Book Review: *Islam, Authoritarianism and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Development*

Islam, Authoritarianism and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Development by Ahmet T. Kuru (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). 322 pp. US$34.99. ISBN 978-1-108-41909-3

Reviewed by Ziad Hafez

This is another book on Islam which is quite fascinating at times. One may refrain from adding adjectives such as "well timed," "ill-timed," "relevant," and "irrelevant" because all could be true depending upon one's perspective, background, political, ideological, and even epistemological orientations. Many concepts in the book are either taken for granted without a thorough examination such as treating "Islam" as a block, even though the author is careful about indicating that Islam is not monolithic. Yet, the book's title suggests just that.

The title is itself a political program, even though it is a scholarly work. The list of references is impressive in length and variety, yet one cannot but note a glaring absence of Arab authors and their Arabic writings. This is not to say that the author has shun away from Arab references, but he did rely mainly on translations rather than original works. Hence, one may note the possibility of the absence of command of Arabic, which in itself is a problem when tackling Islam and issues about Islam. We have always maintained that understanding the Quran requires an understanding of Arabic, and so does understanding Muslim history. Using secondary sources and the works of orientalists may be helpful for a non-Arab scholar, but there is no substitute

for having a deep knowledge of Arabic when addressing various sensitive issues in the Quran and other sources of Islamic jurisprudence.

The author believes his book differs from similar books by his peers in two different ways. First, he argues that other authors focus on current Muslim problems and their state of stagnation or regression without explaining how and why Muslims were successful between the eighth and mid-twelfth centuries. His claim is that his book fills this gap and, in fact, it does. The second feature of this book is that it undertakes a comparison of Muslim states with non-Muslim states and tries to highlight the differences. Other books focus only on Muslim issues without a comparison with the rest of the world. Again, the author succeeds in that mission.

The author undertakes a multidisciplinary approach to explaining authoritarianism in Muslim societies and their state of underdevelopment. Many factors contribute to the slow and long historical process that led to the current situation. In particular, he argues that intellectual production was the result of the alliance of *ulemas* (scholars) and the merchant class, whereas the decline occurred when the alliance shifted to an alliance between *ulemas* and the state. Other authors prefer a linear or single causal approach as the key to unlocking the reasons of stagnation and regression in Muslim societies.

It is one of the several misgivings we have about scholarly work in the West about Islam. It seems that each contribution is a perpetuation of previous works without suggesting alternative ways of looking at things. Even the suggested approach by the author who makes it an issue to differentiate his approach from others is, at the end of the day, an intelligent upgrade of the same line of linear thinking about Islam. To some extent, the book reminds me of another book written and published a decade ago about the cause of the decline of Islamic civilization and the regression in the Muslim world. Robert Reilly's book on Islam, *The Closing of the Muslim Mind* (2010), is a typical example of single-cause methodology. In this particular case, the reason of the decline was "Ash'arism," a doctrine that refutes the supremacy of Reason and hence the ensuing "closing of the mind" due to the lack of critical reasoning. Our review of that particular book (Hafez 2016) outlined the shortcomings of such an approach. The present book under review does present similar features, although it avoids falling into the trap of the single-reason approach even though that the main theme developed is one major development, that is, the state alliance with the religious scholars, the *ulemas*.

Before delving more into the deconstruction of the themes developed in the book, it is necessary to provide the reader with an *aperçu* of its contents. It is a well-written work, of moderate length (322 pages including an index and a bibliography), clear and to the point, well researched, and with an impressive bibliography notwithstanding the above-mentioned remarks. It is divided into two parts of uneven length. In Part I, titled, "Present," the author undertakes to describe the current situation of Muslim countries relating to violence (chapter 1), to authoritarianism and democracy (chapter 2), and to socioeconomic underdevelopment (chapter 3). The whole of Part I is about fifty-four pages, which, on the one hand, makes it easier to read, but, on the other, is full of concepts and ideas that range from the controversial to the difficult to understand and that at almost every line of the chapters. A thorough critique of such chapters would require more than can be allocated in this review, and therefore some arbitrariness is necessary to convey the idea about the magnitude of thought-provoking issues raised by the author.

Part II of the book, aptly titled "History," is supposed to provide the historical evidence of the thesis developed by the author about the current state of Muslim underdevelopment. There are four relatively long chapters. Each is almost about the length of Part I, just less than fifty pages. Therefore, chapter 4 tackles the historical evidence of the alliance made by scholars and merchants from the seventh to the eleventh centuries. It was the golden age of intellectual production and this alliance was at its base. Chapter 5, titled "Crisis," shows the impact of invasions of Islamic territories in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, the rise of a military class, and the alliance of scholars with the military dominated states. Chapter 6 describes how three Muslim empires (Ottoman, Safavid, and Mogul) coexisted with the alliance of scholars and state. The author argues that such an alliance is the main cause for the decline of innovative intellectual production when compared with that of the golden age. Chapter 7 describes the collapse of the Muslim empires and the rise of colonialism and the birth of the reformist movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Finally, the conclusion recaps the main findings and thesis developed in the book.

As indicated above there will be some arbitrariness when addressing some of the issues and arguments developed in the book because of space constraints. However, we hope to cover some points worth discussing. In Part I, the author develops his ideas about the stagnation and regression in the Muslim world. He tries to formulate a theory about the decline of Muslim civilization by first refuting established theories and then by advancing his

own thesis. As far as refuting widespread themes about the incompatibility of Islam with progress, he does a succinct but effective job in the rebuttal of such tired orientalist memes. Indeed, how could that great body of knowledge and civilization produced pass to the world if there were some incompatibility between the requirements of progress and Islam?

Another issue the author addresses is the role of Islam and violence. Citing several works that try to associate violence with Islam, the author correctly points out that all religions have texts that are subject to various interpretations, including the Bible (Kuru 2020, 22). He refers to the role of the religious scholar in the development of violence in Muslim societies. "Pro-violence interpretations reflect the political conditions of not only modern Muslim societies (under occupation) but also medieval societies" (23). Violence is associated with authoritarianism prevalent in Muslim countries (29). Though such authoritarianism has survived over the centuries, the author does not really explain why socioeconomic conditions have allowed the survival of violence as a means of conflict resolution. It could be the theme of another work. In this reviewer's point of view, violence is associated with the two root causes of legitimacy and fragmentation as briefly discussed below.

The central theme of the book is the role of the *ulema*–state alliance (scholar–state alliance) in causing the decline of Islamic empires and civilization. This is what the author claims to be his major contribution. He argues that from the eighth to the mid-twelfth centuries there were two classes, financially independent from the state: the merchant class and the scholars. They were creative and innovative and hence the bulk of intellectual production took place during this period. In later periods, there still was intellectual production, but the increased militarization of the state did stifle critical reasoning and intellectual production. The alliance of state and *ulemas* marginalized independent scholars and the merchant class and that is how Muslims lost their philosophical and economic dynamism, foretelling the economic underdevelopment of contemporary Muslim societies. Yet, the important point the author makes is that the militarization of the state is not inspired by the Quran, but by Persian tradition (Waterbury 2020).

Largely, he does an effective job in demonstrating how the state–*ulema* alliance stifled innovation, creativeness and, therefore, continued development and growth. One will have a task to dispute the historical evidence produced because of the thoroughness of his research. However, in the opinion of this reviewer, there is a fundamental flaw in the logic of his

argument. For even though the scholar–state alliance has contributed to decline by stifling dissent and critical reasoning as argued by the author, yet it falls short of pointing out why the alliance happened in the first place. It is true that power attracts and that it is quite difficult to resist it. In the early years of the ascent of the Islamic empire, and especially during the Umayyad rule and early 'Abbasid rule, *ulemas* or scholars were relatively independent of the state. Their sponsors were a class of merchants and notables, or what the author calls the local bourgeoisie. With the increased role of military or mercenary forces in the courts of the 'Abbasid caliphate (the Persian influence), the dependence of scholars on the benevolence of the state increased. We do not dispute this fact, but ask the following and obvious question: Why did the state "need" that alliance in the first place and its corollary, why did the scholars need it? For the latter, it was a matter of survival in an increasingly militarized rule (in modern parlance one can say a "security state"). The relationship between scholars and state was not always harmonious. It was, in fact, quite confrontational as many scholars refused the dictates of the ruler and ended up in prison, such as Imam Abu Hanifa (699–767) and Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (780–855). As for the state, the need was to ensure the legitimacy of the ruler and his dynasty.

Indeed, the major problem that plagued the Islamic political system was the search for legitimacy, an issue the author unfortunately does not address. That issue started from the early days of Islam and relates to the succession of the Prophet. When Prophet Muhammad passed away, he did not leave any indication about a line of succession, the criteria to be used, and the duration of each rule. The magisterial work of Wilfred Madelung addresses this issue (Madelung 1997). Islamic political thought centers on the form of rule, that is who should rule and how to rule, and this is because there was no clear-cut foundation except the rule of force. Legitimacy was sought in the Arabness of the ruler and his belonging to the tribe of Quraysh. Rivals from the House of Hashem disputed that fact and believed it belonged to the House of the Prophet and his direct descendants. This is the argument of 'Ali's partisans, called Shi'a as per the term in Arabic. The argument developed by Madelung was that the whole body of Islamic jurisprudence towards women was politically inspired to delegitimize the claim that the succession of the Prophet rests with his offspring, namely his daughter Fatima and Ali's wife. To date, this issue of legitimacy for ruling is still up in the air. Islamist groups compete to restore that legitimacy albeit with means that discredit most of their thesis. In the modern Arab world, the criteria for legitimacy have significantly

changed, but the legitimacy of the political system remains an active point of contention among competing groups and among the Arab people. This issue is also not addressed in the book.

The other cause of the decline of Islamic civilization is fragmentation among Muslims, whether at the political or jurisprudential levels, or even at the nationalist level. There are institutions created to rally Muslims, such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. However, they have failed to rally Muslims because of the politicization of their agenda, dominated by Arab petro-monarchies with their own brand of Islam (Wahhabism), not necessarily a rallying point! Fragmentation at the state level necessarily leads to weakness, and weakness leads to regression and further weakness until the ability to resist foreign invasions or economic subjugation is close to nil. However, there is a resurgence of Arab and Islamic consciousness, but this is an issue for another debate.

In the final analysis, the author argues that Muslims need to recreate an intellectual class capable of critical reasoning. A bourgeois class becomes an imperative to support such intellectual creativeness in the same way the old merchant class supported the scholars during the golden age. While one may dispute such a "recipe"; it remains to be seen whether the economic and social dynamics in play in modern Muslim societies are conducive to such an objective.

Largely, the book is pleasant to read and quite informative. It can be a valuable addition to the library of those interested in the world of Islam.

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