

BOOK REVIEW

Islam, Authoritarianisme dan Kemunduran Bangsa: Suatu Perbandingan Global dan Pensejarahan by Ahmet T. Kuru. Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Renaissance Front, 2024, 381 pp.

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This Malay edition of the book *Islam, Authoritarianisme dan Kemunduran Bangsa: Suatu Perbandingan Global dan Pensejarahan* translated and published by the Islamic Renaissance Front (IRF) in 2024, was from the English version *Islam, Authoritarianism and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison*, written by political scientist Ahmet T. Kuru from San Diego State University and published by Cambridge University Press in 2019. During his first visit to Kuala Lumpur for the book launch of the Malay translation that generated a lot of controversies, Kuru's impression of the host country as clean and organised a day after his arrival was probably soured by the incidents that subsequently unfurled. The first salvo originated from conservative Muslim academia who excoriated the author and his book as liberal and disrespectful of the ulama. The International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS), a centre known for promoting progressive ideas and a think tank of the MADANI government, rescinded the offer to host him for the book launch, most likely in response to complaints from both the conservatives and the Turkish Embassy in Kuala Lumpur. This was alluded to in press statements given by several social movements such as GERAK (Pergerakan Tenaga Akademik Malaysia, an association of Malaysian academics committed to educational reform) (FMT Reporters 2024) and Aliran (a reform movement in Malaysia promoting justice, freedom, and solidarity) (Aliran 2024) on the stifling of intellectual discourse in Malaysia.

This review aims at reviewing Kuru's ideas, especially those putatively controversial portions in the eyes of Muslim conservatives, including the Turkish embassy. The Islamists see the world in black and white: Islam and *Thāghut* (evil). They attribute Muslim suffering around the world to the failure to live in a state prescribed by Allah—an Islamic State—a state that upholds the sovereignty of Allah and implements sharia or Islamic laws. They contend that the sharia, as interpreted and implemented by pre-modern Muslim scholars and jurists respectively, is a fixed canon that defies time and place, even if certain rulings appear unjust to the human intellect or the faculty of reason. To them, it does not require much of human intellect to approximate God's justice. This seems to be in stark contradiction to the view of the great medieval scholar Ibn al-Qayyim (a student of Ibn Taymiyya) who said it loud and clear in *al-Turuq al-Hikmīya* 1/13 that:

Allah Almighty has made clear by many of His laws that the purpose is to establish justice between His servants and for people to behave fairly. Whichever path leads to justice and fairness is part of the religion and does not contradict it. (Elias 2013)

In his seminal book *I'lam al-Muwaqqi'in* 3/11, he said:

Verily, the sharia is founded upon wisdom, and welfare for the servants in this life and the afterlife. In its entirety it is justice, mercy, benefit, and wisdom. Every matter which abandons justice for tyranny, mercy for cruelty, benefit for corruption, and wisdom for foolishness, is not part of the sharia even if it was introduced therein by an interpretation. (Elias 2012)

There seems to be a dissonance between today's Islamists and Ibn al-Qayyim. But the eclipse of sharia in many Muslim countries nowadays, which many Islamists see as the reason for the failure of Muslims to thrive, was actually not due to the abandonment of sharia itself but due to repression as a result of Western colonisation (*isti'mār*), one of the reasons behind the Muslim world's underdevelopment. Hence, in order to retrieve the glory of yesteryears, we have to return to Islam. This solution has been proposed by many Islamists, with Sayyid Qutb probably the most famous among them. The slogan has been "*al-Islām huwa al-hāl*"—Islam is the solution, which was the motto for almost all Islamists in the East and West. Similar slogans led to the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 that culminated in overthrowing the Shah of Iran. Although the revolution initially brought great changes to Iranian society, what we see today is the discontent and disillusionment with the revolution, especially among the youths. Seeing this unfulfilled promise of the revolution, the unattractive appeal of Islamism, and the unstoppable rise of new politics in Turkey in the early 21st century, Kuru wrote an

important paper “*Muslim politics without an Islamic State*” that was published by Brookings Doha Center in 2013. This publication is worth revisiting since it heaps praises on the Justice and Development Party (AKP: *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) government in Turkey as a model to be emulated by other Arab Islamist parties in the region. This is in contrast to the book we are currently reviewing where Kuru criticises the AKP government’s transformation into an authoritarian regime. This, I believe, explains the AKP regime’s unhappiness with Kuru, which led to their intervention. However, it also means that Kuru is not only an academic but also an intellectual. He speaks truth to power, an important signifier of an intellectual. As Edward Said puts it, intellectuals “are not professionals denatured by their fawning service to an extremely flawed power” but rather, they are those who provide “an alternative and more principled stand” (Said 1994, 71).

In his article on “*Muslim politics without an Islamic State*”, Kuru celebrated AKP’s success in practising Muslim politics without seeking the establishment of an Islamic state as a worthy example to be emulated by all Arab Islamists in the region. While he cited a few compelling reasons to back up his claim, the most important is the AKP’s acceptance of passive but not assertive secularism. Indeed, there exists multiple interpretations of secularism, but AKP defines it as “being neutral towards all religious groups” (Kuru 2013, 2–3). A passive secular state is not anti-religious but guarantees religious freedom. Passive secularism requires the state to assume a passive role in accommodating the public visibility of religion. This is in contrast to assertive secularism where the state plays an active role in excluding religion from the public sphere and making it a private affair. This is the main misunderstanding of many Islamists, particularly in Malaysia, who often accuse the IRF of promoting Kemal Ataturk’s secularism without understanding the concept of a secular state that we are actually promoting. In line with Kuru, we believe that there is no need to formally name the state “Islamic” in order to promote Islamic values and principles in politics since we already have enough so-called Islamic states that fail to uphold Islamic principles in their everyday politics. Kuru revisited this issue at a small gathering with IRF activists in Kuala Lumpur recently with a talk entitled “*Can passive secularism be a middle ground between assertive secularism and Islamism?*” (IRF 2024a).

Returning to the book under review, Kuru explained that the main reason for writing it was to address the issue of the Muslim world’s backwardness. In the Preface, Kuru wrote about the exchanges between his father and a Turkish army general whom they hosted for dinner which left the former quite upset, way back in the summer of 1989. During the debate, the general insisted that only Protestant nations truly contributed to modern civilisation, while Muslim nations were only consumers. As expected, Kuru’s father Ugur, a provincial chairman of then Turgut

Ozal's party, the Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*), disagreed with the assertion and cited several examples of Muslim contributions to world civilisation. But the debate left a very deep impact on Kuru. After learning from his mother the next day about what happened the night before, the debate pricked his curiosity. Kuru subsequently read in his father's library a Turkish translation of Walter Kiaulehn's *The Iron Angels: Birth, History and Power of the Machines from Antiquity to the time of Goethe*. Kuru thought that he had found the answer after reading the book but his father disagreed by saying "You should read at least ten to fifteen more to say that." That was how he began searching and reading about this topic until he wrote the current book that has almost 1,000 references, some of them in Arabic, a language that Ahmet Kuru masters as Director of the Centre of Islamic and Arabic Studies at San Diego State University.

This particular book consists of two parts: present and past. As Kuru said during his talk to the IRF activists, since he is not a historian, he normally starts his books with the present to be followed by the past. This book has five maps portraying the early Muslim world; the Muslim empires of Ottoman, Safavid and Mughals; and the European colonisation of the Muslim world. Additionally, it features five tables that depict the various issues described in the texts including secularism and sharia in the 49 Muslim countries; the rents, taxes, and rentier states; and the comparative historical development between Muslims and Western Europeans. The first part abounds in facts and figures, showcasing the socioeconomic and political condition of the Muslim world. The author uses empirical methods backed by statistical data to comparatively study the status of Muslim-majority countries with regard to the prevalence of authoritarianism and the concomitant low levels of socioeconomic development as compared to world averages. A few critics have pointed to colonisation as being responsible for the backwardness of Muslim nations. While admitting that colonisation played a significant role in delaying progress among Muslim nations, Kuru argued that the decline in the Muslim world predated Western colonisation. Nevertheless, this stagnation was not inherently due to the religion of Islam itself. As a reminder, we were once a proud global community that housed the *Bayt al-Hikmah* (House of Wisdom)—a remarkable confluence of the intellectual richness of diverse scholars and thinkers from different geographies, cultures, and religions.

In the second part of the book (the past), Kuru dwells on his idea on what actually caused stagnation and underdevelopment of the Muslim world vis-à-vis the prevalence of dictatorship in Muslim-majority countries. After a long deliberation, Kuru came to the conclusion that the state-clergy alliance, which developed in the 11th century, is the most significant factor. According to Kuru, during the golden age of Islam from the 7th to 11th century, the Muslim world experienced

a period of rapid development and civilisational progress as a result of the relative independence of scholars and merchants from the court of the rulers. However, the situation gradually changed in the 11th century. The Abbasid caliphs started a new wave of Sunnisation by declaring wars against any groups who did not conform to their understanding of Islam, including the rationalist theologians (the Mu'tazilis), Muslim philosophers, and other heterodox groups, declaring them apostates and deserving of death. The ulama and military rulers somehow developed a kind of reciprocal relationship where the ulama legitimised the state while the rulers supported them financially. This kind of alliance marginalised the independent scholars and merchants, who were themselves the foundation of socioeconomic development. Consequently, from the 18th to the 19th century, the ulama normally opposed any development and change in order to maintain their monopoly over Islam. Conversely, in Western Europe, a different kind of transformation took place: separation between church and state authorities coupled with the expansion of universities, which led to the emergence of the intellectual class. Moreover, the growth of the merchant class continued to fuel the engine of the European renaissance.

Needless to say, a discussion of the book will be incomplete without looking at what riled the Muslim conservatives on the one hand, and the Turkish Embassy on the other hand. It was Kuru's criticism of al-Ghazali, one of the most revered ulama among the conservatives, for promoting an epistemology sidelining reason, that forms the basis of anti-intellectualism among the ulama, Islamists, and Sufi shaykhs, that spurred the anger in the first scenario. Kuru wrote extensively on *Al-Ghazali and the Decline* from pages 108–112 in the original English version and from pages 142–148 in the Malay translation. He quoted Ziauddin Sardar, among others, who remarked: “[T]here is little doubt that al-Ghazali made a major contribution to the downward spiral of Muslim civilizations” (p. 142). However, his criticism of al-Ghazali's Asha'ari occasionalism was probably the most profound. Kuru cited that in *Tahāfut al-Falasifa* (The Incoherence of the Philosophers), al-Ghazali discussed the burning of cotton in contact with fire and concluded: “The one who enacts the burning by creating blackness in the cotton...is God, either through the mediation of His angels or without mediation” (p. 143). He suggested that while it is a personal choice to accept this idea or not, but epistemologically, when it becomes a dominant approach, it would definitely hinder scientific development. Besides making people fatalistic, it undermined the idea of cause and effect. In other words, it hindered scientific development and progress. In addition to his rejection of causality, al-Ghazali presented non-religious sciences as a potential threat to faith, and philosophers as almost categorically irreligious. While admitting the existence of alternative views that deny al-Ghazali's role as the main cause of Muslim intellectual stagnation, Kuru

questioned the dominance of the more orthodox interpretation of al-Ghazali at the expense of alternative interpretations. To Kuru, the answer lies in power relations. Al-Ghazali and the Nizamiyya madrasas were part of a powerful coalition of orthodox Sunni ulama and the military state. Al-Ghazali, in the author's view, not only contributed to this alliance but also received its support. Therefore, the main contribution of al-Ghazali to the ulama-state alliance was his theoretical role in the formation of Sunni orthodoxy. In fact, al-Ghazali consistently defended the idea of the religion-state alliance. He even wrote in *al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad* (Moderation in Belief): “[I]t has been said that religion and sultan are twins, and also that religion is a foundation and the sultan is a guard: that which has no foundation collapses and that which has no guard is lost” (p. 112). Nonetheless, during his interview with an IRF Research Fellow regarding the claim that there was no science in the Muslim world after al-Ghazali refuted the idea of causation and that al-Ghazali was the main cause of scientific and intellectual stagnation in the Muslim world, Kuru rejected this simplistic claim. According to him, no man—even someone as important as al-Ghazali—can stop an entire civilisation. Kuru is adamant that we cannot simply blame one scholar for the huge problems of the Muslim world spread over four different continents (IRF 2024b).

Now let us look at what infuriated the Turkish Embassy that led to their intervention in pressuring IAIS to cancel the book launch, besides being probably complicit in the near-arrest of Kuru at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) during his departure. The reason is in the second chapter of his book under the subtopic Ulama-State Alliance, from pages 42–45 in the original English version and pages 56–60 in the Malay translation. The past Bruce E. Porteous Professor of Political Science at San Diego State University made a scathing attack on Erdogan's regime. Turkey used to be no different from many other Muslim countries, where governments have full control of the mosques to regulate the ulama and legitimise their rule. The secularist government of Turkey established *Dinayet* (the Directorate of Religious Affairs) in 1924 for this purpose. But when Erdogan came to power, he continued to manipulate this *Dinayet*, instead of reforming it as a centralised institution under government control. In about 100,000 mosques nationwide, the *imams* continued to recite Friday sermons composed by the *Dinayet* office, and during election time, these sermons turned into propaganda for Erdogan's regime. Erdogan also implemented a list of authoritarian measures including confiscation of thousands of citizens' private property, and jailing of tens of thousands under dubious terror charges. Yet, Kuru asserted, Erdogan continued to receive undivided support from the Islamic actors, including prominent ulama and Sufi scholars. In another instance, Kuru claimed that even in Turkey, without oil rents and with European Union candidacy, Erdogan has built a semi-rentier system by receiving international loans and selling Istanbul's lands in order to

finance his statist and authoritarian regime based on a new form of state-ulama alliance. Admittedly, such strong criticism of those in power was bound to cause much consternation among the officials of the Turkish Embassy. But then, this is a hallmark of an intellectual. Not surprisingly, no single statement was ever issued on this particular incident with regard to the cancellation of his talk either by IAIS or the Prime Minister himself, who is known to be a very close friend and ally of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and in whose country's embassy he had sought refuge in 2008 (*Reuters* 2008).

It is sad that although the new Madani government promised an open space for debate, foreign intellectuals are not immune to harassment by local authorities. Undoubtedly, it is imperative to remind the current government that disagreements, criticisms, and condemnations are all part and parcel of democracy; no one should be harassed or arrested simply because they have a different opinion. Having independent thoughts, and articulating them, is not a crime. Finally, despite its heavy criticism of the state-ulama alliance, this book is to be read by those who are interested to understand the cause of the deplorable state of the Muslim ummah. Whether we agree or disagree with Kuru's arguments is beside the point. We must learn to act with civility when engaging with differences.

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