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## **Political Representation of Alevi Kurds in Turkey: Historical Trends and Main Transformations**

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### **Abstract**

This article explains the process of change in the political representation of Alevi Kurds in Turkey since the country held its first competitive election in 1950. It applies process tracing methodology to identify the dominant trends in Alevi Kurds' political representation and highlights how the mode of their political participation and representation evolved over time. The discussion presented here develops an explanation that connects the effects of key events and processes that have been shaping the outcome of this complex political phenomenon. The strong appeal among Alevi Kurds of the Turkish socialist movement and political parties associated with the secular republican regime is discussed before assessing the impact of the rise of Alevi and Kurdish movements on the Alevi Kurds' political representation. The barriers Turkey's restrictive political and legal order place on Alevi Kurds' political representation are also highlighted.

**Keywords:** Political Representation; Alevi movement; PKK; HDP; pluralism in Turkey.

### **Abstract in Kurmanji**

**Temsiliyeta siyasî ya kurdên Elewî li Tirkîyeyê: Meylên dîrokî û veguherînên esasî**

Ev gotar proseya guherîna temsiliyeta siyasî ya kurdên Elewî li Tirkîyeyê, ya ji wexta hîlbijartina ewil ya pêşbazîdar a 1950an heta îro, rave dike. Gotar, rêbaza şopandina prosesê tetbîq dike ku meylên serdest ên di temsiliyeta siyasî ya kurdên Elewî de rave bike û li ser disekine ka şêwaza beşdarî û temsiliyeta wan bi demê re çawa vediguhere. Nîqaşa ku li vir hatiye diyarkirin ravekirineke wusa dike ku tesîra bûyerên û proseyên girîng yên ku şiklê didin encama vê fenomena siyasî ya tevlihev bi hev ve girê dide. Daxwaza xurt a di nav kurdên Elewî yên di nav tevgerên sosyalîst ên tirk û partiyên siyasî yên têkilî rejîma komarî ya sekuler de tê nîqaşkirin berî nîrxandina tesîra bilindbûna tevgerên Elewî û kurd ên li ser temsiliyeta siyasî a kurdên Elewî de. Herwiha, bal hatiye kişandin ser astengiyên nîzama qanûnî û siyasî ya sînorker a Tirkîyeyê ya ku li ser temsiliyeta kurdên Elewî bi cih dike.

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**Abstract in Sorani**

**Nwênerayeti syasî Kurdanî 'Elewî le Turkyä: rehende mêjûyyekan û werçerxane serekîyekan**

Em wtare prosey gorrankarî le nwênerayeti syasî kurdanî 'elewî le tukya, lew satewe ke wllateke yekem pêşbirkêy hellbjardinî le sallî 1950 encamda, rûndekatewe. Wtareke mîtodî prosey şwênpê bekardênêt bo dyarikirdnî araste serekîyekanî nwênerayeti syasî kurdanî 'elewî we eweş rûndekatewe ke çon şêwey beşdarikirdnî syasîyan û nwênerayetiyan legell katda geşey senduwe. Ew giftugoyey lêreda amadekrawe raveyek geşepêdedat ke karigerîyekanî rudawe serekîyekan bew prosanewe debestêtewe ke derhawîştekanî ew dyarde syasiye allozey arayîşdawetewe. Berle hellsengandini karigerî serhellidanî cullanewey 'elewî û kurdi leser nwênerayeti syasî kurdanî 'elewî, tawtiwêy penabirdnî begurri kurdanî 'elewî bo cullanewey soşyalistî turkî û parte syasiyekanî hawaheng legell rjême komariye skiwlahekeda dekrêt. Herweha tîşk dextrête ser ew berbestaneş ke sistemî syasî û yasayye le qallbderekey turkyä deyxate ser nwênerayeti syasî kurdanî 'elewî.

**Abstract in Zazaki**

**Tirkîya de temsîlkariya kurdanê elewîyan a siyasiye: Meylê tarîxî û vurîyayîşê serekeyî**

Na meqale Tirkîya de weçînitîşê reqabetinê verênî yê serra 1950î ra nat prosesê vurîyayîşî yê temsîlkariya kurdanê elewîyan îzah kena. Tede metodolojîya taqîbkerdişê prosesan yeno bikarardene ke wina meylanê serekeyan yê temsîlkariya kurdanê elewîyan a siyasiye bêrê dîyarkerdene. Ancîna, na meqale bale ancena ser ke usûlê beşdarbîyayîş û temsîlbîyayîşê înan senî bi wext ra şîyê aver. Munaqeşeyo ke tîya de pêşkêş beno, tesîrê serebût û prosesanê serekeyan ê ke şekil danê netîceyê nê fenomenê siyasiyê kompleksî, înan îzah keno. Verê, cazîbeya xurte ke miyanê kurdanê elewîyan de seba tevgerê sosyalîstanê Tirkîya û partiyanê siyasiyanê rejîmê komara sekulere esta, a munaqeşe bena. Badê, temsîlkariya kurdanê elewîyan ser o bandura berzbîyayîşê tevgeranê kurdan û yê elewîyan bena mewzû. Astengê ke awaniya siyaset û huqûqê Tirkîya ya sinorkerdoxe verê temsîlkariya kurdanê elewîyan de nana ro, ma înan ser o kî vîndenîme.

## Introduction

This article develops a historical explanation and analytical account of political representation of Alevi Kurds since Turkey's transformation to multi-party electoral democracy in 1950. Throughout its history, Turkey has had a troubled relationship with its minorities, members of whom were targeted by systemic persecution and episodic mass violence. This has been the case, not only for the ethnoreligious minorities that are officially recognised, such as the Armenians, Greeks and Jews, but also for those groups whose identity and difference has not been formally recognised in the country, such as the Alevis and Kurds. Despite the official view that Alevis and Kurds were part of the Turkish and Muslim dominant majority, both groups faced widespread discrimination and had to conform to the dominant cultural and religious norms in Turkey's homogenised public space.

Being both Kurdish and Alevi, Alevi Kurds have been experiencing a double exclusion in republican Turkey: “While the Turkish Alevi can stress their Turkishness, and Kurdish Sunnis their religious bond with the contemporary Republic, neither route is available to the Kurdish Alevi in any straightforward way” (Shankland, 2003: 19). Their religious and ethnic difference set them apart from the dominant Turkish and Muslim majority; while being Kurdish made them a minority within the Alevi community, the majority of which is Turkish, being Alevi made them a minority in the Kurdish society that mostly adheres to Sunni Islam (Güler, 2019: 15).

The lack of official figures on Turkey’s ethnoreligious makeup prevents us from stating with certainty the exact number of Alevi or Kurds in the country and consequently, it is almost impossible to know the exact number of Alevi Kurds. It is estimated that 20 per cent of Turkey’s 80 million population is Kurdish (Gurses, 2018: 1; Gunes, 2019a: 2). Scholars cite a figure of 12 million or 15 per cent of Turkey’s population when estimating the Alevi population (Dressler, 2013: xi; Shankland, 2003: 20). Alevi Kurds are estimated to constitute 20 per cent of the Alevi in Turkey and the majority of them speak the Kurmanji dialect of the Kurdish language with the minority speaking the Kirmanjki dialect (also known as Zazaki). Many Alevi Kurds self-identify as Turkish or of Turkmen origin, which creates further difficulties for estimating their population. Historically, the Alevi Kurdish population was concentrated in the provinces of Adıyaman, Bingöl, Dersim/Tunceli, Elazığ, Erzincan, Erzurum, Kayseri, Malatya, Maraş, Muş and Sivas. During the Ottoman rule, some Alevi Kurds were forcibly displaced to central Anatolia (Gezik and Gültekin, 2019: xix). Since the 1950s, many Alevi Kurds have been migrating to western Turkey and European countries, which has decreased the concentration of their population in their historical homelands.

The secularisation reforms the state carried out soon after the proclamation of the republic in 1923 significantly weakened the power of the Kurdish Alevi religious leaders and facilitated Alevi Kurds’ assimilation. In 1925, after the enactment of the ‘Law for Closing the Dervish Lodges and Shrines’ (Law No. 677), Alevi worship and learning centres, such as *dergahs* (religious lodges) and *ocaks* (hearths), were closed and Alevi religious leaders were prohibited from providing religious services (Bayır, 2017: 175-6). Accessing Alevi holy sites (*ziyarets*) was restricted and, in effect, these reforms dismantled Kurdish Alevi religious structures and weakened their ability to lead collective action or resistance against the Kemalist assimilation policies that the state began to pursue. Consequently, the role that Alevi *dede* (member of the *ocak* families), *mürşit* (guide/teacher), *pir* (saint or holy man) and *rayber/rehber* (guide and *pir*’s helper) played in the community’s life gradually decreased, leaving the community without a guide and source of

knowledge of their religious traditions and practices. On 10 June 1949, article 1 of the Law 677 was amended to further restrict Alevi religious practices by enabling the exiling of Alevi religious leaders who offered religious service. This article remained in force until 13 July 1965 and the emphasis on the key Alevi institution of *ocaks* in the government's justification for the law showed that Alevi were one of its main targets (Bayır, 2017: 176).

Turkish nationalists sought to integrate Alevi into the Turkish nation by constructing Alevism as *essentially* Turkish and Islamic; Alevism was described as a heterodox Islamic belief and tradition that originated from Central Asia and its resemblance to ancient Turkish Shamanistic traditions was highlighted to argue that it was an *authentic* Turkish tradition. The state popularised this narrative and used it as the framework to assimilate Alevi Kurds, which influenced "the practice of writing about" and "the production of data on" the Alevi religion: "The application of such a modernist religiographic framework to Kızılbaş-Alevism had enormous implications on the academic and popular discourses established on it since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and also impacted on indigenous knowledge formations of Alevism" (Dressler, 2013: 9).

According to Dressler (2013) and Karakaya-Stump (2012), the works of Turkish historian Fuad Köprülü published in 1920s and 1930s are central to the attempt to conflate Alevism with Turkish identity. In Köprülü's narrative, Islamic movements, which he described as "heterodox", "popular" and "syncretistic", "are reasoned to have functioned as major carriers of Turkish traditions and sentiment, the origins of which are traced back to Central Asia" (Dressler, 2013: 19-20). In the past decade, this dominant narrative on Alevism has been challenged by new scholarship which attempts to develop an alternative narrative that located Alevism in Anatolia and connected it to "various Sufi circles and itinerant dervish groups who joined together under the spiritual and political leadership of Safavid shahs" (Karakaya-Stump quoted in Dressler, 2013: 12). However, despite the opposition it faces from the Alevi community, the Turkish nationalist narrative on Alevism continues to be championed by the state and some Alevi organisations.

Apart from the dismantlement of their religious structures, Alevi Kurds' tribal ties also weakened in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which further eroded the social bonds that held the Alevi Kurdish community together. In Dersim in 1937-38, a massacre against Alevi Kurds was carried out with more than 10,000 people killed and many more exiled to western Turkey (Kieser, 2011; Aygün, 2011). As the main centre of Kurdish Alevi culture, the destruction of Dersim significantly weakened the Alevi Kurdish social organisation. Furthermore, Alevi Kurds' traditional way of life was undermined by the socio-economic transformation and the rural-to-urban

migration that began in the 1960s and continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Massicard, 2013: 25; Ertan, 2019: 932).

In addition, there were frequent attacks by Turkish nationalists and religious fundamentalists that targeted Alevis in general and Alevi Kurds in particular. On occasions, the oppression of Alevi communities took the form of massacres and pogroms committed by Turkish nationalist and Islamist fundamentalists, such as the Maraş massacre in December 1978, which resulted in the death of 100 people, and the Sivas massacre, which took place on 2 July 1993 and resulted in the death of 35 Alevi intellectuals and community leaders after the hotel they were staying in was set on fire by a Sunni fundamentalist mob (Zürcher, 2017: 267, 295).

The Alevi challenge during the past three decades seems to have brought about a limited recognition of Alevi identity. This policy, described by Derya Bayır as “selective recognition”, involved minor steps towards recognition of diversity in Turkey but is far from being developed into a new policy that recognises and protects Turkey’s ethnocultural diversity: “despite the changing political discourse and political recognition of the existence of some of the non-Turkish-speaking population in Turkey, the political and legal discourse on diversity and protection of minorities has not changed much” (Bayır, 2016: 3). This is because the state’s recognition of diversity in Turkey is “conditioned upon the compatibility of their [ethnoreligious groups’] differences with the majority’s perception” and this logic is most evident in the debate around the non-recognition of Alevi *cemevis* as places of worship (Bayır, 2016: 3). More importantly, the selective recognition of Alevi identity has, rather than lessening the Alevis experience of discrimination and marginalisation, coincided with a deepening of their disenfranchisement “under the AKP [Justice and Development Party] and its accelerated top-down Islamization of broader Turkish society” (Karakaya-Stump, 2018: 54).

With the intensification of the public debate on the position of the Alevis and Kurds in Turkey during the 1990s, the multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion that these groups experienced and their attempts to realise their rights and political demands began to receive more sustained academic interest (Shankland, 2003; White and Jongerden, 2003; Massicard, 2012; Gunes, 2012; Dressler, 2013; Bayır, 2016; Jenkins et al., 2018). The academic debate has also focused on the tensions that exist between the different segments of these groups and highlighted the specificities of repression that those at the intersection of these marginalised identities experience (Deniz, 2019; Weineck and Zimmermann, 2018a; Jongerden, 2003). However, the existing studies on the Alevi and Kurdish mobilisations in Turkey have not sufficiently explored the complex trajectory of the political representation of the Alevi Kurds since Turkey’s transformation to multi-party electoral

democracy in 1950, which opened new channels for Alevis and Kurds to engage with the institutions of the state. While democratisation created opportunities for political representation, both groups found it very difficult to advocate their political demands and cultural rights because the barriers the Kemalists placed on the representation of ethnic and religious groups were maintained. Since the 1960s, Turkish socialist groups and parties and political parties associated with the republican order had a strong appeal among Alevi Kurds but in recent decades, they have been increasingly mobilised by the Alevi rights and Kurdish national movements.

The article uses process tracing methodology, which provides “analysis of evidence on processes, sequences, and conjunctures of events within a case for the purposes of either developing or testing hypotheses about causal mechanisms that might causally explain the case” (Bennett and Checkel, 2015: 7). Causal mechanisms are defined as “causal processes that are triggered by causes and that *link* them with outcomes in a productive relationship” (Beach and Pedersen, 2019: 30). However, rather than the theory testing or theory-building variants, it uses the explaining-outcome process tracing approach, which is “a pragmatic strategy for capturing the multiplicity of causes and linking them to outcomes that produce particular historical outcomes” (Beach and Pedersen, 2019: 283). Therefore, it examines within-case evidence to make inferences about causal explanations of that case (Bennett and Checkel, 2015: 4). The dominant trends in the political representation of Alevi Kurds since 1950 need to be identified first before the causal mechanism behind the process of change in their political representation can be elaborated.

## **Political representation of Alevi Kurds since 1950**

Political representation refers to “the activity of making citizens’ voices, opinions, and perspectives ‘present’ in public policy making processes” (Dove, 2017). This definition is based on Pitkin’s seminal study, *The Concept of Representation*, which has made a major impact on the subsequent discussion on the topic. The academic literature on minority representation draws attention to two distinct understandings of political representation: “descriptive” and “substantive”. Descriptive representation refers to a situation where representatives share a descriptive likeness with the represented and in the debate on the representation of minorities, this often refers to similarities in terms of ethnic, religious or cultural background (Pitkin, 1967: 61). In contrast, substantive representation is based on the notion of representation as “substantive acting for” others and here the importance of representatives advocating the “best interest” of the represented is emphasised (Pitkin, 1967: 115). These two views of representation are distinct, but they are not mutually exclusive and in many

ways are connected to, and impact on, each other. For example, an increase in descriptive representation of a group often enhances the substantive representation of that group's interests "by improving the quality of deliberation" (Manbridge, 1999: 628).

Pitkin's account of representation has been critiqued by Michael Saward on grounds that it does not sufficiently consider the non-electoral forms of representation as well as the issue of the contestability of political representation. For Saward (2010), representation is something that is claimed by actors involved and is framed as an "ongoing, dynamic process in which a great variety of actors and organizations take part, electoral actors through elective process and other actors through other processes" (43-4). Saward (2006) sees representation in politics as a two-way process: "the represented play a role in choosing representatives, and representatives 'choose' their constituents in the sense of portraying them or framing them in particular, contestable ways" (301-2). Hence, non-elective and self-authorised forms of representation can enjoy strong legitimacy and support among a constituency and need to be considered when thinking about political representation.

It is often assumed that Alevis have been highly supportive of Kemalism and the Kemalist secular republic. Hamit Bozarslan (2003:9) challenges this assumption in an insightful piece which unpacks the complex relations between Alevis and Kemalism:

One can neither suggest that Kemalism had an organic link with Alevism or that it was particularly interested in this group. A report prepared as late as 1949 testifies that Kemalist party was not rooted in the Alevi areas and the Kemalist elite knew very little about Alevis and Alevism.

In fact, during the early years of the republic, Alevi Kurdish opposition was a significant concern for the state, which passed a special law in 1935, the "Law on Administration of the Tunceli Province", to pacify the Dersim region, one of the main Alevi Kurdish heartlands. This law combined with the 'Resettlement Law' of 1934, enabled the state to intensify its efforts to Turkify Dersim and culminated in the massacre of Alevi Kurds in 1937-8.

The political competition that Turkey's transformation to multi-party electoral politics introduced created more room and avenues for Alevi Kurdish voters to take part in political processes and raise their political demands and concerns. The patterns of political participation among Alevi Kurds during the 1950s and 1960s resembled those that were experienced elsewhere among the Kurdish population in Turkey. At the 1950 and 1954 elections, Alevi Kurds voted mainly for the Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti*, DP) led by Celal Bayar and Adnan Menderes (Güler, 2019: 17; Massicard,

2013: 26). In 1950, in provinces with a significant Kurdish Alevi population, it was only in Malatya, Erzincan and Bingöl that the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) outperformed the DP (YSK, 2019). In the subsequent elections during the late 1950s and 1960s, the Alevi Kurdish vote was split between a number of parties including the CHP, New Turkey Party (*Yeni Türkiye Partisi*, YTP), Justice Party (*Adalet Partisi*, AP) and the Worker's Party of Turkey (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi*, TİP). The YTP was a centre-right political party and it managed to obtain 13.73 per cent of the national vote in the 1961 general elections, winning 54 seats in the parliament and serving as a junior coalition partner in the government between 1962 and 1965. The TİP was founded by 12 trade unionists in 1961 as an independent socialist party promoting a parliamentary and evolutionary route to socialism, and Alevis became one of its key target groups. It was keen to challenge the discrimination Alevis faced in Turkey and its party programme, accepted in 1964, openly mentioned the need to ensure Alevis benefit from equal citizenship rights. Alevi songs and folk poetry were widely used in the TİP's election campaign in 1965 and this attempt to mobilise Alevi voters had a strong resonance among Alevi Kurds, with TİP winning a seat in the province of Malatya (YSK, 2019). In the 1969 general election, the TİP's electoral support decreased nationally but it increased its share of votes in provinces and districts populated by Alevi Kurds, such as Dersim, the Varto district of Muş province and the Akçadağ district of Malatya province (Güler, 2019: 28).

The strong association between Sunni Muslims and the centre-right parties, coupled with the CHP's inability to challenge the dominance of centre-right political parties during the 1950s and 1960s, triggered a search by Alevi political actors for a political party to represent them. This search led to the establishment of the Unity Party (*Birlik Partisi*, BP) in 1966, under the leadership of Mustafa Timisi. The BP was a centrist political party and worked closely with the Alevi cultural groups, such as the Hacı Bektaş Veli Lodge (*Hacı Bektaş Veli Dergahı*), and advocated religious freedoms and equality for Alevis, including the recognition of Alevism and the representation of Alevis at the Religious Affairs Directorate (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, DİB) (Çiçek, Aydın and Baran, 2017: 31). It also constructed its programme closely around Kemalist principles of the republic, such as promoting Turkist policies in the cultural sphere, and the use of the Turkish language in religious instructions and worship, and did not manage to win significant support from the Alevi Kurds (Bayır, 2017: 189; Güler 2019: 16). The party won 2.8 per cent of the vote and 8 seats in the parliament at the 1969 general election (Massicard, 2013: 27). It changed its name in 1971 to the Unity Party of Turkey (*Türkiye Birlik Partisi*, TBP) and adopted a more leftist programme to broaden its appeal and possibly as a reaction against



the TIP's popularity among the Alevis (Çiçek, Aydın and Baran, 2017: 40). It obtained 1.1 per cent of the votes and won one seat in the parliament in the general elections held in the 1973, but could not consolidate its electoral base in the polarised political environment of the 1970s.

During the 1970s, Alevi Kurds voted in great numbers for the CHP. The politicisation of Islam and its instrumentalisation in politics by the centre-right political parties seems to have played a key role in Alevi Kurds' gradual turn towards the CHP (Güler, 2019: 26; Grigoriadis, 2006: 455). The CHP was closed down following the military coup in 1980, and during the 1980s and early 1990s Alevi Kurdish voters mainly supported the Social Democratic Populist Party (*Sosyaldemokrat Halkçı Parti*, SHP) and then returned to the CHP following its re-establishment in 1992. In provinces where a significant Kurdish Alevi minority exists such as Erzincan, Maraş, Kayseri, Malatya, Tunceli and Sivas, a high percentage of Kurdish Alevi voters still tend to vote for the CHP. The CHP has a notable Kurdish support base also among the Alevi Kurds living in the urban centres in the west of Turkey.

In addition to formal political channels, starting in the early 1970s, a significant section of Kurdish Alevis have been taking part in politics through clandestine left-wing political organisations (Leezenberg, 2003: 198-9). As Elise Massicard (2013: 4) states, the early instances of Alevi political mobilisations took place within "overarching frameworks" such as the left in Turkey and the left's message of equality had a strong resonance among Alevi Kurds. Socialist groups frequently made references to historical instances of Alevi resistance in their discourse and situated their struggle as part of Alevis' long history of resistance: "For the leaders of the left, adopting Aleviness amounted to inventing themselves a genealogy anchored in local culture, providing them with an indigenous base" (Massicard, 2013: 30).

According to Mehmet Ertan (2019: 934), the Alevis' strong association with the left was due to the overlapping of the "dissolution of traditional Alevism" and the needs of the socialist movement to embed itself within a popular base. The Alevis' long history of rebellion, and the central role of these rebellions in "the historical evolution of Alevism on a large scale", meant that Alevis' political culture was highly receptive to a mobilisation by the left: "As a result of Kemalist influence, both the people the socialists went to and the local origins the socialists needed had to be secular. In this context, the Alevis became the people to whom the socialist organizations went" (Ertan, 2019: 935-936).

The trend of Alevi Kurds voting for the CHP continued into the 2000s and 2010s. The analysis of the recent election results provided by the Istanbul based polling company KONDA Research and Consultancy indicates that a

significant section of Alevi Kurds still support the CHP. In the June 2015 election, Alevis constituted 18 per cent of the CHP voters and 71 per cent of Alevis voted for the CHP (KONDA, 2015: 68-9). In the June 2018 election, 69 per cent of Alevis voted for the CHP (KONDA, 2018: 40). The CHP's current leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, is an Alevi from Dersim and influences the choices of Alevi Kurdish voters, particularly the older generation. In addition, several other Alevi Kurds were active in the CHP, including Kamer Genç and Hüseyin Akgün. Despite this support from the Alevis, the CHP has not been very vocal in articulating particularistic Alevi cultural demands. For example, in its 2011 election manifesto, Alevis as a group are mentioned only once: "We will realise the equal citizenship demand of our Alevi citizens in all spheres" (CHP, 2011: 18). The manifestos for the 2015 and 2018 general elections did not mention any Alevi specific group demands. However, in the past two years, the CHP has been more willing to voice Alevi political demands to strengthen its support base among Alevis. In 2018, it attempted but failed to introduce parliamentary legislation that could pave the way towards the recognition of Alevi *cemevis* as places of worship. On 13 January 2020, the CHP held Izmir Metropolitan Council accepted 7 *cemevis* in the city as places of worship (T24, 2020). During the past two decades, the AKP has been the dominant political party in Turkey but except for Ibrahim Yigit (2007-2015) and Reha Çamuroğlu (2007-2011), it did not have any Alevi MPs. According to the above mentioned reports, between 1 and 3 per cent of the Alevis voted for the AKP.

The increase in the descriptive representation of Alevis in the CHP and their political participation in Turkey's political institutions has created a platform for the articulation of demands for Alevi substantive representation and as the next two sections discuss in greater detail, political representation of Alevi Kurds is contested by the Alevi and Kurdish movements, both of which attempt to include them within the political constituencies that they seek to construct around the Alevi and Kurdish identities respectively. Both movements have succeeded in mobilising Alevi Kurds but face challenges in addressing their specific demands.

## **Alevi identity politics and the Alevi Kurds**

During the past 30 years, there has been a significant increase in the public expression of Alevi identity in Turkey. This came about as a result of the socio-political changes in Turkey and within the Alevi community, especially migration to western Turkey and European countries. The relative freedoms that Alevis found in Europe enabled them to build an extensive network of cultural and community organisations, especially in Germany, which played a central role in the re-emergence of the Alevi movement in Turkey during the 1990s: "Alevis who organized in Europe financially and

ideologically supported their networks in Turkey to organize as Alevis to build *cemevis* and organize as Alevis” (Özyürek, 2009: 240). Hence, from the late 1980s onwards, stronger attempts to mobilise Alevis as *Alevis* and around the recognition of Alevi religious and cultural identity began to be made.

A major Alevi cultural organisation is the Istanbul based Republican Education and Culture Centre Foundation (*Cumhuriyetçi Eğitim ve Kültür Merkezi Vakfı, Cem Vakfı*), which was established by İzzettin Doğan in 1995 and continues to function as a platform for the promotion of Alevi identity and culture. Another significant Alevi organisation is the Pir Sultan Abdal Cultural Association (*Pir Sultan Abdal Kültür Derneği*), which is named after the fifteenth century Alevi poet Pir Sultan Abdal and was established in 1988. The organisation has grown over the years and currently has over 75 branches across Turkey. The Hacı Bektaş Veli Anatolian Cultural Foundation (*Hacı Bektaş Veli Anadolu Kültür Vakfı*) was established in 1994. The Alevi-Bektaşî Federation (*Alevi-Bektaşî Federasyonu*) was established in 2002 as another representative organisation for Alevi community centres and associations. A new organisation with a mainly Kurdish-Alevi membership, the Democratic Alevi Associations (*Demokratik Alevi Dernekleri*) was established in 2008 and has been active in the past decade through its 35 centres across Turkey. Also, many *cemevis* and cultural centres that offer Alevi religious service have opened in Turkey and in western Europe since the late 1980s. Currently, several Alevi organisations are active in the Diaspora in Europe and have created representative bodies that lobby for Alevi rights in Europe and in Turkey. Their effort began to bore fruit in 2002 when Alevism was recognised as an official religion by the local government in Berlin and since then several other state-level governments in Germany have recognised Alevis as a distinct religious community (Özyürek, 2009: 241-2).

Festivals, such as the Munzur Culture and Nature Festival (*Munzur Kültür ve Doğa Festivali*) organised annually since 2000 in Dersim, and other cultural activities have further strengthened the ties among Alevi communities (Sözen, 2019). Media and television broadcasts by Alevi groups have become part of the repertoire of Alevi mobilisations in the past decade and strengthened the sense of Alevi identity (Emre Cetin, 2018). In recent years, in addition to channels that cater for the Turkish Alevi community, such as Cem TV and Yol TV, in 2011 TV10 was established in Istanbul to cater for the Kurdish Alevi community and it regularly broadcasted in the Kurmanji and Zazaki dialects of the Kurdish language. In 2016, as Turkey’s authoritarian turn accelerated, TV10 was closed-down by a government decree (DİHA, 2016). A news agency, Pir Haber Ajansı (PIRHA), was established in November 2016, which provides regular news reports on

issues affecting the Alevi Kurdish community. In 2019, a new channel, Can TV, with the same mission as TV10, began its broadcasts in Germany.

Although the above-mentioned organisations are cultural associations and provide religious service, they have facilitated the articulation of Alevi political demands, which have mainly centred on the recognition of Alevi identity by the state, ending compulsory religious education in public schools, recognition of *cemevis* as places of worship and removal of barriers preventing Alevi religious practice. These demands have been continuously refused by the state and any attempts to recognise the Alevi identity has been conditioned on the imposition of a standardised notion of Alevism as a Turkish and Islamic practice. In fact, Alevism has emerged as a site of contestation and Alevi Kurds have resisted the attempts at homogenising Alevi beliefs and interpreted this as an assimilationist attempt and the *sunnification* of Alevism (Weineck and Zimmermann, 2018b: 31-5).

In 2009, the AKP launched the so-called “Alevi opening” that had the objective of broadening the rights of the Alevis and involved workshops with representatives of Alevi organisations and community leaders. However, rather than meaningfully engaging with the demands that the Alevi representatives were making and addressing the concerns of the Alevi community, it turned into an attempt to define Alevism (Balkız, 2014). The “*cemevi*-mosque project” that was initiated and championed by the followers of the cleric Fethullah Gülen during the early 2010s can be highlighted as another example of the attempts to standardise and homogenise Alevi beliefs and frame Alevism as part of Islam. The project was supported by Alevi organisations that have a close ideological affinity with the state and Turkishness, such as İzzettin Doğan’s *Cem Vakfı* (T24, 2013).

In contrast, Alevi Kurds tend to dispute the conceptualisation of Alevism as an Islamic belief and have argued for the need to retain the diversity prevalent within the Alevi community in Turkey (Cumhuriyet, 2015). With the rise of the Kurdish political struggle in Turkey during the 1980s and 1990s, Alevi Kurds have increasingly challenged the Alevi movement’s silence on Kurdish rights and the movement’s ignorance of grievances related to being Kurdish. Moreover, Alevi Kurdish voters cannot be considered a single bloc brought together around Alevi cultural demands. As the next section discusses in greater detail, in the period under discussion, increasing numbers of Alevi Kurds have been mobilised around Kurdish political demands and in the past decade, the pro-Kurdish political parties have provided a platform for their descriptive and substantive representation. While advocacy by Alevi organisations has succeeded in creating a platform for cooperation around specific political demands, tensions generated by attempts at homogenising Alevism have prevented the emergence of an overarching Alevi political identity. In 1996, the Peace

Party (*Barış Partisi*) was established to represent Alevis but it failed to create a popular base and an unsuccessful attempt to form another Alevi political party was made in 2010. Such failed attempts show the difficulties associated with uniting the Arab, Turkish and Kurdish Alevi communities under the Alevi identity.

## **Kurdish national mobilisation and the Alevi Kurds**

The numbers of Alevi Kurds taking part in Kurdish nationalist political activities in Turkey are substantial. One of the leaders of the Koçgiri rebellion of 1921, Nuri Dersimi, continued his strong association with Kurdish nationalist organisations throughout his life. Following the Dersim massacre, he escaped to Syria and continued his activities from there until his death in 1973. The leader of Kurdish resistance in Dersim, Seyyit Rıza, was an important Alevi religious figure and was executed in 1937. Alevi Kurds' activism continued during the 1960s when the Kurdish national movement began to re-emerge. One of the leading figures of the 1960s Kurdish activism in Turkey, Sait Kirmızıtoprak, was an Alevi Kurd from Dersim. He was one of the leaders of the Kurdistan Democrat Party of Turkey (*Türkiye Kürdistan Demokrat Partisi*, TKDP) and was killed in Iraqi Kurdistan in November 1971. The veteran Kurdish political activist and leader of the Socialist Party of Kurdistan (*Partiya Sosyalist a Kurdistan*, PSK), Kemal Burkay, is also an Alevi Kurd from Dersim.

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK) has been the dominant force in Kurdish resistance in Turkey since the early 1980s and many of its leading cadres were/are Alevi Kurds. These include Mazlum Doğan (1958-1982) and Sakine Cansız (1958-2013), Ali Haydar Kaytan (b.1952), Mustafa Karasu (b.1950) and Rıza Altun (b.1956). The current co-chair of the executive council of the Union of Kurdistan Communities (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan*, KCK), the body established by the PKK in 2005 to organise and bring together Kurds in self-governing communities within the existing nation-states in the Middle East, Bese Hozat (b.1978), is also an Alevi Kurd (Gunes, 2019b: 259).

As far as the late 1970s, Alevi Kurds were identified by the PKK as one of the key groups to be mobilised. This is evident from its choice to select provinces with a significant Kurdish Alevi population as localities to carry out its initial organisational work during the latter part of the 1970s. A pamphlet analysing the Maraş massacre published in December 1979 remains the PKK's earliest text on the Alevis (Serxwebûn, 1979). In this text, rather than treat the massacre as an isolated incident of violence between the right- and left-wing, as was the case with many leftist analyses of the event, the PKK was keen to highlight the systemic and widespread oppression that the Alevis Kurds historically suffered in Turkey and interpreted the

massacre as a sign of the intensification of repression to be unleashed in order to suffocate the nascent Kurdish movement, towards which many Alevi Kurds showed sympathy. The PKK was also keen to present itself as a defender of the Alevi community in Turkey and targeted Turkish nationalists in the Elazığ district who were involved in the Maraş massacre (Cansız, 2018: 298-9). The PKK's appeal among Alevi Kurds increased from the late 1980s onwards after the Turkish socialist groups that drew considerable support from Alevi Kurds began to decline due to the devastating impact of the *coup d'état* of 1980 and the difficulties the Soviet Union experienced.

In that period, the PKK channelled much effort into mobilising Alevi Kurds. This was initially done as part of its efforts to mobilise the religious sectors of Kurdish society, which were strategised in a pamphlet prepared by its leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1989 titled *Din Sorununa Devrimci Yaklaşım* (A Revolutionary Approach to the Problem of Religion). In this pamphlet, Öcalan developed a critique of the position on religion adopted by many communist parties in the Middle East and emphasised the need to overcome the common view that equated religion with backwardness (Öcalan, 2008: 12). As a practical step, an organisation called *Kürdistan Dindarlar Birliği* (The Union of the Religious of Kurdistan) was created in 1989 as part of the PKK's political front, the National Liberation Front of Kurdistan (*Eniya Rizgariya Netewa Kurdistan*, ERNK). In 1993, separate organisations for different religious groups were established, including the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan, the Union of Alevis of Kurdistan and the Union of Yezidis of Kurdistan (Gunes 2012: 110). The Union of Alevis of Kurdistan published a monthly political magazine *Zülfikar* for the Alevi Kurdish community between 1994 and 2002, with the publication changing its name to *Semah* in 2002. Several Alevi Kurdish community associations were also established in Europe, mainly in Germany, and these continue to be active and were subsequently brought together under the Democratic Alevi Federation (*Federesyona Demokratika Elewi*, FEDA).

Another outlet for the political participation of Alevi Kurds has been provided by the pro-Kurdish democratic movement that came into being with the establishment of the People's Labour Party (*Halkın Emek Partisi*, HEP) on 7 June 1990. Arif Sağ, a popular Alevi musician and community leader, was a founding member of the HEP and Alevi political demands have been articulated by HEP and other parties that subsequently represented the pro-Kurdish democratic movement as part of demands for equality and democracy in Turkey. Their effort to voice Alevi political demands continued throughout the 2000s and a symbolic milestone was achieved when a *cemevi* supported by the Diyarbakir Metropolitan Municipal Council was opened in Diyarbakir, the main city in the Kurdish

populated Southeast Turkey, on 26 December 2011 (Bianet, 2011). Since its opening, it has become a centre of Alevi culture in Diyarbakir providing religious service to the city's Alevi community and hosting many cultural events to promote cultural coexistence and understanding.

Many Alevi Kurds have been active within pro-Kurdish political parties, some even at a leadership level. An important figure in pro-Kurdish politics is Gültan Kışanık who worked as a journalist with pro-Kurdish newspapers during the 1990s before being elected as an MP for the Diyarbakir province in 2007 and Siirt province in 2011. She was the co-chair of the Peace and Democracy Party (*Bariş ve Demokrasi Partisi*, BDP) between 2009 and 2014 and on 30 March 2014, she was elected the co-mayor of Diyarbakir Metropolitan Municipal Council. She served in this position until her arrest on 24 October 2016 and remains in custody at the time of writing (Bianet, 2016). Other prominent Alevi Kurds within pro-Kurdish political parties include Sebahat Tuncel who was an MP for the Istanbul province between 2007 and 2015.

The Democratic Alevi Association is a founding organisation of the Peoples' Democratic Congress (*Halkların Demokratik Kongresi*, HDK), which is a pro-Kurdish organisation established in October 2011 to bring together representatives of diverse ethnic and religious groups in Turkey and is the umbrella body that initiated the formation of the current representative of the pro-Kurdish democratic movement the Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP) in 2012. Alevi political demands have been articulated within the discourse of the HDP which advocates the abolishment of Turkey's Religious Affairs Directorate on grounds that the existence of such an institution leads to the domination of religion by the state and repression of religious diversity. Instead of the strict application of republican *laïcité*, as has been done throughout much of the republican rule, the HDP advocates the full separation of the state and religion and calls for rebuilding the relationship between the state and religious authorities according to a new model of secularism that is pro-diversity and protects the freedom of religion (HDP, 2015: 19; HDP, 2018: 18). Within this overall framework, the HDP campaigns for ending compulsory religious education in the national curriculum and officially recognising Alevi *cemevis* as places of worship:

All the Alevi places of worship, especially the *cemevis*, will be recognized as 'places of worship'. Barriers to closed dervish lodges and similar places of worship will be removed and

initiative will be given to local governments in this regard (HDP, 2015: 19).<sup>2</sup>

In fact, in recent years, the HDP has emerged as the main political representative of Alevi Kurds and the main advocate of Alevi rights more broadly. The HDP has also worked closely with Alevi community organisations to identify Alevi political representatives for its electoral lists and consequently, several Alevi community leaders were elected to parliament in the 2015 general election. These include Turgut Öker, who was the President of the Federation of Alevi Community Unions in Germany (*Almanya Alevi Birlikleri Federasyonu*) and Ali Kenanoğlu, who held various leadership positions at the Hacı Bektaş Veli Anatolian Cultural Foundation, both elected in Istanbul province. Müslüm Doğan, who was a former president of the Pir Sultan Abdal Cultural Association was elected in Izmir province. In addition, several Alevi Kurds active within the pro-Kurdish democratic movement were elected as MPs, such as Alican Ünlü in Tunceli province.

The practice of selecting candidates among Alevi community leaders continued in the 2018 election. In addition to Turgut Öker and Ali Kenanoğlu, who were re-elected in Istanbul, Alevi rights activist Kemal Bülbül, who was a former president of the Pir Sultan Abdal Association and a former general secretary of the Alevi-Bektaşî Federation, was elected to the parliament in Antalya province. As mentioned above, the great majority of Alevis vote for the CHP but since 2015, a significant number have voted for the HDP. The analysis of the HDP's voter profile provided by KONDA for the June 2015 election revealed that Alevis constituted 7 per cent of HDP's voters and 12 per cent of all Alevis voted for the party (KONDA, 2015: 68-9). According to the analysis of the 2018 election, 16 per cent of Alevis voted for the HDP (KONDA, 2018: 40). It is likely that the majority of the HDP's Alevi voters are Kurdish and these figures suggest that the majority of Alevi Kurds now vote for the HDP but it is difficult to state the exact proportion. Also, the HDP has created a notable support base in provinces with a Kurdish Alevi presence, such as Malatya, Adiyaman and Erzincan where it obtained 6.7, 15.3 and 5.3 per cent of the vote in the 2018 general election respectively (Secim.Haberler.com, 2018).

While throughout their history the pro-Kurdish democratic political parties have had many Alevi Kurds amongst their ranks and Alevi political demands have been articulated in their discourse, after the establishment of the HDP, efforts to form closer relations with the Alevi community intensified leading to the increase in both descriptive and substantive

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<sup>2</sup> Author's own translation.



representation of Alevis and Alevi Kurds within the HDP. The HDP's desire to represent a cross-section of Turkish society, and its need to create a larger support base necessary to pass the 10 per cent electoral threshold, has necessitated the closer cooperation with the Alevi community. The HDP's advocacy of a plural and democratic Turkey and its attempts to represent all of the marginalised groups in Turkey has facilitated the integration of Alevis into its ranks.

## Conclusions

Turkey's transformation to democracy in 1950 created opportunities for Alevi Kurds to increase their engagement in state institutions but the restrictive legal and political order that prevailed in the country prevented the substantive representation of Alevis and Kurds. The rise of right-wing populist parties and their instrumentalisation of Islam in politics became a key concern for the Alevis who feared that Islamist encroachments would target their way of life. Consequently, they rallied around the CHP and saw Turkey's secular order as a protective shield. During the 1970s, a significant number of Alevi Kurds began engaging with leftist political groups and parties. The widespread discrimination and repression Alevi Kurds faced, both as Kurds and as Alevis, created many grievances among them which the left in Turkey was able to utilise. The left's message of equality resonated with a large section of Alevi Kurds, particularly those who had migrated to western Turkish cities.

In recent years, with the rise of the Alevi and Kurdish movements, the number of political actors vying to represent the Alevi Kurds has increased. The decline of the left after the military coup of 1980 left a void in the political life of Alevi Kurds, many of whom began to organise around Alevi rights, which led to the emergence of the Alevi rights movement in Turkey and Europe. Alevi rights organisations have succeeded in creating a network of community organisations that play an important role in the social and cultural lives of Alevi Kurds. However, the tensions that exist within the Alevi movement show the difficulties they face in creating an Alevi political constituency that is sensitive to the ethnic differences that exist within the Alevi community in Turkey.

Many Alevi Kurds were mobilised by the PKK as part of its struggle for Kurdish rights and a significant number continue to be active in the PKK in rank-and-file roles and at leadership levels. The pro-Kurdish political parties' project of unifying the left and extending its appeal to a larger section of Turkish society has facilitated the participation of Alevi Kurds in these parties. In fact, in the past five years, we have witnessed the emergence of the pro-Kurdish movement as a key political avenue for the descriptive and substantive representation of Alevi Kurds in particular and Alevis in

general. Many of the organisations and Alevi religious leaders active within Kurdish Alevi communities have been supporting the HDP in recent elections and several Alevi community leaders have been elected as MPs in the HDP's list, which has further strengthened the relations between the Alevi community and the HDP. However, the repression that the HDP has been experiencing since the acceleration of Turkey's authoritarian turn in 2015, has decreased its ability to effectively campaign for the rights of the groups it represents, even though the realisation of Alevi rights has become one of its key political demands.

The recognition of Kurdish and Alevi identities and the associated rights require major changes in Turkey's identity as a state, but the public debate in Turkey on the recognition of Turkey's ethno-cultural diversity reveals the ideological rigidity of Turkish nationalism and its hesitation in accepting the legitimacy of the political demands and rights of Alevis and Kurds. Without the constitutional recognition of Kurdish and Alevi identities in Turkey, it is difficult to address the discrimination and inequality that Alevi Kurds face and to initiate steps or policies to effectively accommodate their political demands.

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