CHAPTER TWELVE

ALEVIS IN TURKISH POLITICS

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Introduction

The religious scene in modern Turkey is often described in a way that conceals diversity. In so far as any reference to religious minorities is made, these groups are assumed to solely consist of non-Muslims, ignoring the sizeable Muslim minority groups. This misrepresentation of the religious character of modern Turkey's population can be traced back to the Peace Treaty of Lausanne of July 1923, which effectively shaped the foundation of the Republican regime in the international arena. In its definition of religious minorities whose rights are to be protected by the new Republican regime, the Treaty of Lausanne is exclusively concerned with non-Muslim groups. No similar explicit recognition can be found for Muslim minorities, whether ethnic groups, such as the Kurds, or religious groups, such as the Alevis.[1] Both the Kurds and the unrecognized religious groups posed a formidable challenge to the young Republic in its formative years. The Republic answered this challenge by systematically denying the existence of ethnic or sectarian differences among the Anatolian populations. Over the years, a hegemonic discourse of ethnic and religious homogeneity, which denies recognition to ethnic and sectarian minorities, developed in the country. In the aftermath of the Cold War, as Turkey's domestic as well as international policies underwent radical changes, due especially to closer relations with the European Union (EU) and the start of membership negotiations in 2005, the hegemonic discourse and the related public practices have increasingly been challenged. There is today a growing recognition

[1] The section concerning minority rights of the treaty clearly stipulates that the articles therein "shall be recognized as *fundamental* laws, and that no law, no regulation, nor official action shall conflict or interfere with these stipulations, nor shall any law, regulation, nor official action prevail over them." In Article 38, the assurances are granted that "full and complete protection of life and liberty of all inhabitants of Turkey without distinction of birth, nationality, language, race or religion." As such, all minority rights, be it of Muslim or non-Muslim origin, could find protection under the Lausanne Treaty.

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of the country's ethnic and religious diversity, even though limitations and severe pressures upon certain groups still exist.

The Turkish religious scene is marked by two distinct cleavages. The first is based on sectarian differences between Sunnis and Alevis (White and Jongerden 2003; Shankland 2003); the second is based on lifestyle and cultural differences among the Sunnis, between those who adopt a lifestyle in accordance with the tenets of Sunni Islam and those who take a more secular (*laik*) view of life. Alevis have historically been the minority which has stood almost uniformly behind the secularist regime since the beginning. Alevis consider the secularist principles as their protection against Sunni infringements upon their religious freedom. Among Sunnis, there are various conservative traditions which can be described as 'pro-Islamist'. They support a religious revivalism in reaction to the secularist policies of the Republican establishment. The two divides, between Sunnis and Alevis on the one hand, and among the Sunnis themselves on the other, are at the source of political tensions in the country. The protagonists here are, on the one side, the secularist state establishment and its centrist mass public support (consisting primarily of Alevis) and, on the other, the Sunni peripheral masses of pro-Islamist inclinations.[2]

The Alevis are thus not a powerless minority; in the center-periphery dichotomy they side with the center, in other words, with the secularist state establishment. Hence, whatever marginalization they may suffer from, due to the sectarian division, is partially compensated by the power gained as they position themselves on the right side of the cultural divide between 'religious' versus 'secular'. Yet, the nature of the secular regime prevents the full recognition of Alevi identity, Alevi religious and cultural practices, and Alevi political preferences concerning the recognition of their identity. Our aim in this chapter is primarily to explore the contours of political empowerment and disempowerment among Alevis in Turkey. We will first give a brief description of Alevism, followed by details about population

[2] We adopt here the center-periphery framework of Şerif Mardin (1973). According to this framework, Turkish politics is built around a strong and coherent state apparatus, or the "center", run by a distinct group of elites dominated by the military and bureaucracy. The 'center' is confronted by a heterogeneous and often hostile 'periphery', composed mainly of peasantry, small farmers, and artisans. Kemalist secular principles form the founding ideology of this center which runs a nationalist modernization program. The 'periphery' is built around hostile sentiments towards the coercive modernization projects of the center and includes regional, religious, and ethnic groups with often conflicting interests and political strategies.

characteristics; we will then look into Alevi political alignments in the Republican era, focusing particularly on the most recent developments.

The Alevi Population

Except for a couple of serious clashes in the 1970s and 1980s, the historical animosities between the Alevi and Sunni communities have been kept mostly under control during the Republican era.[3] Nevertheless, as Alevis have moved into urban areas over the years, they keep their sectarian identity concealed in the public space. As a result, a solid assessment of the size of their population is practically impossible. As John Shindeldecker notes:

> You cannot count them according to what language they speak, because most of them speak Turkish as their mother tongue. You cannot count them according to where they live, because there are Alevis in almost all provinces of Turkey. Alevis have no distinguishing physical characteristics such as skin color, hair color or eye shape. They wear no traditional dress that sets them apart from anyone on the street. In fact, unless an Alevi tells someone he is an Alevi, it is difficult to discern. (Shindeldecker 1996: 4)

Population estimates vary widely: from 10 to 12 million at the lowest, to one-third of Turkey's population at the highest (Shindeldecker 1996; Shankland 2003; Kehl-Bodrogi 1992; Zeidan 1999). While census data do not tell us much about the sectarian divide, those gathered at the micro-individual level through academic surveys are much more informative. Çarkoğlu (2005) provides a first attempt at diagnosing Alevism in a nation-wide survey based on field research. Only about 3 percent of the respondents said they were Alevis when asked about their sectarian background. Such a low percentage is indicative of identity concealment among Alevis (Çarkoğlu and Kalaycığlu 2009). Two additional rounds of questions were asked about people's beliefs, in order to diagnose their sectarian background and to show that indirect methods function better in uncovering identity concealments. In the first round, a list of names of famous religious figures, including men of historical and theological significance for the Alevis, was

[3] Notable exceptions to this peaceful coexistence of the Alevi and Sunni communities can be found in bloody clashes between the two communities in the late 1970s in Çorum and Kahramanmaraş. In early July 1993 an Alevi group called Pir Sultan Abdal Association sponsored a conference in Sivas. Sunni reactionists put fire to the hotel where the conference was being held; as a consequence 37 participants died from flames and smoke. (Doğan 2007; Sokefeld 2008; White and Jongerden 2003).

provided. Respondents were asked to point at the most important religious figures for them; twenty percent of the respondents picked the Alevi names. In the second round, the respondents were asked if they had pictures of religious leaders in their homes. This question was used as a distinguishing criterion, as only Alevis tend to display pictures of Caliph Ali and the twelve imams. Thirteen percent confirmed that they had the pictures of these Alevi leaders. These percentages indicate that Alevis constitute a larger proportion of the Turkish society than the 3 percent arrived at through direct questioning about sectarian identity. The survey findings show that it is practically impossible to obtain definite answers to direct questions regarding the sects of the respondents. A more indirect method, meanwhile, shows that approximately 15 percent of the respondents display some signs of Aleviness. These figures are overall national estimates, we do not have any breakdowns by provinces.

More useful is the recent publication by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy of a map of Turkey with estimates of the Alevi population by provinces.[4] When we use this map in conjunction with the 2008 population figures released from TUIK (Turkish Statistical Institute) on January 2009, we arrive at an Alevi population estimate for the whole country. According to this estimate, approximately half of the Alevi population has now moved to metropolitan areas; the other half still live in the provinces that were originally predominantly Alevi. As Alevis increasingly move into urban areas, the provinces are becoming more mixed. Such a long-term trend has the positive effect of easing the historical tensions between the two communities which now live side by side, especially in metropolitan settings. On the negative side, sectarian mixing renders the Alevi population more socially and politically disempowered. As a result of geographic dispersion, Alevis are now faced with challenges regarding political representation both on the national and the local level. Political mobilization is more arduous nowadays, when Alevis live in cities among large Sunni populations, than previously when they lived in rural communities.

Alevi Doctrine and Religious Practices

A peculiar feature in the case of Alevis is that there is no generally accepted definition of Alevi identity.[5] Alevism is considered by some as a branch of

[4] See http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/mapImages/4616b6127d683.pdf.

[5] The name Alevi derives from Arabic, and means "of Ali" or "pertaining to Ali". It thus links the Alevi tradition to the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law and cousin Ali, who along

Islam that differs from other, more orthodox, orientations only in that it leaves wider room for various heterodox traditions and cultural elements; others, meanwhile, look upon Alevism not as a religious but rather as a cultural orientation. Even young immigrant Alevis in Istanbul are said to view Alevism as a 'life-style' rather than a religion (Seufert 1997: 172). Although Alevism share many common features with orthodox Islam, for example veneration of the Prophet Muhammad and emphasis on his family (most important of all, his son-in-law Ali), it has certain characteristics that differentiate it from both Sunni and Shia Islam, in particular the Shia Islam practiced at present in Iran. Although Shia Islam and Alevism look highly similar in their respect for the trinity of Allah-Muhammad-Ali and for the Twelve imams, they diverge significantly in religious practices. For instance, like Sunnis, Shia use mosques for worship; meanwhile, most Alevis do not attend mosques at all, but make use of *cem* houses, an exclusively Alevi feature. Shia also fast during Ramadan, again as Sunnis do, while Alevis have a different fasting period during which they recall the death of Hussein, the son of Caliph Ali, in Karbala.

The religious identity of Alevis can best be delineated in reference to the Sunni majority in Turkey. The oneness of God is commonly accepted by both groups, but Alevis tend to reject a vision of God as an "angry master who delights in forcing the slaves he has created to obey strict religious rules or face the penalty of burning for eternity" (Shindeldecker 1996: 4). Although they respect all major holy books and their prophets, and see the Quran as the last and most inclusive book that was 'let down from heaven', Alevis tend to interpret the Holy Quran more esoterically and mystically. Accordingly, they emphasize the understanding of the Holy Quran rather than its recitation, and call for the Quran to be read in Turkish. Besides the Quran, the most important sources of Alevi belief are the mystical poems and musical ballads (*deyişler, nefesler*) that largely remain part of an oral tradition rather than being recorded in writing. The Alevi practice of replacing the strict structure of 'orthodox religious teachings' with un-structured oral tradition is the main reason for other Muslims' skepticism as to the nature of Alevism's identity (Melikoff 1998; Erman and Gökar 2000; Koçan and Öncü 2004). There are also significant differences in beliefs and worship practices between the Sunni majority and Alevis. To cite just a few:

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with the Prophet is the central figure in the Shia tradition. Shindeldecker (1996) notes that the term *Alevi* fits a linguistic pattern in Turkish for the followers of Moses (Musa in Turkish or Musevi for Jews) and followers of Jesus (Isa in Turkish or Isevis). Turkey's Alevis should not be confused with the Alawi of Syria with whom they only share a veneration of Caliph Ali and little else. See Shindeldecker (1996), for different definitions regarding Alevis.

Alevis do not have a literal understanding of heaven or hell; divine judgment according to Alevi belief is not determined on the basis of religious worship or ritual participation but on inter-human behavior. Thus, not all Alevis necessarily observe ritual prayer (*namaz*), mosque attendance, fasting, pilgrimage and almsgiving (*zekat*).

A central Alevi communal worship practice is the *cem*, or *ayini cem*, which is held in an assembly house, a building or a room set apart for such meetings. These buildings have no distinctive signs, e.g. minarets, to distinguish them as worship places and there is no call to prayer corresponding to the Sunni *ezan*. A *cem* meeting is held by an elderly man or *dede* who, besides holding a spiritual and moral authority among Alevis, also has a claim of direct descent from the Prophet Muhammed through one of the twelve imams (*seyyitlik*). Traditionally, the *dede*s' authority used to extend over whole villages. It is not clear how this has changed nowadays, with Alevis being scattered throughout Turkish cities, or gathered in small groups in these cities. As the Alevi patterns of settlement underwent rapid change so have also their centers of authority. For instance, previously *dede*s had the authority to solve conflicts among Alevis, and they could expel people who were found guilty through communal trials. To what extent *dede*s still retain this power in modern urban settings is unclear (Rossum 2008).

The complex relationship between Alevis and the Turkish public in general is reflected in the political sphere as well. None of the major political factions have genuinely sought to advocate for the rights of Alevis throughout the multi-party Republican history, perhaps to avoid the risk of hurting or alienating the overwhelming Sunni majority of voters. Although they have never embraced any major political party as their sole representative on the political scene, Alevis have usually supported the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* or CHP). This support is widely interpreted as a reflection of Alevi support for the official ideology of Kemalism, usually attributed to their fear of an Islamic state (Kehl-Bodrogh 2003). The Islamist parties and their governments have always been looked upon by Alevis as the main threats to their survival in Turkey. This suspicion has been clearly evidenced since 2002, when the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* or AKP) came to power as a single-party government. Although no single party has emerged as the Alevis' political representative, the leftist parties have frequently drawn attention to their situation in Turkish society. Hence, any republican and secularist policy against Islamist politics has involved at least a brief reference to Alevi presence in Turkey and their rights.

Alevism in Republican Turkey: A Brief Overview of Political Trends

Social and political oppression and isolation of Alevis can be traced back to the sixteenth century confrontation between the Sunni Ottomans and the Sufi-Shia Safavids which resulted in an Ottoman victory that pushed the Safavids out of Anatolia into Iran. With their protectors exiled in Iran, the Alevis or *Kızılbaş*—Turkmen followers of the Safavid Sufi order—largely retreated into isolation in remote Anatolian rural lands. Since then, their isolation has been a key factor in the shaping of their peculiar doctrine and social structures noted above. Survival strategies were necessary within the dominant and hostile Sunni Anatolian communities. The use of *taqiyya* or religious concealment under danger, a practice central to Shiism,[6] importantly contributed to the survival of Alevism in this environment (Kuran 1995; Bozkurt 1998; Çamuroğlu 2000; Selçuk, Şaylan and Kalkan 1994; Shankland 2003). Given this historical background, it is no surprise that the Alevi minority faced continuous discrimination by the central authority. As a result, the ambitions of the Kemalist Republicans to replace the Ottoman Empire with a modern and secular state were embraced enthusiastically by Alevis. However, the end result of their support for the Republic did not really meet the Alevis' expectations.

The Kemalist Republic of 1923 relieved the Alevis from considerable legal pressures. Within a few years, the new Republic no longer had an official religion in its Constitution. The daily problems concerning religious practice in *cem* houses and the socio-economic discrimination they had faced within the Sunni communities may have remained largely unresolved; nonetheless the new secular Republic was the very basis of Alevi security. From the very beginning of the multi-party Republican regime, Alevi support for the secularist principles and their ardent opposition to Islamist Sunni electoral traditions have been visible and significant. This state of mind brought the Alevis closer to the Republican left-wing. "Alevis have been the main allies of secularist groups, organizations and political parties as they have a direct interest in resisting the rise of Sunni Islamic fundamentalist influence" (Koçan and Öncü 2004: 477). The right-wing parties in Turkey have long kept their distance from the Alevi communities. While this might be due to the parties' fear of losing Sunni conservative support, the foremost reason is more likely to be a lack of ideological congruence between the conservative right-wing political orientation in

[6] See Firro and Loüer in the present volume.

Turkey and the deeply progressive, egalitarian, and left-wing orientation among Alevis in the post-1960 era (Çakır 1998; Seufert 1997; Koçan and Öncü 2004; Göner 2005).

As Turkey plunged into an anarchic fight between opposing armed groups in the 1960s and 1970s, Alevis' left-wing orientation became increasingly apparent. The leftists of this period were more concerned with class struggle within a socialist or communist ideological framework than with secularism, Kemalist principles or identity issues, all matters that would dominate the public agenda in the 1990s. At a time when the new urban Alevi communities were going through social/political transition, the rising left-wing ideology did not seem to recognize Aleviness, or any cultural or religious distinctiveness of Alevis. Its rhetoric focused exclusively on economic class struggle.

> Instead of being concerned with their own tradition, the Alevi youth joined the left in political struggles prior to 1980 and sometimes even physically attacked Alevi holy men, the *dedes*, for being rural conservatives. Alevi political activism pushed religious and identity issues to the background. The Alevis tended to see themselves as part of the national and international working-class. (Seufert 1997: 164)

The nature of the ideological armed struggle meant that involvement was particularly pronounced among the Alevi youth. Together with the pressures caused by migration to the cities, this resulted in a weakening of the communal cohesion that existed under the control of its traditional authority figures such as the *dedes* and the elders. As the country was heading towards a military regime, the Alevi communities of the late 1970s seemed to have lost their distinct cultural and religious character and increasingly adopted a working class identity.

The military junta of 1980 put an end to all the political parties, and their leadership cadres were jailed and banned from politics. Not surprisingly, labor unions and left-wing youth organizations also took their share of the beating. The implications of such oppression upon the left, that had represented an ideological comfort zone for the newly urbanized Alevi communities, were quite significant. The mobilization push provided by the left-wing class struggle rhetoric and the socialist explanations that emphasized class identities and relations were now displaced by cultural and religious argumentations focusing on the teachings and rituals of the Alevi belief (Erman and Göker 2000). This new emphasis on Aleviness brought forward a glorification of Alevi identity. Alevism thus was seen as even more "just, egalitarian and libertarian than socialism" (Poyraz 2005: 505).

Three factors explain this revival of Alevi identity: urbanization, or what Shankland (2003) describes as the effectual emptying of the rural Alevi communities; the decline and collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist bloc; and the continual rise of the pro-Islamist movement in Turkey, ending with its capture of the executive office as a single party government in 2002. When this occurred, the Alevis, out of their own will, opted not for exit but for the second option put forward by Hirschman (1970), that is, voice. They felt the need to make their sectarian identity explicit and emphasize it so as to make both the state establishment and the government aware that Turkish society is not exclusively Sunni, and that the Alevis need protection in the face of rising Islamism in the country.

From the early 1950s onward, urban settlements have increasingly attracted peasant communities in search of a better life. Typically these migrant communities have settled on the outskirts of the cities and formed what came to be known as shanty towns or *gecekondu* (literally 'settled over night') neighborhoods. From the perspective of formation and maintenance of Alevi identity, urbanization posed new challenges. The most important challenge for the mainly working class shanty town dwellers was the reshaping of, and emphasis on, a distinctive Alevi identity that could counter pressures to blend into the urban setting. The left-wing socialist or class-based identities which were all-inclusive, and thus ignored Alevi cultural peculiarities, became increasingly unacceptable in the new era. Alevi self-identification, with its emphasis on culture and faith, was becoming more appealing. With urbanization came better opportunities for education and economic advancement. These paved the way for a new Alevi bourgeoisie (Çamuroğlu 1998: 79; Şimşek 2004: 129). The priorities of this new middle class did not necessarily overlap with those held by Alevis with a more modest socio-economic status. Rather than stressing the difficulties in Alevi living conditions and the economic hardships experienced, members of the bourgeoisie were more concerned with issues such as self-identification. The Alevi bourgeoisie exhibited a high degree of sectarian awareness, and had the progress of the Alevis as their sole aim.

The collapse of the communist bloc, on the other hand, rendered socialist ideology outdated, as it symbolized the defeat of socialism/communism by liberal democracy throughout the world. Everywhere, claiming devotion to this ideology and its practical application was no longer appreciated and respected, and Turkey was no exception. As a consequence, the meaning of the left-right dichotomy, that had dominated both social and political life in Turkey for several decades, was replaced by rising identity politics.

The military takeover in 1980 already put a temporary end to the conflict between the left and the right in Turkey. To be able to control the left, which is regarded by the state establishment as the more dangerous of the two sides involved in this conflict, the military itself used Islam and embraced a policy called Turkish-Islam synthesis; through this the State and its institutions allocated and promoted a particular place to Islam, with a clear Sunni flavor, in the Turkish public sphere. More specifically, the declared policy of the 1980 junta to build a mosque in each village that did not have one effectively brought Sunni imams with a state salary and an official Sunni world view into all the Alevi villages (Zeidan 1999; Şimşek 2004). The exploitation of religion for political purposes was not a new concept for Alevis who have felt themselves threatened by policies based on religion since the 1950s. Yet, the direct glorification of Islam by the State itself was viewed by Alevis as the most dangerous of all their experiences. Over time, they seem to have decided that making their Alevi identity explicit and putting emphasis on it rather than on other social or political ideologies would be to their benefit, as this will remind the State of the existence of non-Sunni Muslims in the country.

Although the Turkish-Islam synthesis was part of a latent state policy during the 1980 regime, the Turkish State was never comfortable with the rise of social and political Islam outside of its immediate control. It was nevertheless obvious that the state establishment was unable to fully control the Islamization process it originally encouraged, at the beginning of the 1980s, in its struggle against left-wing tendencies in Turkey. The attitude of the State with regard to Islam changed considerably in the 1990s. The state elite, fearing that Islamism would grow out of control, took defensive measures against the rising tide of Islamic activism. One of the preventive measures adopted in the 1990s was to use Alevis to counter-balance Islamism. Alevis were considered suitable for such a role, as they were well known for lending "support to democratic and tolerant ideals, while shying away from some of the more fundamentalist practices found in the Sunni religion" (Poyraz 2005: 506). The Alevi stance towards democracy and secularism, in general, was congruent with the defensive standpoint of the Turkish State and its elite against political Islam. This fact fostered the alliance between the state elite and Alevis, to prevent the latter from being overrun by the rising Islamist forces. "A more rigid secular discourse began to be disseminated by various state institutions" (Koçan and Öncü 2004: 478) when, in 1996 a pro-Islamist party, for the first time in Turkish political history, had the chance to rule the country through a coalition government. "The support of Alevis were even more vital after February

1997, when the Turkish State declared open war on radical Islam" (Poyraz 2005: 512) after the experience of a short-lived government by an Islamist party as one of the coalition partners.

Given the dichotomization and polarization between Alevi identity and Islamist politics, the relationship between the AKP and Alevis deserves particular attention. The AKP is the most recent extension of the National Outlook (*Milli Görüş*) Movement, the group that has established all of the major Islamist parties in Turkey since mid-1960s. All have eventually been closed down for being against the secular principles of the Republic, and most of their members were banned from politics for certain periods. Yet, a core elite group has repeatedly re-created these parties under different names, each and every time. The AKP elite cadres come from a relatively younger generation within this movement; they tried hard to distinguish themselves from the rest of the movement immediately after their breakup with the older generation leadership of Necmettin Erbakan and his followers. The young generation Islamists argued that they have a more liberal and a more democratic stance compared to members of the earlier Islamist parties. They even insisted that the AKP was not an Islamist party and that they could be considered only as conservative democrats (Hale and Özbudun 2010; Yavuz 2009; Turunç 2007).

Despite all these discussions and various self-identifications made by members of the AKP, the popular opinion has always regarded the party as an Islamist one; so have the Alevis. Hence, during the seven years between 2002 and 2009, when the Turkish political scene was dominated by AKP governments, Alevis in Turkey have felt themselves under threat. This feeling of being intimidated might not, however, be as high as it was under the preceding Welfare Party's (*Refah Partisi*-RP) coalition government with the True Path Party (*Doğru Yol Partisi*-DYP). One immediate reason is the aforementioned new liberal re-orientation of the younger generation Islamists. However; a number of political openings by the AKP aiming to appeal to Alevis have apparently failed, and Alevi uneasiness seems to continue.

Alevis and the AKP Government

Two major factors explain this uneasiness between the AKP and Alevis. The first and perhaps more important is the ambiguous stance of the AKP leadership towards Alevi identity in Turkey. Admittedly, there have been some positive changes in the AKP's policies, such as the decision to

allocate a seat in the Turkish Grand National Assembly to the well-known Alevi historian and author, Reha Çamuroğlu, and to hold a couple of well-publicized meetings with the Alevi leaders. Most of the conciliatory steps taken by the AKP concern the month of Muharram and the incident of Karbala, when the son of Caliph Ali, Hussein, was killed. The discourse employed has always included signs of resentment about this happening. The Minister of Education of the AKP government lately described this event as a tragic memory in Islamic history (*Radikal* February 09, 2006). However, the prime minister, Tayyip Erdoğan's open denial of Alevis as a *suis generis* religious group to be reckoned with can be interpreted as a sign of the AKP's negative stance towards this group. To support his view, Mr. Erdoğan made a comparison between mosques and cem houses and called the former worshipping places, while the latter were spoken of as only culture houses (*Radikal* September 14, 2003). Many Alevis feel uncomfortable with such a definition for two reasons. First of all, even though members of the group are known for their secular outlook, they regard Alevism as their religion, rather than their culture; hence, the cem practices are for them part of a religious ceremony. Moreover, in Turkey, places of worship (whether churches, synagogues, or mosques) are exempt from paying fees for water and electricity. Therefore, having the cem buildings recognized as places of worship would help Alevis also in economic terms. Mr. Erdoğan's attitude is what Alevis in general expect from the leader of an Islamist party.

Within the course of the first government—between 2002 and 2007—formed by the AKP, the deputy chairman of the party claimed that failure to have an Alevi among their parliamentarians was a pity, and a result of the misrepresentation of the AKP as the party of the Sunnis. He even encouraged Alevi citizens of Turkey to enroll in the party and to become MPs through the seats of the AKP. His one and a half hour-long speech on an Alevi television channel, Cem TV, also attracted the attention of both the political sphere in general and his party's cadres in particular (*Radikal* January 12, 2007). The deputy chairman's declared aim was to include Alevi politicians among the party cadres as MPs. This aim was realized during the second government formed by the AKP in 2007, with three Alevi MPs taking seats in the parliament as members of the AKP. One of these MPs was a well-known figure among the Alevis, and his status as an AKP MP was widely discussed. He was severely criticized by many Alevis. The people who trusted him and believed that he would improve the social and political conditions of Alevis felt, however, highly disappointed by his statements. He said that his priorities do not include the problems of the Alevis, as

there were more important ones. This was interpreted as a perfect sign of his incompetence in this regard and even displayed the fact that he did not much care about satisfying the Alevis at all (*Radikal* July 26, 2007).

The second factor affecting the relationship between Alevis and the AKP has more to do with the inner dynamics and convictions of Alevis than with those of the AKP. Firstly, Alevis do not consider the AKP's conciliatory moves towards them sincere; they believe that all the steps taken towards Alevis are results of electoral calculations for winning elections. The Alevi elites seem to believe that, although the AKP was the winning party in the 2002 elections and had the chance to form the first single-party government in Turkey since 1991, the vote percentages showed that the party enjoyed the support of less than two thirds of the electorate. The AKP, according to Alevis, were aware of this fact and knew very well that Alevis were among the first groups it had to reach or neutralize for a long and peaceful survival in government. This reasoning explained every step the AKP took towards Alevis as an extension of the assimilationist process they pursued against this group (*Radikal* March 23, 2003).

Secondly, Alevis are an inherently heterogeneous group. While some seek the legal recognition of their belief system by the State, ask for government support for their cem houses, and hence react favorably towards the conciliatory moves of the AKP in these respects, others object to such a cooperative stance, and argue that the AKP never acts for the benefit of Alevis but instead has ulterior hidden motives.

In consequence, the relationship between Alevis and the AKP is still full of problems and could not have been smoothened, despite the advancements attempted by the AKP government during their more than seven years long tenure in executive office. Alevis seem to position themselves in opposition to Sunni fundamentalism in the political arena. They believe that they have to secure the permanence of secularism in Turkey, and to block any advance by fundamentalists. With these aims in mind, the main allies they have are secularist forces; yet they also want to ally with moderate Sunnis against fundamentalists. With respect to nationalism, on the other hand, Alevis perceive themselves as the real guardians of Turkish culture and religion. Defining Alevism as a combination of Islam and Turkish culture, Alevis label Sunnism as an Arab Islam. "Alevis view themselves as the true preservers of authentic Turkish culture, religion, and language amidst Ottoman pressures to Arabize or Persianize. In sum, the Turks are the real guardians of Islam, and the Alevis are the real Turks" (Zeidan 1999).

Despite their long-enduring leftist inclination, during the last couple of years, Alevis have begun to express anger at the CHP, the *à la Turca* left or self-declared social democratic party in Turkey, as it had been reluctant to answer their calls. For instance, the CHP has still not objected to the mandatory religious education courses, a legacy from the 1980 military regime. Nevertheless, these developments and the sour relations between Alevis and the CHP can hardly detach Alevi votes from the CHP, as Alevis believe they cannot embrace the conservative approaches of political Islam, due to the humanist nature of Alevism, and to its doctrine that equates all nations, cultures and identities (*Radikal* February 12, 2007).

Progress or Stagnation: Alevi Complaints and Demands

Alevis' main complaint is that they are not recognized by the Turkish State. The state institutions, they claim, impose Sunni Islam on the population even though the Turkish Republic officially proclaims itself to be a secular state. The status of cem houses, the mandatory religion courses, and the limits they face in upward mobility in public employment constitute the crux of Alevi complaints and demands.

The Turkish Constitution recognizes freedom of religion, according to the International Religious Freedom Report of 2008, published by the US State Department.

> Alevis freely practiced their beliefs and have built cem houses, although these have no legal status as places of worship and are often referred to as "cultural centers".
>
> Representatives of Alevi organizations maintained that they often faced obstacles when attempting to establish *cem* houses. They said there were approximately 100 *cem* houses in the country, a number that they claimed was insufficient to meet their needs. (http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/130299.htm).

Alevis are considered to be a heterodox Muslim sect and are often referred to as 'heretics' or 'outcasts' by traditionalist Sunnis who view Alevi theology as 'wrong' and as a "threat to their way of life and an obstacle to their ideal of creating a pious society built around the Qur'an." (*The Independent* January 7, 2007)

A suspicious approach towards the Directorate of Religious Affairs (DRA)—a bureaucratic state institution that is blamed for favoring Sunni Islam at the expense of Alevis, and for its aim to assimilate Alevis into mainstream Sunni Islam—is a common feature of several Alevi groups.

However, the solutions offered in dealing with inequalities created by the DRA also form a basis for deep differences among Alevis. Some seek legal recognition of their belief system by the State and ask for government support for their cem houses; they argue that the government should provide electricity and water to cem houses as it does for mosques, churches and synagogues; hence, they react favorably to the recognition attempts of the State. Others blame the members of the first group for being adulators of the State and argue against a cooperative stance towards these new overtures of the State. The former group argues for the integration of Alevis into the DRA, whereas the latter supports the abolishment of the DRA altogether, as they believe that this institution creates a formal bias in favor of Sunni Islam in Turkey (Dressler 2008: 289–290). Indeed, what makes Alevis really nervous with respect to their relationship with the DRA is the fear that they might lose their independence from the State once they get involved with the DRA, which is by nature a state institution.

Compulsory religious education provided throughout all Turkish secondary education is another major point in the Alevi criticism of the established system. It deems these classes to be highly problematic for Alevis' religious freedom, and views them as a vehicle of assimilation by the State. "Critics claim that Turkish religious education, which has been compulsory since 1982, effectively tries to indoctrinate children to the state-sponsored approach to Islam" (Stewart 2007: 55). The State is believed to force Alevi students to learn the Sunni interpretation of Islam, and to ignore Alevi identity totally, while claiming to be talking about Islam in general. Meanwhile, the students belonging to the religious communities that are legally recognized as minorities in Turkey are exempted from this compulsory religious education.

As part of its policies towards religious communities, the Republican regime aimed to control and regulate Islamic movements through, among other means, the use of the DRA, which has always had a Sunni orientation and has thus kept the Alevis mostly outside the Republican administrative circles of influence. Thus, although Alevis provided the backbone of popular support for secularism, the very Republican policies aiming to regulate religion in the country resulted in an effective exclusion of Alevis from the State apparatus. These policies also turn a blind eye towards Alevi community rights. More than 4000 court cases against the Ministry of Education regarding this discrimination are reported in the 2008 International Religious Freedom Report (http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/130299.htm).

Alevis also complain about lack of upward mobility in the Turkish public sector. Most of the officeholders in the public sector change with each and every election, as each ruling party prefers to appoint its own supporters in these offices. Alevis believe that none of the parties ever cares about them when they make the appointments. "The complaint of the Alevis regarding political representation is about holding public office. The Alevi claim is that there are no Alevi governors in the 81 provinces in Turkey, and none of the 400 general managers in the public sector organizations are Alevis." (Özalay 2006: 18)

These historical animosities and the continuing Alevi complaints, that the Turkish State favors the Sunni community at their expense have resulted in a number of deep rooted individual reactions and attitudinal patterns among Alevis. Çarkoğlu and Kalaycıoğlu (2009) report individual level reflections of cultural and attitudinal differences which seem to distinguish Alevis from the rest of Turkish society, which is pre-dominantly of Sunni orientation. As noted above, such individual level analyses suffer from the difficulties of finding out who is an Alevi in the context of a nation-wide representative survey. Nevertheless, we observe that the pattern of attitudinal contrast between the Alevi minority and the Sunni majority in Turkey fits many of our expectations. For instance, Alevis appear less religiously conservative and more liberal in their religious attitudes. Especially focusing on anomic attitudes and political efficacy, we observe that the two major minority groups in Turkey, Kurds and Alevis, are not situated far from each other on average, but they are distinctly different from the average of Sunni Turks.[7] Comparing levels of anomie, we find that Kurds and uneducated individuals are about equal, while both have about average levels of political inefficacy. The average Alevi respondent, on the other hand, has a lower than average level of political inefficacy, and about the average anomie level for our sample. In other words, Alevis appear to feel more politically efficacious as well as being less anomic than Kurds, which implies that, in comparison to the latter, Alevis are more integrated into Turkish society.

[7] Feelings of efficacy and anomie have been chosen as being reflections of the empowerment and disempowerment of Alevis within the larger Turkish society in social and political arenas. Higher anomie would function as an indicator of Alevis' perception of powerless status in the Turkish society. Efficacy, on the other hand, is defined as the ability to actualize the intended social or political effect in the society. Inefficacy, hence, is also believed to be a character of powerless groups that do not have the necessary competence or opportunity to affect social and political outcomes. For more discussion on the conceptual merits and shortcomings of both anomie and political inefficacy as well as measurement details see (Çarkoğlu and Kalaycıoğlu, 2009).

Even in a multivariate setting where demographic and attitudinal control variables are included in our evaluations, Alevi respondents appear to be at a lower level of political inefficaciousness than the non-Alevi group. While Alevis are not different from the sample in general in terms of their feelings of anomie, in political efficacy they seem to rate higher than the average member of Turkish society, indicating that Alevis do not think that they are underrepresented in decision-making processes and in political outcomes. In some respects these findings may sound like a contradiction to our earlier arguments. However, as we already argued, Alevis are not strictly a powerless minority, for they use the center-periphery cleavage in Turkish society by siding with the center to maintain a certain level of efficacy in Turkish society. Thus, our observation concerning the higher level of political efficacy for Alevis as opposed to Kurds is very much in line with our preceding historical analysis. From a perspective of comparative evaluation, these empirical measures of anomie and political inefficacy offer informative opportunities. Obviously limited in scope and explanatory power, they are the only measures of the feelings and attitudes of Alevis as opposed to Kurds, who are the two largest Muslim minority groups in Turkey. One should be cautious about the limited diagnosis capability of these two simple measures. Yet, as an aggregation of attitudinal evaluations within a scale format, these are the only two measures with wide empirical data basis from the recent Turkish social experiences.

Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn from our analyses above. The first one is about the historical evolution of Alevism in modern Turkey. The Alevis' role in defining the scope and limits of the Turkish State as it relates to the overwhelmingly Muslim Turkish society has always been critical in modern history. Recently, Alevis seem to have become important actors in the resistance to the rise of pro-Islamist forces in Turkish politics and in the protection of secularist principles. There has also been a clear emphasis upon a new Alevi identity.

As there are no easy ways to identify Alevi respondents in an empirical setting, it is difficult to carry out studies based on representative samples and draw general inferences about this group. Given these difficulties and the resulting limitations of our empirical data about Alevis, we can nonetheless observe that most Alevi respondents in empirical settings appear to be better educated and to have a higher socio-economic status than the

rest of our nation-wide representative samples. As a result, Alevis appear to feel politically more efficacious than the rest of the predominantly Sunni Muslim samples. Alevis political alliances also appear to be increasingly complex due to the changes which have taken place with the rise of pro-Islamist electoral forces. We should also note that migration to the cities creates a *de facto* situation in which Alevis are increasingly surrounded by conservative urban Sunni majorities. While this situation may lead to a weakening of their potential for political mobilization, hence their political representation, it may also result in aligning them behind some of the right-wing parties.

Despite concerted efforts by the AKP government since its coming to power in 2002, Alevis' demands remain largely unresolved and their expectations unfulfilled. This leaves them in search of new allies in the political arena, since the traditional ones seem to have abandoned the Alevi cause. In the immediate future the Alevi minority will most likely concentrate its efforts on demanding the recognition of their distinct sectarian identity, and on searching for new political representatives in the political scene who are ready to defend the Alevis' social and political rights. Both efforts aim to further the group's empowerment within Turkish society.

Alevis' relations with the ruling Islamist conservative AKP government are likely to exert an enduring influence on the way their role within the Turkish polity is redefined. As they moved into urban settlements over the past few decades, Alevis have effectively disconnected themselves from the traditional left-wing ideological and political agenda and adopted a series of demands in the realm of identity politics. They are now in a better position to enter into effective social and political alliances. The AKP's overtures to the Alevis, for example, are not only aimed at broadening the party's electoral support base; rather, they are meant to legitimize the AKP's own identity claims based on conservative Islamist ideology. However, the skepticism with which Alevis view these AKP advances is evidence of the enduring difficulties on both sides. Alevi demands come at a time when this minority is widely spread in urban areas that are predominantly Sunni and where Alevi communal identity is on the rise. It is not easy to reach simple conclusions about their empowerment and disempowerment as of the early decades of the twenty- first century. Segregation between the Alevi minority and the Sunni majority has decreased significantly, but the fact that the majority has become increasingly more religiously conservative has not contributed to making it easier for Alevis to express their sectarian identity. Nevertheless, as a result of Turkey's quest for membership in the EU together with the rise in identity politics among ethnic and religious

groups, there are signs that Alevis today enjoy greater recognition as a distinct group with distinct identity demands.

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