

A CASE FOR PLURALISM: THE ALEVIS' LATEST STRUGGLE AGAINST DISCRIMINATION

This article is an attempt to elaborate on recent political and sociological discussions between Alevis and the state institutions. The current stage of the "Alevi issue" is composed mainly of four problem areas: difficulties encountered in the transmission of the belief, demands that "cemevis" be officially recognized as houses of prayer, debates revolving around compulsory courses on religion in secondary education, and discriminations that Alevis experience both in everyday life and in the workplace. Outlining the current state of public debates in these four problem areas, this article calls for an exploration of paths toward pluralistic secularism and democratization for all citizens, including the Alevi community.

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levism is a belief system that is experienced as an adventure. I do not use the word “adventure” to allude to the fundamentals of the belief itself, or to the way its religious practices are carried out. Nor do I mean to define “the essence” of Alevism. As a matter of fact, it is not easy to give a concise definition of Alevism without doing injustice to its irreducible diversity, as regional and historical differences have left their imprints on Alevism belief systems and their society. What I describe as an adventure is, rather, Alevis’ resistance to the centralization and assimilation policies of the Sunni mainstream.

The Sunni mainstream’s centralization policies first began during the Ottoman period in the 16th century. Although there is a general perception that these policies relaxed with the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, in reality the situation is very different. With the proclamation of the Republic, Alevis –who had been subjects of the Sultan before becoming citizens– were still treated as “marginal others,” because the framework of citizenship espoused by the Republican state was Sunni-centered. Moreover, the Ottoman and Republican periods did not have the same impact on all Alevis. For example, Alevis living in Central and Northern Anatolia –the region that used to be called the “roman province” (*Vilayet-i Rum*)– were slaughtered in the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514 during the Ottoman period, while the Kurdish Alevis living in and around Dersim in the Eastern Anatolia region were massacred in 1938, as a result of Republican governments’ resettlement policies. Finally, Arab Alevis living predominantly in and around southern Turkey’s Antakya, İskenderun, and Adana provinces suffered a different sort of discrimination.¹ In short, even though the historical memories Alevis recall and relate are diverse, what they have in common is that they all suffered under centralization policies. These policies attempted to organize faith and religious affairs under a hierarchical structure as part of centralized mechanisms and institutions of the state. This process typically includes the creation of a state employed clergy (*ulemas* in the case of Sunni sect). In the Ottoman Empire this process was completed in the mid-16th century.² After the declaration of the Turkish Republic, *Diyanet*³ took over the same function.

1 In the Ottoman period, Arab Alevis did not have a distinct legal status, however, their social status was considered very low. For instance, it was forbidden for them to buy *the Koran*, even though they were the only Alevi group who could read and understand it in its original language, Arabic. In the republican period, when “Westernization” and Turkification became the rule of the game, they were (and still are) regarded as social and cultural pariahs. See: Hakan Mertcan, *Türk Modernleşmesinde Arap Aleviler: Tarih, Kimlik, Siyaset* [Arab Alevis During Turkish Modernization: History, Identity, Politics] (Adana: Karahan Yayınları, 2013).

2 Rıza Yıldırım, “Barış Sürecine Diğer Taraftan Bakmak: Bir fay hattı (Türk-Kürt) kapanırken (Alevi-Sünni) diğeri derinleşiyor mu?,” [Looking to the Peace Process from the Other Side: Is one Fault (Turkish-Kurdish) Line closing while the other (Alevi-Sünni) is deepening?], *Türkiye Günlüğü*, Vol. 114 (2013), pp. 60-69.

3 The state institution *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı* [The Directorate General for Religious Affairs] serves the believers of the Hanefi Sunni sect of Islam in Turkey.

Alevis living in different geographical regions resist centralization policies in different ways. While doing so, they also have to struggle to continue practicing their beliefs. Currently, the “Alevi issue” encompasses four main problem areas: difficulties encountered in the transmission of the belief, demands that “*cemevis*” be officially recognized as houses of prayer; debates concerning compulsory courses on religion in secondary education; and discriminations that Alevis experience both in everyday life and in the workplace. Furthermore, for Alevis, Alevism is as much a religious belief as it is a value system for realizing social and economic justice. This being the case, a discussion of Alevism has to address not only the damage inflicted upon this religious belief system, but also the plural identities of the Alevi community as shaped by the processes of rapid urbanization.

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Recent initiatives were met with mixed reactions from Alevi non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These initiatives included workshops organized by the AKP government under the rubric of the “Alevi opening”, the discriminatory discourse the AKP adopted against Alevis in tandem with the escalation of the Syria crisis, and the Gülen Movement’s project of building a complex containing a Sunni mosque and a *cemevi* side-by-side.⁴ Those who are not familiar with the specifics of the Alevi faith may find the measures AKP proposed to solve the Alevi problem reasonable. It is also possible to defend the Mosque-*Cemevi* project on the basis of it being an “egalitarian” move. It is obvious, however, that the tension that exists between successive central governments and the Alevis has its roots in historical differences, for which there is still no concrete solution in sight. How these differences will be dealt with will not only determine the future of the Alevi faith, but will also shape the public conception of freedom of thought, conscience, and belief, as well as the practices and institutions of secularism and democracy in Turkey.

Who Should Control the Transmission of Belief?

How the transmission of Alevi faith will be actualized is significant because it shapes Alevis’ relations with the powers that be. The republican law that banned *tekkes* and

⁴ Further discussions can be found in: Zeynep Alemdar and Rana Birden Çorbacıoğlu, “Alevis and the Turkish State,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No: 4 (2012), pp. 117-124; Nil Mutluer, *Aleviler* [Alevites] Serial published in *Milliyet*, 13-27 January 2013; Murat Borovali and Cemil Boyraz, “Turkish Secularism and Islam: A difficult Dialogue with the Alevis,” *Philosophy and Society*, Vol. 40 (2014), pp. 479-488.

zaviyes (Islamic monasteries) in 1925 also abolished traditional Alevi institutions such as the *dergah* (dervish lodge), *ocak*, and *dedelik* – a development that made it difficult to maintain Alevism as a religious belief system. In Alevism, the people who are responsible for the transmission of the faith are the *dedes*, *pirs*, and sheikhs. Even though there are some regional differences, the *dede-talip* relations are mostly shaped in *ocaks*, through direct personal interactions.⁵ Moreover, the *dede*'s guidance is not limited to belief-related issues; they also help *talips* with their legal and social problems. One of the most important institutions related to the transmission of Alevism as a belief system and wisdom is the *dergah*. Today, the transmission of the Alevi belief itself is, for all intents and purposes, interrupted.⁶

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In addition to state policies, rapid urbanization has also had an impact on Alevism. *Ocak* members, who have been dispersed across different cities and neighborhoods, cannot reach their *dedes* easily. Urbanization has also harmed two other important mechanisms of the Alevi belief: *musahiplik* and *düşkünlük*. *Musahiplik* is the brotherhood among men and their families, who declare their intention to practice Alevism as a religious belief. Since

these men are responsible for each other's deeds, *musahiplik* is an important mechanism of social supervision.⁷ *Düşkünlük*, for its part, is a mechanism of crime and punishment; as such, it is an important instrument for the realization of justice in society. If a crime is committed, the accused is questioned during the *cem* ritual.⁸ As these two mechanisms are instruments of social supervision, the social and economic structure of society and the establishment of justice are also affected. Since *müsahips* now rarely live in the same city –even if they do, it is almost impossible for them to be informed of all the deeds of others– *müsahtiplik* can hardly be considered a functioning mechanism under urban conditions. Likewise, due to the

5 *Dede* is the term used by Turkic Alevis; Kurdish Alevis use the term *pir*; while Arap Alevis use *sheikh*. *Talip* is what a believer is called in Alevism.

6 In the field research I carried out in June-August 2013 in 12 cities in Turkey, *dedes*, *pirs*, and sheikhs elaborated on how the 1925 law harms Alevism.

7 Interview with Alevi *dede* Hüseyin Dedekargınoğlu, 15 July 2013, Ankara. Further discussion on *musahiplik* can be found in his book: Hüseyin Dedekargınoğlu, *Dede Garkın Süreğinde Cem [The Cem in Dede Garkın's Path]* (Ankara: Yurt Kitap Yayın, 2010).

8 Interview with Ali Yıldırım, 16 July 2013, Ankara. For Yıldırım, homicide, forgoing Alevi belief, adultery, divorce, lying, insulting, theft, and abuse of animals are among such crimes. Further analysis can be found in his book: Ali Yıldırım, *Alevi Legal System and Düşkünlük* (Istanbul: Doruk Yayınları, 2010).

loosening of interpersonal ties under urban conditions, *düşkünlük* is almost extinct as an effective societal mechanism as well.

Further detrimental to the transmission of Alevism are the educational institutions of the Turkish state. Alevi children, who receive a very weak education in their own belief system through Alevi's own institutions and mechanisms, are required –as are all Turkish citizens– to attend courses on religion that are framed by a Sunni understanding of Islam. In 2007, Hasan Zengin

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won a case against Turkey at the European Court of Human Rights by arguing that his daughter, Eylem Zengin, had the right to be exempted from obligatory religion courses. The ECHR's *Zengin v. Turkey* decision generated a general optimism that may open –not only for Alevi, but also for other Muslims who look upon such courses with disfavor– a way to be exempted from them.⁹ While several court decisions under domestic law allowed Alevi children to be exempted from attending obligatory religion classes, these decisions did not help to soothe the psychological pain of children who had to wait in school corridors during religion classes, feeling alone and excluded; nor did they ease the social pressure felt by their families.

Those who were hoping that obligatory religion courses would finally be abolished were bitterly disappointed in the school year 2012-13. Not only was the obligatory course on “Religious Culture and Ethics” not removed, but the Ministry of Education actually introduced three new elective religion courses into high schools' curricula: “The Koran,” “The Life of the Prophet Muhammad,” and “Fundamentals of Religion.” There are, of course, other elective courses on subjects such as epistemology, human rights and democracy, literary composition, and philosophy, but these courses are usually not taught because of a shortage of qualified teachers. Yet there is no such shortage when it comes to religion courses. Thus, if the other elective courses are not available, students are obligated to take four courses on religion. Further, there is a section on Alevism in the curriculum of the mandatory religion course, but this section is usually covered hastily in the final weeks of the school term, and Alevi find it very unsatisfactory. Alevi are also concerned that, in a society with profound prejudices against Alevism, the content of what is taught about Alevism in schools is as important as how it is taught.

⁹ The Lausanne Treaty officially recognized Armenians, Greek Orthodox, and Jews as minorities and officially exempted them from otherwise obligatory religion courses.

Conflicting Proposals

While the above discussion reflects the current situation, in the past, the AKP government publicly announced two proposals directly related to Alevism as a belief system: establishing an Institute of Alevism and paying regular state salaries to *dedes* out of the government budget. When one considers that even the word “Alevi” was banned from official discourses until 10 years ago, and the insufficiency of academic studies on Alevism, the suggestion of establishing an institute to focus on the subject in depth, seems to be a very good one. It is also a fact that most *dedes* continue practicing their beliefs, living under very difficult economic conditions in cities to which they had to migrate. However, it is obvious that both proposals will harm the already injured Alevi belief system and social structure even more.

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The proposal regarding the establishment of an Institute of Alevism where *dedes* would be trained is likely to cause problems. Alevism, as a belief, is orally transmitted from one generation to the next. As such, it demonstrates considerable regional diversity. A formal institute is not likely to allow for the preservation of such diversity. Molding a belief system to fit the formal framework of an institute, particularly a belief system like Alevism in which life-style is a significant part of the religious experience,

would undeniably harm it. In the event that an institute to train *dedes* is established, the following questions would inevitably arise: Who will develop its curriculum and how? What would be the status of *dedes* who do not choose to be trained by the institute? The idea of paying regular state salaries, in turn, brings to mind the case of the *Diyamet*, which has functioned as an ideological apparatus of the state since its foundation in the early Republican era. In recent times, the *Diyamet* is known to take inconsistent stances on various religious, social, cultural, and political issues. This inconsistency has its roots in the *Diyamet*'s historical inability to distance itself from the political positions of changing governments. That said, the idea of paying regular state salaries to *dedes* raises concerns about their autonomy, which is often subject to the political pressure of governments.

The AKP's proposals outlined above seem to be suspended for the time being, yet it should be kept in mind that the state is prone to adopt such centralization policies

towards Alevism at a moment's notice. In my interview with Hacibektaş *Postnişin* (Head of Dervish Lodge) Veliyettin Ulusoy, he clearly summarized his concerns both about the proposals for the Institute of Alevism, and the idea of paying state salaries to *dedes* as follows:

Steps are taken so skillfully. Previously we were killed. Now, our belief is being killed. It's losing its substance. Take the idea of paying state salaries to *dedes*: *Dedes* serve their *talips*. Their service is not limited to guiding *cem* rituals, it also involves solving their social, legal problems. A *dede* knows their *talips*. If *talips* feel like giving something to a *dede*, they give *hakkullah*, which is a voluntary gift. But this is not a must. As a matter of fact, real *dedes* do not care whether they get it or not. They give service for the sake of faith. However, if *dedes* are given a regular salary by the state, this won't be the case anymore. If a *dede* becomes a civil servant, he will have to do what he is asked to do. Additionally, we have different approaches to *namaz* –prayer– and fasting [than Sunnis]. What would happen if these rituals were demanded of us?¹⁰

Reducing the Demands to the Mosque-Cemevi Dispute

Alevis have long been demanding that *cemevis* be given legal status as places of worship, but this demand effectively came to public attention only recently, when the Gülen movement and the Cem Foundation collaborated on a construction project to build a complex with a mosque and a *cemevi* side by side. One could suggest that this was one of the instances in which the AKP government –which lost its willingness for reforms to solve Alevis' problems after having completed the Alevi workshops of 2010– found itself trapped in a public opinion dilemma by a move initiated by the Gülen movement.

AKP representatives have even politically attacked and publicly offended Alevis and Alevism on a number of occasions.¹¹ Yet with the initiation of the mosque-*cemevi* project, the AKP found itself in the difficult position in which it could neither distance itself publicly nor adopt the project as official state policy. This was evident in the fact that, on the one hand governmental minister Faruk Çelik attended the ceremony celebrating the initiation of the construction project, while on the other hand another government minister, Bekir Bozdağ, publicly emphasized that it was not a state project.

¹⁰ Interview with Veliyettin Ulusoy, 4 August 2013, Hacibektaş.

¹¹ A few examples of such of attacks can be found in the discriminatory language adopted against Alevis with the escalation of war in Syria, the proposed naming of the third bridge over the Bosphorus Yavuz Sultan Selim – the name of the 16th century Ottoman Sultan who is accused of perpetrating massacres against Alevis.

Some Alevis do not welcome the project and have protested it for months due to the painful memories of centralization, discrimination, assimilation, and slaughters that it recalls. Moreover, constructing mosques and *cemevis* side by side serves to emphasize the differences in the beliefs of Alevism and Sunni Islam. Representatives from various Alevi institutions were embroiled in a bitter controversy, some endorsing the project and some opposing it. Although the common demand of all Alevis from the state is the recognition of *cemevis* as place of worship, this controversy reflects the diversity of political opinion among the Alevi population when it comes to engaging in public debates with the political mainstream.¹²

Current discussions in the mainstream media aim to reduce Alevis' demands and problems to the recognition of *cemevis* as place of worship, yet what is meant by recognition is not simply the recognition of a building. The *Cemevi* is the inevitable product of urbanization and, as such, it represents Alevi society in the urban space. In rural areas, *cems* are traditionally carried out in one of the houses in the neighborhood or village. Because of the 1925 law on banning *tekkes* and *zaviyes*, *cemevis* have been officially categorized as "culture centers," where in addition to religious rituals, educational and cultural activities also take place. Non-practicing Alevis also participate in the activities of *cemevis*. While public discourse is preoccupied with discussing the legal status of *cemevis*, and how they ought to be constructed, the *cemevi* functions as the place of worship for Alevis. The significance of recognizing *cemevis* as place of worship lies in the fact that it will determine how the faith will continue its urban –or in Yıldırım's terminology modern– adventure and who will guide this adventure in the future.¹³

From Gazi to Gezi...

It is no coincidence that AKP's Adıyaman Deputy Metin Metiner associated the *cemevis* with "terrorism" during a recent televised debate about Alevi houses of prayer.¹⁴ Faced with discrimination in all aspects of their lives, Alevi youths have lost all hope for a future and employment, and have become increasingly political with the advent of urbanization. They have been actively taking part in various factions of leftist politics, which the state has associated with "terrorism" since the 1970s. Most recently, they were active in the forefront of the Gezi Park demonstrations. All those who lost their lives during the events were Alevis. The state and

12 For detailed account of how mosque-*cemevi* dispute has been reflected in the mainstream media see: Nil Mutluer, "No Negative News, But Discrimination: Media Report on Alevis between September-December 2013," *Hrant Dink Foundation*, No.3 (2014), http://www.nefretsoylemi.org/rapor/Eylul-Aralik2013_nefretsoylemi_ayrimcisoylem_raporu.pdf

13 Rıza Yıldırım, "Geleneksel Alevikten Modern Aleviliğe: Tarihsel Bir Dönüşümün Ana Eksenleri" [From Traditional Alevism to Modern One: Main Axes of a Historical Transformation], *Türk Kültürü ve Hacı Bektaş Veli Araştırma Dergisi*, vol.62 (2012), pp. 135-162.

14 "Tarafsız Bölge," [Neutral Zone], 7 September 2013, *CNN Turk*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MVb3dtmAAU>

government-aligned mainstream media degraded the participants of Gezi and the subsequent demonstrations. While doing so, they sometimes claimed that Alevis were the perpetrators.

Although the degradation of the Alevis had been going on through policies of oppression since the Ottoman era, it became systematic after the declaration of the Republic under the guise of equal citizenship.¹⁵ Alevism was not considered a distinct faith during the founda-

tion of the Republic, and the demands of Alevis were subsumed under the Sunni Islam-centered state philosophy. Alevis suffered discrimination in many areas, from everyday life to education, government bureaucracy, and business. Alevi villages did not receive any utilities. They were also blamed for many social and political ruptures, from the Ottoman era to the present day. State-affiliated massacres against Alevi citizens in places like Maraş, Çorum, Sivas, and the Gazi quarter in Istanbul, where the Alevi population is predominant, were not resolved with justice or fairness. Although technically considered to be equal citizens, Alevis have consistently suffered systematic discrimination. Because they were not legally classified as minorities, they were unable to prove such discrimination and seek compensation. With the equal citizen discourse but clear lack of justice on the one hand, and the assimilation of faith and sociological structure on the other, Alevi actors have been prompted to establish different modes of relationships with the Turkish government.

Some chose to reduce Alevism to the positions that various Alevi groups' take *vis-à-vis* political parties and actors on the Turkish public scene – such as being voters of the Republican People's Party (CHP). Although Alevis are questioning their relationship with the CHP today, this is done covertly rather than explicitly.¹⁶ On the other hand, some Alevi groups chose to openly criticize dominant political actors such as political parties, civil movements like Gülen's, various Alevi organizations, and other civil institutions. Critics include legal organizations as well as some armed groups that are considered illegal by the state.

The government set out to solve the Alevi problem and initiated the Kurdish process. However, it very nearly branded the Alevis as the new “bad boys” in town.

15 The examples of degrading discourse can be found in: Aykan Erdemir et al., *Türkiye'de Alevi Olmak* [Being Alevi in Turkey], (Ankara: Alevi Kültür Dernekleri, 2010).

16 It should be emphasized that the political dynamics of Kurdish Alevis are closer to the Kurdish political movement.

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Instead of admitting injustices committed and offering apologies and compensation, the government continues to exclude Alevis. The memory of these occurrences and the motives these created for Alevi youth are perhaps best expressed by Menekşe Poyraz, who lost her daughter Zeynep during the violent events of 1995 in the Gazi quarter: “Had Sivas Madımak not occurred, Zeynep would not have been in Gazi and would not have died.” Gazi youth are also certain: “Had Gazi not occurred, we would not have supported Gezi.”¹⁷

What the Future Holds...

How the multiethnic Alevi population reacts to the current, polarized environment will be an important indicator for the future of democratization in Turkey. The short path is to resort to identity politics, which is prone to polarization and susceptible to provocations, and even violence. Although the current political environment necessitates meeting demands associated with identities, it is obvious that identity politics will not be a long-term solution. This is because focusing on identities has a tendency to absorb all the issues surrounding the debate; indeed, such a focus usually pushes people away from other issues at stake. Furthermore, it is a fact that some Alevi institutions diverge due to differences in political objectives.

The other path is to explore ways to achieve pluralistic secularism and democratization for all citizens, including the Alevi community. This requires focusing on building a new constitution that will protect freedoms of thought, conscience, and belief without discriminating on the basis of religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and/or class. This also requires a systematic and widespread struggle against discriminations suffered by Alevis and other faith groups to-date. Many Alevi institutions are expressing their views by endorsing this objective vocally. Alevi institutions must proactively engage in an internal critique about how best to deal with the association within the rest of society of Alevis with certain violent fringe groups.

The most important step is to put pressure on the state so that it launches comprehensive measures to stop all forms of discrimination against Alevis. Forcing the state to become more transparent is a decisive factor in combating all forms of discrimination not only against Alevis but all excluded religious, ethnic and/or gender, groups in Turkey. If the centralizing reflexes of the state could be overcome and a pluralistic structure evolved, this could have implications for other key issues such as redefining secularism in pluralistic terms. Otherwise, the resistance of Alevis against centralization will continue with the addition of new modes of discrimination.

17 Nil Mutluer, “Yol Bir Yürek Binbir” [One road, a thousand and one hearts], *Milliyet*, 15 September 2013, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/alevi-olmak-hayata-yenik-baslamak/gundem/detay/1764007/default.htm?ref=OtherNews>