

## BOOK REVIEW

**Ahmed T. Kuru (2019). *Islam, Authoritarianism and Underdevelopment: A global and historical comparison*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 303 pp.**

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Opinions abound regarding Islam's incompatibility with modern culture and industrial lifestyle, and that many of its values contradict with personal freedom and liberalism, as espoused by people in the modern, democratic and economically developed West. Islam has been said to suffer from what scholars call "democratic deficit", hence the authoritarian nature of governments and political systems in the mostly Muslim Middle East. The religious mentality of late antiquity and the superstitions held dearly by Muslims have led Islamicate societies to become inward looking, retrogressive and hopelessly underdeveloped.

As an alternative to the more essentialist approach to understanding Muslim backwardness, as it were, post-colonial scholars focus their attention on the banality and brutality of European colonialism, which had destroyed Muslim civilisation that was once an envy of nations around the world. The proponents of this approach emphasise the subjugation and capitulation of the Muslims and the plundering of their natural wealth over the past centuries. Conceivably, this practice could only be sustained by way of slavery, forced labour or indentured servitude of the indigenous, colonised Muslims with the aim to fill up the Imperial coffers to support the opulent lifestyles of the reigning monarchs as well as development of their own nations.

It is precisely these overly simplistic and neat approaches that Ahmed T. Kuru takes to task in his book entitled *Islam, Authoritarianism and Underdevelopment: A global and historical comparison* (2019). His work basically attempts to respond to the ultimate question of why Muslim-majority countries are less peaceful, less democratic and less developed compared to their European and North American counterparts. Through the employment of process tracing, path dependence and critical junctures, Kuru proved how the Muslim civilisational decline occurred mostly due to the pre-eminence and pre-dominance of the *ulema*, who were in cahoots with the vanguards of the Muslim Praetorian states since the 11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The unholy alliance between the *ulema* and the state reached its zenith when Muslim autocratic leaders were thinly disguised as the Divinely ordained *khalifahs* - Muslim leaders acting as the representative of the Prophet of God - or even *zil Allah*, 'the shadow of God' on earth.

Here, Kuru proposes a way of knowing and understanding how Muslims got to this point in contemporary time through the prism of comparison that is both global and historical at the same time. Kuru argues that the negative development and transformation

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of the Muslim *ummah* began in the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of three major forces: the conservative, power-seeking ulema, the Islamists and the Sufi *syaikhs*, who tolerated and collaborated with corrupt officials and political opportunists aligned with both the *Ummayyad* and *Abbasid* caliphs and the powers that be. If anything, these actors shared one thing in common: an anti-intellectual streak, which had wreaked havoc to the Muslim developmental trajectory.

Slowly but surely, the unholy alliance had led to widespread anti-intellectual attitude, which had inadvertently contributed to the Muslim propensity for violence, authoritarianism and underdevelopment. The *ulema*'s monopoly over Islamic knowledge and interpretation has also terminated any form of innovative thinking and creative socio-political and economic endeavours. According to Kuru, the *Ashari* theology, which is one of the foundations of Sunni Islam, and Ghazali's work, while very influential to this day, have contributed significantly to the fatalism, conservatism and anti-intellectualism within the Muslim body politic.

Naturally, these groups contradicted the *modus vivendi* of the independent minded polymaths and scientists such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Rushd (Averroes), Al-Khwarizmi, Al-Biruni and others, who laid the foundations for modern science and research. Even prior to that, the four "Imams" of the Sunni juridical schools - Hanafi, Maliki, Shafii and Hanbali - suffered tremendously in the hands of the caliph and his corrupt agents, simply for keeping a respectable distance that was necessary for their research and thought process. Needless to say, the *Shii* Imams, who had resisted the caliphs since the demise of the holy Prophet, also underwent insufferable treatment. Ja'far ash-Shadiq, the 6<sup>th</sup> Imam of the Twelver Shiism, who founded its juridical school, was also poisoned to death, for distancing himself and his disciples from the corrupt regime. Most of these ulema-cum-scientists had been traditionally supported by Muslim pious bourgeoisies who had a knack for logic, philosophy, creative thinking and speculative enterprises, but also constantly yearned for freedom, autonomy, economic progress and development.

Kuru's work thus avoids the sweeping, overgeneralisations about grand narratives of Islamic history and its civilisational decline, and focuses squarely on the "human factor", i.e. the main actors involved in the turning around of Muslim intellectual progress and development. He is particularly concerned about the highly pragmatic *ulema* who have, both historically and in present day, served the so-called "rentier states" well by imposing strict interpretation and application of the Quran and *ahadist* (Prophetic traditions). In Kuru's words, "[T]he way the *ulema* produce Islamic law excludes the people's participation in the legal process; therefore, it inherently contradicts democratic processes and ideals" (pp. 41-42).

As a consequence of this "medieval interpretations of Islam", the *ummah* lost its collective genius and, with it, confidence, integrity and the will to democratise. Moreover, Muslim (mis)understanding of their basic texts have made them inclined, more than other religious communities, to violence, patriarchy, religious discrimination and authoritarianism. Kuru opines that:

The main problem of the *ulema*, regardless of whether they are Sunni or Shii, is their conservatism and opposition to the idea of progress. According to the *ulema*'s worldview, religious knowledge represents all that is good in a perfect and permanent way; change means deviation and corruption (p.59).

Extending the argument, he questions "the inherent incompatibility" between Islam and constitutional secularism. Yet, he argues by way of using intellectual history, which suggests that the growth and crystallisation of Islamic orthodoxy negatively affected the Muslim rationality and ability to employ critical thinking, thereby ultimately causing intellectual stagnation and propensity toward authoritarianism and underdevelopment.

What is truly fascinating and rather counter intuitive is Kuru's insistence that the Sufi *syaiikhs* and their esoteric and metaphysical understanding of reality have in actual fact provided a strong justification for political stratification and socio-religious hierarchy, which in turn has ultimately served and enabled a framework for authoritarian rule. This can be observed in the subsequent period during the reign of three powerful Muslim empires, namely the Ottoman, the Safavid and the Mughals. Rather than investing on knowledge, research and science, these empires were solely focused on building an oversized and centralised military to cope with the vast expanse of their territories. Hardly any scientific progress or intellectual achievements occurred during this period, which further marginalised and disenfranchised the merchant classes, which previously provided vital resources to the Muslim intellectuals, scholars and philosophers.

In view of the above, the rejection of the separation between the state and religion has its historical precedents. In fact, Kuru argues that such rejection, which we often hear today in many so-called "Islamic countries", underpins the Muslim intellectual stagnation and again reifies the disposition toward authoritarianism. It would be almost effortless to accuse Kuru of being an apologist and an unrelenting defender of Europe's brutal colonisation and exploitation of the Muslim land from the Middle East, North Africa, the Indian subcontinent and right down to Southeast Asia, but he does have a point. The longstanding logic of the *ulema*-rentier state alliance needs to be destabilised, if not utterly abolished. The question then of course is whether or not westernisation is the most appropriate Muslim response. Moreover, military intervention and annexation of Muslim countries, as a modern-day practice of colonialism as witnessed in the Middle East today, have not exactly done good service to destroying the *ulema*-state alliance, much less to promote critical Muslim intellectual life.

While Kuru's work is instructive when it comes to the imperative for maintaining the autonomy of intellectuals and scholars, Muslim societies still need to figure out a way to reconstruct a more open, tolerant, democratic and progressive ideas about religion and politics. That is assuming that Muslim societies desire to come out of this indelible quagmire.