IDENTITY PROBLEMS IN TURKEY: ALEVIS AND AKP

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ABSTRACT

As successive Turkish governments have attempted, AKP too is trying to solve the perennial Alevi problem as part of its broader agenda regarding the question of minorities. However, this paper argues that there are two fundamental obstacles facing Turkey's conservatives in reaching a meaningful solution. First, there is the ontological issue that AKP itself does not represent a radical break with the country's tumultuous past in terms of perception toward Alevis. Secondly, there is the ideological issue that the Sunni majority, who are at the core of AKP's concept of oppressed Muslims, are hardly sympathetic to Alevi rituals or complaints. Decades long effects of Turkish-Islamic synthesis did not bode well for that effort also. So, any recognition of equal status on religious grounds for Alevis would create a backlash for the ruling party among its rural electorate.

Keywords: AKP, Alevis, Turkey, Religion, Secularism.

ÖZ

Kendisinden önceki birçok hükümet gibi AKP iktidarı da esasen uzun ve karmaşık olan Alevi sorununu, azınlık politikaları çerçevesinde çözmek için çaba göstermektedir. Fakat Türk muhafazakârlığını bu konuda oldukça zorlayacak

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iki temel engel mevcuttur: Birincisi, ontolojik olarak AKP iktidarı, toplumsal ve tarihsel açıdan ülkenin sıkıntılı geçmişindeki Alevi algısından radikal bir kopuşu temsil etmemektedir. İkincisi ise, partinin ideolojik çekirdeğini oluşturan ezilmiş Müslüman algısı doğrultusunda, merkezi Sünni kesimin Alevi ritüel ve problemlerine sempatik yaklaştığını söyleyemeyiz. Bu konuda yıllardır süre gelen Türk-İslam sentezi uygulamalarının etkileri de çözüme pek zemin hazırlar gözükmemektedir. Buradan hareketle Alevi kimliğinin dini temelde eşit olarak kabul edilmesi, iktidar için, özellikle kırsal kesimdeki tabanı açısından sorunlu bir süreç yaratmaya gebedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: AKP, Aleviler, Türkiye, Din, Laiklik.

INTRODUCTION

Among the many political ramifications of Turkey's increasingly sectarian and pro-Sunni foreign policy on the civil war in Syria, one of the most striking is the escalating tension between ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi –AKP) and the country's Alevi minority. Glaring signs of Alevi discontent have begun in the largely Arab city of Antakya, whose inhabitants feel uneasy about the ascendance of Sunni Cihadist and fundamentalist Vahabi power within the Syrian opposition, even as the conflict adversely affects economic and social wellbeing on the Turkish side of the border. Alevi involvement in the Gezi Park countrywide protests of June 2013, especially against the authoritarian discourse of the prime minister, was visible from the start. All the seven youths killed during the clashes with security forces were Alevi (Internet Haber, http://www.internethaber.com/ergenekonun-son-kalesi-aleviler-582305h.htm, 20/01/2014) and interestingly of those six people, three of them, Abdullah Cömert, Ali İsmail Korkmaz and Ahmet Atakan, were Alevis from Antakya. Due to heavy involvement of Alevis at the protests, some commentators described the incidents as an "Alevi uprising" (SonDakika, http://www.sondakika.com/haber/haber-nagehan-alci-gezi-alevi-ayaklanmasidir-5366012/, 29/11/2013). In this tense political environment, the AKP government resumed its reconciliatory rhetoric with the country's minorities, especially with Alevis, last summer. This was the government's second attempt, following on its 2009-2010 Alevi initiative, complete with workshops, which failed to find any real echo in the Alevi community. Our observation of these events prompted us to write about the question of the Alevis

and their problems in Turkey. Browsing through Alevi history and its theoretical foundations, we found that in opposition to Turkish state assimilatory or annihilatory practices, Anatolia's Alevi inhabitants have remained defiant and become ever more vocal regarding their belief system and minority rights.

This study argues that there exist two highly contentious issues that block any attempt by the AKP government to solve Alevi problems or fully reintegrate them into the system: One is ontological and the other ideological. On the ontological issue, it may be said that despite its slightly more democratic tone, the rhetoric employed by AKP is no more than a continuation of Turkish state tradition which has been shaped by Sunni sect of Islam. The historical conditions and balance of class forces that played a role in the emergence of AKP, especially in the environment post-12 September 1980 military coup, do not aim at any full-scale democratization of Turkish society. Instead, it can be said that the main political struggle rests on control of the country's state and material resources for the benefit of a more religious fraction of the wealthier classes.

The ideological issue is related to the religious ideology of the ruling party. AKP government discourse of oppressed Muslims against secular elites comprises Sunni Turks and Kurds, but largely excludes other religious groups. This discourse has treated the Alevi belief system as the 'other' from the start. Alevis cooperate with the country's secular forces and any acceptance of Alevi/Sunni equality in Turkey would create awkward questions for the ruling party, stemming from the fact that AKP, like its predecessors National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi – MSP), Welfare Party (Refah Partisi –RP) and others, tries to present itself as the real and most legitimate voice of oppressed Muslim identity. Accepting the grievances of Alevis as equals would entail a loss of AKP's monopoly on religious politics. Moreover, given the strength of Alevi critiques of established Sunni orthodoxy, this kind of move could become the root of conflicts within AKP's electoral base, especially in rural areas. Due to these ontological and ideological problems, the AKP government in Turkey cannot come up with a meaningful solution to the Alevi issue.

The article proceeds as follows: The opening part of the essay will explain the history and formation phase of the Alevi belief system, providing information on how Anatolian Alevi beliefs differ from Persian Shiism and mainstream Sunni understanding. The second part will examine Alevi philosophy and its teachings on how to become an insan-ı Kamil (a mature, enlightened human being, close to God). This part points out the importance of the three steps, outside Sharia, that

must be taken to mesh with the wisdom of God; Tarikat, Marifet and Sırrı-Hakikat. The third part focuses on the treatment of Alevis by Ottomans and the Turkish Republic and show that Anatolian Alevis have traditionally sided with minorities and the oppressed, thus inherently establishing an oppositional identity for themselves, especially in the eyes of the state. We further argue that this "otherness" has not changed much, even in the secular republic of Mustafa Kemal. The history of the Republic is marked by numerous massacres of Alevis, and unofficial discrimination meted out against them by state bureaucracy. It will be also argued that, the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis have became "official" state ideology in Turkey especially after 1980 coup and despite all democratization initiatives, it remains to be the determinant ideology especially at the state's religious affairs. Therefore, this ideology remains to be the main obstacle in solving Alevi issue in Turkey. The final part of our analysis looks at the dilemmas AKP faces in dealing with the Alevi problem and tries to suggest some possible solutions to this perennial issue.

1. FOUNDATIONS OF THE ALEVI BELIEF SYSTEM

While most people, especially in Sunni populations, have tended to equate the belief system of Anatolian Alevis with that of Iranian Shiites, closer research can reveal that Alevis not only have different conceptions regarding subject-God relationships and its associated rituals, but that Alevi identity is not primarily determined by remnants of Shiite cultural influences within Alevi tradition. Before exploring these two, we should explain the Sunni-Shiite difference, so that the reader can more comfortably situate Alevi practices in historical time. The main schism between these two strands of Islam is centred on succession to the Caliphate and how Muslims should be governed (Walker, 1993). While Sunnis argued for a consultation process with the Umma to choose a successor to the Prophet Mohammad, Shiites claimed that the legitimate heir to the prophet was his nephew Ali, as the direct family descendant. This clash of opinion fed on various social and economic divisions in earlier eras of Islamic empire, as there was significant opposition to the Kureysh clan and its rule, namely on the question of distribution of wealth (Munson, 1990).The Umayyad dynasty, which clashed with Ali and his descendants, deepened this divide between those two strands of Islam, since Shiites all over the Middle East saw the Kerbela incident as a sign of Sunni despotism over remaining Muslims.

However, historical record does not support this mythical Ali figure. Regional historians argued that Ali was a loyal follower of the Kureysh clan, Muhammad and the main tenets of Sharia law. Moreover, he penalized his own supporters

brutally as he perceived them as no more than heretics. Hence, rather than being the real protagonist of the opposition, Ali's actions and the stories regarding his good and just nature became a unifying nexus for divergent social and religious opposition groups, from non-believers to Shiites, the followers of Imam Ali. According to Oriental historians, those groups that rebelled against the inequalities and injustices of Kureysh administrations had to find an ideological cause to underpin their uprisings, so, despite Ali's conservative tendencies during his reign (Wellhausen, 1996), from the views of ibn-Sebe to the movement of Muhtar el Sakafi, Ali and his family predecessors constituted a unifying symbol for radical opposition and a cover for immediate economic and social grievances.

As a result, the Alevi belief system was generally shaped by the long and deep history of Mesopotamia and adjacent areas as far northward as Azerbaijan, lands in which heterodox groups from as far as Central Asia mingled with Anatolian Christians, Jews, and Muslim Arabs. For example, old Turkish rituals from Shamanist days, such as circling and dancing around the prominent figure of the community, or the use of candles and emphasis on the holiness of fire from the Zerdust practices of Persians all have had some influence on today's Alevi customs (Yörükan, 2005). The religious myth of the tree of life among Ancient Greeks has elements in common with Alevi rituals around the Tuğba tree. Christianity's unification of three, God, The Son, and the Holy Spirit is very close to Alevi's combining Muhammad, God and Ali. Moreover, the traditional Shia belief in the lost Mahdi or the concept of the twelve Imams also resonates within Alevi tradition (Ersal, 2011). Alevis envision the coming of the Mahdi as a sign of emancipation and the end of injustice, in contrast to the Shia perception of Mahdi as the ultimate punisher. Faik Bulut argued that the Mahdi myth in Middle Eastern societies represented the idealistic yearnings of oppressed populations for an invincible hero in the wake of subjugation to unjust powers (Bulut, 2011). As Raymond Williams argued in his cultural analysis, elements from the past still have some influence on present-day dominant and marginal cultural values; as the dominant side tries to hide or marginalize them, alternative interpretations may use them as symbols of resistance and counter-culture. A close examination of all these cultural rituals and their influence on the Middle Eastern psyche can reveal that Alevis tend to incorporate all these residual elements into their discourse. Williams' main ideas on the meaning of residual are as follows:

> *A residual relationship does not denote something that is archaic, in the sense of recognizably belonging to a past era, but which has been "formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the*

past, but as an effective element of the present. Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practices on the bases of the residue – cultural as well as social – of some previous social and cultural institution or formation." (Williams, 1977)

On the one hand, they are familiar practices to people, while on the other, they may be used to weaken the status quo. Thus, if we return to what the Alevi belief system is, one may say that, rather than being a call for a political program, Alevi beliefs are a methodology for becoming a good human being. The ultimate goal is to merge with the wisdom of God. Hasan Harmancı outlined the four stages of progress as Sharia, in which the untrained and unsophisticated human creature and its desires are taken under control through the rules of religion and legal codes. In the second stage, the Tarikat phase, the individual can act with his/her own volition to purge all unnecessary and harmful desires from his/her body and mind. In the third stage, Marifet, a human being reaches a sophisticated level of emotional and spiritual wellbeing wherein she/he becomes aware of God's secrets. In this phase, when the subject can really put aside all selfish worldly things, the road is open for him or her to merge with the God, a state which Alevis call Insan-ı Kamil or the stage of Hakikat. According to Alevis, unification with God, the basis for the philosophy of Vahdet-i vucud, emerged from people who reached that stage. Since the time of Hallacı Mansur, mainstream Sunnis and present-day Shiites have perceived this spiritual awakening as some kind of heresy. In response, Alevis criticize their confining of the God-subject relationship to only the Sharia phase, which mainly emphasizes external control over human beings and neglects training of the soul through unselfish practices (Harmancı, 2013).

Although Alevis are considered close to the Shiites of Mesopotamia, Alevi ideas differ significantly from mainstream Shia practices.[3] For example, Shiism does not include the three stages of enlightenment outside the Sharia phase. In rituals such as praying five times a day, the symbols used and the segregation of men and women during rituals are rejected by Alevis. While religious practices are performed in Shiism and Sunnism to avoid punishment, and are therefore shaped by a pessimistic set of ideas that subject people to the wrath of God, in the Alevi belief system, rituals are performed for the sake of personal wellbeing, and the symbolic power of God is conceptualized as ultimate wisdom, a necessary guide on the road

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[3] It should be noted that, in Turkey there are different versions of Alevism. Especially Arap Alevis in Hatay, Adana and Mersin differ significantly from the Turkish and Kurdish Alevis of Anatolia. Due to their majority position among the Alevi population in Turkey, in this study, belief systems of Turkish and Kurdish Alevis are taken into consideration.

to becoming insan-ı-Kamil (Harmancı, 2013; Savasçı, 2004; Selçuk, Şaylan and Kalkan, 1991). Thus, contrary to mainstream Islam, Alevis do not have a societal program to regulate every sphere of life. The Sharia is merely one strictly personal stage in the method for them, as opposed to being the final solution to society's ills that it is in the minds of Sunni and Shia. We can give the example of Shia and Sunni Sharia interpretations from today's Iran Islamic republic to Vahhabi Saudi Arabia. In these two countries Sharia, unlike the Alevi understanding, became a regulatory principle of everyday life from personal relationships to societal laws such as inheritance and penal code (Abrahamian, 2008; Commins, 2006).Even in secular Turkey, prominent Islamic scholars like Hayrettin Karaman in his writings preached how Sharia law prescribes rules on everyday life (Karaman, 2011). This differs greatly from Alevi perception of Sharia which means a strictly individual taming of the soul but do not extend into societal regulations. This harmonizes Alevi methods with the principals of a liberal and secular society.

2. ALEVIS IN OTTOMAN AND REPUBLICAN TURKEY

For centuries, Alevis living in Anatolia have had unequal status with the dominant Sunnis. It is true to say that the unequal status of Alevis living in Anatolia reached to its peak during the Ottoman period. Ottoman State was a Sunni state and did not recognize Alevis as a different religious group. Under the Ottoman rule, Alevis were considered in "Muslim Millet", however they did not have the freedom of practicing their beliefs. For Ottoman state, there was only one type of Muslim and all Muslims should be practicing Sunni sect's rituals. Therefore, during the Ottoman reign Alevis mostly preferred to live in rural areas and to practice their religious beliefs secretly.

From the time of the Seljuk State in Anatolia to the mid-17th century, we may say that Alevi communities in Anatolia, with the ideas of equality and social justice operating as strict moral codes in their spiritual practices, were mostly allied with opposition. From Baba Ishak to Pir Sultan Abdal, the Ottoman reaya, subjects of the Sultan, generally complained about the growing arbitrariness of multezims (tax collectors) and the state's increasing neglect of its duties in providing social welfare in Anatolian communities (Genç, 2000). The sudden halt to conquest in Europe and other remote parts of the Empire, combined with the growing power of European armies brought about by new weapons and trade routes, meant that the Ottoman state found itself in dire straits in meeting its budgetary expenses. As the Romans had done centuries previously, Ottoman Sultans resorted to increasing tax revenues, thereby putting pressure on its domestic population (Ozyuksel, 2004). The centuries

old Tımar land system was gradually replaced by the İltizam system, in which multezims were authorized to collect the taxes of assigned regions, with the added benefit of being allowed to retain any surplus as private profit. This policy stripped the system of its most emancipatory aspect, as it led to multezims' intervention in the Ottoman villagers' freedom of production organization, i.e. their relative freedom to choose which crop to grow when. Post-16th century, multezims generally forced villagers to base their production on cash-crops rather than community needs (Akkaya, 2007). Moreover, kadıs, the representatives of the Sultan's symbolic justice in rural areas, and other bureaucrats pocketed their share in corrupt dealings. The result was numerous peasant rebellions from the 17th century onwards (İnalcık, 1969).

Alevi-Bektashi ideological leadership of these rebellions, while progressive in its emphasis on equality and more freedoms, was largely insufficient in devising a more emancipatory and growth-oriented alternative (Öz, 2000). Therefore, while failing to achieve their goals, these rebellions brought down the wrath of the Ottoman state on Alevi believers, culminating in massacres and Alevis' rituals retreating underground in later times. The massacres of Alevis, especially during the reign of Yavuz Sultan Selim as punishment for their cooperation with Persian Safavids, are still remembered by Turkish Alevis as a significant symbol of their grievances in Anatolia. This negative perception on the part of the State forced Alevis to keep a low profile and practice their rituals in utmost secrecy (Birge, 1962). Ottoman rulers' harsh treatment of Alevis was not limited with the Turkish Alevis. Thousands of Arab Alevis, too, were massacred by Yavuz Sultan Selim in 1516-1517 in Syria (Talhamy, 2008).

With the foundation of the Turkish Republic, in order to decrease influence of the Ottoman past, elites of the new state took several steps to reduce effect of religion in political, social and cultural areas. For this purpose several steps, like abolishing the caliphate, closing several religious institutions, were taken and finally in 1937 laicism principle was placed into the constitution. Despite those kind of steps, it would be wrong to say that religion was completely neglected by the state. On the contrary, religion became the main criteria in some vital policies. For example, in the early years of the Republic, religion was accepted as the main criteria at the population exchange conducted between Turkey and Greece, while criteria like language was totally disregarded (Aktar, 2003; Kirisci, 2000). As a result, while Turkish speaking Christian Orthodox people were sent to Greece, non-Turkish speaking Muslims were accepted to Turkey. Similarly, Turkey did not allow

immigration of Turkish speaking Christian Gagauz Turks to Anatolia (Keyman and İçduygu, 1998).

Turkey's new Kemalist leadership, while declaring the new republic a secular state, set about creating an umbrella of Turk-Sunni identity that would shelter all subordinated cultural and religious groups in Turkey. On the one hand, laicism was accepted as a constitutional amendment, but on the other, designated the new Directorate of Religious Affairs and its Sunni teachings became an official body of the government. This, of course, meant that Kemalist secularism left Alevis in a conundrum. They supported secularism as a welcome development in decreasing Sunni orthodoxy's reign over the public sphere, but at the same time realised that the new directorate perpetuated their otherness in the eyes of state bureaucracy. The Alevi belief system was viewed as a variant of Islam, and hence Alevis could not obtain minority status recognition in the manner of Christians or Jews in the new Turkey. Most Alevi leaders tried to collaborate with the official discourse on Islam, aware of the fact that any attempt to debate or discuss the un-Islamic contours of Alevi teachings would only mean more restrictions on their rituals and life styles. Any resistance by Alevi communities to the official party line was penalized with further suppression

3. THE TURKISH-ISLAMIC SYNTHESIS AND "OFFICIAL" RELIGION

At the end of single party rule in 1950 and the beginning of parliamentary democracy, prejudice regarding Alevi worship continued in the state and the conservative right, evidence that even multi-party democracy had not influenced the real kernel of the Turkish state. Turk-Sunni identity continued to be the all-embracing and implicit signifier of the desired status quo in Turkey (Hür, 2013). Particularly during and after the right-wing military coups, "Turkish-Islamic synthesis" was openly embraced by secular military-civilian bureaucrats.

Various groups were influential in the formation of this synthesis. In a sense, the emergence of the synthesis was a reaction to strengthening leftist movements (Ayvazoglu, 2009). Certainly, the appearance of the synthesis in the 1960s was not a coincidence. After the 1960 coup, nationalists saw Islam as a way to increase their popular support and influence in political and social arenas (Ertekin, 2009; Taşkın, 2007). The popularity of the synthesis among nationalists grew steadily in the 1960s and it became the main ideology of some organizations, the most important of which was Aydınlar Ocağı (Intellectual Hearth). Of the various organizations

founded in the 1960s, it was the the Aydınlar Kulübü (Intellectual Club) in particular – founded in 1962 – that created the base for Aydınlar Ocağı (Taşkın, 2007; Özdoğan, 2006).

Many well-known nationalist academics and people from other professions came together and founded Aydınlar Ocağı formally in May 1970. Aydınlar Ocağı, in contrast to its predecessors, which were strictly Turkist organizations, tried to reach broader support by expanding the intellectual foundations of Turkish nationalism. The organization describes itself as a "national civil society organization" and refuses to affiliate itself with any political party. Since its foundation, Aydınlar Ocağı has succeeded in remaining influential in Turkish political, social and cultural arenas (Özcanbaz, 2013). Aydınlar Ocağı describes its main goals as promoting Turkish nationalist ideas through improving national culture and consciousness, struggling with ideas negatively affecting the Turkish nation, and empowering the nation by supporting its main tenets (Aydınlar Ocağı, http://www.aydinlarocagi.org/genel.php?islem=ayrinti&yaziID=amacimiz 22/01/2014).

In addition to civil society organizations, the Turkish-Islamic synthesis was also an important factor for some political parties. Alpaslan Türkeş, a former military officer who became leader of the Republican Peasant Nation Party (Cumhuriyetçi Köylü Millet Partisi –CKMP) in 1965, tried to combine Islam and Turkish nationalism in order to increase his party's popular support. In Türkeş's view, following a strict Turkist ideology would not bring political success. Instead, Islam needed to be integrated into Turkish nationalism. In accordance with its new nationalist-conservative ideology, CKMP was renamed as the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi –MHP) in 1969 and statements on the indivisibility of Turkishness and Islam were issued (Ayvazoğlu, 2009). During the 1970s, alongside nationalist arguments, MHP continuously put forward Islamic references. Hence, several slogans combining Turkishness and Islam were disseminated among MHP sympathisers (Can, 2009; Akgün and Çalış, 2009). Although, as a political party MHP was the first to adopt the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, it found many supporters in other political parties. Especially in the post-1980 coup, the synthesis influence on many political parties could be seen clearly (Duman, 2015).

Aydınlar Ocağı and most of the nationalist-conservatives supported the military coup of September 12, 1980. When it came to power, the military regime closed all political parties, seized their assets and banned their leaders from politics.

Although MHP was among the closed political parties, the new military regime in its activities adopted MHP's ideology and supported the Turkish-Islamic synthesis (Taşkın, 2007; Zürcher, 2005). In order to appear neutral, the military regime targeted nationalist and other politicians of the time, but maintained very close relations with those nationalist-conservatives of the Aydınlar Ocağı. After the coup, Aydınlar Ocağı submitted its own draft constitution, based on its own philosophy, to the National Security Council (Milli Güvenlik Konseyi –MGK). Although the MGK mandated the Advisory Council to prepare a new constitution, Aydınlar Ocağı played an important role in its preparation. Hence, in July 1981, Kenan Evren, head of the MGK, announced that religion classes would be mandatory in primary and secondary schools. This was clearly a victory for Aydınlar Ocağı.

The 1982 Constitution, prepared according to the military regime's ideology, bore many similarities to the principles of Aydınlar Ocağı. Sacredness of the state and importance of moral values were emphasized, and laicism and the divinity of religion were combined. Most importantly, Article 24 of the constitution rendered religion classes mandatory in primary and secondary education. The curriculum of these classes was prepared based on Sunnism, and hence is especially disturbing for Alevis in Turkey. The curriculum teaches only the principles and practices of Sunnism, with the Alevi sect completely neglected. More importantly, the classes expose Alevi students to Sunni propaganda at an early age. Currently existing Sunni version of Islam in Turkey sees Alevis as contradicting with Islam and Alevis' adherence to main tenants of Islam are questioned by many Sunnis. At some incidents, like Kırıkhan, Çorum, Maraş, Sivas, those questioning reached to level of killing Alevis by Sunnis. Sunni conservatives tend not to accept any interpretation of Islam other than their own way of Islam.

With beginning of the multi-party system in Turkey, due to Democratic Party's (Demokrat Parti –DP) close relations with the Sunni conservatives, Alevis took some lessons and for the most part, they supported the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi –CHP) (Küçük, 2009). Not surprisingly then, while enlarging its support base, the Turkish-Islamic synthesis engendered no sympathy among Alevis. In the 1960s and 1970s, when many Alevis again identified themselves with the socialist Left due to the congruence of their spiritual methods with the goals of socialist parties and trade unions, the spectre of pogroms and massacres against them raised its ugly head. Paramilitary forces of the nationalist-conservatives played a critical role in incidents targeting Alevis. From the events of 1971 in Kırıkhan, through the 1978 Maraş, Sivas, and Malatya massacres, to the 1980 incidents in Çorum, thousands of Alevis were killed or forced to evacuate their

homes, resulting in a return to their maintaining a low profile and practising rituals privately. This situation existed until the mid-1990s, when the Kurdish struggle with official state discourse created an opening for alternative minority identities in Turkey (Bulut, 2011).

Just before the AKP government came to power, Alevis and their civil society organizations were divided into two main camps. One, under the leadership of İzzettin Doğan, chairman of Cem Vakfı, espoused a more Islamic Alevi tradition and tried to cooperate with the official Sunni line under the umbrella of Muslim identity. As an indicator of this cooperation, Doğan has been the prominent defender of the idea of providing a mosque and Cemevi in the same building complex (Bugün, http://gundem.bugun.com.tr/-baris-projesini-asagi-cekmeye-calisiyorlar--haberi/789700, 24/0172014). Despite criticism from many Alevi organizations, (Sol Portal, http://haber.sol.org.tr/devlet-ve-siyaset/alevi-orgutlerinden-ortak-aciklama-cami-cemevi-projesi-kabul-edilemez-haberi-79400, 24/01/2014) the mosque-cemevi project was put into effect a while ago. Other groups, like the Pir Sultan Abdal Association or Alevi-Bektashi Federation, have chosen to remain in opposition to official discourse and demand recognition of their equal rights and special status as a religious group (Soner and Toktaş, 2011).

4. ALEVIS UNDER AKP RULE

In the early years of its coming to power, but more especially since 2007, AKP has argued that it wants to create a new Turkey, one which would represent a fundamental break with old established state institutions. In questioning whether this has been achieved, one has to survey the primary policies of the current government. Thus, in this part of the article, we will try to focus on three distinct policy areas from the perspective of the Alevi minority, i.e, minority rights, political party laws and education, since these are most important to an oppressed group in Turkey in terms of organizing its civil capacity and resisting any assimilation attempt. Turkey changed its accumulation regime and main social policies in the aftermath of the September 1980 coup. This coup was the Turkish elite's response to the rebellion of the population against the economic reform program set forth on January 24 1980 (Ercan, 2002; Boratav, 2003; Yalpat, 1984). Protagonists of neo-liberal change in Turkey aimed at completely transforming Turkey from a peripheral Fordist economy to a post-Fordist neo-liberal one, which would in turn suppress the lower classes and cripple the organizational capacities of civil society. The new framework necessitated a break with pre-1980 economic and social policies, so any actor who alleges to have as its aim a significant

transformation in the country's social relations has to prove that its policies do indeed create a meaningful break. At this point, since the post-1980 coup leaders and their supporting classes generally implement their oppressive strategies in the aforementioned policy areas through the legal assistance of 1982 constitution, one has to examine the trajectory of the AKP government in those subjects so that we can measure their promise of a new Turkey against the yardstick of the old order. We need to hold AKP's past performance under closer scrutiny to see whether it represents a radical new beginning for Turkey in solving these perennial issues. It must be said here that any government which perpetuates established relationships in major areas within a social formation is not expected to engender a complete breakthrough in fields like minority issues, since thinking otherwise means that various spheres of social life exist independently of each other, which may create the illusion that analytical categories of social science have ontological distinctions.

As stated in this text before, Alevis were not accepted as a legitimate social group let alone a minority by the Ottomans. Later, the Turkish Republic framed its interpretation of minorities according to the articles of the Lausanne agreement, which identified only non-Muslim groups as minorities, and made no reference to Alevis. Throughout the years of the Kemalist Republic, Alevis, in order to be visible in the mainstream, went along with that non-minority status since implicitly this meant that they were recognized as one of the groups that originally founded the nation state. However, when the Kurdish struggle for recognition in Turkey reached its critical threshold, one may say that, like those of Kurds, Alevis' demands from the state easily qualified as a quest for minority status. Under UN declarations, minority is defined as follows:

> *A group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members - being nationals of the State - possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language (OCHR, 2010).*

An examination of the behaviour of the Turkish state after the 1980 military coup, shows that it still numbers non-Muslim groups as minorities in line with the Lausanne framework. In the Turkish psyche, minorities were always understood as second-class citizens and potential allies of Turkey's enemies. Even a cursory browsing of Turkish education and media materials reveals that state prejudice against minority identities (Kaya, 2007). The project of Turkish-Islamic synthesis articulated since the 1960s has as its typical goal the grouping of all citizens under

the rubric of Kemalist nationalism, ignoring diversity. This reasoning shows why it is understandable that Kurds and Alevis have been so reluctant to define their struggle in terms of minority status. Under the AKP government, which alleged that it wanted to create a fundamental break with "old Turkey", the interpretation of minorities was revisited as something akin to the Ottoman-era millet system, and AKP decided to compensate non-Muslim groups for previous violations of their rights, especially regarding property, throughout the years of the republic. With these policies, AKP aimed to raise the status and visibility of these non-Muslim groups in society. Though acceptable as a reform, one may argue that the Ottoman millet system accepted these groups' legitimacy only, not their equal status (Bali, 1996). When it comes to the Alevi question, the government has proven itself to be less flexible and tolerant, mainly because, unlike the aforementioned minority groups, Alevis have been vocal in criticizing dominant Sunni practices and violations of secularism. AKP has neither accepted the equal status of Alevi Cemevis, nor signalled any recognition of the rights of Alevi victims of earlier massacres in history. Moreover, practices associated with the 1982 constitution, such as mandatory religious lessons, played a role in enlarging the electoral base of religious parties like AKP. Also, in terms of presence at all levels of government bureaucracy, Alevi numbers have significantly diminished under AKP government (Birgün, http://www.birgun.net/news/view/bilale-anlatir-gibi-akpye-anlatiyoruz/9124, 22/02/2015). These examples show that there is a continuation of similar practices regarding Alevi identity since the Ottoman era, and AKP did not differ that much from Kemalist elite. Kemalists condoned Alevi presence as long as they suppressed their minority status, but AKP has a more fundamental opposition to Alevi identity. Hence, in terms of Alevi minority rights, the current government has had no ontological break with the past.

After the 1980 coup, the MGK took several steps aimed at maintaining its control over the political system. The first post-coup elections in 1983 were conducted entirely under its control with the MGK deciding which parties and candidates were eligible to participate. Several parties and hundreds of candidates were banned, and only three political parties approved by MGK appeared on ballots. Indeed, control measures were not limited to vetoing political parties and candidates. Some permanent measures were also introduced, one of the most important of which was the introduction of a new electoral system. As far as the leaders of 1980 coup were concerned, small parties were a source of danger for the newly-designed political system and they should not be represented in parliament. In order to achieve this end, a nationwide 10% electoral threshold was put into effect for the first time in the republic's history, thus guaranteeing that bigger parties

were favored and smaller ones prevented from having any presence in parliament. The 10 % electoral threshold has been in effect in Turkey at all parliamentary elections since 1983.

In contrast to its democratization arguments, AKP insists that the 10% electoral threshold continue. Several arguments have been put forward suggesting that it be reduced to 5%, but AKP seems unwilling to relinquish the 10%, which works in its favor (Gülerce, 2010). In order to enhance its national and international support, AKP is trying to appear as the political party which is bringing army generals of 1980 coup to court, but it does not hesitate to support undemocratic laws and organizations introduced by the same generals.

In addition to the new electoral system, a new law of political parties was introduced in 1983. This law brings several constraints to bear on representation of ethnic and religious groups. According to Article 81 of this law, political parties cannot claim the existence of national, religious, sectarian or linguistic minorities within the Republic of Turkey. The second clause of the same article states that political parties cannot involve themselves in any activities to protect, develop or spread languages and cultures other than Turkish language and culture (Siyasi Partiler Kanunu, http://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/MevzuatMetin/1.5.2820.pdf, 21/02/2014) itself does not define Turkish culture, but it may be easily said that for the generals of the 1980 coup who officially adopted the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, this means Sunni Turkishness. Therefore, political parties are not allowed to undertake any direct or indirect activity related to Alevis. In addition, as may be clearly inferred from the law, political parties cannot describe Alevis as a separate minority group in Turkey. From its foundation to the current era, the only officially recognized minorities in Turkey have been the ones described in the 1923 Lausanne Treaty.

The 1983 Law of Political Parties is still in effect and AKP does not seem to be interested in altering it to give rights to different religious groups. As we have seen in other issues, AKP is sustaining the philosophy of the 1980 coup on the issue of political parties vis-à-vis Alevis. While it is willing to deal with Alevi organizations like Cem Vakfı, which are ready to adopt AKP's agenda in their programs, the demands of Alevi civil society organizations such as the Alevi-Bektashi Federation and other Alevi organizations are being ignored. Indeed, various activities have been carried out to discredit Alevi organizations. For instance, although the Alevi-Bektashi Federation has declared several times that it has no intention of establishing an Alevi political party (Bianet,

http://www.bianet.org/kadin/siyaset/118684-alevi-federasyonu-alevi-partisi-kurmuyoruz-partiye-donusmuyoruz, 21/02/2014) its activities for protecting Alevi rights have been discredited on the grounds that the Federation intends to do just that (Özgürel, 2009). Within the abovementioned background, when it comes to the actual practices of AKP and its prime minister, we have not seen very encouraging signs from his speeches, in which the crowds booed the Alevi identity of the opposition leader Kılıçdaroğlu, or in his remarks just before the 2010 referendum on the Turkish judicial system that promised to cleanse the judiciary of alleged Alevi domination (İnsel, 2013). Given the large-scale problems of democracy in Turkey, AKP government reform attempts in terms of judiciary and other branches of bureaucracy do not resemble a genuine move towards democratization.

For example, if we look back at the 1990s discourse of AKP's predecessor, the Welfare Party, we see it as quite anti-Western, with an emphasis on the religious features of Turkish society. This inevitably resulted in a clash with Kemalist military-civilian bureaucracy in 1998, and following the closure of Erbakan's Welfare Party by the constitutional court, the moderate voices and more liberal wing of the party decided to found AKP as a new beginning for the movement. When it came to power in the aftermath of the 2001 economic crisis, the new party was willing to cooperate with pro-Western sections of the business class, and gave up its strong emphasis on religiosity. This change signified that rather than opting for confrontation with rivals, Turkey's Islamists were choosing to create and strengthen their own business and intellectual class. Hence, the struggle over the distribution of state resources of the intervening ten years has revealed an AKP that broadly changed its Islamic identity from one that was at odds with the Kemalist republic to one that accepts reconciliation as a preferred method.

In addition to all of the above, the AKP government and its base are greatly indebted to the pro-Turkish-Islamic synthesis policies of the 1980 coup leaders and the Islamic capital that spurs its profits through the ongoing neo-liberal economic policies of successive administrations of the last three decades. These factors can be counted as proofs to support our argument that the current AKP government does not represent an ontological break with the history of the country (Üşenmez, 2012).

We recall from the introduction that AKP's ideological problem constitutes the second obstacle to their addressing the real problems of Alevis. From the start, AKP has championed the cause of suppressed and prosecuted religious groups in the country. The significant issues of this championing have been mainly women with headscarves, and the visibility of religious rituals and customs within the public

sphere. However, Alevis significantly differ from the ruling party on these subjects, since, unlike Sunnis, they do not believe in covering female heads or in suppression of female sexual identity. Furthermore, any acceptance of Alevi tradition on equal footing with Sunnism inevitably increases the legitimacy of Alevi criticisms of traditional Sunni interpretations of religious rituals and morals. The most basic one would be the juxtaposition of Alevi belief in unification with God's wisdom with that of the Sunni, Shia perception of God as the ultimate punisher of people for their sins in their worldly life. Even though any acceptance of Alevi beliefs on equal footing may not cause too much disturbance among modern populations of cities, it may lead to a significant backlash in more conservative Sunni-dominated rural areas. Any survey of today's electoral maps reveals that it is precisely those rural communities and Sunni-dominated conservative areas that have formed the backbone of the ruling party's electorate (Milliyet, http://gundem.milliyet.com.tr/turkiye-de-alevilik-hayatin-her-alaninda-ayrimcilik-var/gundem/gundemdetay/13.01.2013/1654629/default.htm, 1/12/2013).

Against this background, AKP government tried to convene two Alevi workshops under the leadership of its minister, Faruk Çelik. Reports of the workshop at the conclusion of seven different meetings emphasized the divided nature of Alevi community. The state demanded that Alevis come up with an official definition of the Alevi belief system and rituals (1. Alevi Çalıştay Raporu, http://www.farukcelik.com.tr/images/editor/1.pdf, 1/12/2013). This demand is largely an expression of the state's perennial dissatisfaction with the heterodox nature of Alevi customs, which strikingly shows AKP's above-mentioned ideological limits in its Alevi initiative, as well as demonstrating continuity with the so-called old Turkey. In addition to this, the government maintained a domineering presence over Alevis throughout the conferences, which climaxed with government insistence on recognition of the Directorate of Religious Affairs as the umbrella institution for all religious sects, and attribution as a kind of an upper authority to the Sunni interpretation of Islam. In other words, Sunnism as first among equals. The state did not show any initiative on mandatory religious courses or on alleged financing by the state of religious education through İmam Hatip schools. On the contrary, AKP has taken several steps to strengthen its support base by playing İmam Hatip card. With the recent educational reform of 2012, AKP brought regulations in favour of İmam Hatip schools by reopening secondary section of those schools. By same reform, religion classes were left as mandatory classes for primary and secondary schools, and new selective courses were introduced for students at secondary schools. Among selective courses, there are three new classes about religion. The curriculums of the all three classes, 'the Koran', 'Life of the

Prophet Muhammad' and 'Basic Religious Information' are prepared in accordance with Sunni sect. This means that, AKP still sees Islam as composed of a Sunni sect. Apart from those steps related to new religious classes, some other pro-Sunni steps have been taken by AKP. Ministry of Education made some amendments in its regulations for secondary schools in September 2013. According to the Article 99 of the new regulations, a room of worship will be opened in every secondary school if a demand arises (Resmi Gazete, http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2013/09/20130907-4.htm, 28/02/2014). Although, a room of worship term is stated instead of small mosque in the new regulations, for the conservative policymakers of AKP, obviously this means opening a small mosque in every secondary school in Turkey. The new regulations bring opportunity of opening worship rooms for Armenian, Christian or Jewish students (Uçar, 2013). But when it comes to opening Cemevis at schools, the Ministry of Education does not seem to be interested in opening them at schools (Sol Portal, http://haber.sol.org.tr/devlet-ve-siyaset/mebin-son-atagi-her-okula-ibadethane-ihl-ogretmenlerine-melelik-haberi-79358, 28/02/2014). So then, as a summary one can argue that AKP chose to pacify Alevi opposition by internalizing their critiques in the current status quo institutions. Not surprisingly, most Alevi organizations passionately reacted to the state's offers, since their primary demands of real secularization of state and acceptance of their religious identity as complete equals to Sunnism before the law fell on deaf ears.

In the wake of these events, at the ground-breaking ceremony for the planned third Bosphorus bridge, the government announced that the bridge would be named the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge (in commemoration of the 16th century Ottoman ruler famous for his harsh policies against Alevis), and it is fair to say that this marked a point at which Alevi suspicions of AKP's intentions towards them reached their peak. Several Alevi organizations arranged protests about the name of the bridge (Milliyet, http://gundem.milliyet.com.tr/alevi-derneklerinden-3-kopru/gundem/detay/1717829/default.htm, 24/01/2014) and the name caused the gap between Alevis and AKP to grow more than ever. In our conclusion, we will try to outline what could be done to partially alleviate the grievances of Turkey's 12-15 million Alevis.

5. CONCLUSION

From the beginning, this paper has tried to argue that the issues and confrontations between Turkey's rulers and the Alevi minority stem mainly from the irreconcilability of the former's orthodox Sunni interpretation of religion and its

associated rituals and the latter's heterodox understanding of these same issues. Since most features of the Alevi belief system radically questions the main tenets of official Islam and are perceived as heresy by the large majority of Sunni & Shia believers in the Middle East, Alevis have always tended to side with the opposition and leftist politics in their respective nation states. Given the interplay of all these factors, it is inevitable that the AKP government, with its historical and structural ties to the Turkish-Islamic synthesis of September 1980 coup and its emphasis on the oppression of Sunnism by the secular state throughout the years of the Turkish republic, should have serious ontological and ideological constraints in its efforts to solve this perennial minority problem.

What then would constitute feasible advice for Turkish politicians in handling this problem more appropriately? First of all, the equal status of Alevi Cemevis as a place of worship should be recognized. There have been occasions on which the current prime minister referred an Alevi Cemevi as ucube (a freak). Moreover, in the past, in response to a petition of an opposition representative for the opening of a Cemevi within the Turkish Grand Assembly Building, the chairman of the assembly surprised everyone by rejecting the request on the basis of some religious opinion from the Directorate of Religious Affairs. A country that defines itself as a secular republic cannot base its political decisions on religious grounds, especially if the subject is related to the rights of another religious minority group. Secondly, mandatory religion classes in schools and state involvement in religious education should cease. However, the country's recent history showed a different picture, as the state actively encourages religious education at every level in secondary education.In addition to these two, assimilatory activities and secret intelligence gathering about Alevis should be stopped. In accordance with the principles of a normal secular state, the Directorate of Religious Affairs must be dissolved, since any secular country has to preserve its neutral status among different religious groups. It is clear in this paper that the Directorate represents the Sunni population, even though it receives tax revenues from all sections of Turkish society. Finally, there is a need for truth and reconciliation commissions in order for the Sunni majority and the state to face up to the country's past and its treatment of minorities. These steps would be a harbinger of a real democratization of these lands.

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