

## The Origins of Decline: An Inquiry into Authoritarianism and Underdevelopment in the Muslim World

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### Abstract:

The Muslim world has undergone many transformations over the passing centuries. While displaying high levels of socioeconomic development, Muslims have created a substantial intellectual legacy between the ninth and twelfth centuries. Today, however, the predicaments of Muslim-majority countries are notorious for chronic authoritarianism and underdevelopment. In *Islam, Authoritarianism and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison*, Ahmet T. Kuru sets out to expose the historical origins of this particular disparity. In doing so, he criticizes the latent essentialist and post-colonial theoretical approaches that respectively point to Islam and the advent of Western colonialism as the root causes of far-reaching violence, authoritarianism, and underdevelopment in the Muslim world. Alternatively, Kuru situates the origins of these pervasive elements within the persisting alliance of the *ulema* (orthodox Islamic scholars) and military states in the Muslim world. Eventually, Kuru argues that this alliance undermined intellectual and economic productivity in the Muslim world over centuries by marginalizing intellectual and bourgeois classes.

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When thinking and arguing about the Muslim world today, one particular question continuously revolves around not only the studies of different disciplines such as political science, sociology, and history but also public discussions: Why do Muslim-majority countries embody higher levels of authoritarianism and underdevelopment than the world on average? This question becomes further complicated considering the fact that Muslims had once enjoyed a 'Golden Age,' an era of immense intellectual, cultural, and economic production during their early history. Therefore, one might rightfully ask: What were the causes of Muslim world's ensuing decline? When and how did authoritarianism and underdevelopment start to emerge and ultimately become its chronic predicaments? Ahmet Kuru, professor of Political Science at the San Diego State University, tries to answer these uneasy questions in his recent book *Islam, Authoritarianism and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison*. In this study, Kuru argues that the origins of the Muslim world's decline can be traced to the eleventh century when Islamic orthodoxy began to mature in the form of an alliance between religious scholars (the *ulema*) and military states. According to Kuru, this alliance had gradually undermined the intellectual and economic dynamism of the Muslim world by marginalizing the classes of thinkers and merchants. Furthermore, the book aims to display how this orthodoxy persisted long after the eleventh century, to this day within the Muslim world, hindering intellectual and socioeconomic productivity.

The first part of the book, "Present," consists of three short chapters which are "Violence and Peace," "Authoritarianism and Democracy" and "Socioeconomic Underdevelopment and Development." Throughout these three chapters, Kuru attests to high levels of violence, authoritarianism, and underdevelopment in the Muslim world by presenting global data

indexes of human rights violations, violence, democracy, and education. In the book's "Preface" and first chapter, "Violence and Peace," he also challenges two predominant theoretical approaches on the Muslim world's enduring problems of violence, authoritarianism, and underdevelopment.

The first of these approaches is the essentialist approach, which perceives Islam as the main source of these problems. Based on its texts or history, the proponents of this approach argue that Islam has some characteristics that are inherently violent, absolutist, and inimical to progress (p. 20). Kuru objects to this approach by indicating that violence is a general human problem, as almost every religion or ideology had violent episodes in their histories (p. 21). Besides, between the eighth and twelfth centuries the Muslim world had been the heartland of remarkable intellectual and socioeconomic achievements (Preface, xv). The second approach is the anti-colonial or post-colonial approach, which appeals to the advent of Western colonial occupation and exploitation since the nineteenth century as the main cause for the Muslim world's contemporary problems (p. 16). In response, Kuru stresses the fact that Western colonization alone cannot fully account for violence and underdevelopment. This approach downplays the role of regional and internal dynamics in the materialization of these patterns (p. 19). Complementarily, he suggests that the Muslim world had already suffered from devastating socioeconomic and political crises long before the unfolding of Western colonization (Preface, xv). As such, Kuru contends that both approaches fail to sufficiently elucidate the inception of these problems.

As stated above, Kuru thinks that the origins of the Muslim world's contemporary problems lie in the establishment of Islamic orthodoxy in the form of an *ulema*-state alliance. In the second part of the book, "History," which consists of four chapters, he tries to reveal the very peculiar historical development of this alliance. In the fourth chapter, "Progress: Scholars and Merchants," Kuru argues that scholars produced major intellectual achievements between the eighth and eleventh centuries because they were mostly independent from state influence as diverse groups of merchants sponsored their activities (p. 80-81). However, negative conditions started to emerge in Muslim lands between the tenth and eleventh centuries. This period witnessed the establishment of the state-centric land and revenue distribution system *iqta* within the Muslim world. This system marginalized the merchants and undermined their economic potential (p. 98-99). Eventually, this thwarted the opportunities of private funding

for Islamic scholars and, gradually, led them to accept state patronage. In the fifth chapter, “Crisis: The Invaders,” Kuru investigates the effects of devastating invasions of Mongols, Crusaders, and Timurids within the Muslim world between twelfth and fourteenth centuries. He observes that the need for survival and order had strengthened the *ulema*-state alliance amid the invasions (p. 126-127). In the sixth chapter, “Three Muslim Empires,” Kuru focuses on the structures of *ulema*-state alliance in three powerful Muslim empires – the Ottoman, the Safavid and the Mughal – between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. He argues that all of them accommodated similar structures of *ulema*-state alliances which prevented the emergence of independent scholars and marginalized the merchants (p. 168-171).

Meanwhile, in Europe, the cooperation of intellectuals and bourgeoisie led the way for transformative events like the Renaissance, geographical discoveries, and dissemination of the printing press (p. 185-193). Lastly, in the seventh chapter “Western Colonialism and Muslim Reformists,” Kuru subjects the developments in the Muslim world between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to critical analysis. He indicates that although there were efforts for modernizing reforms by certain rulers of the Ottoman Empire and Egypt, these could not overturn the decline at the face of the intellectual and socioeconomic superiority of Europe (p. 216-224).

Ahmet Kuru’s *Islam, Authoritarianism and Underdevelopment* is well-structured as each chapter predicates its content on a specific theme or historical period. His methodology successfully balances historical analysis with quantitative-statistical data. The book’s citations also reveal his immense research over a diverse array of sources. Having said these positive aspects, it seems also necessary to reflect one critical caveat. In the book, Kuru argues that the *ulema*-state alliance in the Muslim world is sustained to this day. However, his analysis of how this alliance has been sustained in the twentieth century, especially in the wake of the establishments of secular nation-states in the MENA region, could have been more detailed and nuanced.

## Die Ursprünge des Niedergangs: Eine Untersuchung über Autoritarismus und Unterentwicklung in der muslimischen Welt

### German Abstract:

Die muslimische Welt hat im Laufe der Jahrhunderte viele Veränderungen erfahren. Zwischen dem 9. und 12. Jahrhundert weist die muslimische Welt ein hohes Maß an sozioökonomischer Entwicklung und hat ein bedeutendes intellektuelles Erbe geschaffen. Heute sind die Probleme der mehrheitlich muslimischen Länder jedoch für chronischen Autoritarismus und Unterentwicklung berüchtigt. In dem Werk *Islam, Authoritarianism and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison* möchte Ahmet T. Kuru die historischen Ursprünge dieser speziellen Ungleichheit aufdecken. Dabei kritisiert er die latent essentialistischen und postkolonialen theoretischen Ansätze, die jeweils auf den Islam und auf das Aufkommen des westlichen Kolonialismus als Hauptursachen für weitreichende Gewalt, Autoritarismus und Unterentwicklung in der muslimischen Welt hinweisen. Im Gegensatz dazu verortet Kuru die Ursprünge dieser allgegenwärtigen Elemente innerhalb des anhaltenden Bündnisses der *Ulama* (orthodoxe islamische Gelehrte) und der Militärstaaten in der muslimischen Welt. Schließlich argumentiert Kuru, dass dieses Bündnis die intellektuelle und wirtschaftliche Produktivität in der muslimischen Welt über Jahrhunderte hinweg untergraben hat, indem es intellektuelle und bürgerliche Klassen an den Rand gedrängt hat.