
THE DIMINISHING AGENCY OF URBANISED ALEVIS AGAINST THE RISE OF POLITICAL ISLAM IN TURKEY

O z g e O n a y

Introduction

Turkish mob boss Sedat Peker, once a fervent supporter of the Justice and Development Party (AKP hereinafter), has been making online confessions in the form of a series of weekly videos about state-mafia relations since early May 2021, and recently posted a new video on YouTube, this time warning against an alleged plan to attack Alevis, a religious minority in Turkey.¹ He claimed that Mehmet Ağar, a former interior minister, was plotting an attack on a cemevi, the Alevi place of worship. Sedat Peker made it clear later on Twitter that the attack would be on a much larger scale than the one in 1995, when unknown perpetrators had opened fire with automatic rifles on coffee shops in

¹ Though they are a minority, Alevis distance themselves from the notion of being a minority. Being registered as such frightens Alevis as they seek to avoid further marginalisation. Amongst many other reasons, one of the causes of the fear of marginalisation is founded upon the fact that Alevis do not adhere to orthodox Sunni Islamic practices, such as veiling women, fasting during Ramadan, and gendered segregated worshipping in mosques. It is this distinctiveness that has often resulted in the exclusions and culminated in major attacks targeting Alevi groups across Turkey. For more about this topic, see: Ulaş Tol, "Urban Alevism and the Young Alevis' Search for Identity," in *Istanbul Youth Mapping Series*, ed. Greg Bennetts, 14–36 (Istanbul: PODEM and the Berghof Foundation, 2017), <http://podem.org.tr/en/researches/urban-alevism-and-the-young-alevis-search-for-identity/>; Ayca Arkilic and Ayse Ezgi Gurcan, "The political participation of Alevis: A comparative analysis of the Turkish Alevi Opening and the German Islam Conference," *Nationalities Papers* 49, no. 5 (September 2021): 949–966, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.49>.

Istanbul's Gazi neighbourhood, which is predominantly occupied by Alevis.² The fact that Peker leaked such sensitive information to the media came as a complete bombshell given that the amount of public exposure and visibility of Alevis was for the most part entirely absent in the public sphere since the 15 July 2016 coup d'état attempt. In the aftermath of coup d'état attempt, Turkey imposed a state of emergency and in the course of which thousands gathered the streets to oppose the failed coup attempt and whose majority consisted of the urban poor, and the unemployed. They chanted takbir ('Allah is great') in harmony with continuous calls for prayer recited by mosques. Factions of such crowds also harassed Alevi neighbourhoods and used violence against conscripts, who were then allegedly mobilised and followed the AKP's call.³

Just a couple of years earlier in 2013, demonstrations were held in Gezi Park. It was a spontaneous urban protest movement assembling a diverse group of socio-cultural milieus in contemporary Turkey to protest the redevelopment of a park in Istanbul. The fundamental grievances which mobilised the Gezi protestors were by and large based on the Islamist government's top-down conservative politics and then Prime Minister Erdoğan's increasing authoritarianism. The Erdoğan administration and its immediate media collaborators, relying on sectarian politics in their tactics, recast the Gezi protests as an Alevi revolt, which successfully demonised Alevis in the eyes of the Sunni majority.

Only six years prior to the Gezi protests, following their victory in the 2007 general election, for the first time in its political agenda, the AKP initiated a dialogue with Alevi public leaders⁴ calling it the Alevi

² "Mafia Boss Peker Warns against a Possible Attack on Alevis," English Bianet, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://bianet.org/english/society/244964-mafia-boss-peker-warns-against-a-possible-attack-on-alevis>.

³ Gonenc Uysal, "The Failed Coup in Turkey: Prolonged Conflict in the State Apparatus," *E-International Relations*, September 21, 2016, <https://www.e-ir.info/2016/09/21/the-failed-coup-in-turkey-prolonged-conflict-in-the-state-apparatus/>, 8.

⁴ Bayram Ali Soner and Şule Toktaş, "Alevis and Alevism in the Changing Context of Turkish Politics: The Justice and Development Party's Alevi opening," *Turkish Studies* 12, no. 3 (2011): 419–434, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2011.604214>.

Opening⁵ (*Alevi açılımı*) to involve them in political processes to settle an entire range of Alevi demands, among which were the official recognition of the status of cemevis and the representation of Alevism in compulsory religious courses.⁶ Despite a series of meetings taking place, the Alevis' demands were largely ignored and deflected under the intensification of the sectarian discourse of the AKP government.⁷ It is particularly interesting to see the changing attitude of AKP governments with regard to Turkey's Alevis since they came into power in 2002.

Situated within a theory of agency/governmentality approach, this article seeks to unearth the AKP's political agenda that shifted from liberal-democratic to conservative-Islamism⁸ over the past 19 years, and to what extent this shift in the AKP's political agenda portrayed Alevis as the "other" of Sunni Islam, therefore, relegating them to a status of exclusion vis-à-vis the state-favoured Sunni Islam as a form of governmentality. Based on empirical data, the article documents experiences found in the nuances of above mentioned tensions and crisis manifest in the lives of my respondents at the personal and structural levels. The article focuses upon three key themes including everyday life, institutional discrimination and the workplace to understand the ways in which first generation urbanised Alevis have faced the politicisation of Alevism, a tradition that the AKP has by no means invented, but has taken to a new level.⁹ By presenting a series of accounts, the article illuminates a textured narrative around a range of precarities first gen-

⁵ The Alevi opening process has mostly been driven by domestic incentives; arguably the issues addressed in the Alevi Opening reflected a party strategy to attract votes from the Alevi electorate. Once the AKP and the President Erdoğan entrenched their political position, their relationship with Alevis deteriorated. It is not surprising that Alevi relations with the Turkish state have attenuated noticeably in the third AKP term (2011–present), as the party has largely locked in majority support from other segments of the Turkish electorate. For more about this topic, see: Ayca Arkilic and Ayse Egzi Gurcan, "The Political Participation of Alevis."

⁶ Soner and Toktaş, "Alevis and Alevism," 429.

⁷ Ayfer Karakaya-Stump and Emrah Yildiz, "Alevizing Gezi," *Jadaliyya* (Mar 26, 2014), <https://everywheretaksim.net/jadaliyya-alevizing-gezi-ayfer-karakaya-stump>.

⁸ Besim Can Zirh, "Euro-Alevis: From Gastarbeiter to Transnational Community," in *The Making of World Society*, ed. Remus Gabriel Anghel, Eva Gerharz, Gilberto Rescher, and Monika Salzbrunn (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2015), 103–132, <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839408353-004>.

⁹ Karakaya-Stump and Yildiz, "Alevizing Gezi."

eration urbanised Alevi living in urban areas have experienced, and aims to broaden the understanding of the experiences of the Alevi community in Turkey.

Method

My first-hand experience as the child of the first generation urbanised Alevi informed my desire to explore to what extent has the politicisation of Alevism fused into the AKP government's Sunni sectarianism diminished the agency of the first-urbanised Alevi over the last 19 years. My own insider status facilitated access to the respondents, who were self-selected through my personal and professional network.¹⁰ A total of eight semi-structured virtual interviews were conducted with first generation urbanised Alevi and under conditions of confidentiality, I have used pseudonyms to protect my respondents' anonymity.¹¹

Purposive sampling is applied with the aim of generating insight and an in-depth understanding of the degree to which the growing tendency toward Sunni sectarianism and the shifting political agenda of the AKP in the urban context has impinged on my respondents, all of whom have lived their entire lives in Istanbul.¹² My second criterion was to reach out to those who have lived their adult years under AKP rule, hence have grown used to carrying the heavy burden of precarity as they were the first generation of urbanised Alevi who, through education, engaged in everyday life in one of the largest cities of Turkey. Unlike their parents, who upon migration to Istanbul in the 1960s mostly isolated themselves in their private spheres such as *gecekondu*¹³

¹⁰ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners* (London: Sage, 2013), 56.

¹¹ Braun and Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research*, 56.

¹² Braun and Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research*, 56.

¹³ Gecekondu means "shantytown," "favela" in Portuguese meaning "built in a night." In the 1950s, when mass migration to cities started, cities were the places of modernising elites such as bureaucrats and those from the military. Alevi built up their own gecekondu, remained inside their community and continued to consider themselves villagers due to low social mobility in the new context, *Glosbe*, s.v. "gecekondu," <https://glosbe.com/en/en/gecekondu>; Tahire Erman, "Becoming 'Urban' or Remaining 'Rural': The Views of Turkish Rural-to-Urban Migrants on the 'Integration' Question," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 30, no. 4 (1998): 541–61, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/164340>.

neighbourhoods, for fear of discrimination and violence,¹⁴ the first-generation urbanised Alevis have been more active in the public sphere where they have engaged in urban life next to the Sunni majority.

Experiences of Stigma in Everyday Life

Despite constituting the second largest minority in Turkey, the Alevis' long-standing anguish and grievances due to their portrayal as practicing a heterodox version of Islam, are still commonplace if not intensified over the rule of the long-serving president Erdoğan's authoritarian and sectarian discourse.¹⁵ Especially in the aftermath of Gezi Park protests, the government did not refrain from using the "Alevi riot" label to underline the "us versus them" discourse presented as a threat to "national unity and welfare," evoked and strengthened by a popular discourse of "us, the Sunnis, versus them, the others." Relying on sectarian cleavages, where the majority of the population is Sunni, actually determined the support of the Sunni majority for the AKP government. Against this background, social and political divisions forged between the Sunni majority and the "rest" have been aggravated, indicating an upsurge of a visible Islamic identity underpinned by the AKP's political-legal agenda. Having said that, prolonged conflict with the Alevis existed prior to the emergence of the AKP in 2002, but this time has been integrated into the governmental structures in order not to alienate the ultra-religious wing of its Sunni core supporters.¹⁶

An increasingly sectarian turn enshrined in the "Sunnification" of Turkish politics,¹⁷ with no official approach toward the Alevi commu-

¹⁴ Cristina Cusenza, "Localist Cosmopolitanism: Alevism as a Rooted, Universal Discourse," *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* IX, no. 3 (2017): 295–343, https://www.anthro.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/anthro/documents/media/jas09_3_2017_295_343.pdf.

¹⁵ Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, "The AKP, Sectarianism, and the Alevis' Struggle for Equal Rights in Turkey," *National Identities* 20, no. 1 (2018): 53–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2016.1244935>.

¹⁶ Cemal Karakas, *Turkey: Islam and Laicism between the Interests of State, Politics, and Society*, PRIF Reports No. 78 (Frankfurt: Peace Research Institute, 2007), <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/71725021.pdf>.

¹⁷ Arkilic and Gurcan, "The Political Participation of Alevis."

nity's long-standing demands¹⁸ in sight, has materialised and played out in intentional and unintentional exclusionary and Aleviphobic attitudes with its relatively subtle forms in the day to day lives of the urbanised Alevi community. My interviews reveal the subtle discrimination and elusive stigma operative in the lives of first generation urbanised Alevi, and the ways in which they are intensely interwoven with the hassle of everyday life:

“Alevi community has long been oppressed and marginalised yet the type of threats would shift depending upon the incident. Today, Alevi are still oppressed, however, I doubt that another Alevi massacre would happen in the 21st century. Even though similar tensions are still expected under the AKP government, the primary purpose of the AKP is to perpetuate its power and constantly reproduce it by politicising minorities like us, undervalue and underrepresent minorities in the face of perpetuating its political Islam. For us, being discriminated against would not be taken as a surprise if we were to face another hostility today, which we always face in our daily lives through getting sacked, being obliged to take religious courses at school and being discriminated against, regardless of where I am.” (Cansu, 42 years old, Hotel Manager)

The next respondent similarly notes a sense of subtle contempt of Alevi operating in the hassle of the day:

My son was reprimanded in traffic due to listening to traditional Alevi folk songs in his private car, window down. Two men wearing Islamic clothing wanted my son to turn the music down saying that it is sinful. (Sevinc, 50 years old, Housewife)

A sense of eliminated agency and decision-making as a means of systematic disenfranchisement in everyday life is not a new phenomenon for the Alevi community. Though there is a great deal of literature addressing the Alevi's struggle for equal rights in Turkey in relation to their political and religious representations,¹⁹ the covert and subtle na-

¹⁸ Demands including the denial of the official status of cemevis or the compulsory religious instruction in schools and textbooks solely on Sunni Islam.

¹⁹ .Soner and Toktaş, “Alevi and Alevism”; Karakaya-Stump, “The AKP, Sectarianism, and the Alevi's Struggle”; Omer Tekdemir, “Constructing a Social Space for Alevi Political Identity: Religion, Antagonism and Collective Passion,” *National Identities* 20, no. 1 (2018): 31–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2016.1247259>.

ture of exclusion in everyday interactions of older Alevis appears to have been neglected, presumably on the basis of its nature as harder to pin down. Indeed, feeling like an outsider against a backdrop of the Sunni majority was made clear in my interviews:

I am 50 years old and still cannot peacefully share my Alevi identity unless I am surrounded with people who are somewhat related to me. Today's government, like it or not, maintains a 'divide and rule' politics so as to breach solidarity by abusing the rights of the Alevi community in the public sphere. As a matter of fact, I still feel keyed up in certain situations in Turkey. Not the least of my concerns is that the AKP government's misconceptions on Alevi's lack of fasting or going to the mosque makes me a false Muslim in their eyes. (Gokhan, 52 years old, Accountant)

In Gokhan's reflections on the visible difficulty of being a middle-aged Alevi person still lacking the privileges and inner comfort his Sunni counterparts enjoy, one can see the ways in which structures of government and their official identity disguised within Sunni Islamisation mediates the entitlement, reception and status of the first-urbanised Alevis in the current public sphere. For evidence of this we need to look no further than to the statement, "as a matter of fact, I still feel keyed up in certain situations in Turkey (...) today's government, like it or not, maintains a 'divide and rule' politics so as to breach solidarity by abusing the Alevi community's rights," where Gokhan simply demonstrates the constraints of the Sunni Islamic hegemonic power of the AKP government articulated in the questions of rights, subjectivity and the possibilities of agency.

While a variety of definitions of the term "agency" has been suggested, this article will use the definition put forward by Grossberg, who saw it as "a matter of action" and "the nature of change." In a broader cultural term Grossberg points out that questions of agency involve the possibilities of action as interventions in the processes by which reality is continually being transformed and power enacted.²⁰ As articulated by the above quotes, Alevi subjects' possibility to act appears to be limited, closed and reduced through the processes of repre-

²⁰ Lawrence Grossberg, "Identity and cultural studies: Is that all there is?," in *Questions of cultural identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, 87–107 (Sage Publications, Inc., 1996).

sensation by which Alevi have been portrayed as the antipode of Sunni Muslims and associated with communism in certain milieus. These representations undoubtedly remain in the service of both Erdoğan and other members of the AKP in ways in which, on numerous occasions, sarcastic comments were made concerning the Alevi background of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who is the leader of the main opposition party, the Republic People's Party (CHP).²¹ Interestingly, however, at no point did Kılıçdaroğlu himself emphasise his Alevi background, nevertheless Erdoğan and the newspapers close to the AKP continued to highlight Kılıçdaroğlu's ethno-religious identity in a derogatory manner.²² Such an approach toward Kılıçdaroğlu and the Alevi community thereof, as a testimony to the intentional stigmatisation so deeply entrenched in politics and society, has arguably propelled first urbanised Alevi into the periphery of the society without a voice, as potential disrupters and the other of the mainstream Sunni Muslims in Turkey. To this end, the extent to which Alevi can backwash the negative claims and generalisations about their identity remains severely restricted in everyday life:

The Alevi community has always been marked out as heretics and hence we all ended up in neighbourhoods which are notably segregated from the rest of the city. Our parents did not face this in distant villages perhaps, only later did they acknowledge that they were the actual target when they had to head over to the municipalities, general register office or any public institution. I still am concerned that uncovering my identity would pave the way for my discharge at work or inhibit my promotion in some way, therefore I still hide it in the public space. (Zehra, 49 years old, Doctor's Assistant)

The feeling of having to hide one's Alevi identity was not as salient for the first comers to the urban centres as it is for their children today. In that sense, it has been stated by my respondents that covering up who they are in everyday life has amplified in tandem with the AKP government's growing sectarian discourse, especially over the last decade:

²¹ Karakaya-Stump, "The AKP, Sectarianism, and the Alevi's Struggle."

²² Bilgin Ayata and Serra Hakyemez, "The AKP's Engagement with Turkey's Past Crimes: An Analysis of PM Erdoğan's 'Dersim Apology,'" *Dialectical Anthropology* 37, no. 1 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-013-9304-3>.

Some of my relatives who live in Samsun have recently begun wearing hijab to hide their Alevi identity. On the whole, in response to governmental and mainstream discrimination, we have to conduct ourselves so much so that we hide who we are in public, on the streets, in public organisations. Some of my neighbours do not even accept the *Asure*²³ I distribute. (Saniye, 47 years old, Housewife)

Navigating stigmatisation in everyday life is a nexus around which one can see the fundamental issues underlying the nature of governing practices in Turkey. Mobilising the sectarian card to solidify its conservative Sunni-Muslim support has been considered an effective form of governmentality for the current government in Turkey, where Sunni Islam is hegemonic, the headscarf functions, as illustrated by the above quote, as a symbolic manifestation of power.²⁴ Foucault's concept of governmentality goes beyond the narrow limits of state power to look at how societies employ more subtle methods of power exercised through a network of institutions, practices, procedures and techniques which act to regulate social conduct.²⁵ As is clear in Saniye's quote: "we have to conduct ourselves so much so that we hide who we are in public" is the reminder of the propagated public visibility of Sunni Islam under AKP leadership and its intention to reinsert its ideology of Sunni political Islam through its governmental practices such as "Islamic dress."²⁶ Marginalised and excluded in the public sphere under the growing influence of Islamic conservatism, my female respondents complained about the growing degree of verbal assault which they report encountering in everyday life because of the way they dress, one respondent explains this as follows:

²³ *Asure* (a traditional dessert served during Muharrem) is a part of broader Turkish culture, shared by Alevis and Sunnis alike.

²⁴ Gözde Orhan, "Religious Freedom Governance or Institutionalization of a Heterodox Religion? Turkey's Urban Policies with Respect to Alevi Population," *Peace Human Rights Governance* 3, no. 2 (2019): 193–214, <https://doi.org/10.14658/pupj-phrg-2019-2-2>.

²⁵ Jonathan Joseph, "The Limits of Governmentality: Social Theory and the International," *European Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 2 (2010): 223–246, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066109346886>.

²⁶ Kerem Öktem, "Being Muslim at the Margins: Alevis and the AKP," *Middle East Report*, no. 246 (2008): 5–7, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25164829>.

One of those days I was walking through with a friend in *Eyup Sultan*,²⁷ we both wearing tank-tops as it was summer time. Two hijabbed women walked past us saying ‘you both will burn in hell, we are taking control, fast and furious.’ They literally assaulted us on the basis of our Alevism. (Zehra, 49 years old, Doctor’s Assistant)

The above examples represent how the privileged position of Sunni Islam, with its concomitant hegemonic powers, perpetuate the Alevi’s status as outsiders who became the target of the AKP government’s political discourse reaffirming and legitimising a collective sense of “us” against “them.” This, in turn, facilitates the rise of Sunni Islamic politics, unlike the early 2000s which focused on the recognition of differences leading up to the Alevi Opening, legitimised and deployed as a governmental policy today, attempts to disavow Alevi’s actions and right to live according to their own values and beliefs in the public sphere- which is notably displayed through verbal abuse, hate speech and microaggressions evident in the interviews. That said, hostile attitudes and apparent discrimination excluding Alevi from the public sphere, empowered by the rise of political Islam, has permeated not only daily interactions, but has become deeply entrenched in the political ideologies and power structures of the AKP government.

Impact of Institutionalised Forms of Discrimination

Alevi have been experiencing downward mobility in all spheres of life, facing discrimination and stigmatisation, especially in relation to the Sunni population.²⁸ The post-1980 military coup facilitated the Turkish-Islamic synthesis where a long-standing religious neutrality was abandoned – which means that Sunni Islam has de facto been nationalised. This is a turning point in Turkish politics – the expansion of state-run religious services, the introduction of religious education as a compulsory subject in public schools, and the use of the Diyanet,²⁹ the

²⁷ A conservative neighbourhood in Istanbul.

²⁸ Ayşe Ayata, “The Emergence of Identity Politics in Turkey,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 17 (1997): 59–73, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0896634600002752>.

²⁹ In Turkey, Diyanet was established in 1924 to become the “protector of the Turkish state’s understanding of secularism and Islam” yet turned into “a promoter with the task of spread-

state agency for religious affairs, for the promotion of national solidarity and integration. While othering Alevi has been brought into public sphere as part of recent politics centring around Sunni Islam and its professed orientation as monolithic,³⁰ it is not limited to subtle discrimination and microaggressions in daily life per se. The instrumentalisation of Sunni sectarianism which constantly pits Sunnis against Alevi operates not only on the mundane routine of everyday life but also on the institutional level,³¹ which is evident in my interviews:

The Maras and Sivas massacres³² have a huge impact on the way I feel towards Sunni people as a matter of fact. People can wear whatever they want, it is seriously none of my business, what I am afraid of is the perception of the people opposite to me about me. I always suppose that I will be disregarded in a government office due to my Alevi identity. I cannot trust my Sunni counterparts on the grounds that they would treat me badly. This perception has been imprinted on Alevi and the fact that we still hold on to such fears derives from the distance that governments set between Alevi and Sunnis, propelled by the disparity between the service Alevi and Sunnis get. When I reflect on the Sivas massacre, which took place only a couple of decades ago, I find myself contemplating the high possibility that such a terrible event might reoccur at any time today. (Gokhan, 52 years old, Accountant).

ing Turkish nationalism and Islamic moral values, solely based on Sunni Islam, both inside and outside Turkish borders, which bodes ill for the protection of Alevi rights in Turkey and abroad.” (Arkilic and Gurcan, “The Political Participation of Alevi.”)

³⁰ Öktem, “Being Muslim at the Margins.”

³¹ Ihsan Yilmaz and Galib Bashirov, “The AKP after 15 Years: Emergence of Erdoganism in Turkey,” *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 9 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1447371>.

³² Alevi were frequently attacked by radical nationalists and Islamists. One of these atrocities took place in Maraş province (officially Kahramanmaraş) in southern Turkey. It was a planned murder of Alevi during the week of 19–26 December 1978 since the doors of Alevi houses had been marked with red symbol weeks before the attack. The massacre lasted one week, 111 were killed, 176 injured, and 552 houses and 289 workplaces were destroyed. The Maraş massacre was not the only atrocity targeting Alevi, and outbreaks of communal violence between Sunnis and Alevi in Ortaca-Muğla (1966), Malatya (1978), Çorum (1980), Sivas (1993) and Gazi Mahallesi (1995) have radically shaped the formation and articulation of the extent of structural and institutional mistrust on the part of Alevi towards the state, engendering a deep enmity between the Alevi and state-led institutions. See: Ayhan Kaya, “AKP’s Alevi Initiative,” in *Europeanization and Tolerance in Turkey. The Myth of Tolerance*, 132–56, Identities and Modernities in Europe (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137318190_5.

Still maintaining a sense of insecurity after the massacres addressed above, Gokhan still sees the possibility of societal and state discrimination against Alevis as tantamount to persecution or serious harm. The trauma of the aforementioned atrocities, transmitted across generations, still illuminate the extent to which Alevis maintain a sense of official discrimination due to a lack of protection from the governing bodies. Over the last two decades, the AKP's sectarian discourse has precipitated the long-standing concerns of Alevis who are systematically portrayed as the other of mainstream Sunni Muslims, undeserving of full security and citizenship rights. One of the first overt manifestations of this can be traced back to the campaign speeches of the 2010 referendum, in which Erdogan repeatedly complained of an alleged "domination of high judicial posts by a clique of Alevis".³³ The authoritarian and sectarian discourse as the approach of governmentality of the AKP is directed at Alevis through its means of institutions of the hegemonic discourse where the legitimacy of Alevis in high judicial posts was debated in a way that consolidated the Sunni-dominated discourse at the institutional level. This "internal enemy" status of Alevis has been intertwined with the AKP government's state control, for instance, limiting Alevis freedom of religion by perpetuating the unrecognised status of *cemevis* as Alevis' official places of worship.

The International Crisis Group reported in November 2016 that "Alevis have long standing demands and security concerns that AKP governments have not met." They have little representation in the upper echelons of the party, feel discriminated against on the basis that the whole range of Alevi demands for equality and justice appears to be unfulfilled.³⁴ It is clear, however, in my interviews that the likelihood of the official recognition of *cemevis* as places of worship is not independent of the AKP government's strategies to reach and "tame" the Alevi people. The extent to which Erdoğan and the AKP government remained seriously at odds with *cemevis* and its official recognition is manifest in Erdoğan's sectarian outbursts where he appeared to sun-

³³ Karakaya-Stump, "The AKP, Sectarianism, and the Alevis' Struggle," 56.

³⁴ UK Government, Home Office, "Country Policy and Information Note Turkey: Alevis, Version 2.0, accessed June 25, 2021, <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1008326/download>, 13.

nify Alevism when he declared Alevism was not a religion and hence refused to recognise Alevis' places of worship.³⁵ In that regard, discussions around Alevis' places of worship were accommodated for the sake of political intrusion on the pretext of responding to the demands of Alevi citizens:

We always hear on the news 'a politician visited a cemevi today'; however, we have never heard of 'a politician visited a mosque.' Cemevis are manipulated as a political tool. In a way, Alevism has been deployed as a political agent through which the government refreshes its hegemonic power. (Yusuf, 53 years old, Journalist)

He goes on to state:

None of the institutions of Turkey, namely president of republic, prime minister, education minister, jurisdiction could represent me today; nor cemevis would represent me today given that cemevis are currently regulated similar to religious congregations. That is, cemevis have been institutionalised similar to a cult. (Yusuf, 53 years old, Journalist)

The first attempt to institutionalise cemevis as Alevis' official places of worship was enshrined in the Alevi Opening which commenced in 2009. The intention of the Alevi Opening³⁶ on the part of the then AKP government was to create an environment conducive to a deeper level of reconciliation related to issues such as the status of cemevis, the position of Alevi *dedes*³⁷ and the broader institutional problems expe-

³⁵ Paul Benjamin Osterlund, "Turkey's Alevis 'under the Shadow of Military Tanks,'" *Alyazeera*, May 1, 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/5/1/turkeys-alevis-under-the-shadow-of-military-tanks>.

³⁶ Alevi Opening was initiated in a series of seven workshops by the government between June 2009 and January 2010 aiming to discover the demands of Alevis to determine policy parameters. In that regard, it was an unprecedented step in Alevi-State relations in the Turkish Republic, it was rather a reflection of the AKP government's declared commitment to further Turkey's democratisation. Though the AKP government was seemingly willing to reform, it was in reality acting in a way that was making a solution even more difficult to achieve. Amongst many others, the demands of Alevis, including official state recognition of the status of the cemevis and the removal of the religious category from national ID cards, has remained unresolved, see Arkilic and Gurcan, "The Political Participation of Alevis." Also Murat Borovali and Cemil Boyraz, "The Alevi Workshops: An Opening without an Outcome?," *Turkish Studies* 16, no. 2 (2015): 145–160, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2015.1043279>; Tekdemir, "Constructing a Social Space".

³⁷ A *Dede* (literally meaning grandfather) is a socio-religious leader in the Alevi community.

rienced by Alevis.³⁸ A series of meetings between the representatives of the Alevi community and the government took place without any concrete results; the disenfranchisement of the Alevis has only deepened under AKP rule in the forms of accelerated top-down Islamisation of broader Turkish society manifest in the corollary intensification of sectarian discourse.³⁹

The upshot of all these then, as my interview shows, is that the AKP's Alevi Opening has a clear agenda to Sunnification:

The AKP's Alevi Opening was to consolidate its hegemony, it did not help Alevis by any means. It was for gaining votes from the Alevi community, by taking them in to the system for fear that when Alevis are excluded from the system, they are allegedly predisposed to Atheism and Communism. With that said, the Alevi Opening was in a sense to tame the Alevi community on the pretext of the democratisation of the Opening. They have nowhere near any respect for Alevi culture and opinions, our children have been exposed to Sunni Islamic courses at schools for decades, which is another form of oppression not found in a democracy. Through the Alevi Opening, the Alevi community were engulfed into the system of government so that they do not dissent against the enforcements of the government. (Serkan, 45 years old, Hotel Manager)

As obvious in the quotes above, for historical and theological reasons, Alevis consider the political expression of Sunni Islam, evoked in a range of different forms including sectarianism and nationalism-driven violence directed towards Alevis, mandatory religious courses based on Sunni Islam or constraints on Alevi religious ceremonies through financial and institutional deprivations, as a threat to their community's security and integrity.⁴⁰ A recurring mistrust, linked with the recurrence of traumatic experiences and still prevalent unkept promises has brought to light the deeply entrenched sectarian clashes today. To this end, the demands of the first-urbanised Alevis, surfaced within the agenda of the Alevi Opening, including an end to the compulsory building of mosques in Alevi villages and the removal from the school

³⁸ Talha Köse, "The AKP and the 'Alevi Opening': Understanding the Dynamics of the Rap-prochement," *Insight Turkey* 12, no. 2 (2010), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26331449>.

³⁹ Karakaya-Stump, "The AKP, sectarianism, and the Alevis' struggle," 54.

⁴⁰ Soner and Toktaş, "Alevis and Alevism."

curricula of mandatory religion classes were not accommodated, ironically, however, contributed significantly to the government's political Islamic approach. In other words, this initiative, the Alevi Opening, was necessary to the point where the AKP government could substantially strengthen their hold on power, monopolised by political Sunnism as an attempt to maintain its "favourable" position with its Sunni core supporters.

The first generation urbanised Alevi community feel underrepresented at the institutional level much in the same way as in everyday life, as a result of this, in their own words "none of the institutions of Turkey" allegedly represent them today. This sense of anxiety, particularly for the first generation urbanised Alevis who have witnessed the shifting political agenda of AKP governments was common to all my respondents:

No doubt that I would never be able to have my religious affiliation stamped on my national identity card as an Alevi citizen, which by itself is already worrying for me. (Sevinc, 50 years old, Housewife)

To sum up, the AKP's Alevi Opening has long slipped from the agenda since the AKP opposed granting recognition to cemevis, it also never fulfilled the long ignored demands of Alevis including the promised justice for the 1993 Sivas massacre. This demonstrates that the Alevi Opening was an initiative, to seem friendly, used as a social engineering project by the AKP to gain the support of Alevis. A mainstream Sunni perspective was deployed in the evaluation of Alevi demands, for instance, on the status of cemevis, Diyanet ultimately led the push to stop the recognition of cemevis on the grounds that "allowing cemevis may be supporting the birth of a new religion."⁴¹ As could be seen, the above questioning of Alevi demands in relation to equality at the institutional level has impinged on my respondents in ways in which they fully acknowledge that the current government will never recognise the agency of Alevi community, or evolve towards a policy of recognition

⁴¹ Ihsan Yilmaz and James Barry, "The AKP's De-Securitization and Re-Securitization of a Minority Community: The Alevi Opening and Closing," *Turkish Studies* 21, no. 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2019.1601564>.

of difference.⁴² In other words, Alevis are convinced that they are otherised not only within the routine of daily life, but also underrepresented and silenced at the institutional level. The next section focuses on the divisions and tensions encountered across working environments.

Divisions and Tensions in Work Life

The workplace is often thought of as an ever-changing and stressful environment. Being subjected to the exclusionary classifications and the scrutiny of their co-workers, superiors, and customers, the extent of the stress and anxiety the first-urbanised Alevis have to endure at the occupational level is constitutive of the ways in which the deeply engrained prejudices against the Alevi community are also not absent in the workplace. Across the interviews, the respondents recounted the extent to which exclusionary hurdles they have had to overcome in the workplace impinged upon them:

I was pretty successful in my work, while having a small talk with some of my colleagues one day, I accidentally revealed I am Alevi. My manager called me out and said ‘If I had known that you were Alevi, I would not have liked you and grown so accustomed to you.’ This was so painful for me. My boss was a doctor also, and I was in my fifth year working as his assistant. He basically could not associate me with all those derogatory statements about Alevis and wanted me to undo this image somehow. I do not like when people simply want you to be just like them, follow their footsteps in every way. (Ceren, 42 years old, Doctor’s Assistant)

In a similar manner, another respondent talked of how frustrating it is to be stigmatised because of his Alevi identity despite his high level of expertise in his job:

Especially when at work, I am concerned about discrimination and certain trigger events which can result in being dismissed from work and the problem of making ends meet. I have worked as a mechanic with my brother for years and witnessed and suffered insults and bullies in many ways because of my Alevi identity, though we were top notch mechanics. People would choose us out of obligation because they were happy with our labour. Still we were

⁴² Öktem, “Being Muslim at the Margins,” 7.

perpetually questioned as to why we don't fast, pray in a mosque, we were treated as suspect people also. When you piece together all the sufferings and tensions due to your identity, you always know what they think of you behind the smiles. (Sahin, 52 years old, Mechanic)

A number of respondents indicated that at least to some extent they felt anxious and stigmatised in their places of work either by their colleagues, customers or superiors on the grounds of the unexpected “discovery” of their Alevism. Sahin's remark that he is “afraid of discrimination and certain trigger events which can result in being dismissed from work” is emblematic of the pervasive division still overwhelmingly ubiquitous in urban centres of Turkey today. In a similar vein, Ceren felt powerless in the face of her non-Alevi superior's prejudicial categorisation of Alevis based on unfounded derogatory statements⁴³ so much so that the only way to reverse it, she remarked, was to shed her Aleviness and conform to the Sunni majority by any means necessary. Accompanied by the social engineering of the Erdoğan government, underpinned in accordance with a conservative Sunni Islam, Alevis have long been recast as suspect people, heretics or impure and hence the possibility of resistance that assumes a subject standing entirely outside of and against a “well-established” structure of power⁴⁴ is deflected for the informants of this article. Incapable of reversing such misinterpretations, first-urbanised Alevis find themselves caught in precarious financial conditions, or confined to precarious positions and insecure employment.

Working as a journalist for decades, Yusuf narrates how his Alevi identity deprived him of his right to be involved in or have a voice in the undergoing restoration of a historical mosque in Divriği:

⁴³ One particular *derogatory* statement Ceren implicated while pointing to her superior's prejudices is the long standing disparaging phrase “*mum söndü*” (blowing out the candles), representing a widespread insult which accuses Alevis of sexual impropriety in cem gatherings that are not open to outsiders, as Alevi men and women worship together in contrast with Sunni tradition. See Hanoglu, Hayal, “Alevis under the Shadow of the Turkish Islamic Ethos,” *Kürd Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 2020: 138, https://kurdarastirmalari.com/uploads/3_dosya/hayal_hanioglu1.pdf.

⁴⁴ Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage, 1996).

Considering that I am from Divriği⁴⁵ is telling my Alevi identity without anybody asking about it, especially in public bodies. Divriği is such a historical town where there is an archaic mosque named Kale Mosque, built 30–40 years back from Ulu Mosque. What is unique about this mosque is it lacks minarets but while restoring this mosque, its special qualities were distorted. I reported this as a journalist and said that ‘the mosque’s originality was distorted’ and protected the mosque as an Alevi and the ones who distorted the mosque were Sunni people. So that I reported this instance in the newspaper, the then Divriği deputy, an AKP member, called everyone out to Divriği to discuss this. The mayor also attended this meeting. The then Divriği deputy was annoyed at my presence in the meeting and attempted to kick me out of the meeting saying that I was uninvited. They did not like me being in that meeting as an Alevi, considered me an outcast who might have no bearing on an Islamic edifice, but my interest was in its historical value rather than its religious value. (Yusuf, 53 years old, Journalist)

AKP members as the dominant Sunni elite, the then deputies of Divriği, appear to disavow the voice and representation of an Alevi journalist which, without doubt, refers to the unwillingness of the then AKP deputies to subordinate themselves to the voice of their proxy, who will “speak for” them.⁴⁶As is clear in the way Yusuf discussed “they did not like me being in that meeting as an Alevi, considered me an outcast who might have no bearing on an Islamic edifice,” Sunni sectarianism as the powerful political tool AKP members have long deployed is a constitutive part of the AKP’s ideology against which Alevis are positioned as the markers of false Islam, as the other of Sunni Muslims. The influence of this ideology on socio-political issues aside from restrictions in everyday life can be seen in practices which pave the way for intensified efforts in assimilating perceived separatist threats like Alevis as manifested, for example, in the establishment of mandatory religious education (based on the Sunni faith) in schools and in the increase in the construction of mosques in Alevi villages, mostly

⁴⁵ The population of *Divriği* is predominantly Alevi today. See: “Divriği,” Turkey from the Inside, accessed June 9, 2021, <http://www.turkeyfromtheinside.com/who-was-who-in-turkey/a/42-places-to-go/279-dvr.html>.

⁴⁶ Hakkı Taş, “Can the Alevis speak? The politics of representation in early writings on Alevism,” *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 26, no. 3 (2015): 327, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2015.1045177>.

against the will of their inhabitants.⁴⁷ Subordinated by means of state structures of dominance as vital to the maintenance of Sunni sectarian ideology as a form of governmentality, Alevis are conveniently ignored and consciously prevented from any attempt to have a voice in matters such as the restoration of a mosque. By not inviting Yusuf to a meeting directly brought forth by his report, AKP officials in Divriği sought not to confer the power they hold on an Alevi journalist, removed his voice and representation from their political closure. On the whole, the common thread in three of the quotes is that widespread negation of Alevi agency in the public sphere and state institutions is also prevalent for first generation urbanised Alevis in the sphere of professional life. This discrimination and stigmatisation against them manifests itself through strong tendencies to marginalise Alevis from the Sunni Islamic mainstream, underlying the consolidated and legitimated Sunni Islamic political framework of the Turkish state.

Conclusion

After Sunnis, Alevis constitute the second largest religious community in Turkey. However, they have long been ignored by the Turkish state and a number of challenges remain to be sorted out to provide Alevis with the same social, political and legal status as Sunni citizens.⁴⁸ For the first time in February 1990, an open declaration, later became known as the Alevi Manifesto was designed and signed by Alevis and non-Alevis, academics, authors and journalists. The manifesto goes on to call for the recognition of the difference of the Alevi faith and culture, equal representation in education, in the media and in receiving their own religious services.⁴⁹ Thirty years on however, almost nothing has changed for the better. In 2009, the then prime minister Ahmet

⁴⁷ Markus Dressler, "Religio-Secular Metamorphoses: The Re-Making of Turkish Alevism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 2 (2008): 286, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25484003>.

⁴⁸ Amanda Paul and Demir Murat Seyrek, "Freedom of Religion in Turkey – The Alevi Issue," EPC Commentary, January 24, 2014, <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Freedom-of-religion-in-Turkey-1c965c>; Soner and Toktaş, "Alevis and Alevism."

⁴⁹ Tahire Erman and Emrah Göker, "Alevi Politics in Contemporary Turkey," *Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 4 (2000): 102, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4284116>.

Davutoğlu mentioned a new set of reforms to be unveiled, he referred to a new relationship between Alevi and the state, which would include steps to further the freedoms of Alevi but it similarly failed to materialise. Furthermore, after the rise of political Islam and its gaining of considerable electoral power over the last two decades, ethnic, religious and cultural differences between mainstream Sunnis and the minority Alevi have been further marked out and mobilised under AKP rule, as an instrument gearing towards sustaining and enhancing the party's support base in society.

Against this background, one could draw the conclusion that the challenges of the first-urbanised Alevi, as shaped under current political conditions, are far from rapprochement and negotiation today. Still treated differently and often labelled as non-Muslims, false Muslims or heretics, the Alevi community's exclusion and marginalisation in the urban context aggravates their downward mobility. That is, they are made to feel as though they are invisible, that they do not belong, and they are of no value⁵⁰ vis-à-vis the increasing Sunnification strategy of the AKP reinforced as a form of governmentality. This Sunni sectarianism as a political tool is played out in the routine of everyday life where the Alevi community's lifestyle is arguably diametrically opposed to the AKP's own interpretation of Islam. In this context, first-urbanised Alevi expressed a sense of exclusion and insecurity due to the absence of Islamic dress such as the hijab for my female respondents, or simply listening to Alevi folk music in the public sphere. This low sense of mobility is also clearly expressed in the sphere of professional contexts such as hiding one's Alevi identity in the workplace for fear of being sacked. Alongside this, the findings have illustrated that subtle manifestations of political Islam as a form of governmentality employed by the AKP, where power is exercised through networks of practices including the Alevi Opening initiative and through humiliating statements made by AKP officials about Kılıçdaroğlu due to his Alevi background, Alevi's varying demands for equality, security and moving past obstacles of

⁵⁰ Katy Sian, "Being Black in a White World: Understanding Racism in British Universities," *Papeles del Centro de Estudios sobre la Identidad Colectiva* 2, no. 176 (2017): 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.1387/pceic.17625>.

prejudice were vilified rather than resolved. It then turned to the politicisation of Alevism and its associations such as cemevis to consolidate the AKP's power in the face of its Sunni Muslim core supporters, whereas Alevis have been recast as an "internal enemy" or "potential traitors."⁵¹ Beyond doubt, much remains to be done with regard to reconciliation with the Alevi community in Turkey, such as outstepping the religious-political agenda relying on Sunni Islamisation, given that it is only in the service of the visibility and representation of Sunni Muslims. "The government still does not accept Alevism as a legitimate belief," said Turgut Oker, the head of the European Alevi Federation, "Erdoğan is completely trying to make Turkey more Sunni."⁵² In a similar vein, my respondents expressed various feelings of collective disenfranchisement and Islamist encroachment, as a result of which, their hopes for a better life in Turkey simply continue to ebb away under the nuances of the Sunnification discourse of the AKP.

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⁵¹ Yilmaz and Barry, "The AKP's De-Securitization and Re-Securitization."

⁵² Patrick Kingsley, "Turkey's Alevis, a Muslim Minority, Fear a Policy of Denying Their Existence," *The New York Times*, July 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/22/world/europe/alevi-minority-turkey-recep-tayyip-erdogan.html>.

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