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Atıf Künyesi | Citation Info

Bor, Y. (2025). Millet System in Ottoman Empire: An Extraordinary Policy with Extraordinary Implications. *Akademik Tarih ve Düşünce Dergisi*, 12 (4), 806-815.

Millet System in Ottoman Empire: An Extraordinary Policy with Extraordinary Implications

Abstract

The Ottoman Empire managed to be one of the most powerful empires throughout the world for centuries. The Ottoman sultans enhanced the territory of the empire through continues conquests. As a result of enlarged territories, many ethnic and religious communities lived under Ottoman rule. The fact that Ottoman Empire managed to provide these communities with an atmosphere of peaceful coexistence has attracted the attention of many noteworthy historians. In fact, millet system was an extraordinary and effective policy in the historical context of Ottoman Empire. Thanks to this government system non-Muslim and non-Turkish elements of Ottoman society could experience a peaceful and egalitarian social system. In this respect, it would not be wrong to argue that millet system was a key to social and political order of Ottoman Empire. While discussing this main argument, this paper aims at providing a multi-faceted and detailed analysis of millet system in the Ottoman Empire. Relying on the previous sources on millet system, I will elaborate the issue under three main headlines.

Keywords: Millet System, Ottoman Empire, Non Muslims, Muslims, Social life in Ottoman Empire

Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Millet Sistemi: Olağanüstü Sonuçları Olan Olağanüstü Bir Politika

Öz

Osmanlı İmparatorluğu yüzyıllar boyunca dünyanın en güçlü imparatorluklarından biri olmayı başarmıştır. Osmanlı sultanları, aralıksız fetihlerle imparatorluğun topraklarını genişletmiştir. Bu toprak genişlemesi sonucunda çok sayıda etnik ve dinsel topluluk Osmanlı yönetimi altında yaşamıştır. Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun bu topluluklara barışçıl bir birlikte yaşam ortamı sunmayı başarmış olması, birçok saygın tarihçinin dikkatini çekmiştir. Gerçekten de millet sistemi, Osmanlı



İmparatorluğu'nun tarihsel bağlamında olağanüstü ve etkili bir politika olmuştur. Bu yönetim sistemi sayesinde Osmanlı toplumunun gayrimüslim ve Türk olmayan unsurları barışçıl ve eşitlikçi bir toplumsal düzen içinde yaşayabilmiştir. Bu bakımdan, millet sisteminin Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun toplumsal ve siyasal düzeninin anahtarı olduğunu savunmak yanlış olmayacaktır. Bu temel sav tartışılırken, bu makale Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'ndaki millet sistemine çok yönlü ve ayrıntılı bir analiz sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Millet sistemi üzerine önceki kaynaklara dayanarak konu üç ana başlık altında ele alınacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Millet Sistemi, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, Gayrimüslimler, Müslümanlar, Osmanlı'da Toplumsal Yaşam

Introduction

Ottoman society consisted of two main elements: Muslims and non-Muslims. According to Islamic law, the people of the book who are non-Muslim and who practice their religion under the protection of the Caliphate were called dhimmis (Bozkurt, 1996). The category of non-Muslims involved a significant number of ethnic and religious communities. Given that the Ottoman Empire was a theocratic state, religion was one of the most definitive factors in the social and political system of the Ottomans. Despite this characteristic of the Ottoman Empire, non-Muslims were treated equally. Many historians argue that the millet system was the key for establishing such an egalitarian rule and peaceful coexistence (Ceylan, 2002). How can this effective system, which is called the millet system, be explained? What are its definitive features?

The basic determining elements of this system can be listed as follows: Islamic law, church law to the extent that it is recognized by the former, capitulations, peace treaties, and reform movements. However, it can be argued that the most groundbreaking and contested feature of this system was its pluralist nature. Ebubekir Ceylan argues that even though such concepts do not date back to the rule of the Ottomans, the conceptions of “multiculturalism” and “pluralism” have explanatory capacity in terms of defining the dynamics of the millet system (Ceylan, 2002). Peaceful coexistence and securing egalitarian relations between the Muslim community and non-Muslim communities was one of the most fundamental characteristics of the millet system. This system basically relied upon the relatively separate but interactive coexistence of Muslims and non-Muslims within the same society. These two groups were generally living in different parts of cities or in separate villages. However, this was not a must rule. There were also villages in which they lived together (Çetin, 2000). As a proof of the fact that the millet system was a successfully functioning system, Muslims and non-Muslims

did not experience hardships in living together. Under the millet system, Muslims and non-Muslims were not only sharing the same space but also the same economic environment. They continued their economic transactions in the same marketplace with each other and with third parties.

1 .Anti-assimilationism and Freedom of Conscience

It can be argued that one of the most important and idiosyncratic features of the Ottoman system was its anti-assimilation emphasis. Even though Muslims constituted the majority of the society, the Ottomans did not require non-Muslim communities to conform to Muslim norms and provided them with a significant degree of freedom. In this way, these communities could protect their cultural and religious characteristics. Regarding this pro-minority characteristic of the millet system, Ceylan argues as follows: The Ottomans, for many centuries until the nineteenth century, had the ability, authority, and power to assimilate socio-cultural forms of different ethnic and religious groups, which was the general practice in many countries. However, the Ottomans chose heterogeneity and peaceful coexistence (Ceylan, 2002). From this perspective, it can be argued that the millet system and its implementation by the Ottoman Empire was not only a key feature of Ottoman rule; it was also an important characteristic that differentiated the Ottomans from their contemporaries, which chose to assimilate minorities.

Assimilation of non-Muslims among Muslims was never implemented as an Ottoman policy (Bozkurt, 1996). The different status that was granted to dhimmis provided them with the opportunity to retain their national, ethnic, and religious identities. It would not be wrong to argue that this attitude was a deliberate choice that stemmed from the requirements of Islam. According to Islam, “there is no compulsion in religion” (Bozkurt, 1996). Ottoman sultans were known to represent the justice of God in the world. Thus, they were supposed to ensure that the fundamental principles of Islam were implemented in their empire. As a result of this necessity, they were also responsible for the lives and prosperity of their non-Muslim subjects without forcing them to have faith in Islam.

This anti-assimilationist tendency, which both recognized the dhimmis as subjects of the Islamic state and underlined their differences from Muslims, can be found in the early definitions of the notion of *dhimma*. Debusi defines *dhimma* as follows: *Dhimma is one of ours with respect to the country and this world and one of them with respect to religion and the hereafter* (Özel, 1996, p. 420). As it can be understood from this simple definition, the dhimmis’ unique identities were recognized. In addition, it is also clear that their religion was respected and they were not bound by Islamic rules with respect to their spiritual

(otherworldly) concerns. In this respect, dhimmis were external to Muslims. However, this was not an absolute separation wall because the above-mentioned definition also shows that they were considered as members of the community with regard to living in the same state. Thus, they were internal elements of the Ottoman society as much as the Muslim subjects. Simply put, dhimmis were under the protection of the Islamic state; in return, they had rights and duties arising from their status (Ortaylı, 2020). From this perspective, it would not be wrong to argue that the millet system established a functioning mechanism similar to equal constitutional citizenship. All people were equal before the law regardless of their religious differences. They also had the chance to choose the legal system that worked best for their situation. Even though the “constitution” in this case was sharia law, they were able to protect their religious identity and traditions.

2. Legal Plurality

A further significant feature of the millet system was the existence of multiple legal systems. This can be regarded as a natural result of the above-mentioned “no compulsion” principle. Given that the Ottomans did not require non-Muslim subjects to live in accordance with Islamic rules, it would be a self-contradictory attitude if non-Muslims were forced to solve their problems in sharia courts. Within this historical and religious framework, the Ottoman Empire permitted non-Muslim communities to have their own courts and preserve their own legal systems as long as the decisions and practices of these courts did not contradict the fundamental principles of Islamic law (Kermeli, 2007). With respect to the multiplicity of legal systems, the question of the court that would be applied in legal conflicts is of importance for the purposes of this work. According to the Ottoman system, it was secured that if one of the parties was a Muslim, *kadi* courts were the authorized institutions. However, if both parties were dhimmis, they could choose whichever court to apply to. In other words, they were not obliged to resolve disputes through the arbitration of the representatives of sharia law. However, many Jews and Christians were turning to *kadi* courts when they had law-related problems (Kenanoğlu, 2007). It is worth mentioning one important detail at this point. The aforementioned legal autonomy involved the issues related to private law. The private law, determined through church law, was allowed to regulate such issues as marriages, divorces, and clerical matters (Bozkurt, 1996). With respect to public law cases, dhimmis were adjudicated within the Ottoman public law, which was applicable to non-Muslim subjects (Bozkurt, 1996). This means that in the public law cases dhimmis were adjudicated through special principles that were regulated by taking the religious differences of millets into consideration. From this

perspective, the fact that there were different but non-discriminatory regulations for non-Muslims can be regarded as an early indication of pluralism.

In a way supporting this perspective, Al-Qattan underlines that many historiographic studies show the following: *Dhimmis had the right to litigate most of their legal affairs in officially recognized and communally organized and operated dhimmi courts as long as their cases did not cross religious boundaries, involve capital crimes, or threaten public order and security* (Al-Qattan, 1999, p. 433).

From the perspective of the above-discussed historical analyses, two major characteristics of the Ottoman legal system regarding dhimmis can be assessed. First of all, as would be expected, the dhimmi communities and the implication of their laws were bound to Ottoman legal principles. Put differently, the legal decisions and their implications were expected to be in accordance with the general Ottoman principles. İnalcık's ideas also support this claim: *Islam guaranteed the lives and property of Christians and Jews on the condition of obedience and payment of poll tax. It allowed them free exercise of their own religions and to live according to their own religious laws [...] The Ottomans applied these principles of Islam with the greatest liberality and tolerance* (İnalcık, 1973, p. 41).

The second characteristic of this system, which distinguished the Ottoman system from its Western and Eastern contemporaries, was that dhimmis were free to resort to their own legal mechanisms and practice their requirements. Thus, they were not forced to be subject to Islamic law all the time. In other words, they had a significant degree of autonomy. However, this kind of autonomy did not mean that dhimmis were totally excluded from the requirements of Islamic law. The contested existence of this autonomy, its nature, and the extent to which it was practiced will be discussed in the following section of this paper.

3. "Myth or Reality?"

The millet system has not always been regarded as a positive societal administration method. For instance, Benjamin Braude argues that it was not even an administrative system (Braude, 1982). He claims that the millet system was mostly a myth since a system of administration of non-Muslims did not exist in the Ottoman Empire. Braude also suggests that the "invention" of the term millet and its proposition as a "system" brought distortion to non-Muslims rather than freedom (Braude, 1982). Similar to Braude's interpretation, Bernard Lewis also argues that traditional Muslim societies neither gave equal status to non-Muslims nor claimed to do so (Lewis, 1984). On the contrary, he claims that discrimination is an intrinsic element of the Islamic world. In addition to being a fundamental characteristic, it was also

institutionalized through the legal systems of Muslim countries (Lewis, 1984). However, even if he is one of the most vocal critics of a positive understanding of the millet system, Lewis accepts that it points to the fact that the Ottomans recognized non-Muslim elements of society. In addition, this recognition brought about a more egalitarian system for non-Muslims in the Tanzimat era. Besides, many historical and legal studies demonstrate that the millet system was neither a myth nor an anti-egalitarian structure. Kenanoğlu (2007) argues that the most functional means to assess whether the millet system was a myth and to determine the degree of autonomy accorded to *dhimmis* is a thorough analysis of the Ottoman legal system. According to Kenanoğlu (2007), the approach of Muslim states to non-Muslim communities and its legal foundations dates back to a document prepared during the time of Prophet Muhammad. These manuscripts were called the Medina Records, also known as the Constitution of Medina, which constituted the fundamentals of the Islamic state of the time. These accords are important for two major reasons: first, peaceful coexistence of Muslims and non-Muslims was secured thanks to them; and second, they constituted a guarantee for the civil rights of the citizens, including polytheists and Jews (Kenanoğlu, 2007). However, at this early stage of the Islamic state, *dhimma* was not yet a status given to non-Muslims, despite the fact that it was mentioned in the Medina Records. The groundbreaking historical source that granted non-Muslims this status was the *Dhimma Pact*, which was signed after the conquest of Mecca (Bosworth, 1982). With this pact, *dhimma* became a legal status for non-Muslims.

Kenanoğlu's analyses are important because they indicate the true status of *dhimmis* with respect to the legal regulations and documents that institutionalized their relations to the Ottoman Empire. These documents and their implications empirically demonstrate that the fundamental principles of Islamic law applied in the Ottoman Empire were far from discriminating against *dhimmis*. From this perspective, the millet system in the Ottoman Empire was not a myth. Legal documents of the Ottoman Empire—especially the *dhimma* pacts concluded after the conquest of Istanbul—show that the millet system did exist. In addition, it provided considerable space for multiculturalism and pluralism. However, this is not to say that the Ottomans granted *dhimmis* unlimited group autonomy. Kermeli (2007) approaches the issue from an objective perspective and argues that the millet system indeed provided the *dhimmis* with autonomy. However, she suggests that what needs to be questioned is the degree of such autonomy, not its existence. The degree of the autonomy of *dhimmis* is another topic of discussion.

4. Autonomy or Integration?

Historians tend to evaluate the activities of the dhimmis in the Ottoman Empire in two ways. They either evaluate the position of dhimmis as autonomous (Engelhardt, 1999) or argue that such autonomy never possibly existed in the Ottoman Empire. Similar to his approach to the equality question, Kenanoğlu (2007) suggests analyzing the legal system of the Ottoman Empire in order to understand the extent to which Ottoman sultans, who established a central rule, enabled autonomy. He adds that it would be wrong to think that total autonomy was given to non-Muslim religious leaders since the scope of their power would contradict that of Ottoman authorities, which functioned along with the principles of a very powerful and central system. The legal-historical analysis of Kenanoğlu (2007) demonstrates that Ottoman dhimmis were not fully autonomous communities. The Ottoman Empire never regulated the administrative, economic, legal, and criminal issues related to dhimmis on a completely autonomous basis. On the contrary, Ottoman leaders regulated such issues in a way that would balance the relations of non-Muslims with Muslims and established central control mechanisms to ensure that non-Muslim communities and leaders lived in accordance with Ottoman laws. However, in a very successful way they also guaranteed that these communities would retain their laws, traditions, and customs as long as the balance was not broken and Islamic law was not contradicted. At this point, it is worth remembering that autonomy does not mean independence. Thus, it was not surprising that the Ottoman Empire regulated the social and legal status of its subjects. Neither was it surprising that the main legal regulations, which depended on Islamic law, were the major rules. In this respect dhimmis did not constitute autonomous states within the state as some historians claim (Hussain, 1993). However, the decisions regarding the communal, religious, and private lives of dhimmis were allowed to be regulated according to their own religious requirements. From this perspective, it can be argued that even though the Ottoman Empire did not give total autonomy to the extent of independent institutionalization, it did provide space for a certain degree of autonomy. This balance, in fact, constituted the Ottoman style of perfecting the millet system: the Ottomans both provided dhimmis with freedom and equality as well as a limited degree of autonomy and secured central administrative power. However, this well-functioning system started to dissolve in the later periods of Ottoman rule.

5. 19th Century Reforms and Changing Position of Dhimmis due to International Influence

The 19th century was a very turbulent historical epoch for the entire world. In the modern era, Islamic civilization experienced fundamental ruptures as well as Western civilization

(Kalin, 2007). All the above-mentioned dimensions of the Ottoman plurality served for the peaceful coexistence of Muslim and non-Muslim elements for centuries. However, this working system was not immune to nationalist movements or international pressures of the 19th century. Starting with the early 19th century, which coincided with the spread of Western modern ideas throughout the Ottoman Empire, the traditional millet system started to change.

The non-Muslim communities under the protection of the European states became increasingly politicized and involved in separatist activities. The gradual decline of the central authority of the Ottoman Empire corresponded to the increase in the influence of the Western countries on the Ottoman Empire. This influence, which mainly resulted from the Capitulations, also had a great impact on the millet system and the situation of dhimmis (Ceylan, 2002). The 19th-century reforms were direct responses to these changes and efforts to reestablish the millet system. Thus, the reforms and the collapse of the millet system should be thought of in relation to nationalist separatist movements and international pressures.

In order to secure the obedience of the millets and eliminate Western influence on them, Ottoman sultans reformed the millet system. In the previous system, Muslims and non-Muslims were treated equally and fairly in legal affairs. However, some of the elements of the millet system that helped preserve diversity and identities functioned in a way that differentiated Muslims and non-Muslims. Such differentiation was not a problem in the golden ages of the Ottoman Empire. However, they constituted serious problems as the Ottomans weakened and became open to nationalist critiques. In other words, the traditional egalitarian system was not enough to secure order. The Ottoman Empire needed to provide total equality to non-Muslims and Muslims. As confirmed by a number of historians, the major aim of this reform movement was to eliminate the status differences of non-Muslim millets and integrate them into the Ottoman citizen category (Bozkurt, 1996). This was only possible through the creation of a new legal system that would include both Muslims and non-Muslims and eliminate all restrictions based on the status of non-Muslims. The reform wave aimed to achieve this objective through the integration of secular Western legal rules into the Ottoman system (Bozkurt, 1996). Consequently, non-Muslims were now allowed to be part of Ottoman politics. With the Tanzimat reforms and the following fermans, the equality between the two communities was secured to a greater extent. The poll tax was eliminated, and non-Muslims started to take part in foreign affairs and parliament (Bozkurt, 1996). The 1856 Islahat Edict brought further opportunities for the millets. According to Ceylan (2002), the most important of these new regulations was that each millet was asked to carry out its own constitutional reforms. However,

none of these reforms could help secure the maintenance of either the millet system or the Ottoman Empire. The reforms altered the initial system, and the Ottoman governmental and economic structure failed to meet the requirements of the new system. Ottoman central authority weakened to a great extent, and devolution of power to the millets did not stop this weakening. In this way, a system that was a significant example of early multiculturalism practices collapsed along with the Ottoman Empire. It can be argued that the relative lack of success of the reforms and the resistance from both Muslim and non-Muslim millets to the idea of change were among the major reasons behind both the weakening of the Empire and the collapse of the millet system.

Conclusion

As the above discussions have demonstrated, the millet system was far from being a myth. On the contrary, it represented one of the earliest and most significant historical examples of institutionalized pluralism. This pluralism was primarily secured through the Ottoman Empire's non-assimilationist policies and the considerable degree of legal autonomy granted to dhimmis. Nevertheless, the system remained a product of its own era. Although it ensured a relatively high level of egalitarianism for its time, it did not establish complete equality in the modern sense. With the spread of modern values and the pressures of 19th-century political transformations, the millet system required fundamental reform. Yet neither the millet system nor the Ottoman Empire was ultimately able to survive the demands of modernity. Even so, the attention and importance attributed to the millet system were not in vain. As a defining feature of the Ottoman political and social order, it provides critical insight into the mechanisms that enabled peaceful coexistence between Muslim and non-Muslim communities under Ottoman rule. The continuing fragmentation and conflict in many of the regions once governed by the Ottoman Empire underscore, by contrast, how effective and stabilizing the millet system once was. Far from being merely an administrative curiosity of the past, it remains a historically illuminating model for understanding interfaith coexistence and pluralistic governance.

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