalist and formalist religious interpretations. This wouldn't have been a serious problem but for the dearth of Muslim intellectuals to challenge the ulema's monopoly of Interpretation.

As if authoritarianism is not inherently bad, his explanation of why authoritarianism sparks development in East Asia but not in the Muslim world speaks volume. One important point to note is that with good government, efficient bureaucracy, and massive investment in education, there can be development without democracy. This idea is well captured under the subtitle 'Authoritarianism and the Vicious Circle' on page 61-63.

On the central Islamic concept of 'Commanding good and forbidding wrong', Kuru rightly opines that it "needs a modern interpretation to become compatible with democracy and individual freedom." (p. 46). I expect him to further explain how this re-interpretation will take

care of the rigid position of Islamic scholars who assert that it is un-Islamic to publicly criticize leaders or embark on industrial actions like strike, protest, and demonstration.

The book emphasizes, especially in its fourth chapter, that egalitarianism is part of Islam in its formative years. But this ideal was later discarded to pave way for authoritarianism when rulers, with the support of the ulema, became authoritarian. Kuru captures this reality with a quote from Louise Marlow; "Once scholars were engaged not only in accepting but also in justifying the existence of unofficial social hierarchies in Islamic terms, the realization of the egalitarian ideal was increasingly postponed to the next world." (p. 46).

For instance, al- Mawardi who wrote extensively on government thought on preservation of noble women by not allowing them to marry those who are below them in status. This is a strange justification for, and promotion of, social hierarchy by a highly ranked scholar. It is a clear case of hierarchization of the Muslim society which is apparently antithetical to Islamic egalitarianism.

No group of ulema escapes Kuru's critique. He criticizes the sufi shaykhs for their monopolization of wali/awliya (friendship to Allah) just like the ulema monopolized the interpretation of religious texts. This implies giving Islam a sort of hierarchical outlook with some individuals, who are beyond censure, at the top of the social ladder. This contributed to the authoritarian tendencies in Muslim sociopolitical life (pp. 144-146).

The author, times without number, apportions blame of Muslims backwardness on the ulema who, he claims, monopolized the interpretation of religious texts, and are always at loggerheads with the philosophers. Hence, many scholars, following al-Ghazali, declared ibn Sina, Farabi and their ilks as apostates. In opposition, Ibn Rushd believes these philosophers will be rewarded for whatever error they must have committed in their thoughts since they are scholars (not laypeople). Espousing his position, he quotes a well-known hadith: "If a judge makes a correct *ijtihad* (interpretation), he gets two (spiritual) rewards; if he makes a wrong *ijtihad* he gets one (spiritual) reward." In this regard, Ibn Rushd asserts, "it is wrong to declare these philosophers as heretical innovators or apostates." (p. 136).

Rather than condemn philosophers like other scholars, Ibn Rushd went as far as showing that philosophy is obligatory for Muslims since there are verses of the Qur'an that urge contemplation in order to understand Allah's creation. To do that, Ibn Rushd argues, "one needs to learn demonstrative, dialectical, and rhetorical reasoning, which requires philosophical training." (p. 135). His sense is that some of the Quranic verses are "symbolic" and can be interpreted by "those firmly rooted in knowledge" (Q 3:7). This verse particularly foregrounds his justification for critical thinking by scholars.

Chapter five shows that the contemporary perception of an umbilical relationship between Islam and state is a historical construction. This was traced to have emanated from some certain Sasanian political ideas, not an essential part of Islam. The ulema–state alliance, he argues, "is not an essential aspect of Islam, but a historical construct of the eleventh century and its aftermath." (p. 158). Coincidentally, developments in the eleventh century also shaped the historical construction of church–state separation in Western Christianity.

Therefore, it is too simplistic, the author argues, to claim separation of state from religion in Christendom. To the contrary, history of France demonstrates that the Catholic Church's struggles with political authorities continued even in the twentieth century. Kuru concludes in chapter five that the essentialist argument about the inherent difference between Islam's and Christianity's relations with state authority is inaccurate.

So what went wrong with the Muslims if Islam does not explain their backwardness? Kuru insists that ulema-state alliance which resulted in the marginalization of merchants and philosophers in the Muslim world explains their backwardness. In contrast, Western Europe underwent profound transformations that witnessed the emergence of an influential merchant class, an increase in agricultural production, population growth, development of commerce, and the establishment of universities (p.163).

In the last chapter, arguments that capitalism sprouts development were presented. It was claimed that printing press was first invented in China but due to the absence of capitalism, remained stagnated for centuries. It was also noted that the absence of influential merchants (bourgeoisies, capitalists, investors) who could profit from printing press, in addition to the ulema's opposition which was rooted in their desire to preserve their monopoly over education and scholarship, delayed progress in the Ottoman Empire for centuries. Meanwhile, Western Europe took the advantage of the merchants and printing press to advance its economy (p. 209).

Kuru mentions some fabricated ahadith and some common sayings in Sufism that are inherently anti progress. These are often quoted by ulema to strengthen the ulema-state alliance, discourage intellectualism, promote mystical knowledge, and justify authoritarian regimes. There should have been an appendix of such quotes at the end of the book. For example on page 9, "[R]eligion and ('secular') power are twins," on Page 48, "Whoever does not have a shaykh, his shaykh is Satan."

The central theme in this book is that the ulema–state alliance explains authoritarianism and underdevelopment in the Muslim world, not Islam. A not-too-critical reader would think Kuru has an axe to grind with the ulema, especially their alliance with the state. He clears the

air when he says:

My historical analysis may seem deterministic and pessimistic; in fact, it is neither. By explaining the ulema–state alliance as an eleventh-century construction, my analysis has indicated the possibility of change and the reasonableness of optimism. It has exposed the historical inaccuracy of seeing the ulema–state alliance as something essential to Islamic texts or permanent in Islamic history. (p. 235).

Though Kuru avers that the perceptions of Islam as a religion that fundamentally rejects religion–state separation are mistaken, yet he does not claim that the ulema should be apolitical. That would have been a mistake too. Rather he recommends that Muslims can redesign the relationship between their religion and their states in way that would promote intellectual and economic creativity. This, I understand to be a veiled reference to passive secularism since the idea of caliphate seems not to be feasible as he rightly argued.

Call Kuru iconoclastic if you like. On a final note, he posits that Islam is not responsible for Muslims’ problems and backwardness, but certain quasi-Islamic theories are. Defending these political theories, he explains, keeps Islamic actors—which he collectively calls the ulema, Islamists, and Sufi shaykhs—out of tune with the present lived realities experienced by Muslims in the modern world.