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Between Central Control and Constitutional Rights: The 1908 Elections and Provincial Politics in Erzurum

MERKEZİ KONTROL VE ANAYASAL HAKLAR ARASINDA: ERZURUM'DA 1908 SEÇİMLERİ VE TAŞRA

GÜLSEREN DUMAN KOÇ*

ABSTRACT

This article examines the transition to a constitutional regime in the Ottoman periphery by focusing on the 1908 elections and their aftermath in the province of Erzurum. As a frontier province with a diverse demographic structure comprising various nomadic and semi-nomadic groups, Erzurum offers a compelling case for scrutinizing how the promises of the 1908 Constitutional Revolution, namely liberty, equality, and fraternity, unfolded in a local context. This study first analyzes debates over the demographic distribution of deputies and electoral irregularities, as well as their reflection in the press. By investigating specific cases from Erzurum, the article demonstrates the tension between the central authority prioritizing state security and public order, and constitutional rights such as freedom of expression, representation, and the inviolability of privacy. Based on an analysis of Ottoman archival documents and the Minutes of the Ottoman Chamber of Deputies, the article argues that both electoral processes and constitutional rights emerged as contested fields among central authorities, deputies, governors, and the local population.

Keywords: Ottoman History, 1908 Elections, Erzurum, Constitutional Rights, Center-Periphery Relations, Opposition.

ÖZ

Bu makale, Erzurum vilayetinde 1908 seçimlerine ve sonrasına odaklanarak Osmanlı sınırında meşruti yönetime geçiş sürecini incelemektedir. İmparatorluğun demografik çeşitliliğe sahip bir sınır vilayeti olan ve göçebe ile yarı-göçebe aşiretleri barındıran Erzurum, 1908 devriminin vaatleri olan hürriyet, müsavat ve uhuvvet kavramlarının yerel bağlamda nasıl tezahür ettiğini incelemek için önemli bir örnek sunmaktadır. Bu çalışma önce mebusların demografik dağılımını, seçimler sırasındaki usulsüzlükleri ve bu gelişmelerin basına nasıl yansıdığını incelemektedir. Erzurum'da seçim süreci ve sonrası ile ilgili bazı somut vakaları inceleyerek, bu makale devletin güvenliğini ve asayişi her şeyin önünde tutan merkezi otoritelerle, ifade ve temsil özgürlüğü, mahremiyetin dokunulmazlığı gibi anayasal haklar arasındaki çatışmayı göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Osmanlı arşiv belgeleri ve Meclis-i Mebusan Zabıt Ceridelerini inceleyerek bu makale hem seçim süreçlerinin hem de anayasal hakların nasıl merkezi otoriteler, mebuslar, valiler ve yerel halk arasında çatışmalı bir alana dönüştüğünü göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Osmanlı Tarihi, 1908 Seçimleri, Erzurum, Anayasal Haklar, Merkez-Çevre İlişkileri, Muhalefet.

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INTRODUCTION

> "(...) The next day I went down to see Istamboul. The scene on the bridge caught me at once. There was a sea of men and women all cockaded in red and white, flowing like a vast human tide from one side to the other. The tradition of centuries seemed to have lost its effect. There was no such thing as sex or personal feeling. Men and women in a common wave of enthusiasm moved on radiating something extraordinary, laughing, weeping in such tense emotion that human deficiency and ugliness were for the time completely obliterated. Thousands swayed and moved on. Before each official building, there was an enormous crowd calling to the minister to come out and take the oath of allegiance to the new régime."[1]

This excerpt from the memoirs of Halide Edip (Adıvar) provides a typical description in many narratives of the first few days of the 1908 Constitutional Revolution. Widespread joy and excitement among the imperial subjects, regardless of religion and ethnicity, signaled a long-anticipated desire for a constitutional regime. On July 23, 1908, the Constitution was reinstituted after a thirty-year interval. The first Ottoman Constitution and the Parliament were very short-lived; after a long struggle by the Young Ottomans, *Kanun*ı *Esasi* (the Constitution) was promulgated in 1876, yet Sultan Abdülhamit II suspended the Parliament and the Constitution on the pretext of the harsh conditions of the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-1878.[2] Thereby, the promulgation of the Constitution in the summer of 1908 was the most substantial experiment of a constitutional monarchy in the Ottoman lands.

By focusing on the 1908 parliamentary elections and their aftermath in the province of Erzurum, this article examines the dynamics of the post-revolutionary Ottoman periphery. As a multi-religious and multi-ethnic eastern province hosting various nomadic and semi-nomadic groups, Erzurum serves as a microcosm for testing how the promises of the 1908 Constitutional Revolution, liberty, equality, and fraternity, and the constitutional regime unfolded in a local context. The article argues that election processes and constitutional rights, particularly the right to representation, freedom of expression, and inviolability of privacy, became a contested field. This struggle occurred not only among high-level authorities in Istanbul, such as the Committee of Union and Progress (the CUP, hereafter) and opposition parties, but also among provincial elites, deputies, and the local population.

The leading actors of the 1908 Revolution were the Young Turks and their organization, the CUP. The organizational history of the Committee was traced back to 1889, when *İttihad-i Osmani Cemiyeti* (Ottoman Unity Society) was established in the Military Medical College. After a series of purges by the Hamidian regime, some members were caught, some were sent into exile, and others fled abroad. In Paris, they met with a circle of Ottoman constitutionalists, led by Ahmet Rıza, a positivist intellectual and a former Ottoman bureaucrat. In 1895, under the leadership of Ahmet Rıza, the CUP was established, yet the opponents in general were known as Young Turks (Jeunes Turcs) in Europe.[3] Over a decade, the leadership of Ahmet Rıza was challenged, and a split occurred among the Young Turks when Prince Sabahattin established *Teşebbüs-i Şahsi ve Adem-i Merkeziyet Cemiyeti* (Society for Private

1 Halide Edip Adıvar, *Memoirs of Halidé Edib* (London: John Murray, 1926), 258.

2 For the first Ottoman parliamentary account, see Kemal Karpat, "The Ottoman Parliament of 1877 and its Social Significance", *Studies on Ottoman Social and Political History* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 75-89.

3 Eric J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1992), 86-87.

Initiative and Decentralization) in 1906.[4] New groups were founded both abroad and within the empire; one of these groups stood out for its support and network. In 1906, in Salonica, *Osmanlı Hürriyet Cemiyeti* (Ottoman Freedom Society) was established by young officers and bureaucrats. Mehmet Talat Bey became prominent for his organizational skills, and after a short while, with the participation of Second (Thracian) and Third (Macedonian) army officers, the society spread throughout the empire. In 1907, after negotiations with Ahmet Rıza, the two groups joined, and the traditional name of the CUP was adopted.[5]

In their criticism of the Hamidian regime, the Young Turks were not alone; they tried to establish contact with other oppositional groups. Ahmet Rıza's and Doctor Nazım's efforts to compromise with the Social Democrat Hunchakian Party (Hunchakian Party, hereafter) in 1895 did not result in a concrete plan. However, with the efforts of first Tunalı Hilmi and Ahmet Rıza and then Prince Sabahaddin, the Young Turks reached a deal with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaksutyun, the ARF, hereafter).[6] Indeed, the goals of the two groups could not be easily reconciled; as the ARF insisted on the implementation of specific "Armenian reforms" in the eastern provinces, the Young Turks sought to persuade them to abandon demands that were exclusive to Armenians in favor of a general imperial reform agenda. More importantly, the Young Turks demanded that the ARF abandon its revolutionary activities and reject the involvement of the Great Powers. In the ordinary course of events, the demands of both sides could not be reconciled, yet they cooperated against the Hamidian autocracy to bring the constitution to the country.[7]

A detailed account of the CUP or the 1908 Constitutional Revolution is beyond the scope of this article.[8] Nevertheless, this article confines itself to noting that in the lead-up to the revolution and its aftermath, the Salonica branch served as the driving force, with young officers playing a pivotal role. The economic and political crises of the years 1906-1907 had already created discontent with the Hamidian regime. The Unionist officers and members organized this common discontent into a broader reaction against the regime. When the possibility of the partition of Macedonia became concrete with the meeting of the British and Russians at Reval, the Unionist officers took the hills in the summer of 1908 and demanded the restoration of the Constitution. After futile attempts to suppress the movement, Sultan Abdülhamit II had to declare the promulgation of the Constitution on July 23, 1908.[9]

The news was welcomed with great zeal throughout the empire, and the notions of the

4 Zürcher, *Turkey,* 88-89. For details on organizational development of Young Turks, Zürcher, *Turkey*, 86-90.

5 Zürcher, *Turkey,* 88-89.

6 In the nineteenth century, four Armenian organizations were active throughout the Ottoman lands: the Armenekan Party (1885), Social Democrat Hunchakian Party (1887), *Veragazmyal* Hunchakian Party and Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaksutyun, 1892). Arsen Avagyan - Gaidz F. Minassian, *Ermeniler ve İttihat Terakki: İşbirliğinden Çatışmaya* (Istanbul: Aras Yayıncılık, 2005), 13. For details on Armenian organizations, see Dikran M. Kaligian, *Armenian Organization and Ideology under Ottoman Rule, 1908–1914* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2009); Garabet K. Moumdjian, *Struggling for a Constitutional Regime: Armenian-Young Turk Relations in the Era of Abdülhamid II, 1895-1909* (Los Angeles: University of California, Ph.D. Dissertation, 2012).

7 Avagyan - Minassian, *Ermeniler ve İttihat Terakki*, 15-17.

8 For an account of 1908 Revolution, see Aykut Kansu, *Revolution of 1908 in Turkey* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Aykut Kansu, *Politics in Post-Revolutionary Turkey, 1908-1913* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); Feroz Ahmad, *The Young Turks: The Committee of Union and Progress in Turkish Politics, 1908-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969); Sina Akşin, *Jön Türkler ve İttihat ve Terakki* (Istanbul: Imge Kitabevi Yayınları, 2007). For a more nuanced understanding of the Young Turk Revolution, Bedros Der Matossian, *Shattered Dreams of Revolution: From Liberty to Violence in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

9 Zürcher, *Turkey*, 90.

constitutional regime, such as 'liberty, equality, and fraternity' became the catchwords of the demonstrations. Nevertheless, the precise legal implications of these concepts, including the constitution itself, were not fully understood. Thus, the promises of the new regime were to be tested through the parliamentary elections and subsequent processes. In what follows, this article first provides a critical account of the 1908 parliamentary elections, examining the demographic distribution of deputies (Muslim vs. non-Muslim representation), instances of electoral irregularities, the jurisdictional conflicts between local authorities and the Parliament, and how these controversies were reflected in the press. Then, the study presents case studies from Erzurum, which appeared in parliamentary debates through questions and interpellations, offering a deeper insight into the post-revolutionary periphery. When opposition emerged against the CUP, either from individual actors or in the form of new parties, the provincial deputies played a great role in parliamentary politics.

1. Parliamentary Elections of 1908

During the reign of the CUP, three successive elections were held in 1908, 1912, and 1914.[10] The first Parliament was inaugurated in December 1908 and remained in session until January 1912.[11] The 1908 elections took place in the autumn and were governed by the İntihab-*ı Mebusan Kanunu* (Parliamentary Election Law) of August 3, 1908. According to this law, the *sancak* (sub-province) served as the primary electoral unit. The law stipulated that one deputy would be elected for every 50,000 male subjects. If a sub-province had fewer than 50,000 male residents, it was still entitled to one deputy. Sub-provinces with male residents between 50,000 and 125,000 were allotted two deputies; those with up to 175,000 male residents received three; and those reaching 225,000 male residents were entitled to four.[12]

The parliamentary elections of this period were based on a two-stage balloting system, with primary and secondary elections. In the primary stage, primary voters (*müntehib-i evvel*) elected secondary voters (*müntehib-i sani*), who then voted for the members of the Ottoman Parliament. The preconditions for being primary voters were as follows: being over 25 years old; not being deprived of civil rights; not being a subject or protégé of a foreign government, not claiming to be such; not being in the temporary service of a foreign national; not enjoying any privileges accorded to foreigners; in the case of bankruptcy, having been reinstated to good standing; in the case of legal incapacity, such incapacity having been removed; having resided in the place of domicile for at least one year; and paying taxes to the government. Secondary voters were subject to the same requirements, with exception of the tax obligation.[13] Qualifications for deputies were stipulated in Article 68 of the Constitution. The qualifications regarding nationality, bankruptcy, and civil rights were the same. In addition, candidates were required to be over 30 years old, possess knowledge of Turkish (in the elections of 1912, this condition was refined as to require reading and writing skills in Turkish), and be a

10 The last parliamentary elections of the Ottoman Empire were held in 1919, during the armistice period.

11 Feroz Ahmad - Dankwart A. Rustow, "İkinci Meşrutiyet Döneminde Meclisler: 1908-1918", *Güney-Doğu Avrupa Araştırmaları Dergisi* 4/5 (1976), 245.

12 Fevzi Demir, *Osmanlı Devleti'nde II. Meşrutiyet Dönemi Meclis-i Mebusan Seçimleri 1908–1914* (Istanbul: Imge Kitabevi Yayınları, 2007), 50-51.

13 Demir, *Osmanlı Devleti'nde II. Meşrutiyet Dönemi Meclis-i Mebusan Seçimleri,* 50-52.

resident of the province from which they were elected.[14]

In the election of primary and secondary voters and deputies, population registers were prepared at the quarter and village levels. Headmen, religious leaders (imams, rabbis, priests), along with local notables, were responsible for preparing these population registers, which were used as voter lists. Once these registers reached district centers, inspection committees consisting of municipality council members were established under the leadership of mayors. These committees, composed of four to six members, were responsible for the execution and supervision of the elections. They were allowed six to fifteen days to examine primary voter registers, which were then posted on the walls of mosques, churches, and similar places where they could be easily inspected by local inhabitants. After a fifteen-day period, the secondary voters were elected. According to this two-stage system, one secondary voter was elected for every 500 primary voters. Finally, deputy elections were conducted at the district level, requiring the presence of eight-tenths of the secondary voters. Secondary voters wrote down as many names of the candidates as the number of the deputies allotted to the sub-province.[15]

In sum, late Ottoman elections were an indirect, two-stage balloting system and not proportional.[16] These elections fell far short of modern democratic standards due to gender restrictions and tax requirements. Ultimately, only male subjects who paid taxes were eligible to vote. Despite these limitations, these elections represented significant milestones in the political history of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. The problems and ambiguities of the Electoral Law became apparent during the process. Across the empire, in addition to technical issues, demographic and socio-economic conditions, as well as political alliances, shaped the implementation and outcomes of the elections.[17]

2. The 1908 Elections in the Province of Erzurum: Demographic Anxieties and Electoral Irregularities

The archival documents indicate that the election proceedings began in October 1908 in the province of Erzurum. In a letter to the Ministry of the Interior, the governor of Erzurum, Tahsin Bey, stated that the population census for the elections had been completed and that, accordingly, five deputies would be elected from the entire province. However, he requested guidance on how to determine the number of Muslim and non-Muslim deputies. The ministry responded that there was no quota based on religion in the Electoral Law and that the candidates who received the most votes would be elected as deputies.[18] The governor's concerns can be considered alongside a petition from the Armenian Patriarchate regarding the lack of proper representation of non-Muslims in the elections. The Patriarchate pointed

14 Demir, *Osmanlı Devleti'nde II. Meşrutiyet Dönemi Meclis-i Mebusan Seçimleri,* 52.

15 Demir, *Osmanlı Devleti'nde II. Meşrutiyet Dönemi Meclis-i Mebusan Seçimleri*, 55.

16 The same electoral law was used with slight revisions until 1946. Ahmad and Rustow, "İkinci Meşrutiyet Döneminde Meclisler", 245.

17 For examples on different cases regarding elections of the Second Constitutional Period, Hasan Kayalı, "Elections and Electoral Process in the Ottoman Empire, 1876-1919", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27/3 (1995), 265-286; Fevzi Demir, "İzmir Sancağı'nda 1912 Meclis-i Mebusan Seçimleri", Çağdaş Türkiye Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi 1/1 (1991), 155-182.

18 The Presidency of State Archives of the Republic of Türkiye, Ottoman Archives (BOA), Dahiliye Mektubi Kalemi (DH. MKT), 2623/50, 9 Ramazan 1326 (October 5, 1908).

out that, because the population of most sub-provinces was only slightly above 75,000, only one deputy could be elected according to the Electoral Law, which stipulated that one deputy was to be elected for every 50,000 male subjects. Moreover, in most sub-provinces the majority was Muslim, which would lead to the loss of rights of non-Muslims (*teba'-i gayr-i müslimin hukukı zayi' olacağı*). The solution proposed by the Patriarchate was to conduct the elections again at the sub-province level while aggregating the votes at the provincial level to determine the total number of deputies. By enlarging the electoral district, the Patriarchate hoped to increase the number of non-Muslim deputies. However, the Ministry of the Interior rejected this proposal, arguing that it was contrary to the law, that the elections were already nearing completion, and that such a change fell under the duty of the Parliament.[19] In a similar vein, the ministry suggested to the governor of Erzurum that, although the government should not be involved in the election process, it could recommend that the secondary voters refrain from splitting their votes and instead vote for the same candidates.[20]

These documents shed light not only on the shortcomings of the election process but also on the positions and strategies of non-Muslim communities under the new constitutional regime. The concerns expressed by the governor of Erzurum were not merely local; the Patriarchate's petition points to a broader problem of representation among non-Muslim communities. Although the 1908 Constitutional Revolution promised equality, liberty, and fraternity, the elections became a litmus test for these ideals. For many non-Muslim communities, equal representation in Parliament was understood as a concrete expression of equality. However, the vision of the Young Turks, more specifically, the Unionists, was to construct an "Ottoman" identity that transcended ethnic and religious boundaries. Indeed, this divergence had already become apparent when the Unionists and, for instance, Armenian revolutionary organizations attempted to cooperate a decade before the revolution. Bedros Der Matossian points out that the Unionists did not necessarily hold a sincere commitment to the constitutional regime; rather, the constitution functioned as a means to preserve the integrity of the empire.[21]

Another major issue during the 1908 elections was the manipulation of the electoral process. An inhabitant of the district of Bayburd in the province of Erzurum sent a letter to an Armenian periodical published in Istanbul, *Arvelek*. The editors published the letter, according to which the local authorities had provided voters with a list of preferred candidates. On election day, voters simply stamped that list. The source of this report was a letter from Bayburd, and the author, after describing the electoral fraud, adopted a discursive strategy by questioning the validity of the Ottoman Constitution and the notions of freedom, equality, and liberty.[22] This case of Bayburd, a small town in a frontier province, illustrates two important aspects of the constitutional period. On the one hand, despite the existence of formal electoral procedures, their fair implementation largely depended on local power dynamics and the role of local authorities. On the other hand, the press emerged as a key actor

19 BOA, DH.MKT, 2623/49, 6 Şevval 1326 (November 1, 1908).

20 BOA, DH.MKT, 2623/50, 9 Ramazan 1326 (October 5, 1908).

21 Der Matossian, *Shattered Dreams of Revolution*, 3.

22 *"We too ask what others have asked: is this the Ottoman Constitution? Is this how justice, liberty, and equality are to be understood? If the government was to elect its own deputies, why did it take our votes in vain?"* BOA, DH.MKT, 2667/87, 29 Şevval 1326 (November 24, 1908).

in the transmission of information between the center and the periphery. In other words, the press reshaped the circulation of information and functioned as a mirror through which the constitutional regime's normative claims, particularly those of electoral transparency and integrity, could be tested. The voice of an individual from even the most remote district of the empire could reach the broader public through a newspaper column. In response, the government initiated an investigation into the complaint. Although archival records do not reveal the outcome of this investigation, what matters most is the government's decision to act upon a report published in the press.

3. The Case of Süleyman Sudi Efendi, the Deputy of Bayezid

In the 1908 elections, Abdülkadir Aghazade Süleyman Sudi Efendi, the former chief clerk of the Court of First Instance (*Bidayet Mahkemesi*), received the most votes in the sub-province of Bayezid. However, the local inspection committee responsible for supervising the elections refused to approve his deputyship, alleging that he had been dismissed from his former position for misconduct and formally tried. The second-ranking candidate, Şamil Efendi, a member of the Karakilise Court of First Instance, also faced long-standing complaints. Instead, the committee ultimately selected Abdülkerim Efendi, the chief clerk of the Administrative Council of Bayezid, as the deputy. Nevertheless, the Presidency of the Parliament rejected the committee's decision, arguing that it lacked the authority to do so. The Parliament demanded that Süleyman Sudi Efendi be granted his certificate of election and dispatched to Istanbul, noting that any necessary investigation would be carried out by the legislative body itself.[23] This intervention highlights two significant points: first, it exposes the procedural ambiguities and irregularities in local elections; and second, it illustrates the Parliament's assertion of legislative authority over local administrations. On the one hand, this situation reflected a clash of authority. On the other hand, the head of the Parliament intervened to ensure the legal supervision of the elections. Ultimately, Süleyman Sudi Efendi was dispatched to Istanbul as the deputy of Bayezid.[24] He took his seat in the Parliament and was evidently exonerated, as archival documents from six months later show him submitting proposals for educational facilities in his district.[25]

In February 1910, however, Süleyman Sudi Efendi and another deputy of Erzurum, Hacı Şevket Efendi, defected from the Party of Union and Progress to establish *Ahali Fırkası* (People's Party), the second opposition party of the era.[26] This break from the CUP prompted Şerif Bey, the mayor of Erzurum, to send a telegram to *Tanin*, a pro-Unionist journal, expressing regret over their defection.[27] Subsequently, Şerif Bey received an anonymous letter from Edirne (posted from Tekfurdağı), signed only with the initials "Ayn" and "Nun".

The author employed a discursive strategy of feigned objectivity while accusing the mayor and the CUP of "inviting opposition to the constitutional regime" and violating Islamic

23 BOA, DH.MKT, 2706/15, 20 Zilhicce 1326 (January 13, 1909).

24 BOA, Bab-ı Âli Evrak Odası Evrakı (BEO) 3468/260061, 17 Zilhicce 1326 (January 10, 1909).

25 BOA, Maarif Nezareti Tedrisat-ı İbtidaiyye Kalemi (MF.İBT), 236/58, 19 Cemaziyelahir 1327 (July 8, 1909). For further information about Süleyman Sudi Efendi's proposals and deeds in the Parliament, see Şaban Ortak, "Kişisel Mektuplarının Açılması Meselesiyle Meclis-i Mebusan Gündemine Gelen Bayezid Mebusu Süleyman Sûdî (Acarbay) Bey'in Siyasi Faaliyetleri", *Afyon Kocatepe Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 22 (November 2020), 44–68.

26 The party joined the *Hürriyet ve İtilaf Fırkası* (Freedom and Accord Party) in 1911, Tarık Zafer Tunaya, *Türkiye'de Siyasal Partiler: İkinci Meşrutiyet Dönemi,* (Istanbul: Hürriyet Vakfı Yayınları, 1988), 1/234.

27 The telegram of Şerif Bey could not be located in *Tanin*; however, similar telegrams expressing regret over the defection were published. For the ones from Edirne, see *Tanin* "İttihad ve Terakki Fırkasından Çıkan Mebuslar için Aldığımız Telgrafnameler", (February 28, 1910), 2.

etiquette. Comparing the current administration to the Hamidian period of despotism, the author alleged that the head of the municipality regarded every Unionist word and action as a sign of 'wisdom' and an unquestionable 'miracle'. Although the author claimed that he did not recognize either the deputies or the mayor, he nevertheless described the Mayor Şerif Bey as a true patriot with seemingly impeccable moral integrity, thereby revealing a clear contradiction, as he simultaneously disavowed familiarity while making moral judgments about his character. According to the author, Şerif Bey had been misled, as he regarded "two prophets from Salonica who spread irreligious affairs in the country" with a clear conscience like his own. The author further claimed that Şerif Bey was unaware of the crimes that could be committed, as the Unionist leaders imposed their views on the party. He also blamed the press, arguing that it applauded the Unionists just as it had previously done for Sultan Abdülhamid.[28]

The tone of the letter became sharper regarding the Adana incidents, claiming that the Unionists had scapegoated Muslim religious leaders in order to appease Armenian clergy through the Court Martial. The author questioned how Şerif Bey, as a party member, could tolerate this situation and fail to recognize the truth. The author concluded by calling on Şerif Bey to judge the Adana Incident impartially; only then, could he realize how the country was being driven into the abyss.[29] This emphasis suggests that the anonymous author was not objective but rather aligned with the conservative factions seeking to undermine the Unionist legitimacy by portraying them as anti-religious and pro-non-Muslim.

This letter, written in Edirne and posted from Tekfurdağı, aroused suspicion among the provincial authorities in Erzurum. Celal Bey argued that this indicated a cautious author attempting to conceal his identity. He further suggested that the letter had been written either by the followers of Hacı Şevket Efendi, one of the founders of the new opposition party, or by a clandestine organization opposed to the constitutional regime. Noting that the leaders of the CUP were depicted as "two false prophets from Salonica who spread irreligion across the country", and that the letter portrayed the Committee as the sworn enemy of the Turks and Islam, the governor defined it as a "malicious manifesto" (*melanetname*). Consequently, the governor argued that the letter reflected religious fanaticism and hypocrisy and was intended to provoke public unrest and another counter-revolution.

This case, including the anonymous letter and the reactions of the governor of Erzurum, serves as a representative example of the political atmosphere in 1910, just two years after the 1908 Constitutional Revolution. It not only represents a challenge to local authority in the Ottoman eastern periphery but also illustrates how the initial 'euphoria' of 1908 dissipated and political polarization spread throughout the empire. First, the anonymous author's comparison of the Unionist regime with the Hamidian despotism is significant. Second, the fact that provincial officials, such as governors or mayors, were aligned with the Unionists, or were perceived as such by local powerholders, reflects the growing fusion of the Committee and the state within the provincial administrations. Furthermore, the reference to Salonica as the birthplace of the CUP leadership points to a conservative backlash, as the author explicitly associates their origins with allegedly irreligious activities.

28 BOA, Dahiliye Muhaberat-ı Umumiye İdaresi Evrakı (DH.MUİ), 78/66, 18 Şubat 1325 (March 3, 1910).
29 BOA, DH.MUİ, 78/66.

The governor of Erzurum interpreted this reactionary letter as a part of a 'secret initiation' that crept like snakes along the ground, waiting for opportunities to poison uneducated and bigoted people once again, despite the calamities the country had endured. Here, the governor refers to the March 31 Incident, the counter-revolution that took place a year after the 1908 Constitutional Revolution. Although it was the culmination of opposition to Unionist autocratic policies and was supported by various groups, including the *Ahrar* Party, the liberals, the Unionist regime interpreted the incident as a reactionary and fundamentalist uprising. Calling for the restoration of Sharia law and the persecution of the Unionists, the revolt lasted eleven days before being suppressed by the Action Army (*Hareket Ordusu*). Sent from Macedonia and composed largely of Unionist officers and volunteers, this army intervened to preserve the constitutional regime. As Zürcher argues, the counter-revolution was a profound shock and trauma for both the Unionists and their successors.[30]

Historiography generally holds that the counter-revolution was confined to the imperial capital and did not spread to the provinces.[31] However, a significant exception was the clashes in Adana, the first wave of which erupted on the night of April 12, just two days after the outbreak in Istanbul. In the anonymous letter, the author placed particular emphasis on the Adana incidents, accusing the CUP of scapegoating Muslim religious leaders and sentencing them to death in order to curry favor with Armenians. Although the Adana clashes occurred during a vacuum of central authority caused by the unrest in the capital, their underlying causes remain contested. As Bedros Der Matossian argues, the counter-revolution and Adana clashes/massacres (April 14-17; April 25-27) were two interrelated events that shaped the political atmosphere of the era.[32] While a detailed discussion of these events is beyond the scope of this article, the conservative wing of the opposition clearly used them to reinforce its claim that the CUP was anti-religious. This argument is further strengthened when considered alongside the author's depiction of Unionist leaders as "two false prophets from Salonica", a reference used to highlight the divide between conservative provincial opponents and the CUP.[33]

Governor Celal Bey believed that either the defected CUP deputy, Hacı Şevket Efendi, or his followers were behind this reactionary letter. In the same file, he informed the imperial center of the alleged misconduct of another defected deputy, Süleyman Sudi Efendi, attributing him responsibility for rumors that threatened peace and security in Erzurum and its neighboring districts. Such reports unsettled the local population; as Celal Bey continued his report, he noted that the province was shaken by rumors of secret tribal alliances, impending unrest, and a mass migration of Kurdish tribes into Iranian and Russian territories. Emphasizing that his claims were not unfounded, the governor stated that two letters in Süleyman Efendi's handwriting had been intercepted. Addressed to the prominent Kurdish

30 Erik J. Zürcher, "The Ides of April: A Fundamentalist Uprising in Istanbul in 1909", *State and Islam,* ed. Cees van Dijk - Alexander H. de Groot (Leiden: CNWS, 1996), 64-76. An analysis of causes and results of the 31 Mart Incident is out of scope of this article, for details, see Zürcher, "The Ides of April"; Sina Akşin, *31 Mart Olayı* (Istanbul: Imge Kitabevi Yayınları, 2015).

31 Zürcher, *Turkey*, 99.

32 For details of Adana clashes, see Bedros Der Matossian, *The Horrors of Adana: Revolution and Violence in the Early Twentieth Century* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).

33 As Tarık Zafer Tunaya states, one of the founders of *Ahali Fırkası*, İsmail Bey of Gümülcine was openly against the Jews and particularly accuses Cavit Bey, as he was of Sabbatean origin from Salonica, of his economic policies. Tunaya, *Türkiye'de Siyasal Partiler*, 1/236. Thus, this reference to Salonica and anti-religiousness is not a coincidence.

tribal leaders in the region, these letters were photographed by the governor and were to be dispatched to Istanbul the following day, while he retained the originals.[34]

The governor was eager to publish the letters in the newspapers. He sought permission from the central government due to the ban on publications by civil servants. He believed the public should be informed that a deputy, who was supposedly entrusted with protecting their inviolable rights, was attempting to incite a revolt against the constitutional regime and encourage a mass migration of Ottoman subjects. However, the Ministry of Interior demanded the immediate dispatch of photographs while prohibiting publication of the letters.[35] In contrast to local authorities, the central government did not permit the public discrediting of a deputy through the press. Beyond the content of the letters, this episode highlights the differing approaches of local and central authorities towards the press. The ban on publications by civil servants extended central authority's control over political life, a development that had become increasingly visible after the counter-revolution. At the same time, this approach also points to a concern with maintaining the prestige of legislative and representative institutions.

To establish a centralist government, the Unionist regime sought to appoint governors loyal to both the regime and the party. This context also explains Governor Celal Bey's eagerness to publish Süleyman Sudi Efendi's letters in the press. The initial accusation alleged that Süleyman Sudi Efendi stood behind the rumors concerning the migration of tribes from Erzurum and Van to Iran or Russia, thereby endangering public security and order in the eastern periphery of the Ottoman Empire. Celal Bey presented these letters of Süleyman Sudi Efendi as evidence to support his claims while seeking to mobilize local powerholders, particularly through local councils. In a report issued by the local council of the Bayezid sub-province, the local powerholders, including the mufti as well as Muslim and non-Muslim members, demanded that Süleyman Sudi Efendi be tried under Article 52 of the Penal Code, claiming that he had dared to "plunge the provinces into bloodshed". Basing their demand on these letters, council members also expressed their gratitude to Governor Celal Bey, whom they credited with saving the country from a great uprising (*ihtilal-i azime*). They subsequently sent the same report to the *Divan-ı Harb-ı Örfi*, an extraordinary military tribunal.[36]

The defection of Süleyman Sudi Efendi from the CUP and the establishment of another opposition party were closely monitored by Governor Celal Bey. The governor closely followed and reported Süleyman Sudi Efendi's journey to Bayezid. He appeared to be attempting to demonstrate to his superiors, namely the Ministry of the Interior and Talat Bey, that the new party lacked a social base in his province. In this context, he emphasized that Süleyman Sudi Efendi was protected by provincial members of the CUP during his trip. He also noted that when Süleyman Sudi Efendi attempted to deliver a speech in Karakilise about his defection and the spread of the new party, the local population refused to listen, forcing him to end his speech and leave. According to a report by the *kaimakam* of Karakilise, Süleyman Sudi Efendi sent letters to various regions advising local tribes not to migrate to their summer quarters. Upon his arrival in the district, he summoned several tribal leaders and reprimanded them for

34 BOA, DH.MUİ, 72/79, 26 Şubat 1325 (March 11, 1910).
35 BOA, DH.MUİ, 72/79.
36 BOA, DH.MUİ, 78/66, 13 Cemaziyelahir 1328 (June 22, 1910).

failing to follow his advice. Celal Bey assured his superiors that, as the necessary measures had been taken, there was no concern regarding the outcomes of these initiatives.[37]

4. Debates over Constitutionalism on the Parliamentary Benches

Despite Governor Celal Bey's assurances regarding security and order in Erzurum and its environs, Süleyman Sudi Efendi and other members of the *Ahali Fırkası* began to question how private letters had reached the governor. Consequently, Süleyman Sudi Efendi's private correspondence became a subject of heated debate on the parliamentary benches. During deliberations on the budget of the Ministry of Posts, Telegraphs, and Telephones, Süleyman Sudi Efendi raised the issue for the first time. Other deputies also expressed concerns about the inefficiency of postal services, noting that although they were now theoretically free to write whatever they wished, in contrast to the previous era, the delivery system remained as ineffective as before. The disappearance of money from envelopes, the opening of letters and telegrams, the inability to send telegrams without the consent of provincial authorities, and the non-delivery of posts were also among the issues discussed.[38]

Subsequently, Süleyman Sudi Efendi called for the establishment of a parliamentary commission to investigate the opening of his private letters by Governor Celal Bey. He found support in the Parliament; Mahir Sait Bey, the deputy of Ankara, presented a report arguing that this action violated constitutional provisions, and called upon the Ministry of the Interior to address the allegation. Furthermore, Nafi Bey, the deputy of Aleppo, emphasized that the opening of letters at the post office constituted a "severe blow" (*darbe-i kasiyye*) to the Constitution. He argued that the letters should be retrieved from the Ministry of the Interior and that all officials involved, including the governor, should be interrogated.[39] Other deputies joined the debate, emphasizing the seriousness and sensitivity of the situation, and insisted that the Minister of the Interior, Talat Bey, explain the governor's actions.

As a result, Talat Bey, took the floor and emphasized that he had come to the Parliament to dispel the deputies' doubts. His remarks are particularly significant for understanding the constitutional era. Referring to reports that described the situation as "a severe blow" to the Constitution, he assured the Parliament that no such constitutional violation could occur during his tenure. He stated that if such a violation were to occur, he would do everything to prevent it; if he failed, he would resign and continue to defend constitutional rights from the parliamentary benches. He added that if he were unable to do even that, he would resign from the Parliament entirely and continue his struggle from the outside.[40]

Regarding the dispute between the governor of Erzurum and Süleyman Sudi Efendi, Talat Bey denied the allegation that Süleyman Sudi Efendi's private letters had been opened at the post office. He argued that even during the "previous era" (*devr-i sabık*, referring to

37 BOA, DH.MUİ, 72/79, 6 Şaban 1328 (August 13, 1910).

38 Minutes of the Chamber of Deputies (MMZC), Doksanikinci İnikad 5 Mayıs 1326, "Posta, Telgraf ve Telefon Nezareti Bütçesi", 5/306-310. This discussion is significant, as many deputies raised similar concerns based on personal experiences. The discussion was connected to two main topics, on one hand it was against the rule of the constitutional regime, on the other hand if the postal and telegraphy system were not ameliorated, the empire continued to rely on the foreign post offices.

39 MMZC, 5/329.

40 MMZC, 5/327.

the Hamidian Period), most postal officials would not have dared to open private correspondence. According to him, only a small number of individuals had engaged in such practices, and they had done so out of fear. He also defended the governor as the official responsible for maintaining provincial security. Following rumors of potential migration from Van and Erzurum to neighboring countries, Talat Bey had instructed the governors to verify these reports. As migration and depopulation were major concerns for the authorities, he warned the governors to take necessary precautions in order to prevent potential hardships among the local inhabitants. The governor of Erzurum subsequently stated that a letter seized from Süleyman Sudi Efendi referred to the possibility of such migration. After requesting the letter, the minister examined it and found no evidence of wrongdoing; consequently, Süleyman Sudi Efendi was not subjected to interrogation.

However, the objection raised by Süleyman Sudi Efendi and his supporters concerned how the letters had reached the governor of Erzurum. Acting within his authority, Talat Bey requested an explanation from the governor regarding how these private letters had come into his possession. Although the deputies present asked Talat Bey to disclose the governor's response, he refused. He defended the governor of Erzurum as the chief official responsible for provincial security (*zabıta-ı adliyye memurinin vilayette en büyüğüdür),* arguing that the governor had both the right to investigate rumors of sedition and the authority to obtain necessary evidence. Talat Bey maintained that the deputies lacked the authority to question a governor on such matters; however, he assured Süleyman Sudi Efendi that he retained the right to file a lawsuit against Celal Bey. He further stated that if the deputy could prove that his letters had been intercepted at the post office, both the governor and the officials involved would be tried in accordance with the Constitution. Nevertheless, as the Minister of the Interior, Talat Bey expressed satisfaction with the governor's explanation, according to which the letters had not been intercepted at the post office but had come into his possession after they had already been delivered to Süleyman Sudi Efendi.[41] The president of the Parliament, Ahmet Rıza Bey, then put Süleyman Sudi Efendi's proposal to establish an investigation committee to a vote, but the motion was rejected due to a lack of majority support.[42]

Finally, İsmail Bey, the deputy of Gümülcine, submitted an interpellation (*istizah*), a procedure more rigorous than a simple question (*sual*), regarding how the letters had been delivered to the governor of Erzurum.[43] Talat Bey maintained that the letters had not been intercepted at the post office but had been sent to the governor from Bayezid by a third party. He also reiterated his position that Süleyman Sudi Efendi had the legal right to file a lawsuit against the governor. However, İsmail Bey argued that Süleyman Sudi Efendi had sent three letters to three different individuals residing in Eleşkirt, Karakilise, and Varto. He emphasized that each of these districts was approximately four hours away from the center of Erzurum. Furthermore, relatives of Süleyman Sudi Efendi stated that they had received no replies to their previous correspondence.

41 MMZC, 5/328.
42 MMZC, 5/332.
43 MMZC, 5/494.

While deputies like Rıza Tevfik Efendi (deputy of Edirne), İsmail Bey (deputy of Gümülcine) criticized the opening of private letters, Seyfullah Efendi, another deputy of Erzurum, supported the governor of Erzurum. He argued that, based on information obtained from reliable individuals and merchants in Erzurum, the letters had not been intercepted at the post office.[44] Another significant objection came from Lütfi Fikri (deputy of Dersim), who argued that the core issue was not whether the letters had been taken from the post office. He asserted that even if the letters had been delivered by a third party, the seizure constituted a violation of the inviolability of correspondence. Citing European constitutions and laws, specifically those of Belgium, Austria, and Prussia, he argued that the mere possession of someone else's private letters by the Minister of the Interior constituted evidence of a constitutional violation. Lütfi Fikri also challenged Talat Bey's argument regarding the scope of ministerial authority in collecting evidence to maintain security and order. He emphasized the distinction between an arbitrary government and a constitutional one. In the former, ministers may exercise broad discretion; in the latter, their actions are restricted by law. In response, Talat Bey employed a discursive strategy, arguing that, as the letters had neither been published nor shown to anyone other than Süleyman Sudi Efendi, the privacy of correspondence had been respected.[45]

Although many other deputies joined the discussion, Süleyman Sudi Efendi and those who raised the strongest objections within the Parliament were members of the opposition party, *Ahali Fırkası*. These deputies had originally been elected as members of the Party of Union and Progress in the 1908 elections, but later broke away in February 1910 to establish this second opposition party.[46] Consequently, the debate clearly reflects the rivalry between the government and the opposition; however, it also goes beyond mere party politics. This dispute over the interception of private letters illustrates the tension between central control and freedom of expression. Talat Bey's stance, which involved defending a provincial governor against accusations, refusing to provide a clear explanation of how the letters were delivered, and inviting the complainants to file an official case against the governor if they possessed evidence, reveals a degree of authority derived not only from his ministerial position but also from the CUP itself. In this way, the Minister of the Interior employed a discursive strategy that emphasized procedural details rather than addressing the core constitutional issue at stake: the breach of confidentiality.

The contents of Süleyman Sudi Efendi's letters shed light on the political atmosphere of the Ottoman periphery in the post-revolutionary period. At the center of this correspondence was the case of Kör (Blind) Hüseyin Pasha of the Hayderan tribe. Hüseyin Pasha, a prominent leader of the Hayderan, a tribe located at the intersection of the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Iran, had served as a chief in the Hamidian Light Cavalry. Following the promulgation of the Constitution, he faced the prospect of arrest alongside other Kurdish tribal leaders for crimes committed during the previous regime. In 1910, however, he crossed the border into Iran along

44 MMZC, 5/500-501.

45 MMZC, 5/502-507.

46 Tarık Zafer Tunaya lists the members of Ahali Party as following: İsmail Bey, (the deputy of Gümülcine), Vasfi Efendi (the deputy of Karesi), Zeynelabidin Efendi (the deputy of Konya), Mustafa Sabri Efendi (the deputy of Tokat), Ömer Feyzi Efendi (the deputy of Karahisar), Şevket Efendi (the deputy of Erzurum), Ferhat Bey (the deputy of Trablusgarp) and Süleyman Sudi Bey (the deputy of Bayezid). Tunaya, *Türkiye'de Siyasal Partiler*, 1/234.

with many of his tribespeople and large numbers of livestock.[47] As the deputy of Bayezid, where the Hayderan tribe was largely based, Süleyman Sudi Efendi repeatedly appealed to Talat Bey, warning that Hüseyin Pasha's departure had already given rise to rumors and posed a threat to public order and security. The inhabitants of the region were reportedly preparing for a mass migration to Iran and Russia, and unless the government intervened, the situation could result in a serious crisis. In response, Talat Bey consulted the governors, who dismissed these claims as unfounded and assured him that the region was under control. Despite this, Süleyman Sudi Efendi continued to press the issue, prompting Talat Bey to request further clarification. Ultimately, Governor Celal Bey claimed that the reports had been fabricated by Süleyman Sudi Efendi and presented the deputy's own letters as evidence. In these letters, Süleyman Sudi Efendi had allegedly urged other tribes and local inhabitants to send telegrams to the government and to pretend that they were migrating to Iran and Russia in order to secure Hüseyin Pasha's return.[48]

At this point, the claims of Ohannes Varteks Efendi, deputy of Erzurum, offer important insights into Süleyman Sudi Efendi's activities concerning the fugitive Kör Hüseyin Pasha. Stressing that Hüseyin Pasha had amassed considerable wealth under the previous regime, and that the Armenians and Kurds of Van, Erzurum, and Diyarbekir had suffered from his cruelty and assaults, Varteks Efendi argued that the local population welcomed his absence. According to Varteks Efendi, Hüseyin Pasha fled to Iran to establish an alliance with the anti-constitutionalist khans of Maku. He further alleged that Süleyman Sudi Efendi corresponded with both Hüseyin Pasha and with the khans of Maku in an effort to organize a coalition against the government. In this context, Süleyman Sudi Efendi was said to have sought both the return of Hüseyin Pasha and securing of immunity for his past crimes by exerting political pressure on the government. Varteks Efendi also noted that the contents of these letters had already become widely known in the region before their interception. Due to widespread illiteracy, letters were generally read by local imams, which allowed their contents to circulate rapidly among the population. In conclusion, Varteks Efendi framed the issue as a matter of public security and, notably, accused Talat Bey not of opening the letters but of keeping them secret.[49]

Finally, three letters written by Süleyman Sudi Efendi were read aloud in the Parliament. These letters provided strong evidence supporting the accusations against him. In them, he reprimanded his contacts for their passivity and criticized other tribes for remaining silent "like animals" in the face of Hüseyin Pasha's migration. Seeking to gain political leverage to secure both amnesty and the return of Hüseyin Pasha, he urged his local contacts to mobilize the population and tribal groups to submit petitions and to send telegrams concerning a mass migration to Iran and Russia. Moreover, he described the governor of Erzurum as a "fool", arguing that his poor administration would ultimately lead to the destruction of the local Muslim population.[50]

47 Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 129-130.

48 MMZC, 5/498.

49 MMZC, 5/508-509.

50 MMZC, 5/510-512.

In his response, Süleyman Sudi first emphasized that he had not sought to conspire against the state, but rather to manage an already existing crisis. He maintained that he had never corresponded with tribes or rebels and presented the names of his correspondents, whom he described as honorable members of the CUP. He also read aloud several other letters he had received from the districts of Bayezid, which emphasized the necessity of Hüseyin Pasha's return to calm the tribes and prevent their migration to Iran and Russia. Finally, he argued that Hüseyin Pasha had fled not because of treason but due to the oppressive conduct of Celal Bey, whom he characterized as a spy.[51] The assembly subsequently voted on Talat Bey's explanation regarding the interception of the letters, and the minister secured a decisive victory, receiving 141 votes of confidence against 32 votes of no confidence.[52]

The position adopted by Varteks Efendi, an Armenian deputy from the Ottoman East, regarding the return of Kör Hüseyin Pasha stood in sharp contrast to that of Süleyman Sudi Efendi. While Süleyman Sudi Efendi maintained that punishing powerful tribal leaders such as Hüseyin Pasha would destabilize the Ottoman East, Vartek's Efendi's stance reflected broader expectations among Armenian deputies and the wider Armenian population. In the aftermath of the promulgation of the Constitution, one of the principal demands of Armenian commoners and Armenian deputies was the punishment of members of Hamidian Light Cavalry for land and livestock usurpation, as well as for a wide range of associated abuses. In this context, the investigation, trial, and punishment of tribal leaders involved in such acts became a crucial test of the revolution's promises of equality, fraternity, and rule of law. The CUP ultimately failed this test. Rather than disbanding the Hamidian Light Cavalry, the government merely renamed it the Tribal Light Cavalry Regiments. (*Aşiret Hafif Süvari Alayları*) in 1910.[53]

CONCLUSION

This study argues that the transition to a constitutional regime in the Ottoman periphery was far more complex than its proclaimed ideals implied. By examining the 1908 elections and their aftermath in the province of Erzurum, the article demonstrates that the province provides a compelling case study for assessing the new regime's promises and realities at the local level. In particular, debates over the demographic distribution of Muslim and non-Muslim deputies, electoral irregularities, and their reflections in the press show that pre-existing power dynamics did not disappear overnight but were instead reconfigured within the framework of the new regime. In this context, the press emerged as an influential political actor and as a platform through which local voices found expression.

Moreover, the defection of Erzurum's deputies in an effort to establish an opposition party alerted local governors, many of whom were aligned with the CUP, to these developments. Within this context, the case concerning interception of Süleyman Sudi Efendi's letters can

51 MMZC, 5/511-512.

52 MMZC, 5/516.

53 For details about Hamidian Light Cavalry and the account of Kör Hüseyin Pasha, Janet Klein, *The Margins of the Empire*, particulary chaps. 3-4.

be interpreted as part of the government's broader approach toward opposition movements. However, the subsequent parliamentary question and interpellation revealed that the issue extends well beyond the rivalry between the CUP and its opponents, pointing instead a deeper tension between constitutional principles and their implementation.

The confrontation between Talat Bey, the Minister of the Interior, who prioritized state security and public order, and the deputies who emphasized constitutional rights, particularly the inviolability of privacy, clearly illustrates the gap between constitutional ideals and administrative practices. Furthermore, the content of Süleyman Sudi Efendi's letters offers a striking example of how the ideal of 'Ottoman unity' encountered serious challenges arising from local ethnic and tribal dynamics. Taken together, this study demonstrates that the constitutional regime became a site of contestation in which central authorities, deputies, local elites, ethnic and tribal groups continuously negotiated the boundaries of newly defined rights and ideals. More broadly, this case invites a reconsideration of how constitutionalism functioned beyond the imperial center. Ultimately, these parliamentary debates reveal that the political and intellectual climate of the Second Constitutional Period was not only dynamic and pluralistic, but also deeply shaped by tensions between central authority and local dynamics.

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