

## Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment

Why do Muslim-majority countries exhibit high levels of authoritarianism and low levels of socioeconomic development in comparison to world averages? Ahmet T. Kuru criticizes explanations which point to Islam as the cause of this disparity, because Muslims were philosophically and socioeconomically more developed than Western Europeans between the ninth and twelfth centuries. Nor was Western colonialism the cause: Muslims had already suffered political and socioeconomic problems when colonization began. Kuru argues that Muslims had influential thinkers and merchants in their early history, when religious orthodoxy and military rule were prevalent in Europe. However, in the eleventh century, an alliance between orthodox Islamic scholars (the *ulema*) and military states began to emerge. This alliance gradually hindered intellectual and economic creativity by marginalizing intellectual and bourgeois classes in the Muslim world. This important study links its historical explanation to contemporary politics by showing that, to this day, the *ulema*–state alliance still prevents creativity and competition in Muslim countries.

Ahmet T. Kuru is Professor of Political Science and Director of the Center for Islamic and Arabic Studies at San Diego State University. He is the author of award-winning *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey* (Cambridge 2009) and co-editor (with Alfred Stepan) of *Democracy, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey* (2012). His works have been translated into Arabic, Chinese, French, and Turkish.

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# Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment

*A Global and Historical Comparison*

AHMET T. KURU

*San Diego State University*



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To Uğur (1935–2004), who I wish could have read it, and  
Yusuf and Yunus Ali, who I hope will read it one day.

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## Preface

As well as I can remember, I was having breakfast with my parents in Iskenderun (Alexandria), on Turkey's Mediterranean coast, on a hot day in the summer of 1989. My father seemed upset, and when I asked why, my mother replied that he had had a challenging debate the night before. My father then explained to me how a secularist Turkish army general we had hosted for dinner had broached the issue of Muslim backwardness around midnight, after I had gone to sleep. The general argued that it was only Protestant nations who truly contributed to modern civilization, while Muslim nations were mere consumers of it. My father, provincial chairman of then Prime Minister Turgut Özal's right-wing party, defended Muslims' importance in world history by listing their early contributions to mathematics and other fields. The polarized discussion had left my father frustrated. Intrigued by the debate, I read a book in my father's library, the Turkish translation of Walther Kiaulehn's *The Iron Angels: Birth, History and Power of the Machines from Antiquity to the Time of Goethe*. I immediately told my father that by reading that book I came to understand how Western Europeans surpassed Muslims in technology. He smiled at me in a compassionate way and said, "You should read at least ten to fifteen more books to say that." This is how I began and have continued to read on the subject of the present book, and why it is dedicated to my father, Uğur Kuru.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am thankful to my teachers, colleagues, and friends for their valuable contributions. The late Bernard Weiss taught me Islamic political thought when I was a graduate student about two decades ago. The late Alfred Stepan, Robert Hefner, Reşat Kasaba, Joel Migdal, and Daniel Philpott inspired and encouraged my comparative work on religion–state relations. I have had rewarding intellectual engagements with Gökhan Bacık, Özgür Koca, and Fevzi Bilgin

about Islam and politics. Mikhail Alexseev, Ronnee Schreiber, Hisham Foad, and Ranin Kazemi were among my numerous critically engaging colleagues at San Diego State University (SDSU). Several SDSU fellowships, including the UGP and Hostler grants, supported my research. I am grateful to the SDSU librarians, particularly Edward DiBella and Joan Goodwin, for their assistance with my research.

I thank Cambridge University Press's editor Robert Dreesen and content manager Robert Judkins for their patience and professionalism, and the two anonymous referees for their helpful recommendations. I owe thanks to several colleagues for their helpful comments and criticisms on earlier drafts of various chapters, including Aaron Glasserman, Maya Shatzmiller, Timur Kuran, Khaled Abou El Fadl, Michael Cook, Frederick Starr, Daniel Chirot, Randall Collins, Jan Luiten van Zanden, Louise Marlow, Hasan Kayalı, Nader Hashemi, Şürü Hanioglu, Stephen Dale, Charles Kurzman, Ziauddin Sardar, Burak Eskici, Kristin Fabbe, Kadir Yıldırım, Peter Adamson, Yüksel Sezgin, Erga Uğur, Anas Malik, Rıza Yıldırım, Renat Shaykhutdinov, Mehdi Aminrazavi, Serhan Tanrıverdi, and Naser Ghobadzadeh. I appreciate the hospitality of several friends during my research in Turkey, Qatar, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, and Kazakhstan in various periods between 2010 and 2013.

I am blessed with the unconditional love and support of my mother Çiçek Kuru, brother Mehmet, and sisters Mine and Lale. My wife Zeynep has always been a source of love, inspiration, and joy. Our sons Yusuf and Yunus Ali have already begun asking comparative questions about the West and the Muslim world – two inextricable parts of their life. They will probably continue to ask many of the questions explored in this book; that is why it is dedicated to them too.

#### METHODOLOGY, THEORY, AND NORMATIVE CONCERNS

This book employs comparative historical methods while comparing certain periods of Islamic history with each other as well with particular periods of Western European history.<sup>1</sup> One method it uses is “process tracing,” which traces the causes of change by dividing a historical process into smaller and analytically comparable periods.<sup>2</sup> The book also uses the methodological tool of “path dependence”<sup>3</sup> to examine how ideational and material conditions in particular historical periods, especially “critical junctures,”<sup>4</sup> shape subsequent conditions by creating a path dependence. For example, in order to examine currently low levels of literacy in Muslim societies, the book traces the historical origins of this problem to these societies' three-century-long delay in establishing printing presses. Muslim societies did not take advantage of the printing

<sup>1</sup> See Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003; Sartori 1970; Collier 1991.

<sup>2</sup> George and Bennett 2005, 205–32.

<sup>3</sup> North 1990, esp. 93–4, 112; Mahoney 2001, esp. 4–11; Pierson 2000; Thelen 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Kuru 2009, esp. 27–8; Lerner 2014.

technology during and even after the critical juncture of the mid-fifteenth century, when first presses were established in Western Europe. This historical experience created a path-dependent literacy gap between Muslim and Western European societies.

There are two main theoretical approaches in the literature on the problems of violence, authoritarianism, and underdevelopment in Muslim countries. The first one is the essentialist approach, which points to Islam as the main source of Muslims' current problems. Several critics of Islam in the West as well as in Muslim countries have adopted various versions of this approach. They define certain "essential" characteristics of Islamic texts or history and then single out these alleged essentials as causes of the problems. The second one is the post-colonial or anti-colonial approach, which is more international in its analysis. It stresses Western colonization of Muslim countries and ongoing Western exploitation of their resources as reasons for Muslim societies' contemporary problems. Many ideological groups in Muslim countries, from Islamists to secularists, have shared this anti-Western perspective.<sup>5</sup>

This book takes issue with both of these approaches. It criticizes essentialism by documenting that between the eighth and twelfth centuries Muslim societies exhibited great philosophical and economic achievements, which indicates Islam's compatibility with progress.<sup>6</sup> The book also criticizes the anti-colonial approach by emphasizing that in the mid-nineteenth century, when the pervasive colonization of Muslim lands by Western powers began, Muslims had already suffered multiple political and socioeconomic crises.

My theoretical approach focuses on the relations between religious, political, intellectual, and economic classes. In both the Muslim world and Western Europe, these class relations have resulted in societies' success or failure in the intellectual and socioeconomic spheres. Early Muslims' intellectual and economic achievements were led by independent intellectual and bourgeois classes. Starting with the eleventh century, however, class relations changed in the Muslim world; the ulema–state alliance emerged and it sidelined intellectuals and the bourgeoisie.

My theoretical approach emphasizes the connections between ideas and material conditions. Historically, the ulema–state alliance was based on some Sasanian-inspired and quasi-Islamic ideas, as well as certain material conditions, including the militarized land revenues and state control over commerce. The

<sup>5</sup> In the words of Timur Kuran (2011, 302), the Middle East "region as a whole has not yet come to terms with the reasons why it turned into an economic laggard. The idea that outsiders are somehow responsible for the Middle East's underdevelopment resonates with much of the population, including secularists who consider Islamic law backward and obsolete."

<sup>6</sup> Referring to this early period, Fernand Braudel (1993, 73) writes, "For four or five centuries, Islam was the most brilliant civilization." Braudel (1982, 559) gives credit to Islam for early Muslims' economic development: "Western civilization did not benefit as Islam did from the bonus of a benevolent religion."

links between dominant ideas and material conditions are also visible today; Islamist ideology and rentierism (particularly based on oil rents) are both critical to understanding various authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world.

It is necessary to make some generalizations about Muslim countries in order to find solutions for their common problems. Initially helpful post-structuralist, post-colonial critiques of Orientalist stereotypes<sup>7</sup> have been exaggerated and used by apologists to obscure Muslims' cultural and ideological problems; this has prevented many scholars from critically analyzing Muslim societies. On the one hand, this book criticizes simplistic over-generalizations, especially what I call "statistical Orientalism," which draws sweeping conclusions about Muslims based on mere numerical correlations without any in-depth analysis. On the other hand, the book tries to conduct a comparative and critical analysis of Muslim countries.

In some of my presentations of this book project, critics have claimed that democracy and development were façades for Western imperialism, and that my analysis would therefore serve the Western agenda in Muslim countries. I have had two responses to this challenge. First, I wish Western policy-makers had a consistent policy of promoting democracy and development in Muslim countries, which is generally not the case. Second, surveys show that the overwhelming majority of the people in Muslim societies favor democracy as the best form of government.<sup>8</sup> Most people in Muslim countries see violence, authoritarianism, and underdevelopment as problems; this book is not imposing a Western perspective upon them.

#### SPELLING, NAMES, AND TRANSLATIONS

This is primarily a book of political science, not history. It analyzes contemporary problems and explores history to understand their origins. That is why it begins with chapters on contemporary issues and then moves to historical chapters.<sup>9</sup> Dates throughout the text, including quotations, are given with reference to the Common Era. In order to reach a broader audience, I use Arabic names and words with their forms in English without using diacritical marks (e.g., sharia, instead of *shari'a*). I italicize words rarely, only if the word is not used in English (e.g., *bay'a*). I use diacritical marks for 'ayn (‘) and for hamza (ʾ) only in italicized words, in direct quotations, and in the Bibliography. Referring to Islamic scholars, I write "ulema," instead of "ulama," because the former better indicates the proper Arabic pronunciation without the diacritical marks.

For Arabic names, I generally do not use the definite article "al." In Ottoman words and names I use the letter "k" instead of "q," the modern Turkish usage.

<sup>7</sup> Said 1979. See also Asad 2003, esp. ch. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Pew Research Center 2013, 32; Fish 2011, 245; Inglehart and Norris 2003, 64.

<sup>9</sup> I used the same chapter order, contemporary before historical, in my previous book, Kuru 2009.



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For pre-modern persons, I use the most well-known version of their names, which may be one (e.g., Biruni) or two (e.g., Harun al-Rashid) words. If the person is well known by both long and short versions of his or her name (e.g., Ahmad ibn Hanbal/Ibn Hanbal), or if there is more than one person with the same name (e.g., Razi), I use the longer version the first time and whenever it helps with clarification. If a pre-modern person's name has two words (e.g., Yunus Emre), the second word functions like a last name in the Bibliography and Index.

In the Bibliography, the overwhelming majority of translations are from Arabic into English; I specify the translations from languages other than Arabic and into languages other than English. For Arabic sources, I mostly rely on English translations. Unless noted otherwise, translations in the text and footnotes from original Arabic, French, and Turkish sources are mine.

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