



Alevi and political parties in Turkey: An analysis through the press

Şebnem Cansun^a *

^a*Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University, İstanbul, 34303, Turkey*

Abstract

This paper evaluates to what extent the governing party in Turkey, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party, JDP) from the center-right, and the main opposition party, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (Republican People's Party, RPP), from the center-left, answer Alevi's demands, through a news search of two ideologically different dailies. These dailies are *Yeni Şafak* (New Dawn), close to the JDP and *Cumhuriyet* (The Republic), close to the RPP. The paper focuses on the period of January 1, 2010–December 31, 2012. This time period has been focused on with the intention of evaluating the results of the so-called "Alevi opening" of the JDP. The paper takes into consideration not only the press but also a comparison of the party programs and election manifestos. Broadly speaking, *Yeni Şafak* supports the JDP and its approach towards Alevi, whereas *Cumhuriyet* supports the RPP and its approach towards Alevi. The dailies, not surprisingly, seem to filter the news according to their own ideology. The results of the research reveal that the conservative-democratic JDP perceives Alevism under the Islamic umbrella and does not embrace Alevi according to the Alevi's expectations. The social-democratic RPP accepts the differences of Alevism and believes the Alevi's dilemma can be resolved. Since the RPP is not in power, its ability to take genuine action on behalf of Alevi remains an open question.

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Keywords: Alevi, Alevism, turkish press, JDP, RPP

1. Introduction

After December 1999, with the recognition of Turkey as a candidate for European Union membership, the country entered a process of democratisation. In this process, some groups who had problems accessing equal rights, raised their voices. Alevi form one the groups that have demanded recognition of their identities and an end to the discrimination from which they had historically suffered. This paper evaluates how much the governing party in Turkey, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party, JDP) from the center-right, and the main opposition party, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (Republican People's Party, RPP), from the center-left, have answered Alevi's demands.

2. Methods

The research is based on a news search of two ideologically different dailies. These dailies are *Yeni Şafak* (New Dawn) and *Cumhuriyet* (The Republic). *Yeni Şafak* was founded in 1995 and has a daily circulation of approximately 110,000. It has close links with the JDP. *Cumhuriyet* was founded in 1924 and has a daily circulation of approximately 60,000. It supports secularism ardently and might be considered as the newspaper closest to the RPP. The paper focuses on the period of January 1, 2010–December 31, 2012. This time period has been focused on

* E-mail address: sebnem.cansun@iszu.edu.tr

with the intention of evaluating the results of the so-called “Alevi opening” of the JDP that started in 2007 and ended in 2010. The news from August 16-18, 2002 and 2003 are also taken into consideration, since those particular days correspond to the Hacı Bektaş memorial ceremony and inform us about how the political parties embrace this special day for Alevi-Bektashis. 2002 is the year the JDP came to power, and both 2002 and 2003 are taken into consideration for comparative purposes. Furthermore, the paper takes into account not only the press but also a comparison of party programs and election manifestos. Few academics have written on the specific subject of the Alevi relationship with the press (Yavuz, 1999; Poyraz, 2005; Işık, 2007). Rather they have focused only on the Alevi magazines, on specific moments, such as the coverage of Hacı Bektaş Festival or on headline articles. This paper intends to fill the gap in this arena by focusing on the political parties’ approaches toward Alevis through news coverage.

3. Results

As the tables below summarizes well, there is more news on the relationship between Alevis and political parties in *Cumhuriyet* than in *Yeni Şafak*. This is not surprising. *Cumhuriyet* has a particular sensitivity towards Alevis. Both Metin Işık (2007) and Bedriye Poyraz (2005) have previously drawn attention to this pattern in the Turkish press, *Cumhuriyet* is the daily that covers the most news on Alevis. We noticed through our research that it is rather hard to evaluate the Alevi issue through *Yeni Şafak*.

Table No 1. News on Alevis that appeared in *Cumhuriyet* between January 1, 2010–December 31, 2012

Subject of the news	JDP	%	RPP	%
Alevis/Alevi institutions criticize the party	46	84	0	0
The party/politicians support Alevis	12	22	37	100
One party criticizes the other party through Alevis	1	2	18	49
Total number of news items	55	100	37	100

Table No.2. News on Alevis that appeared on *Yeni Şafak* between January 1, 2010–December 31, 2012

Subject of the news	AKP	%	CHP	%
Alevis/Alevi institutions criticize the party	4	44	2	100
The party/politicians support Alevis	4	44	1	50
One party criticizes the other party through Alevis	0	0	0	0
Total number of news items	9	100	3	100

Between the two tables above, the first one is the more striking. In 84 percent of the news items on Alevis and the political parties that appeared on *Cumhuriyet*, Alevis or Alevi NGOs declare their uneasiness with the JDP government. In the same daily, in all the news on the RPP and Alevis, party members declare their support for Alevis.

3.1. The JDP and the Alevis

The JDP is a conservative-democratic party consisting mostly of Sunni Muslims. The subject of Alevis was not mentioned in its 2001 party program or 2011 election manifesto. In the same documents, though, the party does

espouse the idea of equal treatment for all citizens regardless of their “religion, language, confession, region, ethnic origin and sex”. It is highly likely that “difference of confession” on this list refers to the Alevi.

In 1993, the state failed to prevent the Madımak (Sivas) massacre, wherein thirty five people, mostly Alevi, died in a hotel set on fire by reactionaries (Yağcı 2009: 135). Members of the JDP, which was formed in 2001, did not begin attending the annual memorial for the incident until 2010 (Kozok & Menekşe, July 3, 2010: 6). As far as their attendance at the Hacı Bektaş memorial ceremony is concerned, it was non-existent before 2002, and problematic afterwards. Attendees have tended to shout their disapproval at JDP members (for example, Şahin, August 17, 2012: 4). In 2002, Tayyip Erdoğan, the prime minister and JDP chairman, declared that his party had not been invited to the Hacı Bektaş memorial ceremony. In 2003, it was Erdoğan who refused to be there even if he had been invited (*Yeni Şafak*, August 17, 2002, p. 1, 10). These events alone demonstrate that the Alevi-JDP relationship is not a smooth one.

Particular declarations by Tayyip Erdoğan have also drawn negative reactions, especially from Alevi. For example, Erdoğan has declared that the JDP government would not seek the permission of “dedes” (Alevi’s spiritual guides). Thus, he insinuated that previously, “dedes” had exercised a great influence on politics. Erdoğan also implied that he had once been put in jail because of the Alevi’s judgments (Menekşe & Yağmur, September 15, 2010: 1). In 2012, Erdoğan proclaimed his aim to “raise a religious youth” and made the Alevi uncomfortable (Menekşe, February 4, 2012: 7). In 2012, he called Karaacahmet Cemevi (house of religious ritual for Alevi) “a freak”, because it was unlicensed. Furthermore, for Erdoğan, cemevis should not be considered as places of worship but those of culture, because in Islam, there is only one type of worship place: the mosques. According to Alevi NGOs, the more of this type of declaration the prime minister made, the more Alevi suffered from aggression and attack (Menekşe, August 7, 2012: 9).

According to most of the Alevi NGOs, the Alevi opening of the JDP turned out to be futile, serving only to divert attention from the relevant issues and deceive Alevi (Cumhuriyet, April 25, 2011: 5). For instance, the description of the Religious Culture and Knowledge of Ethics classes have always been problematic. State Minister Faruk Çelik claimed that Alevi had been on the commission working on the curriculum for these classes, but the Alevi NGOs contradicted this information (Cumhuriyet, November 1, 2010: 5). In 2011, Alevism was integrated into the Religious Culture and Knowledge of Ethics classes programs for primary and secondary education. However, Alevism was mentioned among the religious orders in school text books and this certainly did not satisfy Alevi (El, January 18, 2011: 5).

Cumhuriyet has absorbed the criticisms of the JDP in its approach towards Alevi, whereas *Yeni Şafak* rather supports the JDP in its approach. For instance, according to *Yeni Şafak*, the Alevi who stood against the mention of Alevism under religious orders in school books are “marginal Alevi” (Toprak, September 11, 2011: 9). Thus, this daily implies that most Alevi are happy with what the JDP offers for them. *Yeni Şafak* also asserts that the RPP takes advantage of Alevi by making them scared of conservative Sunnis and monopolizing their votes (Deligöz, April 24, 2011: 11), and that the RPP chairman, who is Alevi, does nothing to benefit them (Fedayi, May 9, 2011: 8).

When we take into consideration both of the dailies and look at the Alevi opening from the perspective of the Alevi, the JDP’s Alevi opening appears to have been unfruitful, and the RPP embraces Alevi more than the JDP.

3.2. The RPP and the Alevi

In the RPP’s 2012 program and 2011 election manifesto, Alevi are present. In its program, the RPP promises to work against “religious, confessional and ethnic discrimination” and to reconstruct the Presidency of Religious Affairs in such a way that Alevi are represented in that institution. The RPP promises to grant the same state financial support to cemevis that mosques currently receive. It wants the Madımak Hotel, which was set ablaze in the Sivas massacre, to be transformed into a center of tolerance (RPP Program, 2012: 19, 51, 52). In the election manifesto, the RPP promises Alevi equal rights of citizenship, to make the Presidency of Religious Affairs

sensitive to all sorts of beliefs and confessions, render religious classes optional, and to put a stop to discrimination in public personnel recruitment (CHP, 2011: 18, 60).

In contrast to the presence of extremely few Alevis in the JDP, there are many publicly known Alevis in the RPP. First of all, the party chairman since 2010, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu is a Kurdish Alevi (Aktar 2011: 186). There are also other Alevis in the RPP (Cumhuriyet, November 26, 2011: 5; Cumhuriyet, October 23, 2012: 6). Party Chairman Kılıçdaroğlu never puts forward his confessional background in order not to draw negative reactions from Sunnis. However, JDP members do not hesitate to attack him just the same. In 2011, the JDP vice-chair Hüseyin Çelik implied that Kılıçdaroğlu appropriates Syria's internal problems because of his Alevism, attracting negative reactions from many, including Alevis themselves (Cumhuriyet, September 9, 2011: 5).

The RPP appropriates the memorial ceremonies in Hacı Bektaş and Madımak. For example, according to former RPP Chairman Deniz Baykal (1992–2010), “Hacı Bektaş is the symbol of the Anatolian left”, and that discrimination against Alevis should stop (Cumhuriyet, August 17, 2002: 1). The RPP supports Alevis in their confrontations against discrimination, including incidences in which they have lost their jobs, had their homes vandalized or cemevis attacked. For example, in 2012, when forty-five houses in which Alevis resided were vandalized, the RPP deputies Hüseyin Aygün and Salih Fırat reacted (Cumhuriyet, March 1, 2012: 1). The RPP united with the academic community to prepare a report suggesting solutions to such problems (Cumhuriyet, June 1, 2011: 4). When in Hatay, Alevi religious leaders faced imprisonment for attempting to teach local youth about their faith without a government license, the RPP supported the position of the accused (Solak & Bodur, April 7, 2010: 4).

In brief, the Alevi-RPP relationship is much better than the Alevi-JDP relationship. The RPP is consistent in its defense of the Alevi population in its struggle with discrimination and works toward resolving these issues. It is rather through Cumhuriyet that we learn about RPP efforts on behalf of Alevis.

4. Conclusions

Cumhuriyet covers more news on Alevis than *Yeni Şafak*. This is a point raised in previous academic works, and it appears in our work as well. Furthermore, Cumhuriyet has the tendency to look at Alevi issues from the Alevis' perspective. We cannot say the same for *Yeni Şafak*.

According to most Alevi NGOs, the Alevi opening of the JDP turned out to be unfruitful. The reason is that the JDP does not embrace all the Alevi NGOs, and that it does not take the steps most of these NGOs desire. The result is not surprising, because in the 2011 election manifesto of the JDP, the party does not make any specific promises to the Alevi community. It only promises to treat all citizens equally. In particular, Alevi NGOs and the JDP disagree on one main point: “the JDP considers Islam as an umbrella that covers Alevism”, whereas Alevis desire to be accepted just the way they are. They do not want to be categorized. During the period of this research, the only development that Turkey experienced regarding the Alevi issue is that information on Alevism has been added to the Religious Culture and Knowledge of Ethics classes programs of school text books. However, most Alevi NGOs still criticized the fact that Alevism was listed under the banner of “religious orders”. They advanced that the JDP uses Alevism in order to legitimize religious orders. Although there have been few positive results, it would be wrong to belittle the fact that the Alevi issue has been integrated onto the national agenda (Yaman, 2009: 19; Soner ve Toktaş, 2011: 430).

RPP-Alevi relations are warmer than are JDP-Alevi relations. The RPP program and its 2011 election manifesto mention Alevis, make several commitments, including protections against discrimination based on confession, Alevi representation in the Presidency of Religious Affairs, state funding for cemevis, transformation of the Madımak Hotel into a center of tolerance, and making the state religious curriculum optional. The RPP not only criticizes the discrimination suffered by Alevis but also use the issue as part of its platform of criticism against the JDP.

The approaches of the JDP and the RPP toward Alevis are different, as we can see in a comparison of the party programs, election manifestos and declarations of party members appearing in ideologically different dailies. It is rather the RPP than the JDP that embraces Alevis. However, since the RPP is not in office, it is impossible to know what the party could genuinely do to the advantage of Alevis.

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