

Alevis and the JDP: from cautious or neutral relations to open conflict

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between Turkey's Alevi community and the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP), which has been in power in Turkey since 2002. I explore this relationship using van Dijk's critical discourse analysis. The statements by the government, as well as the Alevi associations' responses are discussed; in addition, I use my fieldwork material, which was collected from July 2012 to August 2013 in Istanbul and London. I demonstrate that the relationship between the JDP and the Alevi community has changed over the years from neutral or cautious into tense and conflicting. The mere increase in the public visibility of Alevis did not improve their rights and in order to restore the relationship, Alevis' demands need to be evaluated on a civic-legal basis and various Alevi actors need to be included in the decision making process.

Keywords: *Turkey, Alevis, JDP, critical discourse analysis, minorities*

Introduction

Over the 12 years of the Justice and Development Party's (hereafter JDP) rule in Turkey, the party's position regarding Turkey's second largest belief community, Alevis and their response to the JDP have changed dramatically. Alevis, who have been known for their opposition and the favouring of leftist politics, are now one of the central actors of social critique, particularly against the government policies. As Alevis became more visible than they wished to be, they became not only targets but also a strong oppositional voice, both in Turkey and also among the Turkish immigrants abroad.

In this article, I examine the JDP-Alevi relations since 2002, when the JDP first won the general elections. I focus on the question of how the relations between the JDP and Alevis have evolved and eventually reached a deadlock. I do so by examining this time span in three phases: *i*) 2002-2012,¹ which covers the time period when the JDP initiated an Alevi opening in the framework of improving minority

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¹ This first phase is longer than the others because JDP– Alevi relations intensified after the Alevi opening.

relations with the aim of EU membership; *ii*) 2012-2013, which is a time of increasing visibility for Alevis and the period within which they became targets within domestic and foreign policy; *iii*) the 2013 Gezi Park revolt and onwards, which is a period of more open conflict.

By analyzing the relationships in these three periods, my aim is to show how, gradually, the communication became blocked because the government, instead of recognizing Alevis as agents of their own actions, imposed definitions on their faith and tried to implement policies regarding them without obtaining sufficient consensus from different Alevi actors. In addition to Alevi community's distrust of right-wing political parties due to the problematic relations in the recent past, Alevis perceived the government's statements as attempts to fix their identity and opposed further. Alevis' demands were not only a set of objective goals (such as the abolition of mandatory religion classes and recognition of *cemevi*²) but also the secularization of Turkey, where every citizen is equal regardless of their belief or the lack thereof. The JDP instead chose to collaborate with the state friendly Alevi organizations, whose demands seemed to be easier to fulfil, instead of dealing with the issue on a more inclusive basis. The JDP's discourse created a distinction between good and bad Alevis and this cleavage blocked the relations, whilst failing to bring about any long-term solution.

I use van Dijk's critical discourse analysis method and examine what hindered communication between the JDP and Alevi organizational leaders. I demonstrate that Alevis' increasing public visibility is not necessarily empowering for them, since this visibility places them on the spot without improving their rights. I show that the JDP's discourse reveals power inequalities and deepens them by limiting the communicative rights of the opponent and by positive self-presentation and negative 'other' presentation (Dijk, 1993). In this specific case, the negative/positive differentiation is between the cooperating Alevis (positive) and non-cooperating and criticizing Alevis. In doing this, I use both fieldwork material, such as interviews, field notes of participant observation, collected from 2012 July to 2013 August in Istanbul and London, as well as documents and newspaper clips.

Since the JDP's and particularly its former leader and former Prime Minister Erdoğan's electoral success continues, it is crucial to examine the relationship and demonstrate the conflict potential, unless a more inclusive approach is taken by the government regarding belief communities in Turkey. My contribution adopts an historical approach in order to analyse the evolution of the relations, whilst combining the discourse of the JDP government with Alevi actors' responses.

Alevis: the unequal children of the Republic

Turkey is an ethnically and religiously diverse country and its minority relations are regulated according to the Lausanne Treaty signed in 1923 (Jenkins, 2004). Although Turkey recognizes Jews, Greeks and Armenians as non-Muslim minorities and grants them a limited set of rights, larger groups such as Alevis and Kurds were denied recognition and assimilated. Since Turkey is on the road to EU membership, it needs to fulfil democratic criteria and improve the rights of ethnic and religious communities, however the political costs for Turkey's European Union membership are high and the likelihood of membership is not firm (Epstein and Sedelmeier, 2008), so the EU, as a framework for the rights claims of the minorities in Turkey, is not a

² Literally gathering house, *cemevi*, is the place where Alevis conduct their religious ceremony. *Cemevi* in Turkey is not entirely banned but denied official recognition therefore their expenses are not subsidized as the mosques are.

powerful enough incentive to push the Turkish government to undertake the necessary reforms regarding ethnic minorities and belief communities.

Alevis are the second largest belief community in Turkey and they are estimated to be nearly 15-30percent of the population (Vorhoff, 2003). Alevis express their belief system as either heterodox Islam or a separate belief system with elements of Shamanism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam (Okan, 2004; Sökefeld, 2008) and it cross-cuts ethnicities such as Turkish, Kurdish, Arab and Albanian. Despite a few local attempts to recognise Alevis' *cemevi* (Çarkoğlu and Bilgili, 2011), the previous governments ignored their demands and the current Justice and Development Party did not realised them either. Culture is seen as a very legitimate part of Alevi identity by state officials and politicians from a large political spectrum (Massicard, 2007; Şahin, 2005), and cultural elements such as Alevi poetry and folk music has been incorporated into the nation building process (Ateş, 2006). Nevertheless Alevis were neither officially recognized as a distinct belief community due to fears of separation (Sökefeld, 2008), nor did they enjoy equal citizenship because of the physical attacks that they faced (Sinclair-Webb, 2003).

Alevis mainly come from rural areas of Turkey and have been urbanising since the 1950s, gaining more public visibility after the late 1980s, a period that is now known as the Alevi Revival (White and Jongerden, 2003). This emerged as a transnational movement whereby Alevis founded many associations in Turkey and abroad, using their own media and publications and creating a social space of public debate. Their activities extend to various European countries where they have migrated and established their community centres and federations. Historically, these community centres have not only fulfilled migrant Alevis' social and spiritual needs but have also helped them voice their political demands and show variations in terms of defining Alevism within their political outlook and worldviews.

In 1990, with the Alevi declaration, that is a manifestation of public identity, Alevis could identify and express the major issues regarding Alevism and their demands from the state. They demanded that it should be accepted that there is pressure on the Alevis; Alevis should be able to say 'I am an Alevi' without fear; Sunni families should change their opinion about Alevis; enlightened people should defend Alevis' rights in the context of human rights; Turkish media should address Alevi culture; TRT (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation) should take Alevi existence into consideration; the building of mosques in Alevi villages should be stopped; Alevi teaching should be recognized within schools; the governments' point of view on Alevism should be changed; Alevis are one of the guarantees of the laic state; the institution of *dedelik* should be restructured in a modern sense; urgent programs for the Alevis abroad are a must; Alevism and Iranian Shiism today have no relation (Alevilik Bildirgesi, n. d.). This manifesto is significant because for the first time in Turkish history, a religious group other than those recognised by the Treaty of Lausanne, asked for cultural rights (Çelik, 2003). Since the 1990s Alevi identity gained public visibility and some acceptance in media and social life, however, their demands were not fulfilled entirely. In addition, two violent attacks occurred against Alevis (1993 in Sivas and 1995 in Istanbul, Gazi) and raised issues about Alevis' need to organise and struggle for their rights.

Relations between JDP and Alevis

1. Cautious phase or potential improvement

The first phase of the Alevi-JDP relations is not entirely neutral. The suspicion stems from the Turkish-Islamic synthesis promoted by the right-wing governments after the

1980 military coup and the consenting or indifferent role of right-wing politicians in the armed attacks against Alevis. For instance, after the hotel fire in 1993, Sevkett Kazan, who served as Minister of Justice in the coalition government of an Islamist party, volunteered to be the defence lawyer for the perpetrators (Şahin, 2005).

JDP's cadres come from the tradition of political Islam, which was interrupted by the military intervention in 1997 and experienced limitations such as the closing of political parties, the headscarf ban at universities and in working in public institutions. These restricted their political activities; nevertheless, they could gain more visibility and power in the 1990s. JDP, which can be seen as the outcome of this tradition mixed with economic liberalism, conservative social values and tolerance on religion, promised to emancipate religious identities and soften the rigid Kemalist ban of different ethnic and religious groups in the first years of its governance. However, they did not set a boundary between themselves and the previous Islamist parties' anti-Alevi actions and statements.

In the literature on the state-religion relationship during the early years of the JDP, it is suggested that the JDP advocates state-guaranteed freedom of religion and that the role of the state, for the JDP, is not to control and obscure the public visibility of religion, but to secure it (Pinar, 2013). However, examining the case of Alevis would give us a chance to see the limits of this religious freedom.

In the first years of its government, JDP signalled the plans to introduce some rights for Alevis, such as integrating Alevism into the religious course in school textbooks (Şahin, 2005), yet officially announced this in 2007. In the first years, JDP embraced an inclusive discourse and signalled tolerance for the groups, which were excluded or repressed from public visibility in the Kemalist perspective.³ Reha Çamuroğlu, a parliament member from the JDP and himself an Alevi, was the prominent figure in the initial stages of the opening and State Minister Sait Yazıcıoğlu was responsible from the opening. Later, State Minister Faruk Yazıcıoğlu was charged of coordinating the opening. Çamuroğlu suggested reforms regarding Alevis. These included the founding of an administrative unit about Alevis connected to the Prime Minister; founding an Alevi Institute; defining the status of *cemevi*; subsidizing *cemevis'* water and electricity expenses; giving wages to Alevi *dedes*;⁴ the abolition of mandatory religious education classes and making relevant changes in the school textbooks of the religion and ethics classes. The opening was followed by workshops with the participation of the Alevi faith representatives and the JDP authorities. The first workshop was held on 3-4 June 2009 with the participation of 35 Alevi representatives. The Alevi representatives, despite the differences of these institutions in their political views and opinions on Alevism, agreed on the following matters as their core demands: giving legal status to *cemevi*, the abolition of mandatory religious education classes, turning Madımak Hotel⁵ into a museum, stopping the mandatory construction of mosques in Alevi villages and sending away the appointed imams, and finally leaving the places of Alevi faith to Alevi institutions (Alevi çalıştayları önraporu, 2010).

³ Laicism is one of the pillars of Kemalist ideology however in practice it meant state control over religion rather than a radical separation of state and religion. The establishment of Directorate of Religious Affairs (DIB), which is a state-funded institution, also proves this.

⁴ *Dede*, literally grandfather, is the spiritual leader of Alevi communities and each *dede* comes from a holy lineage that supposedly goes back to the 12 Imams. *Dedes* conduct the religious ceremonies and acts as a spiritual guide to their followers.

⁵ This is the hotel which hosted the guests of an Alevi cultural festival in Sivas in 1993. It was set on fire by a radical Islamist mob, killing more than 30 people.

In the next workshops, academics and theologians dominated the participants. This fact alone is telling because it shows the essence of the problem. The government handled Alevis' demands on the level of Islam and theology, while Alevis expressed their demand for equal citizenship and based their particular demands on cultural and political rights, regardless of how their belief was and continues to be defined. JDP's totalizing view of Islam that diminishes sectarian differences (Pinar, 2013), was not a satisfactory analytical tool in addressing Alevis' demands. JDP's strategy was to diminish the differences and deal with Alevis' demands under Islam as a universal category.

Eventually, few of Alevis' demands have been put into practice. For instance, Madımak Hotel, which was set on fire by a radical Islamist mob in 1993 during an Alevi cultural festival, was made public and became a science and cultural centre. However 2 of the perpetrators, who had died in the act of burning the hotel, are commemorated along with the victims (33 festival participants and 2 hotel staff), therefore the content of the museum did not please Alevi institutions and they protested the museum (Yalçınkaya and Ceylan, 2011). In addition, *cem* houses were accepted as cultural centres, yet they are still not recognised as places of worship. As well as this, school textbooks included Alevism but insisted on a certain definition of the faith (Zirh, 2013).

The demands that crystallized in the workshops have been expressed on various occasions since the Alevi declaration, for example, public festivals, meetings with the political leaders and street protests. Because the opening did not fulfil the Alevi opinion leaders' demands, the government's proposal was perceived as tactics of assimilation. For instance, Dr. Ali Yaman, one of the participants of the workshops as an academic and Alevi *dede*, argued that after all the workshops that were organised for the preparation of religious education classes' curricula, the end result of the textbook included only a few pages about Alevi faith and the limited content failed to satisfy or truly present Alevi communities. Yaman said:

The state and the people who rule, not only this government but also the previous ones wish that the Sunni status quo continues. It's like, 'where did the Alevis come from?' etc. Eventually we see that the opening did not reach anywhere. There have been small changes, they did a few things in the textbooks, there were discussions about *cemevi* but they were not legalised, you know. Therefore nothing came out of the opening (interviewed on 17.08.2012, Hacıbektaş).

The failure of the opening intensified Alevis' problems. As Reha Çamuroğlu, who was responsible for the opening realised that the demands were not met, he resigned from his duty as Prime Minister's advisor but stayed in the position. He later stated that he was not supported in the party regarding the opening and that he was left alone (Bianet, 2008). With the resigning of Çamuroğlu the Alevi opening was left to non-Alevi politicians and theologians, which shows the degree of exclusion of Alevi actors from the decision making process. The institutions and individuals who were (or not) invited to the opening was a matter of discussion for the Alevi organisations and the opposition. For example, an opposition DLP (Democratic Left Party) deputy suggested a parliamentary question about the invited people and asked why AABK (European Alevi Bektaşî Confederation) was excluded from the meetings. Minister Faruk Çelik said the invitations were not based on organisations but individuals' discourses. Moreover, the invitation of Ökkeş Sendiller to the workshops, one of the alleged perpetrators of Maraş Massacre against Alevis in 1978, was also problematic and caused Alevi organisations to develop negative opinions regarding the opening

(Yurdakul, 2009).

Alevi institutions' representatives were highly critical of the government's Alevi politics. For instance, Hüsniye Takmaz, chairwoman of the Alevi Associations Federation, argued that the opening failed because the JDP was insincere and only aimed to fulfil the EU pressured-demands:

Why did it (the opening) fail? Because they were not sincere to begin with. If you do something just to fulfil someone's demands, you cannot succeed. You have to believe in the change that you are making (Interviewed on 26.08.2012, Istanbul).

Doğan Bermek, from CEM Vakfı was also critical of the government's attitude but argued that the workshops consolidated Alevis' unification. He stated:

It was not clear why the workshops were held. But still something grew there. For example it occurred that these Alevis although they seem to be fragmented and fighting amongst each other, when they sat at that table they were one voice. That maybe was the biggest disappointment for those who organized the workshops (Interviewed on 24.08.2012, Istanbul).

Alevis' responses to the opening were far from enthusiastic; as it can be seen from the responses of the Alevi organisations' representatives from a large spectrum of both state-friendly and left-wing groups that Alevis were not exactly hopeful regarding the JDP government. A big obstacle for the JDP in convincing Alevis about their sincerity was the Sivas case. In a law suit whereby the perpetrators could legally get married, get a driving licence, travel freely but could not be 'found' by the police, Alevis got the impression that their killers are protected by the state and thus find it difficult to trust the justice system. The JDP did not heal Alevis' old wounds but remained indifferent; for instance, after the case was dropped due to a lapse of time, on 13 March 2012 Erdoğan said "may it be beneficial" (Erdoğan'dan Sivas yorumu, 2012).

2. Increasing visibility and imposing definitions

In addition to the old problems of trust which made Alevis cautious, the JDP's way of tackling the Alevi question also caused further complications. Yalçınkaya (2009) argues that Alevis have two problems: one is the lack of recognition for their belief and the discrimination they face; the other problem is about the internal differences in the interpretation of their faith. He argues that the JDP, instead of dealing with the first set of problems (demands of equal citizenship), focused on the second set of problems and opened the internal issues of Alevis to debate. Therefore the opening did not meet the demands of Alevis; if anything, it made Alevis more visible and turned them into targets in the following years. Also, Alevis were publicly portrayed as a group of people who refuse to negotiate. Van Dijk argues that power involves control of one group over another and this may pertain to the control of action and cognition of the group (Dijk, 1993). JDP could exercise power over Alevis through a strategy of opening Alevis' internal issues into a public debate rather than addressing their public problems because it was clear that a discussion of Alevis' internal problems would not be fruitful and would block other debates which may produce results. This second phase is a time of increasing visibility for Alevis in Turkey.

The aftermath of the opening was a difficult time and the Alevi-JDP relations got tense as the necessary changes/reforms were not undertaken. An additional difficulty at this time has been the war in Syria and the sectarian cleavages in the Middle East.

Alevis were mainly against the war and were concerned about the increasing power of the Syrian opposition, which received support from the Turkish government. Alevis' concern about the sectarian violence and its possible infection to the Turkish side of the border was interpreted by the government as Alevis' alleged support for the al-Assad regime due to sectarian affinity (Phillips, 2012). For instance Hüseyin Çelik, an MP from the JDP, implied such a link between the Syrian government, Turkey's Alevis and the opposition party, whose leader is Alevi. He addressed the main opposition leader Kılıçdaroğlu: "Why do you defend the Baas regime in Syria? Actually some other bad things come to my mind. The Baas regime in Syria is based on a 15percent population. Is Mr Kılıçdaroğlu protecting Syria due to sectarian affinity? This comes to our head too." After this statement the Alevi Bektaşî Federation demanded an apology from Çelik and the JDP and advised them that, before giving democracy and equality lectures to the Middle East, to practice this in their own country (Hüseyin Çelik özür dilesin, 2011).

By the year 2012, one-off attacks and insults against Alevis increased. According to a media report that deals with the news regarding Alevis, nine attacks occurred against various Alevi individuals' homes and *cemevi* in the year 2012 alone (Zirh, 2013). For instance, one of these attacks was directed on a Kurdish Alevi family in the eastern province of Malatya, Sürgü. During the fasting month of Ramadan, a drum player traditionally wakes people up for the beginning of the fast before the sunrise. The Evli family told the drum player not to disturb them because they were not fasting and that they had to wake up early the next day to go to work, therefore they asked him to leave. The disagreement between the drummer and the family escalated: a mob of 50-60 people surrounded the house the next day, yelling "death to Kurds," "death to Alevis." The mob stoned the house and set the stall next to the house on fire. The gendarme prevented further violence by shooting signal fire (Malatya'da tehlikeli gerginlik, 2012).

After the incident, Erdoğan claimed that it was provocative and aimed to weaken his government. He said:

In the last days there are incidents which are related to one another. There is a back stage of these issues. This is all about weakening us. There is serious organisation. We should be aware of the plots for weakening the JDP. There are plots and provocations in order to bring (us) up against society (Başbakan, Malatya'da Alevilere Saldırı, 2012).

Although he did not openly blame the Alevi community for the events, his words can be interpreted as blame being apportioned to the victims and the portrayal of the in-group as vulnerable and innocent due to other people plotting against them (Dijk, 1993). The main opposition party's parliament member, Hüseyin Aygün, wrote an open letter to Erdoğan about the situation. He argued that the attack should be dealt with within the framework of hate crime law and that the necessary steps should be taken to normalise the daily life of the family, which was still facing day-to-day discrimination in the district, some thirty-five days after the incident (Karabağlı, 2012).

The summer of 2012 was already an eventful time for Alevis when an interview with the then Prime Minister Erdoğan escalated the tension. In the interview, he was asked why Alevi people do not support him. In response, he discussed the illegal construction of a particular *cemevi* in Istanbul in the 1990s when he was the Major of Istanbul and expressed his views on Alevi faith and its relations to Islam. The *cemevi* in Üsküdar, Istanbul, called Karacaahmet Sultan Lodge, is one of the historical Alevi-

Bektaşî lodges in Istanbul and was closed multiple times both during Ottoman and Republican rule (Karacaahmet Sultan, n. d.). Since the reopening of the lodge in 1969, the Foundation of Reparation of the Karacaahmet Sultan Lodge has been serving people, attracting nearly 3 thousand visitors each week. The conflict regarding this particular *cemevi* dates back to the 1990s. The foundation lacked the legal permit for construction since *cemevi* is not recognised and, in addition, the construction site is on a cemetery. On the website of the *cemevi*, the abolition attempt is described as an act which is opposite of respect and tolerance and it is claimed that many mosques in Istanbul and even Erdoğan's own house lack legal permission for construction (Karacaahmet Sultan, n. d.).

In August 2012, the topic attracted attention again with an interview that was conducted with the Prime Minister Erdoğan. Sevilay Yükselir, an Alevi journalist who is supportive of the JDP government, mentions the critical events of the year, such as the war in Syria and the Malatya Sürgü incident and asks the reasons for Alevi's lack of support for the JDP government. Erdoğan replies by telling the story of the Karacaahmet *cemevi*. He says he ordered the demolition of Karacaahmet *cemevi* in 1993, when he was the Major of Istanbul. The *cemevi* did not have a construction permit and the place upon which they wanted to build the *cemevi* was in a cemetery. Erdoğan states that he offered the foundation some alternative places for construction, yet they rejected. He continues: "Because that *cemevi* was built there, as a freak. It is still illegal. It has no construction permit. It stands as a freak next to the Karacaahmet tomb." Many Alevi organizations, firstly the Karacaahmet Sultan Lodge as the addressee of the initial statement, reacted against the PM's words, either during the *cem* ceremonies or by writing articles and open letters using the media.

The addressee of the statement, chairman of the Karacaahmet Lodge, Muharrem Ercan, gave an interview after this polemic and expressed his opinion that the Prime Minister should be at equal distance to all faiths and that the word, "freak," offended the community deeply. He also stated that *cemevi* lack a legal permit because they are not officially recognised (Aleviler'den Başbakan'a tepki, 2012).

The last part of the same interview, where Erdoğan discussed the lack of consensus among the Alevi community regarding the Alevi faith, was less problematized by the Alevi public. He stated that Alevi are not unified on whether they are Muslim or not and he argued that if Alevi are Muslims their place of worship should be the mosque. He said "There are some who say Alevi are Muslims. Some say they are not. At the same time, there are atheists among them. If we are Muslims as an Alevi, then Muslims' place of worship must be one. I do not say I am against *cemevi*. For example Turcoman Alevi go to mosque." Erdoğan's statements are similar to the previous governments' approach of accepting *cemevi* as cultural centres but not as places for religious activity. Similar opinions were voiced by Hüseyin Çelik, JDP deputy and former Minister of Education and Minister of Culture: he had also argued that Alevism is an interpretation of Islam and that *cemevi* is not an alternative to the mosque (Hüseyin Çelik ile Alevilik ve *cemevi* tartışması, 2012).

With this binary thinking, the recognition of Alevi's place of worship is connected to a dilemma, which cannot be resolved easily. Erdoğan's strategy leaves Alevi with two options: they either accept the mosque as the place of religious ritual and *cemevi* as a mere cultural centre or detach themselves entirely from Islam and therefore claim that their place of prayer must be a different place. The first option means assimilation while the second means further marginalization.

Alevi's organizational elite demand their *cemevi* to be legally recognized, regardless of how they conceptualize their faith. Alevi's famous phrase "(the) path is

one, vehicles are numerous” explains the heterodoxy and heteropraxy in their faith. The multiplicity in the Alevis’ conceptualization of their path is put forward as a barrier against the legal recognition of their *cemevi*. Either they are forced to accept the mosque as the place of worship and seize to demand the recognition of *cemevi* or they are forced to redefine Alevism as a belief system outside of Islam, which would be opposed by many Alevis in Turkey and abroad.

Alevis’ place of worship, the modern *cemevi*, became widespread in the 1990s. The previous governments also accepted Alevism as culture and saw Alevis as an antidote to political Islam and Kurdish nationalism. For instance, in the 1990s the state provided Alevis symbolic and economic support (Şahin, 2005), but at the same time the previous governments did not legalise the *cemevi* nor recognise Alevis through the Directorate of Religious Affairs.

The JDP’s recognition is based on defining Alevism in a particular way, rather than accepting cultural and religious rights and leaving internal matters to be solved by the leaders of this faith. This interference deepens Alevis’ internal differences. In his analysis of inter-ethnic violence in Rwanda, Mamdani argues that the colonial powers mark the slight differences among the local communities that they govern and they intensify these differences through legal definitions and by grouping people into different ethnicities, although these identities are actually fluid and contingent rather than being fixed (2009). He argues, “political identities are enforced by the state. The modern state enforces political identities as legal identities” (Mamdani, 2009). Similarly the JDP over-emphasises the internal differences rather than dealing with Alevis’ demands by negotiating with them and finding a common ground among the different organisations and their demands. By suggesting what constitutes Alevism, the JDP not only defines a culture but also divides the people who accept or reject particular definitions. In addition, these imposed definitions influence the policies and rights regarding the recognition of Alevi faith.

JDP’s discussion of Alevism always references back to Islam and constructs Alevis in relation to Islam, but not as a belief system with its own rituals and tradition. It is possible to draw a similarity to gender relations: Irigaray argues that the Western male is the fundamental model of human being whereas others were copies of this model and not defined in their own terms but according to a different subjectivity (2000). Alevis in the same way are here depicted as ‘Muslims that do not go to mosque’; they are not defined through the pillars of their belief system but rather through their lack or difference from mainstream Islam. This perspective renders Alevis as the ‘Other’ and is not unique to the current JDP government; however, the failure of the ‘Alevi opening’ and over-visibility of Alevis consolidates this ‘Otherness.’

3. 2012- now: Gezi Park Revolt and onwards

As the evidence presented above indicates, there has been a tremendous increase in the public visibility of Alevis which did not translate into the improvement of their rights and acceptance in society as equal citizens. Rather, their differences were underlined, which made them targets of attacks. By underlining the differences, the JDP creates good (cooperating) and bad (critical) Alevis.

This increasing visibility and the over-emphasis of Alevis’ ‘differences,’ from the Sunni majority and their internal differences pushed Alevis to use the streets as a legitimate form of protest. In 2012 and 2013 there have been various Alevi protests in Istanbul, Ankara, London and Strasbourg, in order to protest the violation of rights. The protest in March 2012 in Kadıköy, Istanbul, attracted many people that protested

against discrimination. The protests gradually spread to European capitals, for instance, in London on 16.02.2013, approximately 3000 people gathered in order to protest against the Turkish government, managing to attract the attention of the local London press as well as the Turkish national press. The protestors had various demands from Turkey; in addition to the recognition of Alevi faith, they demanded that the war in Syria must end and Turkey must not provoke the war. The other protests in Europe were either reactions to specific events or general gatherings to demand rights. It would make sense to analyse the Gezi Park Revolt and aftermath by bearing in mind that Alevis had already been active in the street protests. In the Gezi Revolt they participated as well but not necessarily with their Alevi identity at the fore.

The Gezi Revolt from the point of Alevis can be understood by examining the events right before the protests: Alevis as a group which prides itself on gender equality and liberal lifestyles, were affected by the JDP's restrictions on lifestyles and personal liberties in its last years. In addition, they were accused of supporting the Assad regime in the Syrian war on sectarian grounds and were publicly booed as supporters of an anti-democrat leader. Another issue that upset Alevis has been the third bridge on the Bosphorus in Istanbul, which is named after the Ottoman Sultan, Selim I, who is accused of the mass killing of Alevis in the 16th century and is a historical figure of massacres for Alevis' collective memory. All these accumulated into Alevis' dissatisfaction with the JDP government.

The summer of 2013 witnessed one of the largest civilian urban revolts of Turkish history. The protests started on 27 May 2013 when a group of volunteers began to stand guard in the Taksim Gezi Parkı to prevent the demolition of the park and the building of a shopping mall in its place. The peaceful protest escalated as the police attacked the protestors with water cannons and tear gas in the following days. The news spread through the social media and the participation increased rapidly. The modest protest to protect the trees in the park and the urban space, very little of which is left in Istanbul due to massive construction, turned into a revolt, with the participation of large sections of society, young urbanites being at the fore. In addition to the harsh reactions of the police, the Prime Minister Erdoğan called the protestors *çapulcu* (thugs) and *ayyaş* (drunkards) and did not soothe the anger of the protestors. These words were later appropriated by the protestors in a humorous way to connote a positive meaning (Göle, 2013); for example, the sympathisers of the Gezi revolt began to add the word "*çapulcu*" in front of their names in the social media. The protests grew to voice the discontent with the government on various subjects such as the exploitation of nature, the loss of urban spaces and the oppression of individual liberties.

The position of Alevis in the revolt is difficult to estimate exactly because there was not only organisational but also individual participation in the protests. However, there is evidence that Alevi participation in Gezi Revolts was significant. In addition, the majority of the people who lost their lives in the protest were Alevi; their funeral ceremonies were conducted in *cemevi*. This can be explained with reference to the harshness of the police violence in certain neighbourhoods populated largely by Alevis. Cihan Tugal (2013) situates the Gezi Park revolt in global protests movements since 2011 and argues that although the working class participation to the protests was limited, Alevi neighbourhoods were exceptional in their high support for the protests.

The protestors called for the prime minister to resign, yet Erdoğan did not ease the tension but "undermined the power of others, such as the Mayor of Istanbul, who sought to ease tensions during the demonstrations in Gezi Park" (Göle, 2013).

Moreover, Erdoğan specifically addressed Alevis, accusing the opposition and implying that Alevis are being misused by the opposition:

From the marking of houses to the attack in Reyhanlı, from their communication with Syria to Gezi Park, PRP has openly supported, and is supporting, a very dangerous scenario. The people who provoked Gezi Park incident, the TV and newspaper owners who wanted to mobilise Alevi people are from the PRP, the ones who pay (money) to the people who swear, the ones who tweet in order to provoke Alevis are PRP deputies. I wish that all our Alevi brothers are cautious against PRP who is still doing what it had done in the past (Çiftci, 2013).

Erdoğan's statement portrays (the protesting) Alevis as misguided by evil powers, as if it is not possible for them to be protesting via their own will. In the above quotation, "our Alevi brothers" signifies Otherness, being 'different,' because the same argument is irreversible for Sunnis. The JDP officials would not use the phrase "our Sunni brothers" in the same context because they and the Sunni majority are already imagined to be on the same side and appear as the norm. On the other hand, the identity marker 'Alevi' is used in a totalising manner, as if all can be grouped under one homogenous category of otherness. Although the Gezi Revolt was a more general set of anti-government protests, not solely an Alevi uprising, the JDP could differentiate the Alevi and Sunni protestors or exaggerate the Alevi participation in the protests. This discourse rips Alevis of their human agency and treats them as Alevis first and foremost, but not as equal citizens or humans whose other identities might be salient within that particular context (such as environmentalist, citizen, socialist, resident of a particular city or neighbourhood etc).

This attitude did not soften in the funerals of the deceased either. The most tragic one was the youngest victim of the disproportionate police violence, Berkin Elvan. He was a 15-year-old who was shot by a tear gas canister in the head during the revolts, stayed in coma for 269 days and lost his life on 11 March 2014. The boy's death created massive public outrage and prompted protests in at least 32 cities; some 20 demonstrators were injured and 150 were arrested. Erdoğan, on the other hand, accused the boy of being connected to terrorist groups and did not take any responsibility in the increasing police violence and the death of the protestors (Berkin Elvan, 2014).

Finally, I analyse the mosque/*cemevi* project, which was supported by the government, yet opposed by the majority of Alevi associations. In September 2013 İzzettin Doğan, the chairman of the central right-wing Alevis' CEM Foundation and Fethullah Gülen, an Islamic scholar, announced that there are plans to build a joint mosque and *cemevi* in Ankara (Alevi örgütlerinden ortak açıklama, 2013). The idea was explained to the public as bringing the two communities closer by building a mosque, a *cemevi* and a soup kitchen in the same yard.

Fetullah Gülen, the charismatic leader of a religious brotherhood, the Gülen movement, who lives in exile in the USA, is a name that makes Alevis and the secular people of Turkey cautious. Consequently, his idea to build a *cemevi* and a mosque side by side did not find wide popular support among Alevi organisations. Various Alevi associations and intellectuals expressed that they are against this project. Because some of the elements in Alevi rituals are not tolerated in mainstream Islam (such as men and women praying side by side, music and dance in the rituals), those who are against the project argue that gradually their distinct rituals would be erased from Alevism and their faith would eventually be assimilated into Sunni Islam. In Turkey Alevi organisations protested the project and criticised it with a public

release. The document was signed by nine different Alevi federations and associations in Turkey and the European Alevi Confederation, which is composed of twelve federations throughout Europe. The public release reads:

This is an assimilation project, it aims to melt Alevism within 'moderate political Islam.' Both of the hodjas'⁶ 'glorious aim' is moving Alevis away from their democratic rights demands, rip them off from social opposition in the struggle for rights and liberties and making them 'docile.' The current mentality uses the phrase 'making peace between Alevis and Sunnis' on purpose. We, Alevis, do not have any problems with Sunnis that cannot be solved or any problems that require fighting. Alevis demand rights not from Sunnis, but from the state (11.09.2013).

In this example, it is clear that the policy is implemented without the consent of those who will be affected by the decisions. The government's policies and discourse differentiate between good and bad Alevis and emboldens the internal differences. The two camps (right-wing Alevis who regard Alevism as pure Islam versus left-wing Alevis who would like to maintain the boundary with mainstream Islam) are positioned against each other. Instead of dialogue with all legitimate actors of Alevi communities, JDP chooses to collaborate with only those who do not challenge the state hegemony. So far, the different Alevi groups are not in an open conflict with one another but the differences among them make it difficult to unite and demand their rights all together. The JDP perpetuates this by differentiating between the smaller groups of Alevis that cooperate with them (not exactly in-group but closer to "us") and the majority of Alevi associations that object to the project (out-group, "them"). The former is treated more positively while the out-group is represented in a more negative way.

This issue gains a transnational character as the Alevi organisations in European countries join in the discussion and the positive versus negative Alevis discourse extends to Alevis in diaspora. A recent example of this took place in Erdoğan's visit to Cologne, Germany, in May 2014. A big Alevi rally took place on the same day as he addressed the Turkish community in Cologne. Afterwards Erdoğan accused his opponents of being 'Alevis without Ali', which was a reference to a book written by an Alevi researcher-author, Faik Bulut, who claimed that Alevis' Ali and mainstream Muslim's Ali are understood as different characters. The way that phrase was used by Erdoğan could also be understood as 'those who protested are not real Alevis, but rather a marginal group.' In controlling discourses over another group of people, one of the obvious strategies is the "semantic content" and creating them vs. us. In this example the opponent Alevis are evaluated negatively and marginalized (Dijk, 1993). The lexical choices in describing different groups also show the marginalization of the out group: while the general Alevi public is addressed as "our Alevi brothers/sisters,"⁷ the opponents are called "Alevis without Ali."

Conclusion

In this article, first, I aimed to examine the JDP-Alevi relations and see why and how these have eventually come to demise. I could identify two main reasons for this: first of all Alevis' existing doubts and suspicions regarding the right-wing governments could not be eliminated. Second, the Alevi opening and the statements on Alevis

⁶ Hodja literally means Muslim school teacher, in this context it is used ironically, while referring to Gülen as well as Cem Foundation's leader İzzettin Doğan, who is a law professor at an elite university in Istanbul.

⁷ The Turkish word that was originally is 'kardeş,' which means sibling and is gender-free.

afterwards were not based on equal citizenship but rather upon controlling the discourse on Alevism. It is repetitive to express that the JDP, which had been accusing the Kemalist state elite for being oppressive and functioning despite its citizens, became oppressive and applied its policies regarding Alevis, despite Alevis.

The above evidence shows that mere visibility and policies for Alevis does not necessarily mean the improvement of Alevis' rights. My analysis suggests that there has to be a more thorough negotiation in which all Alevi representatives could equally participate. The blockage in the communication occurred through a set of mechanisms: by emphasizing Alevis' difference from mainstream Sunni Islam; the internal differences (even when these were not relevant in discussing democratic rights); the rendering of Alevis as 'others,' the reduction of the Alevis to one identity (though individuals can possess multiple identities in varying contexts) and finally the differentiation between good (cooperative) and bad (non-cooperative) Alevis.

I aimed to contribute to the understanding of modern day Alevis in Turkish politics and their rough relations with the government by examining these relations over an historical period. From this analysis it can be seen that Erdoğan has been very active in shaping the policies and discourse in his party around Alevi identity. There is no significant inner party opposition about the Alevi opening and even the cooperating Alevi opinion leaders such as Reha Çamuroğlu are not supported and are eventually withdrawn from the process. In the next years of Erdoğan's presidency, time will show if the JDP's attitude towards its opponents will change or not. My analysis would suggest that the relations might be improved if the government discusses the Alevi issue within the framework of religious and cultural rights rather than the framework of Islamic scholars' perspectives on Alevism and urgently adopts an egalitarian approach, where all relevant parties can equally join in the discussion.

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