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To cite this article: Bayram Ali Soner & Şule Toktaş (2011) Alevi and Alevism in the Changing Context of Turkish Politics: The Justice and Development Party's Alevi Opening, Turkish Studies, 12:3, 419-434, DOI: [10.1080/14683849.2011.604214](https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2011.604214)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2011.604214>



Published online: 25 Nov 2011.



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Alevis and Alevism in the Changing Context of Turkish Politics: The Justice and Development Party's Alevi Opening

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ABSTRACT *The Justice and Development Party (JDP, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) has launched a rapprochement policy toward the Alevis. The JDP's Alevi Opening has presented a unique case in Turkey's latest identity politics not only because Alevi claims, for the first time, came to be involved in political processes for official recognition and accommodation, but also because the process was handled by a political party which is regarded to have retained Islamist roots in Sunni interpretation. This article explores the JDP's Alevi Opening process and tries to explain the motivations behind the party's decision to incorporate the Alevi question in its political agenda. What is more, the debate that the opening has caused is also under scrutiny with the positions and arguments held by the actors and the agencies involved in the process, e.g., the Alevis (the secularist and the conservative wings), the General Directorate of Religious Affairs, the National Security Council, the JDP leadership and the Islamist intellectuals.*

Introduction

Having been one of the most vigorously supportive communities of the Republic's foundation, Turkey's Alevis have rejected any social, legal or political categorization classifying them as a minority.¹ Although Alevis have remained suspicious of accepting any form of minority status, this has not prevented them from seeking rights and freedoms similar to those granted to official minorities (the non-Muslim communities of Greeks, Jews and Armenians).² In light of their identity, claims for official recognition and legal–political accommodation over the last decades, one can argue that Turkey's Alevis have been searching for a way to be treated as a group with distinct cultural and religious needs pertaining to their sect, but without being classified as a minority. What makes the Alevi question a rather remarkable issue in contemporary Turkish politics is that the demands for cultural recognition are currently being dealt

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with by a government which has a predominantly Sunnite constituency and a culturally conservative profile. In its second term of office, following its victory in the 2007 general elections, the Justice and Development Party (JDP) government initiated a dialogue with the Alevi community to identify and try to accommodate their identity claims within Turkey's political and legal setting. The dialogue, called the "Alevi Opening," is still ongoing. The JDP's support of Alevis, and the political agenda related to it, have caused some public debate amongst both Alevi and non-Alevi circles.

This article aims to outline this discussion and review the roles, discourses and positioning of the actors involved, along with differences in their definition and assessment of Alevism, Alevi identity, the Alevi question and methods for resolving it. The actors under scrutiny include various wings of Alevi associations, Islamist intellectuals, JDP officials, the National Security Council (NSC) and the General Directorate of Religious Affairs (GDRA). In doing so, a brief account of the historical origins of the question is presented, pinpointing Turkey's modernization project and its republican interpretation of the democratic principle of secularism as a key reason for the Alevi community's peripheral-heterodox positioning. The Alevi revival process is examined through national and international dynamics that encouraged the growth of Alevi identity politics. In the second part, the debate among Alevis regarding their understanding of Alevism and Alevi identity is analyzed. In particular, the community's fragmentation into two major wings (the traditionalist-religious vs. modernist-secularist) is explored by reviewing their differences and similarities of their positions on the Alevi question. In the third part, the JDP's Alevi Opening process is examined in accordance with its terms of office in government: the first term between 2002 and 2007 and the second term after 2007. The motivations behind the party's decision to incorporate the Alevi question in its political agenda are explored. In the last section of the article, the key points raised during the government's workshops held to evaluate the Alevi Opening are analyzed and concluding remarks are presented on the rapprochement process.

The Alevi Revival: The National and Transnational Politics of Identity Building

When Turkey was founded as a nation state from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire in 1923, new laws of the Republic aimed to construct a secular public sphere and integrate all ethnic, cultural and religious communities into a single national identity in the form of a secularized Turkish nation. The Turkish version of secularism not only focused on emancipating the state from religion, but also on transferring religious authority from multiple religious institutions and groups to the single hand of a centric state.³ To this end, the Law on the Dissolution of Dervish Houses, enacted in 1925, entrusted the provision of religious services, the coordination of religious affairs and the management of places of worship to the state institution of the GDRA. Thus, rather than breaking all state ties with religion, Turkish Republican secularism instead created a strong linkage to religion through the GDRA and

created a Sunni-centered public control over religious institutions and groups.⁴ The modernist elite saw the GDRA as an administrative tool of the center that would enlighten society about religion, while eradicating radicalism from the Sunni majority and keeping them under state control.⁵ To the extent that the GDRA was organized according to a Sunni interpretation of Islam, it turned the Sunni-Islam faith into the official religion. The Republic's promotion of one state-favored religion among the diverse interpretations and practices of Islam actually helped to maintain official heterodoxies and orthodoxies from the Ottoman era.⁶ Accordingly, non-Sunni Muslim communities were relegated to a status of heterodoxy (a sectarian community outside the mainstream interpretation of a religion), not directly by Sunni-Islam itself but more indirectly by its official institutionalization.⁷

The state-sponsored GDRA monopoly over religious life narrowed the social and legal grounds of religious pluralism in general; but the Sunni designation of its personnel and services left almost no space for Alevi culture and identity in particular. Only GDRA personnel were allowed to use religious titles, and only mosques were accepted as places of worship for the entire Muslim population, irrespective of sectarian divisions. The Law on the Dissolution of Dervish Houses thus prohibited the use of religious titles related to Alevi-Bektashi leadership, such as *dedelik*, *seyyitlik*, *çelebilik* and *nakiplik*, and Alevi places of worship (*cemevi*)⁸ used for practicing and reproducing Alevi-Islam faith. The institutionalization of an official religion through the GDRA excluded all officially unrecognized religious convictions and groups, including Alevi, from the legal and political instruments necessary for their survival. Because of this political and legal exclusion, Alevi faith and practices, from the early years of the Republic, largely survived as an underground culture until the 1980s. Through the inherited channels of an oral tradition, Alevi community networks continued to provide educational and religious services, and hence kept the Alevi identity alive despite the uniformist inclinations of Republican modernization.

Ironically, the majority of Alevi did not interpret the Kemalist modernization project to impose state control over religion as favoritism of Sunni-Islam.⁹ Rather they expected that Turkish secularism would restrain Sunni groups and prevent them from dominating the public sphere. As Erik Jan Zürcher and Harry van der Linden, prominent analysts of Turkish politics, have argued, "they (Alevi) were prepared to accept that the Republic did not recognize them as a religious community, as long as that same Republic would deny all forms of religion a place in the public sphere."¹⁰ The Alevi community expected the new republic to provide a more secure environment than the Ottoman Empire, during which there had been periodic violent Sunni–Alevi sectarian clashes and maltreatment by Ottoman authorities. In view of their expectations of secularization reforms, Alevi became one of the most loyal groups of the Kemalist modernization project.¹¹

With the rise of identity politics in the late 1980s that dominated Turkish political agenda, Alevi circles started to see Alevism as a source of religious, cultural, philosophical and ideological identity and Alevi public opinion leaders started to demand communal rights and legal–political recognition of their distinctiveness. It was at this stage that Alevism became a recognized political issue for the first time in the

Republican era. Furthermore, from the 1990s, the rise and local and national electoral victories of Islamist parties with their large Sunni constituency and religious political agenda worried the Alevi community. For historical and theological reasons, Alevi consider the political expression of Sunni-Islam as a threat to their community's security, citing in support of their fears the many violent Sunni–Alevi sectarian clashes that date even back to Ottoman times.¹² This view was given even greater justification in 1993, when around 10,000–20,000 radical Islamist protestors of Sunni origin burnt down a hotel (the Madımak Hotel) in Sivas where Alevi were participating in a religious festival, killing 35 people. The event forced Alevi groups to develop a stronger organizational movement for the protection and promotion of Alevi identity against assimilation and the newly increased power of Sunni-Islam in Turkey's social and political life.¹³ It was in this context that the Alevi community mobilized itself in the 1990s as social force through community organizations, cultural activities, *cem* houses, theological and intellectual publications, and various other media channels. Alevi networks became structured around civil society associations where they could come together, take secular and religious guidance, develop community solidarity and organize religious and cultural activities pertinent to their identity.¹⁴ Alevi community associations have suggested various policy options to the political authorities in order to end Alevism's status as an official heresy, to resist assimilation and promote Alevi identity claims.

Alevi communities in Europe have gone through a similar process of revivalism.¹⁵ The role of Alevi-Turkish immigrants in European countries is multi-layered. European Alevi associations have provided financial resources to Alevi associations in Turkey and presented an agenda for the Alevi cause in Turkey. European Alevi have also directly lobbied Turkish officials and parliamentarians in Turkey. At an European Union (EU) level, Alevi advocacy groups have helped insert the Alevi question into Turkey's EU accession process and encourage their host countries' governments to exert pressure on Turkey to recognize Alevi identity.¹⁶ The EU documents such as the Commission's annual reports on Turkey's progress in EU membership have also pointed out shortcomings in Turkey's treatment of Alevi, which chiefly center on the official recognition of Alevi identity, and of their *cem* houses as places of worship, on exemption from compulsory religious courses for Alevi students, and reformulation of Turkish secularism to completely eliminate or reorganize the GDRA.

Partly under the pressure of EU requirements and partly in response to demands by Alevi, there has been a gradual *de facto* recognition of Alevi collective identity. Legal reforms on freedom of association enacted in 2003 lifted the ban on associations founded on the basis of racial (ethnic), religious, sectarian and regional differences or with an intention to create minorities based on the same differences. In consequence, several Alevi associations were re-established that, prior to the legal amendment, had been closed down several times. It was in this legal and political context that the Federation of Alevi–Bektashi Associations was for the first time granted legal recognition in April 2003. This was followed by the recognition of a number of other associations, including the Cem Foundation and the Pir Sultan

Abdal Cultural Association. In addition, Turkish governments started to allocate resources from the state budget to the use of a few state-friendly Alevi organizations, and political authorities regularly attended the Alevi festival annually held in Hacı Bektaş. Other political parties than the Republican People's Party (RPP, Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi), the party traditionally supported by Alevi, began addressing issues regarding the Alevi problem in order to attract their votes. The state broadcasting institution TRT (Turkish Radio-Television Corporation) began to show an interest in Alevi music and started broadcasting documentaries on Alevi cultural heritage. The liberalization of media laws during the same period also introduced new channels of public expression for the leaders of Alevi groups, through which they gained rather extensive public visibility.¹⁷ A number of municipalities have already granted licenses for the construction and operation of *cem* houses. Regarding an application by Alevi parents to exempt their children from school religious courses, the Court of First Instance ruled that any exemption for Muslims, including Alevi, would be against the Constitution. The case was taken to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), which in 2007 concluded that obligatory religious courses were against the principles of objectivity and pluralism, did not respect the religious and philosophical convictions of parents, and that the exemption procedure did not provide sufficient protection for those who had contradictory beliefs.¹⁸ The Turkish Council of State issued a parallel judgment on the case, stating that, because the mandatory course involved teaching a religion, such class should be taught only at the request of parents, and hence should not be mandatory for everyone.¹⁹

The Two Wings of the Debate on Alevism: The Traditionalist-Religious Alevi vs. Modernist-Secularist Alevi

Alevi associations were not only politically active in promoting Alevi identity, but also participated in theological efforts to standardize Alevism. In traditional Alevism, oral traditions and spiritual leaders (*dedes*) offering a variety of interpretations of the religion, had played an important role in its reproduction in isolated rural settings. However, the revival encouraged by modernization required a consolidation of religious norms. The resulting attempts to arrive at theological uniformity within the community, and to create a written belief system from among many different versions of the oral tradition, complicated the task of reinventing Alevi identity under modern conditions. This was because, as the secular leaders and scholars in Alevi associations studied the meanings, practices and rituals of Alevism to create a standardized belief system out of an oral tradition, differences emerged among the Alevi community producing two major camps: the traditionalist-religious and modernist-secularist.

The traditionalist-religious sections of the community conceive of Alevism as the pure form of Islam in terms of theological roots and rituals. They are headed by the more state-friendly Alevi association of the Cem Foundation, and support a more religious definition of Alevism. Founding members defined Alevism, not just as a belief system within Islam, but as the original version of Islam.²⁰ This approach considers

the Sunni interpretation to have been corrupted by political and religious authorities because they added practices and principles non-existent at the time of the Prophet Mohammed.²¹ Consequently, rather than seeking a fundamental transformation in state-religion relations, these rightist groups under the Cem Foundation aim for a reconciliation between the political authorities and Alevis, and the incorporation of Alevism into the existing schema of state-religious affairs.²² In doing so, they assign a role to the state, not on the basis of neutrality, but on the grounds of equality in providing opportunities to different religious groups within society. The remedy to the problems of the Alevi community, from this point of view, is for the state to grant legal-political recognition to *cem* houses, reform the GDRA to allow representation of Alevis within it, allocate public funds equitably to all places of worship and their personnel, and revise compulsory school religious courses in collaboration with Alevi public opinion leaders.²³ Thus, the right-wing Alevi groups seek to solve the Alevi question by integrating Alevi concerns into the prevailing institutional structure of the establishment.

In contrast, modernist-secularist Alevis see Alevism as outside Islam and identify it more with non-Islamic elements. According to them, Alevism is a syncretistic belief system, a philosophy, a culture as well as a lifestyle constructed originally as the community interacted with various religions, including Shamanism, Manichaeism, Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam, as well as other polytheistic religions of Anatolia and the Middle East.²⁴ The modernist-secularist line within the community, gathered under the associational umbrella of the Alevi-Bektashi Federation, campaigns for an Alevi identity on the basis of the historical Sunni-Alevi confrontation in which Alevis were believed to have suffered from maltreatment by Sunni political authorities during the Ottoman Empire. From their anti-Sunni and anti-center positioning, modernist-secularist Sunnis dominate the central power structure and push Alevis to the periphery. To modernist-secularist Alevis, although the Republican regime aimed to create a secular public sphere where no sub-identities would be allowed, very much unlike the Ottoman system, there was in fact no exception regarding the Sunni nature of political authority. Rather, the Republican regime created an official religion based on a Sunni interpretation of Islam that had established close linkage between the state and religion. As a result, and disregarding the constitutional principle of equality, Sunni-Islam is favored in the public realm, while Alevis and all other non-Muslims are moved to the Republic's political and legal margins. It is in this context that the Turkish IDs include the information regarding the Muslim citizens' religious affiliation as Islam in contrast to the principle of secularism and freedom of conscience.²⁵ Turkey's political-legal framework not only denies the Alevi identity but also surrenders the Alevi community to Sunni practices and official institutions, all of which have no other aim except assimilation.²⁶

Modernist-secularist groups in the Alevi-Bektashi Federation ask that state adopt a form of "passive secularism," which would separate religion from the state and emancipate religious life. Their claims have highlighted the shortcomings of the status quo that could have been resolved under a pluralist interpretation of the constitutional principle of secularism.²⁷ Modernist-secularist Alevis represent a shift from

the previous pro-Republican secularist position to liberal secularism. To ensure the state's neutrality toward all kinds of beliefs, modernist-secularist Alevi leaders insist on a liberal transformation, in which there will be no legitimate place for the Sunni dominated GDRA, compulsory religion courses or legal-political restrictions on religious groups. They also anticipate that such a liberal framework would break the current linkage between state and Sunni-Islam to provide all religious groups with equal opportunities in benefiting from state services. These modernist-secularist groups object to the allocation of any state funds for religion, whether to the GDRA or to any other kind of religious institution, Sunni or Alevi.²⁸

The two camps in the Alevi community politically criticize each other. Modernist-secularist groups claim that the Cem Foundation and other traditionalist-religious Alevi groups are inadvertently supporting the Republican state's objective of keeping all religious groups under control through official institutionalization. On the other hand, the traditionalist-religious groups criticize those modernist-secularists who conceive of Alevism merely as a culture for falling into the trap of internalizing Sunni perspectives on Alevism.

Nevertheless, despite the differences in their conceptions of Alevism, both traditionalist-religious and modernist-secularist groups reject Sunni-Islamic principles, interpretations and practices. According to both camps, Alevism is foremost non-Sunni because Alevis have long been discriminated against and suppressed by Sunnis and Sunni-centric political authority, from the Ottoman Empire up to and including the present Republican era. Both groups place the Sunni interpretation at the socio-political center and Alevism at the periphery. Because of this, Alevis have tended to be suspicious of, and keep their distance from, the state authorities. This further deepens when the government in power is associated with Sunni beliefs and groups.²⁹ In short, despite their theological differences, Alevi associations have formed a common front to challenge the status of the official orthodoxy that has excluded Alevi beliefs and practices from the public sphere.

Alevi revivalism and its demands for official recognition of its identity pose a challenge to the Republican ideal of national unity. For this reason, the Alevi question became a security question accompanied by the involvement of the NSC, which is the governmental institution composed of civil and military top-level officials holding regular meetings to discuss and develop security policies. The NSC remained in a state of denial concerning Alevi claims in the name of maintaining a national unity in which religious uniformity was an integral part. For example, in response to the increasing public visibility of Alevism and the voices of Alevis, one former NSC head suggested that granting official recognition to Alevis as a separate sectarian group with their own places of worship other than a mosque was a dangerous threat to the national unity and security concerns of the state.³⁰

Another institution, the GDRA, which provides legitimacy to statist discourses with respect to Alevism also reacted against Alevi claims. The GDRA claims that it is neutral with respect to Islamic sects and does not preferably represent any specific sectarian group. Rather, it says that it acts for all Muslim Turkish citizens by providing religious and educational services common to all Muslims, irrespective of their

sectarian particularities³¹ Within this totalizing approach, Alevism is generally acknowledged as just one interpretation of Islam, but only rarely as an Islamic sectarian group. The GDRA officially refuses to recognize *cem* houses as places of worship, thereby arguing that Alevi demands for recognition are baseless, and political rather than religious. From the GDRA's perspective, *cem* houses can be respected and preserved as cultural assets, but only mosques are places of worship common to all Muslims including Alevis.³² The GDRA's fear is that official recognition of Alevism and *cem* houses as separate places of worship would further alienate Alevis from orthodox Islam and allow Alevism to become a separate religion detrimental to the national unity of the Republican state.³³ According to this logic, other sects would then follow the Alevis' path so that any official incorporation of Alevis into the GDRA would mean giving the same rights to other Muslim sectarian groups, which in the end would be harmful to the foundational principles of the Republic. Some Alevi groups counter the GDRA's argument that other Islamic sects would demand places of worship of their own by pointing out that all non-Alevi Islamic sects in Turkey accept the mosque as their place of worship. It is only Alevis who are distinct in regarding *cem* houses as their place of worship.³⁴

The Governmental Appropriation of the Alevi Question: The Justice and Development Party's Alevi Opening

The GDRA's customary rhetoric with respect to Alevism drew heavily on references to common Islamic origins and respected Islamic figures among both Sunni and Alevis so as to justify the denial of non-Sunni beliefs and practices existing in the Alevi faith.³⁵ The JDP policies, in their first term of government between 2002 and 2007, conformed to the GDRA's vision for a Sunni version of Alevism. In the words of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the JDP's leader and prime minister: "If Alevism is the love of Ali, we all see ourselves as devoted Alevis."³⁶ The party continued to shape its policies similar to the conventional statist view, rather than the Party's principles of liberal secularism, pluralism, democracy and human rights. In its first governmental term, the JDP displayed an inconsistent attitude, focusing, in accordance with the demands of its conservative-religious electorate base, more on the dissolution of secularist restrictions on religious Sunnis than on responding to Alevi complaints. Thus, the government took almost no progressive steps regarding the Alevi question in this period.³⁷ While several ministers attended *cem* ceremonies, none of them mentioned any changes in the legal status of *cem* houses. Most recalled the GDRA's rhetoric in these occasions, paying lip service to the Umma (universal Islamic community) and the common roots of Alevis and Sunnis.³⁸ Prime Minister Erdoğan noted that, although the JDP sympathized with Alevi claims, it was waiting for public opinion to become more favorable to the settlement of the Alevi question before taking steps in this direction.³⁹

The only exception to this policy of ignorance, if not denial, during the JDP's first term, concerned the issue of compulsory religious courses. Conservative-religious segments of the JDP's electorate were dissatisfied with the courses. They found

course contents superficial and insufficient compared to the depth of religious knowledge that could be provided through voluntary religious associations.⁴⁰ Within the JDP government, prominent figures stated on several occasions their objections to compulsory nature of the courses, supporting complete abolition on condition that alternatives would be introduced according to student demand.⁴¹ In response, the Ministry of Education revised the primary-level compulsory religious culture and ethics course by adding a 15-page chapter on Alevi culture. This revision was made, however, in collaboration with Sunni theological academics without any contribution from Alevi groups. Because of this, the new content presented Alevism from a Sunni point of view, provoking further Alevi reactions to the course.

Although the JDP was born from among the ranks of the Islamist movement, it aligned itself ideologically with conservative democracy, grounded on a libertarian discourse of universal rights and liberties. In contrast to European models of conservatism, which rely heavily on the preservation of institutions, the JDP's political stance has put an emphasis on the preservation of social values, including religious beliefs and social traditions instead of the prevailing institutional structure and relations of the status quo.⁴² As a result of the Party's thorny relations with the military and judicial bureaucracy, the JDP came to adopt a more radical understanding of conservatism with regard to state–society relations.⁴³ That embraces a reinterpretation of secularism within democratic principles. On many occasions, the party leadership stated not only that the party is against the idea of government on religious principles, but also that it is against any political interference in the daily religious practices. The JDP has therefore kept its distance from the Turkish version of secularism, which grants the state an assertive role in creating a secular public sphere. In line with its conservatism, the JDP is inclined more toward a passive understanding of secularism, which sees the state as neutral before religious and sectarian groups and allows the public visibility of religion.⁴⁴ In doing this, the party has aimed to reform state–religion relations within a democratic framework of freedom of conscience and association that it expected would undermine restrictions on expression of religion at a societal level.⁴⁵ This anti-status quo positioning and liberal secularism was what fostered the JDP's Alevi Opening during its second term in office.

Alongside the rise of the Alevi community's social power within Turkey, and the external pressures from the EU and the ECtHR, a liberal shift in the discourses of post-Islamist intellectuals has also served as a catalyst for the JDP government's Alevi initiative. In the eyes of the intellectuals, the JDP was founded to develop and implement policies sensitive to freedom of belief and worship, so it could hardly have ignored the historical exclusion of Alevi from the public sphere. The Alevi question was thus appropriated by Islamist intellectuals, who began to discuss the social and political issues of the country using a language of universal rights and liberties devoid of Islamic references;⁴⁶ post-Islamist intellectuals, who appear mostly as columnists and writers in the pro-government media, gave confidence to JDP cadres, who were concerned about possible negative reactions from its religious-conservative Sunni electorate when developing a policy of rapprochement on the Alevi question. Islamist intellectuals, instead of debating Alevism as a religious issue,

adopted a libertarian discourse and formulated it as a socio-political question embedded in the authoritarian practices of Republican secularism, which they viewed as having restricted both Sunni and non-Sunni religious groups in the public sphere, a perception commonly shared by JDP cadres and its supporters in general.⁴⁷

The post-Islamist intellectuals thus located the Alevi question within the broader framework of emancipation of religion from the pressures of the state. According to them, the problems were the consequences of the Republican version of an authoritarian secularism that led to the existence of a state institution of religion, the GDRA, organized on Sunni principles, the non-recognition of *cem* houses, and compulsory religion courses. That is, it was neither the Sunni community nor its understanding of Islam, but rather the Republican version of secularism that was obstructing Alevism and creating barriers against the Alevi community.⁴⁸ The thing to be done, therefore, was to promote a more liberal interpretation of secularism and implement it in accordance with universal standards—that is, to free religion, whether Sunni-Islam or Alevi-Islam, from the control of the state and leave it in the hands of society and its voluntary associations.⁴⁹ The post-Islamist intellectuals argued that, while Alevis were disturbed specifically by the Sunni bias of the GDRA and its services and religious instruction in general, religious-conservative Sunnis were also against the prevailing situation. They recognized that, because the GDRA was controlling religious life in line with state concerns, the compulsory religion courses were not only discriminating against Alevis, but were also preventing Sunnis from receiving appropriate and sufficient religious instruction.⁵⁰ The post-Islamist critique of the GDRA and the religious courses, therefore, rests on a desire for the free development of a conservative-religious life, through freedom of religious association, practices and conscience.

Post-Islamist intellectuals recommend, for the short-term, the official recognition of Alevi identity, although the radical long-term solution, according to them, would be to confront the secularist-pro-establishment forces of the status quo in Turkey. However, under current circumstances, the dissolution of the GDRA, state-sponsored religious services and compulsory religious instruction are all unrealistic goals. For example, Ali Bulaç, one post-Islamist intellectual, argues that, if the realities of the regime do not allow for an immediate radical solution, then Alevi demands should be met by the use of existing political and legal means, such as equal representation at the GDRA, allocation of public funds to *cem* houses and Alevi religious services, and restructuring the content of compulsory religious courses in collaboration with experts of the Alevi faith.⁵¹ Acknowledging the historically rooted suspicions of the Alevi community toward Sunni-Islam and Turkey's Sunni-center, these intellectuals have encouraged the government to generate a mechanism of dialogue with Alevi public opinion leaders, to involve them into the rapprochement process, to maintain their consent and make the Alevi community a part of the resolution of the issue.

In the eyes of the majority of Alevis, however, the JDP has Sunni-Islamist roots and represents Sunni-Islam. Therefore, Alevis considered it an unexpected, if not unconvincing political maneuver when the JDP government developed its policy

of rapprochement to identify and accommodate Alevi demands to end Alevism's heterodox status. However, a more convincing rapprochement appeared between the JDP and the Alevi community just before the 2007 general elections. On the eve of the elections, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited a *cem* house for the first time and outlined a promising future regarding the community's problems.⁵² The party's concern over the Alevi question became more apparent when a number of Alevi were nominated by the JDP and elected to the Turkish Parliament, which undermined the party's Sunni-dominated image. One outspoken Alevi intellectual, Reha Çamuroğlu, a well-known Alevi activist from Alevism's traditionalist-religious wing, became a Member of Parliament from the JDP ranks, and was later recruited as chief advisor to the Prime Minister on the Alevi question. Çamuroğlu played a significant role in the rapprochement process and, when the government started a process of dialogue with the Alevi community in the second half of 2008, consolidated his position as the JDP's spokesperson on the Alevi question. Under his organizational leadership, the government came together with several Alevi public opinion leaders to take their views, with Erdoğan attending the last two Alevi breakfasts, held at the end of the holy month of Muharrem, to show his government's determination to resolve the question. Although the breakfast already held symbolic significance as an official recognition of Alevi identity and their claims, Erdoğan also gave the first signals that the government would question official orthodoxy and move toward recognizing religious pluralism, in which citizens would be enabled to define, practice and express their own beliefs free from the intervention of state authorities.⁵³

Thus, it was evident that the government was ready to abandon state-centered and Sunni-based definitions of Alevi identity concerning the status of *cem* houses and the representation of Alevism in the compulsory religious courses. However, the government also knew that any possible settlement of the question would only be acceptable to the Alevi community if they were included in the solution process. To this end, the government intensified its efforts to broaden the scope of the dialogue, with the Council of Ministers, in December 2008, concluding a framework of measures to resolve the Alevi question. The question of how finally to settle the whole range of Alevi demands was left to the conclusions of workshops with the participation of Alevi public opinion leaders. However, the dialogue's framework, from the start, embraced the official recognition of *cem* houses as places of worship (for example, through the provision of electricity and water free of charge, and public payment of wages for their personnel), and allowing Alevi students to opt out of the compulsory religious courses. At the same time, the framework left open what institutional organization would coordinate the selection and education of Alevi religious personnel and their services to the community.⁵⁴ This so-called governmental roadmap reflected more the propositions of the traditionalist-religious Alevi wing than the modernist-secularist wing.⁵⁵

Preliminary Conclusions of the Workshops

In accordance with the objectives of the roadmap, the JDP government held seven workshops between June 2009 and January 2010 that aimed to discover demands

of Alevi–Bektashi groupings and to determine policy parameters. The JDP government aimed for diverse representation in an extensive process of dialogue to sustain social consensus around the question. To this end, in addition to secular and religious leaders of Alevi groups, Alevi intellectuals, representatives from various Alevi associations of different political views and diverse backgrounds, non-Alevi public opinion leaders, theology specialists, members of civil society organizations, media representatives, academics and political parties were all invited to the workshops. The workshop can thus be seen as a turning point in the government’s rapprochement policy because, although they had remained distant to, and suspicious and critical of the JDP government, even modernist-secularist Alevi associations, like the Alevi–Bektashi Federation, attended the workshop and were for the first time involved in the rapprochement process. This increased the prospective potential of the workshops to generate comprehensive transformations in the official status of Alevi identity. However, due to suspicions of the JDP and its Sunnite constituency, some Alevi groups have not sympathized with the JDP’s Alevi Opening, and either did not take part in the workshops at all or did not participate regularly. Each workshop hosted around 40–45 participants, totaling around 400 participants in the seven workshops. The preliminary conclusions of the workshops were declared to the public on February 8, 2010.⁵⁶

The document gathered the conclusions under eight headings. These included the definitive framework for Alevism, problems of identity, the legal and constitutional boundaries, the GDRA, compulsory religious courses at schools, the issue of the Madımak Hotel in Sivas, the status of Alevi religious leaders (*dedes*) and the legal status of *cem* houses. The preliminary report noted that Alevis were very sensitive to the preservation of their own understandings of Alevism and were against any attempt to impose a definition from outside. The document describes Alevism as a belief system (*inanç ve erkan yolu*) within Islam guided by Islamic concepts of “God, Mohammed and Ali (*Hak, Muhammed, Ali*).” Regarding the problems of Alevi identity, the document emphasized the need for stronger legal measures to combat discrimination and undermine prejudices, ignorance and anti-Alevi representations in social and educational processes. In the workshops, Republican reforms, e.g., the Law on the Unity of Education and the Law on the Dissolution of Dervish Houses, were also discussed, but no agreement was reached. The document affirms that the majority of Alevis have a critical attitude toward the GDRA, finding it incompatible with secularism, and hence hoping for its dissolution at least in the long term. However, this option was generally considered unrealistic in today’s circumstances. Instead, the GDRA was generally accepted as a necessary institution, but one that needed organizational reform to open it up to the representation of all interpretations of Islam existing within Turkish society. The report accepted that mandatory religion courses should continue, but that they should be revised to include Alevi beliefs in the course contents. The report recommended that the Madımak Hotel should be confiscated and turned into a national park. The report also discussed Alevi religious leaders (*dedes*), within the broader framework of the

modernization of Alevism and its education and training facilities for religious leaders. The status of *cem* houses was covered in the section on legal and constitutional barriers.

Conclusion

There is a growing constituency in contemporary Turkish politics that is more responsive to identity claims, the political recognition of social differences and enhancement of liberties. There are new political actors involved in the making of politics. In this article, we have tried to demonstrate policy-making, the process of politics making, and the deliberations and emergence of new discourses and agencies in the Alevi rapprochement case. What the rapprochement shows is that, though the JDP government seems to have taken a prominent role in the process, the full picture of the opening cannot fully be grasped without taking into account other actors and transformations involved in the process.

When it came to power, the JDP government was confronted with an Alevi community that had already transformed itself into an effective social and political actor by developing a strong organizational network with community associations, and secular leaders that were able to use modern mechanisms of identity politics, press and media channels, literary and academic publications. While this Alevi revival secured *de facto* social recognition and public visibility for the community through *cem* houses, *cem* ceremonies, religious festivals and TV programs, Alevism still lacked the political recognition needed to end to their Republic-old status of official heterodoxy. Aware that the protection, promotion and free practice of Alevi causes depended on a legal–political accommodation, the community associations had started to focus their energies for identity claims on political actors inside and outside the country. The government was thus put under effective social pressure. In light of the arguments given in this article, one can argue that, despite its Sunni-Islamist roots, the JDP government responded to the Alevi concerns for political recognition because of ideological changes, promoted by various intellectuals who are influential among its religious-conservative electorate, to the party's political line. This ideological turn was a move away from a religious political agenda to a political discourse relying on universal rights and freedoms, including freedom of belief and conscience. As this liberal discourse positioned the JDP and its intellectual social forces against the authoritarian practices of the Republican establishment, it created a common language between the JDP, Alevi circles and post-Islamist intellectuals, regarding the existence of an Alevi question in Turkey to be solved if not the terms of how to settle it. Behind the governmental opening, therefore, the effect of this discursive rapprochement can be seen between key social and political actors. Beyond doubt, many things remain to be done to provide Alevism with the same social, political and legal status as Sunni citizens. However, the preliminary conclusions of the opening have already given a very clear signal that we should no longer define the status of Alevi citizens in Turkey in terms of an official heterodoxy.

Notes

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