

Ahmet T. Kuru

Book review

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## **“ISLAM, AUTHORITARIANISM, AND UNDERDEVELOPMENT: A GLOBAL AND HISTORICAL COMPARISON”**

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2019, ISBN: 9781108296892

What explains the fact that most Muslim-majority countries are run by authoritarian regimes and demonstrate lower performance in socio-economic development comparing to average values around the world? This is a central question that Ahmet T. Kuru poses in his new book on *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment*.

Ahmet Kuru argues that ulema–state alliance has historically prevented creativity and competition in Muslim societies. Kuru reveals the nature of the relationship between the state and a select group of religious leaders that seems to have sealed the fate of millions of Muslims, who had little choice other than to follow suit in respective states since the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Since about that time in history independent scholars and merchants had been marginalized in Muslim societies and this led to their weakening as a class. This intriguing argument is an outcome of a meticulous research and careful analysis of a huge amount of documented evidence.

*Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment* relies on comparative historical methods to explain the roots and causes of a long-lasting gap between Muslim and Western European societies. The author develops his thesis in two steps. First, he gives a snapshot of the present situation in Muslim-majority countries. He demonstrates how key socio-economic development indicators, freedom scores, and the level of involvement in political violence in 49 Muslim-majority states contrast to world averages. Data confirms that these countries are less peaceful, less democratic, and less developed comparing to overall scores of the rest of the world. Unlike widespread perception that this is either a consequence of Western colonialism or a characteristic of Islam or Muslim culture, Kuru offers a nuanced understanding and calls for a deeper historical analysis. Thus, in the second part he delves deeper into historical analysis of the relationship between the ulema and the state. Step by step the author explains why Muslim societies were scientifically and economically superior to the West from about seventh century up to the eleventh century. Kuru suggests that high status of scholars and merchants proves burgeoning of Muslim societies in early Islamic history. He then suggests how Muslim countries fell into a crisis and decay when the ulema and the military elite established an alliance and became dominant.

Kuru concludes the book by calling Muslims to explore new perspectives on politics and government. The ultimate recommendation that the author offers is a proposal to establish competitive and meritocratic systems in Muslim-majority countries. To carry this out Muslims would need creative intellectuals and an independent bourgeoisie, who could balance the power of the ulema and state authorities (p. 235).

Kuru's book is a timely and necessary contribution to a debate between essentialists and post-colonialists/post-structuralists that still rages over a number of issues. At the time when experts still argue with each other on the causes and consequences of turmoil in the Arab world, Kuru challenges propositions that see Islam as the cause of underdevelopment in Muslim-majority states. Unlike widespread perceptions that Muslim culture and religion are mainly to blame for the authoritarianism and backwardness of the Muslim world, Kuru suggests a closer look at the alliance of religious scholars and statesmen. When the last two come together, this signals a threat to individuality, artistry, innovation, inventiveness, and imagination.

*Islam, Authoritarianism and Underdevelopment* is a very important study with many provocative arguments that go far beyond the area of religion and politics. Not only it shows a decisive role that religion plays in explaining and ordering life, but also it provides a careful and nuanced analysis of contemporary problems in Muslim-majority countries, that in fact is applicable to cultures and peoples far beyond Muslim nations. A threat of damage that the entanglement of religious and political actors may cause, as this study demonstrates, should be equally worrying for all communities that experience a religious revival.

One of the strengths of the book is the conscious effort of the author to explain a causal link between dependent and independent variables that spans over several centuries. Identifying critical junctures, systematizing historical data and offering a fresh look on the flow of well-known events is a skill that the author successfully employs in his work. Mastering this methodological skill partly explains a huge success of his previous book *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) and will undoubtedly facilitate a spread of the present project to even wider audiences. A reader will appreciate not only a detailed analysis but also an ease of reading that makes this book a perfect gift.

Another strength of the book is the comprehensive list of related literature, documents, and the detailed references given both in the text and, together with some comments, in the footnotes. Whatever your entry point might be, you cannot read more than a page or two before you find yourself immersed in a world of ideas that have shaped social science research and theory over the past several decades.

A thought provoking project full of intriguing anecdotes and bold arguments, nevertheless, raises a number of questions. First, the explanatory power

of the ulema-state alliance is apparently high in the case of 49 Muslim-majority countries that Kuru examines. Yet it remains unclear as to what extent this factor may explain the dynamics of life in Muslim peripheries. Muslims in Russia, for example, live in national republics where they constitute a titular majority. A troubled history of Islam in Russia has kept religion mostly confined to the private sphere. Sporadically state authorities and the clergy have worked together to form an alliance. Most recently in the 2000s this resulted in formation of a highly contested notion of "traditional Islam." On the one hand, "traditional Islam" indeed, curtails religious pluralism, creativity, and intellectual flourishing. On the other hand, this state-ulema alliance generates socially-oriented projects that would have never been implemented, should they've acted independently. As far as public sphere is concerned, in today's Russia it is difficult to imagine any major activity without state involvement.

Thinking beyond Russia, scholarly literature suggests that protectionism is not always a bad thing.<sup>1</sup> Although this is primarily a political economy argument, it can also be considered in the context of state-religion relations. Both state and religion may benefit from forming an alliance in the short run, in part because they have common interest in maintaining peace, order and harmony in society. Nevertheless, this is likely to become a problem when protectionism continues indefinitely long. Kuru's argument that state-ulema alliance prevents creativity and competition seems to hold in the long run, yet not necessarily in the short-run. These minor remarks, however, in no way diminish the value of the central argument of the book. On the contrary, they support the view that religion has been and remains a consequential force.

It is true that religion has long been peripheral to the concerns of most political scientists.<sup>2</sup> Today it may still be far from the mainstream of the discipline. Scholars often rely on various factors but religion to explain social phenomena and processes, including development. Kuru's book in that sense is mind broadening.

In summary, this book is an excellent reference (with numerous nuggets of wisdom) that should be readily handy on the shelf of every student of religion and politics. In the hands of an experienced instructor, the book will also serve students as a great textbook. I congratulate the author for this timely book and recommend the volume to anyone interested in Middle East politics and world history.

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1 Robert Maseland and Alberr de Vaal, *How Fair is Fair Trade?*, University of Groningen, 2002; Regine A. N. Fouda, Protectionism and Free Trade: A Country's Glory or Doom?, *International Journal of Trade, Economics and Finance*, Vol. 3, No. 5, 2012, p. 351; B. de Vries, *Interacting with Complex Systems: Models and Games for a Sustainable Economy*, Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, 2010).

2 Eva Bellin, Faith in politics. New trends in the study of religion and politics, *World Politics*, Vol. 60, No. 2, 2011, pp. 315-347.

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