

Freedom of religion in Turkey – The Alevi issue

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Freedom of religion is a fundamental right that must be protected and respected by states. While Turkey has taken important steps in advancing religious freedoms over the last decade, a number of challenges remain. Turkey's Alevi Community continues to face serious problems in terms of being officially recognised by the state and in practicing their religion. While Turkey is officially a secular country, Sunni Islam is the unofficial state religion. Despite Ankara being a signatory of several international conventions and treaties that guarantee fundamental freedoms for all, key fundamental rights of Alevis remain ignored by the state. Last September, hopes were raised that a new "democratisation package" would include steps to further their freedoms but it failed to do so, with the government announcing that a 'special' Alevi reform package would be unveiled by the end of 2013. This did not happen.

Who are the Alevis?

After Sunnis, Alevis constitute the second largest religious community in Turkey. While Alevism is frequently categorised under the Shia denomination of Islam, it is significantly different. While, as with Shia Muslims, Alevis consider the Prophet Mohammed's descendants (12 Imams) as holy, they also see them as philosophic leaders. Philosophy, human development and humanist ideals are important cornerstones of the Alevi belief. Alevi, which means "follower of Ali", attribute great significance to Sufism and the 12 Imams, with a unique importance given to Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed. Alevis, who are staunchly secular, openly practice different gender-policies compared to other denominations. For example, women are accepted to wear modern clothes and veiling is not common place. Gender segregation is not practiced and women are represented in religious ceremonies and feasts alongside men. This has brought a sense of equality to the community.

Alevis are scattered throughout Turkey although, due to censuses in Turkey not taking account of beliefs, their exact number is not known. However, it is estimated at between 15 to 20 million or about 25% of the population (0.2% Christians and Jews, while the rest is predominantly Sunni). They are not a homogeneous religious group, with many groups within Alevism, some more influential than others. Alevis have been the victims of serious religiously motivated crimes, including massacres such as the Kahramanmaraş incident of 1978 or more recently when 35 Alevis were killed after an extreme Sunni group set fire to the Madimak Hotel in Sivas during a cultural event in 1993.

The battle for recognition

Despite some differences between the different Alevi groups, there is a general list of common grievances and demands. Their place of worship, "Cemevleri", are not recognised as such; they do not receive any financial support from the state to build and maintain their places of worship while mosques do. While all clergy serving in mosques are paid and socially secured by the state, because the government considers Alevism a heterodox Muslim sect, it refuses to give any financial support for clergy staff serving in Alevi places of worship. While there are some 600 mid-level Sunni clergy training schools and 46 faculties, there are none for the Alevi. There is also no air space in state operated media for Alevis, while Sunnis enjoy many programmes as well as separate TV and radio channels under national public broadcaster. Furthermore, all of Turkey's 81 governors, who are directly appointed by the government, are Sunni which signals an institutionalised discrimination. There is also resentment over the mandatory religious education in state schools. It focuses on Sunni Islam, ignoring other strands, which is perceived as a strategy of assimilation. This is further compounded by the fact that Jews and Christians are generally allowed to skip such classes due to an Article in the 1922 Treaty of Lausanne, which recognises Christians and Jews as non-Muslim minorities. Legal rights of non-Muslim groups are still based on the Lausanne Treaty, while there is no reference to Muslim minorities in the Turkish legal system.

The Directorate for Religious Affairs (the Diyanet) is also a thorny topic as it is presently composed of only Sunni Muslims. Operating under the Prime Minister's Office and with a President appointed by the Prime Minister, it is a very influential body with a mandate to operate affairs related to the belief, worship and moral principles of the Islamic religion, enlighten the public about religious issues and administer places of worship (mosques and mescid). Many Alevi have called for its abolition, or at least changes in its composition to

allow for Alevi representation, which would permit the Diyanet to meet Turkey's human rights obligations which it presently does not. There is also a financial issue as the Alevi community presently has no share of the 2 billion euro annual budget of the Diyanet, which when adding in the budgets of clergy schools, faculties and media, increases to some 5 billion euro.

Time to change the *status quo*

The current approach contradicts the government's rhetoric that Turkey is a country of equality where, as recently stated by Prime Minister Erdogan "no culture and identity can be denied." While the problem was not created by this government, it is this government that has pledged to change the *status quo* by making key reforms, yet it has delivered nothing more than tit-bits such as naming a University after Hacı Bektaş Veli, the patron saint of the Turkish Alevi Community. This has led to increased belief that the governments talk of change may amount to little more than window dressing reforms in the pre-election period.

More disappointing still is the fact that a number of senior ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) members, including the Prime Minister have made statements which have contradicted commitments made towards resolving this issue. For example when Erdogan condemned the bombings in Reyhanli, a Turkish town near the Syrian border, in May 2013, he explicitly referred to the victims who lost their lives as "52 Sunni citizens". This was the first time in the history of Turkey that a Prime Minister used such a sectarian description. The fact that this happened following a tragic terrorist attack makes the remarks even more unfortunate. Other senior members of the government and Parliament have also used such discourse. The President of the Parliament, Cemil Cicek, following a request to open a cemevi in the Parliament, responded that "Alevism is a part of Islam and places of worship in Islam are mosques and masjids. In this sense, it is not possible to consider cemevis as places of worships". Furthermore, Turkey's main opposition party, the Republican Peoples Party (CHP), does not have a very pro-active approach in this issue, despite its leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, having Alevi roots. Given the CHP does not have the power to bring about the necessary constitutional amendments, this may account in part for the passive approach.

Various governments in Turkey including the current one made pledges to solve the issues of Alevis but they failed to make a comprehensive reform. The current government cannot entirely deny the requests coming from the Alevi community for two main reasons. Firstly, these requests are completely legitimate in a democratic and secular country. Secondly, the Alevi community has undeniable political power considering their population. However, this has not led to a comprehensive reform due to general understanding about Islam within the AKP. The Turkish authorities are coming under increased pressure by Alevi organisations, other belief groups, as well as some liberal Sunni intellectuals to change the *status quo*. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has also made several rulings on this issue. Theological discussions should be left to scholars. Questioning and/or 'correcting' religious beliefs of citizens is not among the responsibilities of the state. Freedom of religion and freedom of worship of Alevis, just like all other citizens of the country, should be respected. Hence, if some citizens see cemevleri as places of worship, the function of the state is to recognise and respect this.

In light of Turkey's EU accession process, this is even more important given that freedom of religion is a fundamental right that must be protected and respected by the state. In the past, the EU had difficulties in understanding Alevis and their problems. Only in the last couple of years, has this issue begun to be raised by the EU in relation to Turkey's accession process, including in the annual European Commission's Progress Report. While the EU's leverage on the government has been significantly reduced following problems in the Turkey's accession talks, the EU could nevertheless increase its ties with the Alevi Community as well as other actors, who are working on this issue in order to develop a broad-based approach to push the Turkish state to move ahead on this issue. Even though the Turkish government is less enthusiastic about joining the EU than it once was, Ankara's attempts to open new negotiation chapters clearly shows the fact that the EU accession process is still taken seriously by the government. In this sense, problems of Alevis could be solved within the framework of the accession process rather than within the internal dynamics of Turkey.

Ultimately, the biggest winner will be Turkey, as improving freedom of religion along with other fundamental freedoms will significantly strengthen the country both internally and externally and will meet the goals and commitments that the ruling elites have laid down related to equality, freedoms and tolerance.

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