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Book Review:

The Role of Islam Religious Scholars in Politics

Islam and the Arab Revolutions: The Ulama Between Democracy and Autocracy by Usaama al-Azami (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022)

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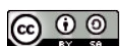
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Usaama al-Azami's *Islam and the Arab Revolutions: The Ulama Between Democracy and Autocracy* represents a significant contribution to the growing body of literature examining the political role of religious scholars in the modern Muslim world, particularly in the context of the Arab Spring. Published in 2022 by Oxford University Press, the book seeks to disrupt centuries-old presumptions over the 'apolitical' or 'quietist' nature of most of these traditional ulama and lays bare how intimately involved ulama are within broader systems of politics, either as the carriers of dissent or tools of authoritarian rule. Al-Azami's work is distinguished not only by its bold argumentation but also by its nuanced methodology, combining textual analysis of sermons and public statements with broader theoretical reflections on Islamic authority, legitimacy, and political theology.



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Al-Azami frames his analysis by situating the Arab Spring within the *longue durée* of Islamic political thought, arguing that the 2011 revolutions were an event of rupture and continuity. He hypothesizes that the revolutions of the people provided a window of opportunity for a new style of political discourse among religious scholars, one which both invoked and challenged classical Islamic conceptions of power and legitimacy. The ulama, as guardians of Islamic scholarship and hegemony, found themselves pulled in competing directions: on the one hand, some of them, such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, mobilized under the people's democratic aspirations, and on the other, others, such as Ali Gomaa and Abdallah bin Bayyah, found themselves with counter-revolutionary and authoritarian forces. Al-Azami's thesis is clear and provocative: the ulama have never been apolitical, and their positioning in the wake of the Arab Spring reveals the deeply political nature of their theological commitments.

One of the book's greatest strengths is the close examination it gives to scholars individually and their political inclinations. Al-Azami tediously traces the ideological trajectory of key figures, paying special attention to Yusuf al-Qaradawi as a representative figure of revolutionary Islamism. Qaradawi's rejection toward parts of democracy system that are against Islamic values, together with his stance against military takeovers and with his defense of popular rule, functions as an opposition against prevailing Western and some Muslim accounts which portray Islamic thought as authoritarian. The author describes Qaradawi's intellectual journey to merge traditional Islamic beliefs with contemporary political values since the Egyptian uprising and post-2013 military takeover.

The book displays a negative viewpoint about scholars Ali Gomaa and Abdallah bin Bayyah through al-Azami's characterization of them as authoritarian religious figures who utilize religion for state objectives while reinforcing repression policy and working against Arab Spring populist movements. The analysis by Al-Azami delivers a harsh evaluation of religious scholars who apply their theological reasoning to remove political opposition while upholding social stability through *fitna* warnings.

and ruler obedience. Contrary to the common belief the study proves that traditional ulama consciously embrace authoritarianism based on their theological commitments rather than being non-participatory.

The excellence of al-Azami's research lies in his precise approach to methodology. He chooses to analyze first-hand Arabic texts instead of depending on Western interpretations found in second-hand sources, studying religious lectures, legal documents and media statements. This allows him to analyze not only what the ulama say but how they say it, tracing shifts in rhetoric, terminology, and theological emphasis. His grasp of Islamic theological and legal debate—honed over decades of study in Western universities and classical Islamic institutions—is what enables him to place these arguments in categories that few Western scholars can.

But the book is not without its flaws. One potential criticism is that it is elitist, dealing with only elite ulama, particularly those with access to the state or the world stage. While figures such as Qaradawi and Gomaa are certainly powerful, they represent merely a part of the broader picture of religious leadership within the Muslim world. Grassroots intellectuals, imams from local communities, and transnational Islamist movements were also strategically placed throughout and after the Arab Spring. Al-Azami, by taking an elite discourse focus in his analysis, risks reproducing a top-down vision of Islamic political thought that elides the fragmentation and diversity of religious authority within contemporary Muslim societies.

Moreover, the book tends to consider the ulama as political actors whose movements can be explained in great part by their engagement with state power. While this is undoubtedly a key factor, it may well not fully explain the richness of their theological motivations. For example, most scholars actually believe that it is important to prop up a strong ruler—even an autocrat—in order to prevent civil war and collapse of society. These articles, perhaps politically convenient, also spring from long-standing Islamic tradition that places a greater premium on stability and

societal calm than on political idealism. Al-Azami sees these perceptions but too often interprets them through an almost purely political lens, undervaluing at times their seriousness of theology.

One place the book can be improved is with more comparative cases beyond the Arab world. The subtitle of 'Islamic Exceptionalism' implies a broader Islamic spectrum, but the comparative framework is predominantly Egyptian, and, to a lesser extent, Tunisian, Saudi, and Gulf states. Having a relatively circumscribed geographic scope detracts from the generalizability of the book. Scholars and students interested in the role of ulama in Indonesia, Pakistan, or Turkey, for instance, will find limited direct application. While al-Azami's theoretical framework is certainly adaptable, a more comparative approach would have enriched the book's analytical depth and broadened its appeal to a wider audience.

One of the more original features of the book is that it challenges the prevalent paradigm of secularism in political science and Islamic affairs. Al-Azami criticizes authors like Noah Feldman and others for taking it as a given that Islamic political theory must be anti-democratic unless shaped according to secular liberal ideals. Instead, he argues that the Arab Spring revealed a potential indigenous Islamic democratic possibility, one grounded in Islamic principles rather than Western liberalism and among them *shura* (consultation), *ijma* (consensus), and *maslaha* (public interest). This book is timely and welcome in that it forces scholars to reconsider epistemological assumptions behind debates on religion and democracy in Muslim societies.

Al-Azami's work also speaks to broader debates about religious authority and legitimacy in the modern world. His analysis elaborates how religious scholars selectively use traditional Islamic sources for distinct political purposes which exhibits the contested nature of religious dialogue. The process of establishing authority between scholars and their public and state allies evolves through continuous negotiations between all three parties. The insights presented in this examination have

significant value for research of Islam and the broader field of religion and political science.

Al-Azami uses a scholarly method while communicating clearly to always demonstrate his arguments with reliable proof. The author ensures equilibrium between academic research standards and ethical concern in his critiques against ulama who validate state brutality. The author employs strong scholarly rhetoric mainly during his examinations of academics who support authoritarian systems. Although the situation supports this level of interest it appears the book's authority could be increased for chemically skeptical readers through an approach that maintains detached scholarly standards.

This book makes a significant contribution to both the disciplines of Islamic studies and political science. The work summons simplistic dualistic dichotomies between secular and religious elements and democratic and authoritarian framework while providing detailed historical knowledge about the role of ulama in modern politics. Students of Islamic religious authority and politics in the 21st century should make it mandatory to read this book.

The analysis presented by Usaama al-Azami in *Islam and the Arab Revolutions* proves to be an extensive exploration of ulama political dynamics post-Arab Spring. The study has its boundaries mainly in geographical selection and concentrating on elite figures yet it successfully reshapes discussions about Islamic authority while political involvement. The knowledge that al-Azami presents about Muslim scholars emphasizes their political position while showing their religious beliefs thus provides essential guidance for understanding modern struggles between Muslims across the Muslim world.