

An Alevi Tide Headed for Turkey's Parliament

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Brief Analysis

The unprecedented influx of Alevi deputies could form a significant anti-AKP bloc in the next legislature, but this development could also hurt the opposition CHP if Alevi deputies act in a sectarian manner.

One of the key dynamics emerging in the buildup to Turkey's June 7 election is the anticipated record number of Alevis set to enter parliament, mostly from the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP). For the first time, the percentage of Alevis in the legislature could roughly represent their percentage of the total population. This development will have implications for Turkish politics, as leftist and liberally disposed Alevis vehemently oppose the ultraconservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) government and could form an informal anti-AKP bloc in the parliament. For its part, the AKP could respond by painting the CHP as an Alevi party, suggesting that Sunnis vote AKP and Alevis vote CHP. Such a tactic could marginalize the CHP and further boost the ruling party's power.

ALEVI POLITICS AND LOW REPRESENTATION

Alevis belong to a Turkish brand of Islam that professes an open, Sufi-inspired understanding of the religion. Though nearly eponymous with the Levantine Arab Alawite community, the Turkish- and Kurdish-speaking Anatolian Alevis are a distinct constituency. Alevis constitute 10-15 percent of Turkey's population of 77 million, while Turkish citizens of Alawite origin are a much smaller community of less than a million people. The latter also practice a deeply devout, esoteric version of Islam shared by Alawite supporters of the Assad regime in Syria. Despite their differences, Alevis and Alawites are politically aligned in Turkey because they share a visceral suspicion of the AKP's Sunni tilt, including its backing of Sunni rebels in Syria. Both groups are staunchly secular in their political habits, voting for the CHP and other leftist parties in overwhelming numbers.

Alevi representation in the 550-seat Turkish legislature has traditionally been much smaller than their share of the country's overall population, hovering at 3-5 percent. There are a number of reasons for this underrepresentation.

First, although CHP deputy Sabahat Akkiraz indicated in 2012 that 75 percent of Alevis tend to support her party in elections, the CHP's leadership has long taken them for granted, and few of its deputies are Alevi.

Second, although an estimated 10-20 percent of Turkish Alevis speak Kurdish, they still identify primarily as Alevi, not as Kurds. Therefore, they typically do not support leftist Kurdish nationalist parties such as the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), limiting another potential avenue for parliamentary representation (though as discussed below, the party will still field a few Alevi candidates).

Third, the conservative platforms of right-wing parties have historically failed to attract Alevi voters. As a result, Alevi deputies have had almost zero representation in these parties' parliamentary delegations. For example, the AKP list for June 7 includes no Alevi candidates, and only one of the party's 312 current deputies is Alevi. Similarly, the right-wing Nationalist Action Party (MHP) has only one Alevi candidate on its June list.

Even taking into account traditional Alevi underrepresentation in Turkish politics, the AKP's rule since 2002 represents a near-total Alevi marginalization that is unique in Turkey's modern history. There are no Alevis in the governing party's leadership or among the twenty-six cabinet ministers. More significantly, there are no Alevis among the eighty-one provincial governors, eighty-one provincial police chiefs, or twenty-six undersecretaries -- all key bureaucratic positions filled by central government appointment. Combined with historical memories of persecution under the Ottoman Empire, the ongoing alienation has led many Alevis to oppose the AKP through street politics and demonstrations. For example, large numbers of them took part in the liberal Gezi Park movement of 2013, organizing rallies and establishing many NGOs.

CHP PRIMARIES AND THE ALEVI TIDE

Turkish parties typically determine their candidates for legislative elections in a top-down process, with the party chair singlehandedly picking who will run. This year, however, the CHP organized primaries in March for a majority of the country's electoral districts, in an effort to mobilize its base and allow new candidates to emerge from the grassroots.

This approach exceeded expectations, producing a highly diverse list. For example, a record number of forty-eight women entered the CHP's lists in the primaries. Party chair Kemal Kilicdaroglu, a liberal, added another fifty-five women to the rosters to further vary the lists, for a total of 103 -- he even included an Armenian woman to top the list in one of Istanbul's districts. Current poll numbers indicate that the CHP could send twenty-five to thirty-five of these women to parliament on June 7, pushing the share of the party's female deputies from 13.6 percent in the current legislature to as high as 25 percent.

As for the Alevis, they mobilized particularly large numbers to vote in the CHP primaries. A recent article by Turkish columnist Hasan Kanbolat suggests that as many as sixty-eight of the Alevi candidates elected in the primaries are likely to win posts in the next parliament. Moreover, another ten Alevis could be elected from the Kurdish nationalist HDP list (as explained below). This would theoretically raise the percentage of Alevis in the legislature as high as 10-15 percent. If so, their parliamentary representation would be almost proportional to their percentage of the population for the first time in Turkey's modern history, ending a long period of disenfranchisement.

ALEVI CAUCUS?

Although it did not hold primaries, the HDP also ended up placing an unprecedented number of Alevis on its lists, naming around ten Alevi candidates. Should the HDP cross the 10 percent electoral threshold required for parties to enter parliament, most of these candidates will be elected. This year, the HDP aims to transcend its traditional Kurdish nationalist focus in order to pass the threshold -- the party has been unable to exceed 6.5 percent of the vote in previous general elections. Accordingly, it has adopted a liberal platform to attract feminist, minority, socialist, and Alevi voters. If it crosses the threshold, the party is expected to gain 50-60 seats, of which 15-20

percent could be assigned to Alevi deputies (for more on the party's threshold quest, see [PolicyWatch 2413, "Kurds Shaping Turkey's Political Map"](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kurds-shaping-turkeys-political-map) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kurds-shaping-turkeys-political-map>)).

Combining this figure with the CHP's projections, the next parliament could have sixty to seventy Alevi deputies, or fifty to sixty if the HDP does not meet the threshold. As such, an informal Alevi caucus is at the cusp of emerging in the legislature (the Turkish parliament does not have formal caucuses). Most of the prospective Alevi deputies are young, and a large number are women, lawyers, journalists, bloggers, and human-rights/NGO activists. Moreover, many of the Kurdish-speaking Alevis on the HDP list identify primarily as Alevis and could vote with their CHP counterparts on key issues, including separation of religion and government, gender equality, compulsory teaching of Sunni Islam to all nominally Muslim students in public schools, and, more thematically, Turkey's Western orientation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TURKISH POLITICS

The Alevi tide currently poised to enter the Turkish legislature can be seen as part of a broader political development. The next parliament will better represent Turkey's diversity, including a record number of women, Roma, Armenian, Yazidi, Orthodox, and Syriac Christian deputies. For their part, Alevi deputies could form an informal bloc to challenge the AKP's authoritarian and ultraconservative tendencies. Given its potential size, this bloc is unlikely to stop any AKP legislation, but its actions could stir public debate.

As mentioned previously, however, the AKP will likely exploit any Alevi bloc formation to label the CHP as the "Alevi party." The CHP is expected to win 100-150 seats, and Alevi deputies will enjoy a significant share of them. Before the August 2014 presidential election, then-prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan depicted the party as an Alevi movement despite the fact that its candidate, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, was a devout Sunni. Today, such a label could marginalize the CHP and render it a minority party par excellence. Therefore, the CHP's challenge is to broaden its appeal and platform beyond promoting Alevi rights. And those Alevi deputies who do manage to win seats will need to demonstrate their nonsectarian credentials by advocating universal rights and freedoms, including for devout Sunnis.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, and author of [The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-century's-first-muslim-power) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-century's-first-muslim-power>), named by the Foreign Policy Association as one of the ten most important books of 2014. ❖

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