

Turkey's Slow-Burning Alevi Unrest

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Articles & Testimony

To ease ongoing tensions, the AKP government needs to adopt a truly sect-blind approach, while staunchly secular communities need to allow some room for religion in the public sphere.

In the past year, Turkey has been shaken by anti-government rallies in which six protestors were killed -- an unusual spike in violence in a society that is otherwise increasingly non-violent. Five of these fatalities occurred during the Gezi rallies of June 2013. On March 11th, Berkin Elvan, a 15-year-old teenager who had had been in coma since he was hit in the head with a gas canister during the Gezi protests passed away. Berkin's death sparked a massive round of Gezi-like demonstrations in which 2 million people took to the streets to protest the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government.

All six casualties in the rallies belonged to either Alevi or Alawite groups, two Turkish communities that have heavily participated in non-stop anti-government rallies since June 2013.

The Alevis are a secular group consisting of approximately 10-20 percent of the country's population of about 76 million. Professing a liberal and Sufi-inspired approach to religion, the Alevis are to Islam what Unitarian Universalists are to Christianity. By contrast, the Alawites are a much smaller community of about a million people who practice a deeply devout esoteric version of Islam.

Though nearly eponymous, the Turkish and Kurdish-speaking Alevis and the Arab Alawites are distinct communities. Despite their differences, as heterodox groups they are politically aligned as they share a visceral suspicion of the AKP's Sunni-Islamic tilt. Accordingly, both groups have been at the forefront of the anti-AKP rallies. After the police cracked down on Gezi rallies in June 2013, taking over Istanbul's central square from the demonstrators, the rallies continued in predominantly Alevi and Alawite neighborhoods in Turkish cities, including Dikmen in Ankara as well as in Antakya, a town in southern Turkey and the center of the country's Alawite community, where the Alawite youth have been setting up daily barricades against the police.

Since the beginning of the Gezi protests, Turkey has been undergoing two simultaneous movements: ongoing unrest for the Alevi community and what appears to be an emerging Alawite revolt against the AKP. Growing Alawite frustration is largely due to Turkey's anti-Assad policy in Syria, where their ethnic community -- the Syrian Alawites and their leader Bashar Al-Assad -- are perceived to be in danger.

The Alevi community's concerns stem not only from the AKP's Syria policy -- which is seen as largely pro-Sunni -- but also from the AKP's straightjacket socially conservative views. The Alevis are simply not represented in the upper echelons of the AKP. In the past, any Alevis who did end up joining the AKP found themselves largely secluded, which led them to abandon the party. Reha Camuroglu, an Alevi intellectual who joined the Turkish parliament on an AKP ticket in 2007, resigned from his post in June 2008, citing bigotry against the Alevis by AKP officials.

The AKP has adopted a liberal attitude towards Turkey's religious diversity. Indeed, compared to their predecessors, the rights of non-Muslims in Turkey have been advanced. For instance, last year the government restored property confiscated by the Turkish state in the twentieth century from Christian churches back to their rightful owners.

The Alevi community, however, has seen little advancement from the government. Turkish legislation stipulates that the government must pay for the upkeep of mosques. The AKP has introduced legislation to extend assistance to also include churches and synagogues. The Alevi community was notably left out of such legislation regarding the upkeep of *cemevis* -- their houses of worship. For decades, the Alevi community has been campaigning for government subsidy to maintain *cemevis*. Not only has the AKP rejected such demands, but Mustafa Albayrak, an AKP member of parliament, has gone as far to suggest that "allowing government subsidies to *cemevis* would open the path for subsidies to devil worshippers." The AKP leadership too does not appear to have warm feelings towards the Alevis. The Alevis (and equally heterodox Alawites) want little to do with the country's ruling party.

The AKP has ruled Turkey longer than any other democratically elected party since Turkey first became a multi-party democracy in 1950. This has meant that in the past twelve years, the Alevis have been almost entirely cut out of power, except in a few cities where the local government belongs to opposition parties like the Republican People's Party (CHP), which is supported by a majority of the Alevis and Alawites, among other groups.

AKP power since 2002 thus represents the longest episode in Turkey's modern history of near-total marginalization of the Alevi community. Historical memory of discrimination and persecution under the late Ottoman Empire in combination with the current alienation has had a severe impact on the Alevi and Alawite communities. The result is a clear political instinct: active opposition to the AKP through street politics and demonstrations. This is no short-term phenomenon; Turkey faces slow-burning Alevi unrest and likely even more pressing Alawite unrest fueled by the Syrian war.

But the Turks can still walk away from the brink of major social strife. The government needs to adopt a truly sect-blind approach to society that includes equal distance from and support to all religious communities, including the Alevis and Alawites. For instance, Ankara can consider opening the Diyanet -- Turkey's government-run agency responsible for funding religious affairs, but de facto a sponsor for only Sunni Muslims -- to Alevis, Alawites, Shi'ite Muslims, and non-Muslims.

At the same time, all Turks -- including the staunchly secularist Alevis and Alawites -- need to compromise on the new nature of the relationship between religion and state in Turkey. Shaped by the legacy of Kemalism, Turkey had mandated freedom from religion in education and politics to the liking of many Alevis and Alawites. Under the AKP, this model has collapsed, giving way to freedom of religion in education and politics. The way forward for Turkey is to have both: freedom of and from religion in government, politics and education. That is Turkey's panacea to alleviate its Alevi unrest, as well as a formula for a liberal state in the truest sense.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington

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