

Opinions of Alevi about Their Problems

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ABSTRACT: Although Alevi have usually had good relationships with the states they lived in, they sometimes have experienced problems. This study focused on latest initiatives launched by the governments formed by Justice and Development party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi /AKP:the political party governing Turkey since 2002) about Alevi since 2002 and effects of these initiatives. The study sample included 534 members of non-governmental organizations founded by Alevi and Alevi volunteering to participate. Data were collected with a questionnaire. Most of the participants mentioned status of Cem evleri (places where Alevi pray) and discriminatory practices they are exposed to. These problems were taken to European Court of Human Rights by non-governmental Alevi organizations and Alevi. Although the cases have been solved in the direction of demands by Alevi, the participants still think that their problems have not been solved yet. In conclusion, practices performed by AKP have not completely satisfy expectations of Alevi and nongovernmental Alevi organizations.

KEY WORDS: *Alevi, Initiatives for Alevi, Nongovernmental Alevi Organizations, Alevi Workshops*

I. INTRODUCTION

Alevism has been a system of beliefs mostly based on verbal culture of Alevi. It was adopted by poor nomadic or seminomadic Turkish tribes after Turkish people embraced Islam. This belief system is not only based on Islam but also religions and beliefs originating from the Middle Asia, the Far East, Iran and Mesopotamia. Interactions between these beliefs have caused Alevism to be a syncretic belief system. Alevi have experienced problems due to their different belief system in the states in which they have lived for centuries (e.g. Ottoman Empire) and have revolted against the authority.

The Republic of Turkey has been a country having citizens from different ethnic or religious origins since its foundation due to the influence of its heritage from the Ottoman Empire. Alevi is one of these groups of citizens. Alevi public figures, Alevi religious leaders and the whole Alevi society, who provided support for M. Kemal Atatürk during foundation of the republic, have faced some problems in the following years. It can be said that discrimination against some groups has continued, though not as severe as it was in the Ottoman period. Alevi was also affected by discrimination during 1960 - 2002 when coalition governments ruled the country and serious social and economic problems were experienced.

Since 2002, governments formed by different members of the same political party, i.e. Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) and voted by the majority of the population have ruled the Republic of Turkey. There have been various attempts to solve Alevi's problems during their ruling. During initiatives for Alevi, there were seven workshops to reveal their problems. The first workshop was performed on 3-4 June 2009 and the last workshop on 28-30 January 2010. More than 300 people attended these workshops. The issues discussed, and the decisions made were presented in a report [1]. Nevertheless, they did not help solve Alevi's problems. The problems related to the religion in their identification cards, compulsory religion courses at schools and the legal status of cem evleri remain to be solved.

During the reform period, several studies were carried out by non-governmental organizations, research organizations, MA/MSc or PhD students at universities such as Report about Alevi by Stratejik Düşünce Enstitüsü (SDE) (a research institute) [2] and "Discrimination in Turkey from Alevi's Point of View", a part of a project titled "struggling against discrimination and taking action for equality" [3].

In addition, there have been studies about lives of Alevi in the society and related problems. Bahadır performed a study titled "Alevi Organizations in İzmir after 1980 and their Importance in terms of Alevi identity" [4]. Atalar carried out a study titled "Different Perceptions of Alevism: Samples from Pir Sultan Abdal Culture Association and Cem Foundation" [5]. Yeler reported about institutionalization of Alevism in Turkey and relevant problems and their solutions [6].

Kaymaz [7] assessed initiatives made by AKP to solve Alevi problems from the perspective of Alevi organizations. Şen dealt with workshops about Alevi and the final report issued after these workshops in a thesis titled "Democratic Reforms and Alevi" [8]. Selçuk examined political discourses on Alevism under the rule of governments formed by AKP [9]. Yaprak revealed Alevi social demands reflected in the workshops conducted in 2009 and 2010 [10]. The results of the abovementioned studies and theses revealed that initiatives for Alevi and workshops did not provide solutions to Alevi demands and that their problems persisted.

Persistence of Alevi problems was the impetus for the present study. The aim of the study was to reveal opinions of members of non-governmental Alevi organizations in İzmir about Alevi related policies created by AKP and their problems. The results of the study, the sample of which only included the organizations in İzmir, Turkey, will contribute to the relevant literature involving studies in other samples. To exemplify prior relevant studies, Kaymaz interviewed administrators of non-governmental Alevi organizations in Ankara and examined their attitudes towards initiatives directed towards Alevi [7]. In the present study, opinions of members and administrators of non-governmental Alevi organizations in İzmir and Alevi volunteers accessed through these organizations were determined with a questionnaire created by the researcher.

The research problem was what members of non-governmental Alevi organizations in İzmir thought about the policies made by AKP governments and what problems the participants experienced.

II. METHOD

The descriptive survey model, directed towards describing a situation available now or in the past, was utilized in this study [11]. This method allows descriptions of individuals or objects searched in their own conditions. Researchers using this method can interpret data they collect with a questionnaire or an interview.

The study population included 28 non-governmental Alevi organizations from 21 districts of İzmir. Five hundred and thirty-four people were accessed and of 534 people, 355 were members of these Alevi organizations and the rest was volunteering Alevi. The volunteers were also accessed through the non-governmental Alevi organizations. They were thought to be people who were hesitating to, were not able to or did not become members of the organizations. Data were collected with a questionnaire at face to face interviews from most of the participants. Some administrators of the organizations were asked to complete the questionnaire themselves and hand it in to the members. However, some of them did not fill it in since they were hesitated or did not have sufficient time for it. Therefore, the participants could be considered as Alevi in non-governmental Alevi organizations willing to participate in the study

The questionnaire was developed by the researcher and included two sections. The first section was composed of questions about socio-demographic features and the second section was composed of questions about opinions about policies directed towards Alevi and created by AKP governments. Expert opinion about the questions was obtained and the questionnaire was piloted on a group similar to the sample. The final version of the questionnaire was obtained after revisions were made in accordance with the expert opinion and the piloting study. It involved 30 questions. In this article, results obtained only through six questions of the questionnaire were presented.

Table 1 shows the associations and the foundations included in the study. The associations and the foundations with more than one branch were presented under one heading, which allows a general distribution of Alevi organizations.

Table 1. The Associations and the Foundations included in the Study

Associations and Foundations	Frequency	Percentage
Pir Sultan Abdal Kültür Derneği	92	17,2
Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli Kültür Derneği	50	9,4
Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli Anadolu Kültür Vakfı	10	1,9
Cem Vakfı	15	2,8
Alevi Bektaşi Derneği	50	9,4
Alevi Bektaşi Kültür Derneği / Alevi Bektaşi Kültürünü Tanıtma Derneği / Alevi Kültür Derneği	81	15,2
Ehlibeyt İnanç Vakfı Merkez	25	4,7
Anadolu Alevileri Kültür ve Dayanışma Derneği Torbalı Şubesi	9	2,4
Tahtacı Kültür Eğitim Kalkınma ve Yardımlaşma Derneği	22	4,1
Dersimliler Yardımlaşma ve Dersim Kültürünü Tanıtma Derneği	1	0,2
Non-members	179	33,5
TOTAL	534	100,0

As shown in the table, the participants were members of three Alevi foundations and other non-governmental Alevi organizations. Although the administrators of Cem Foundation did not complete the questionnaire, some of the participants were members of this foundation. Seventeen percent of the participants were members of Pir Sultan Abdal culture associations and 15% were members of Alevi Bektashi culture associations. A hundred and seventy-nine participants were not members of any organizations but were accessed through the organizations included in the study.

Table 2 shows the distribution of the participants by their education levels.

Table 2. The Distribution of the Participants by their Education Levels

Education level	Frequency	Percentage
Literate	25	4,68
Primary school	131	24,53
Secondary school	95	17,79
High school	151	28,28
Vocational school of higher education	43	8,05
University	82	15,36
MA and MSc	7	1,31
TOTAL	534	100,00

As presented in the table, 28%, 25% and 18% of the participants were high school graduates, primary school graduates and secondary school graduates respectively. Table 3 outlines the distribution of the participants by their occupations and social status. This distribution helped to determine whether the participants' opinions varied with their occupations and social status.

Table 3. The Distribution of the Participants by their Occupations and Social Status

Occupations – Status	Frequency	Percentage
Civil servant	63	11,80
Worker	192	35,96
Tradesman/ Merchant	43	8,05
Having one's own business	27	5,06
Farmer	1	0,19
Retired	97	18,16
Student	29	5,43
Housewife	61	11,42
Other	21	3,93
TOTAL	534	100,00

Of all the participants, 36% were workers, 18% were retired, 12% were civil servants and 11% were housewives. The low percentage of the participants suggests that they hesitated about expressing their opinions due to a fear of being in a blacklist of the government. The participants were asked how often they went to the Alevi associations and foundations (Table 4).

Table 4. The Frequency of Going to the Alevi Associations and Foundations

How often do Alevis go to non-governmental Alevi organizations?	Frequency	Percentage
Every day	114	21,3
Three times a week	53	9,9
Two times a week	39	7,3
Once a week	78	14,6
Once a month	88	16,4
Very rarely	160	29,9
Never	2	0,3
TOTAL	534	100,0

The finding about Alevi association and foundation membership presented in Table 1 suggests that the participants were reluctant to become a member of these organizations (66,5% of the participants were members of Alevi organizations). However, only two participants reported not to go to the organizations. Five hundred and thirty-two participants went to Alevi associations and foundations at certain frequencies. Of 532 participants, 21% went there every day, 30% very rarely, 16% once a month, 15% once a week and 10% three times a week. While the percentage of the participants attending these organizations every day was low, a considerably high rate of the participants went there. The percentage of the participants never going there was not even one percent, which is consistent with the results reported by Bahadır [4]. In Bahadır's study, 25,5% of the participants went to Alevi organizations every day, 14,5% every two days, 22,0% once a week, 10,5% at the weekends, 11,0% once a month, 16,0% very rarely and 0,5% at miscellaneous frequencies. This finding indicates that Alevis considered non-governmental Alevi organizations as a place to socialize although they were not members of these organizations.

III. RESULTS and DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to reveal opinions of Alevis in non-governmental Alevi organizations in İzmir about policies created by AKP governments and directed towards Alevis and their problems. To achieve this aim, the following questions were asked, and the responses given to them were discussed by using tables.

The first question is related to the present status of Cem evleri. It is a multiple-choice question and the results about it are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Opinions of the Participants about the Status of Cem Evleri

What do you think of status of cem evleri?	Frequency	Percentage
Legal barriers to establishment of cem evleri should be abolished, cem evleri should be considered as independent places for worship and the number of these places should be increased.	318	50,96
Cem evleri should be officially recognized places for worship and the number of these places should be increased.	172	27,56
Cem evleri should remain the same.	41	6,57
Cem evleri should serve as affiliates of Alevi associations and foundations.	76	12,18
I have no idea about the issue	15	2,40
Other (the participants making different comments about the issue)	2	0,32
TOTAL	624	100,00

Fifty-one percent of the participants thought legal barriers concerning Cem evleri should be eliminated and that they should be considered as independent temples. Twenty-eight percent of the participants wanted them to be official places for worship. Twelve percent of the participants wanted them to be affiliated with Alevi associations and foundations. These findings are consistent with explanations made in the visual and print media by administrators of non-governmental Alevi organizations.

Ninety-one percent of the participants would like the state to acknowledge Cem evleri, which is of great importance in terms of their beliefs, in some way or the other. They are expected to be considered as official or independent temples. At present, their legal status is still unclear and there is a risk of their abolishment. Since they are not officially recognized, they experience problems with fulfillment of electric, water and fuel needs. Consistent with the finding of the present study, a study performed by Stratejik Düşünce Enstitüsü (SDE)[2] yielded similar results. In that study, the participants were asked whether Cem evleri should be officially approved as places for worship. Seventy-four-point nine percent of the participants gave a positive response to it; however, 14,2% and 4,5% of the participants gave neutral and negative responses to it. Six-point four percent of the participants had no idea about the issue.

The case was taken to the European Court of Human Rights by Cem Foundation [12] and Professor İzzettin Doğan and other Alevis [13] and the court decided that articles 9 and 14 of European Convention of Human Rights were violated. However, it seems that there are not sufficient attempts to eliminate these violations.

Another multiple-choice question in the present study was directed towards revealing opinions of the participants about teaching Alevis in the compulsory course at school Religion and Ethics. The results concerning the participants' responses to this question are outlined in Table 6.

Table 6. The Participants' Opinions about Teaching Alevism in the course Religion and Ethics

What do you think of teaching Alevism in Religion and Ethics courses at school?	Frequency	Percentage
Alevism should be taught in Religion and Ethics courses.	163	30,0
Alevism should not be taught in Religion and Ethics courses.	71	13,8
Religion and Ethics courses should be abolished.	278	51,2
Other	31	5,7
TOTAL	543	100,00

Fifty-one percent of the participants agreed that the course Religion and Ethics should be abolished, but 30% of the participants wanted Alevism to be incorporated into the curriculum of the course. Although the new curriculum involved knowledge about Alevism, the participants might not have heard about it or might not been satisfied with the available knowledge. The finding was comparable with the opinions expressed in the visual and print media by non-governmental Alevi organizations and with the results of the study by SDE [2]. In that study, 49,2% of the participants wanted the course Religion and Ethics to be discarded and 39,6% of the participants were in favor of the elective course of Religion and Ethics. Eight-point eight percent of the participants were against its abolishment and 2,4% of the participants had no idea about it. Both the finding of the current study and that of SDE study suggest that Alevis have negative attitudes towards the compulsory course of Religion and Ethics.

Although knowledge about Alevism was incorporated into the curriculum for Religion and Ethics, Şimşek and Güngör argued that Alevism was considered as a mystical interpretation of Islam in it [14]. In the textbooks of the course, students can read about lives of the last Muslim caliph Ali, the family of the last prophet Mohammed, Hasan -a cousin of the prophet Mohammed, Huseyin, a grandson of the prophet Mohammed, Twelve Imams, Cafer-i Sadık and Hacı Bektaş Veli, their roles in the increasing population of Turks in Anatolia, quotes from their works and the concepts cem evi, cem, pir and nefes etc. The books for all grades of students supply some information and visual material about Alevism and Bektashism -a religious order or sect similar to Anatolian Alevism and named after Hacı Bektash- and poems by Alevi and Bektash poets.

The abovementioned changes in the curriculum posed some difficulty for the teachers offering Religion and Ethics. They thought that they were not competitive enough to teach Alevism. In fact, in a study by Yemenici on 774 teachers from different cities, 60% of the teachers reported not to be sufficiently competitive in teaching Alevism and recommended changes in teacher education and in-service training programs in terms of Alevism [15]. The teachers expected to receive in-service training for Alevism in Religion and Ethics courses, different religions and preparation of learning material taking account of students from different religions. It is clear that the teachers hope to get support from the government. They emphasized that the course content requiring a comparison between different religions and their leaders attracted attention of students to the course and religious subjects. However, it can be suggested that incorporation of Alevism into the curriculum did not satisfy Alevis and non-governmental Alevi organizations.

The verdicts concerning the cases taken to European Court of Human Rights by Hasan and Eylem Zengin [16] and Mansur Yalçın and others [17] showed that the article two in Appendix 1 protocol of European Convention of Human Rights was violated. Nevertheless, it is observed that no strong efforts are made to prevent such violations.

The third question in the present study was whether the participants thought they were exposed to any discrimination due to their beliefs and sects. The results of the analysis of the responses to this question are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Opinions of the Participants about Exposure to Discrimination due to their Religions or Sects

Do you think you have been exposed to discrimination due to your beliefs or sect?	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	494	92,5
No	40	7,5
TOTAL	534	100,00

The fourth question was related to social problems Alevis faced. A striking finding was that 92,5% of the participants were found to experience discrimination because of their beliefs or sects (n=494). This finding is congruent with the opinions of Alevis reflected in the media and surveys and suggests that discrimination is of crucial importance.

Similarly, according to results of a field study performed by Erdemir et al. and supported by Alevi Culture Foundation [3] and an internet-based study, over 90% of Alevis believed that they faced discrimination due to their religions or beliefs. The participants in Erdemir et al.'s study said they experienced alienation especially on Fridays and during Ramadan, both considered as holy in Islam [3]. In addition, in a study by SDE, the participants admitted that they were exposed to pressure by governmental organizations, though in low percentages [2] (38.8% experienced pressure, but 61,2% did not).

In a recent MA thesis Kaymaz, the participants interviewed explained that they faced discrimination and Physical attacks against Alevis in Maraş, Çorum and Sivas were mentioned many times as evidence for aggressiveness of the state and for alienation of Alevis [7].

The results of abovementioned findings underline that both the state organization and governments should prioritize the issue of discrimination against Alevism. They need to remove the situations in which Alevis are exposed to discrimination or eliminate the perception of discrimination if there is not discrimination.

The fifth question in the present study was about the frequency of discrimination. The results of the analysis of the responses are outlined in Table 8.

Table 8. Frequency of Discrimination due to Beliefs of the Participants

How often do you experience discrimination due to your beliefs or sect?	Frequency	Percentage
Always	177	35,8
Often	84	17,0
From time to time	182	36,8
Rarely	37	7,4
Very rarely	14	2,8
TOTAL	494	100,0

Of 494 participants, 36%, 37% and 17% of the participants reported to experience discrimination always, from time to time and often respectively. As shown in the table, the rate of the participants always and often exposed to discrimination was 53% in total. This shows that half of 494 participants faced frequent discrimination. When 37% of the participants experiencing discrimination was added, the percentage reaches 90%. This finding is indicative of one of the problems Alevis frequently have in their social lives. The rate of the participants reporting to experience discrimination rarely and very rarely was around 10%.

When the participants were asked about the environments in which they faced discrimination, they marked more than one choice. The results of the analysis of the participants' responses were outlined in Table 9.

Table 9. The Environments in which the participants experienced Discrimination due to their Beliefs or Sects

Where do you face discrimination due to your beliefs or sect?	Frequency	Percentage
In apartments and during their relationships with their neighbors	227	16,26
Streets	99	7,12
Housing estates	55	3,96
Neighborhood	169	12,16
Cemetery	109	7,84
Shopping centers	36	2,59
Cinemas and theaters	24	1,73
Supermarkets (including corner shops, butchers etc.)	31	2,23
Bazaars	32	2,30
Parks and Parking lots	22	1,58
School	265	19,06
Workplace and during working hours	322	23,17
TOTAL	1390	100,00

Since the participants had more than one response, the number of the responses was higher than that of the number of the participants. Twenty-three percent, 19%, 16% and 12% of the participants encountered discrimination at their workplaces, at school, in their apartments and in their neighborhoods respectively. This finding matches with the results of the surveys published and the explanations made by administrators of non-governmental Alevi organizations. Alevis were found to most commonly suffer from discrimination in workplaces, schools and neighborhoods. These are the places where they maintain their social lives and have to stay. The finding also shows that community pressure is not only a theoretical truth but also felt in real life. Erdemir et al. also reported similar findings [3]. The participants in their study most commonly faced discrimination in their apartments (38,5%), followed by streets (33,1%), housing estates (29,8%), cemeteries (27,1%) and main roads (27,1%). The participants also faced it in shopping centers (18,5%), supermarkets (15,6%), bazaars (15,5%), parks (13,1%) and parking lots (9,6%).

The findings of the current study and evidence from the literature indicate that discrimination due to beliefs remains of importance and that Alevis experience it in many different places.

The last question is concerned with unjust treatment in terms of rights and freedom. The participants were allowed to mark as many choices as they liked. The findings obtained are summarized in Table 10.

Table 10. Opinions of the Participants about Unjust Treatment in terms of their Rights and Freedom

What aspects of rights and freedom have you experienced unjust treatment about?	Frequency	Percentage
Freedom of religion	437	20,8
Presence of the compulsory course religion and Ethics	272	12,9
Alienation	224	10,6
Difficulty in getting a job in public sector	254	12,1
Difficulty in promoting to senior management posts	194	9,2
Difficulty in getting a job in private sector	77	3,6
Difficulty in promoting to senior management posts	86	4,1
Freedom of speech	236	11,2
Considering cem evleri as places for worship	310	14,7
Other (the participants making other comments)	8	0,3
TOTAL	2098	100,0

As the participants gave more than one response, the total number of the responses was 2098. Twenty-one percent of the participants did not have religious freedom. Fifteen percent of the participants complained that Cem evleri were not considered as places for worship and 13% complained about the compulsory course Religion and Ethics. Twelve percent had difficulty to get a job in public sector. Eleven percent thought that they did not have freedom to express their opinions.

The findings suggest that Alevis most commonly faced unjust treatment concerning fulfillment of their religious duties. They were compatible with the results of the relevant surveys reported and the explanations made in the media by administrators of non-governmental Alevi organizations.

It is important that discriminatory treatment the participants were exposed to while looking for employment in public sector was revealed in studies and covered in the visual and print media. The community pressure revealed in both the present study and the results of other surveys should be taken into account since it may cause isolation of individuals from the society.

The study by SDE showed similar results to the current study [2], which can be presented as in the following:

“In response to the question whether you believe Alevis have fewer rights and less freedom than Sunnis in your country, of all the participants, 60,6% said yes, 18,3% said yes but added some more reforms for Alevis are needed although both Alevis and Sunnis are equal in terms of many aspects, 15,7% said no and added Alevis and Sunnis have equal rights and 5,4% had no idea ... “In response to the question in what areas Alevis have fewer rights and less freedom, 26,5% mentioned freedom related to beliefs, 12,1% inequality in education (compulsory course Religion and Ethics), 10,6% isolation from the society, 9,7% attitudes of the state to Alevis and 8,5% freedom of speech. In addition, 7,7% mentioned isolation at work, 7,0% restriction of rights and freedom and 5,9% cem evleri not considered as a place for worship. Two percent of the participants marked other reasons and 10% did not believe Alevis had fewer rights and less freedom.” (pp:31-32)

The abovementioned findings once more emphasize the need to reveal what Alevis think about policies about themselves formed by AKP governments. Alevis clearly explain the problems they experience in their lives. It seems that the problems are related to governmental policies rather than anything else. They demand that governments should play an active role in elimination of their problems.

IV. CONCLUSION

In light of the results of the present study, directed towards showing problems Alevis faced during AKP governments in a sample of İzmir, it can be concluded that Alevis ask the governments to officially accept cem evleri as places for worship.

Another problem is that Alevi children are obliged to take the course Religion and Ethics. In view of the judgements about this issue made by European Court of Human Rights, a solution accepted by all relevant parties could be found by the governments. Although there were various attempts to solve the problems during AKP governments (like initiatives for Alevis and workshops), they seem to be insufficient. This insufficiency can be clearly seen in responses to the questions about discrimination due to beliefs and its frequency and places. Ninety-two-point five percent of the participants admitted that they were exposed to discrimination because of their beliefs or sects. The rate of the participants always and often experiencing it reaches 53%. Seventy percent of the participants face it at their workplaces, schools, their apartments and neighborhoods. These results seem to support the news about stigmatization through marking Alevis' homes and about community pressure.

The responses to the question in what areas you experience unjust treatment lend support for the finding above. The most commonly mentioned areas were lack of freedom concerning beliefs (n=437), not considering cem evleri as places for worship (n=310), presence of the compulsory course Religion and Ethics (n=272) and inability to get a job in public sector (n=254). All these findings reveal that Alevis have experienced various problems during AKP governments and wanted them to be solved.

However, it should be pointed out that inability of Alevis to act together can play a role in failure to solve their problems. Non-governmental Alevi organizations have not been successful in acting collaboratively. This appeared during the workshops conducted and some of the organizations did not get involved in attempts to find solutions to their problems. Cansun reported, "Alevi organizations found initiatives proposed by AKP governments insufficient. They attributed it to the fact that AKP did not embrace all Alevi organizations and did not take action as these organizations wanted" [18]. In addition, Cem Foundation could not be accessed despite all efforts during data collection although foundations forming Alevi Bektashi Federation and other foundations participated in gathering data. This lack of participation also underlines the disagreement between Alevi organizations.

In conclusion, it is significant that all Alevi communities should be involved in attempts to find solutions to their problems. Fulfillment of the participants' demands by the governments can create cooperation, peace and interdependency in the society.

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