CHAPTER TWELVE

ALEVIS IN TURKISH POLITICS

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Introduction

The religious scene in modern Turkey is often described in a way that conceals diversity. In so far as any reference to religious minorities is made, these groups are assumed to solely consist of non-Muslims, ignoring the sizeable Muslim minority groups. This misrepresentation of the religious character of modern Turkey’s population can be traced back to the Peace Treaty of Lausanne of July 1923, which effectively shaped the foundation of the Republican regime in the international arena. In its definition of religious minorities whose rights are to be protected by the new Republican regime, the Treaty of Lausanne is exclusively concerned with non-Muslim groups. No similar explicit recognition can be found for Muslim minorities, whether ethnic groups, such as the Kurds, or religious groups, such as the Alevis.¹ Both the Kurds and the unrecognized religious groups posed a formidable challenge to the young Republic in its formative years. The Republic answered this challenge by systematically denying the existence of ethnic or sectarian differences among the Anatolian populations. Over the years, a hegemonic discourse of ethnic and religious homogeneity, which denies recognition to ethnic and sectarian minorities, developed in the country. In the aftermath of the Cold War, as Turkey’s domestic as well as international policies underwent radical changes, due especially to closer relations with the European Union (EU) and the start of membership negotiations in 2005, the hegemonic discourse and the related public practices have increasingly been challenged. There is today a growing recognition

¹ The section concerning minority rights of the treaty clearly stipulates that the articles therein “shall be recognized as fundamental laws, and that no law, no regulation, nor official action shall conflict or interfere with these stipulations, nor shall any law, regulation, nor official action prevail over them.” In Article 38, the assurances are granted that “full and complete protection of life and liberty of all inhabitants of Turkey without distinction of birth, nationality, language, race or religion.” As such, all minority rights, be it of Muslim or non-Muslim origin, could find protection under the Lausanne Treaty.
of the country’s ethnic and religious diversity, even though limitations and severe pressures upon certain groups still exist.

The Turkish religious scene is marked by two distinct cleavages. The first is based on sectarian differences between Sunnis and Alevis (White and Jongerden 2003; Shankland 2003); the second is based on lifestyle and cultural differences among the Sunnis, between those who adopt a lifestyle in accordance with the tenets of Sunni Islam and those who take a more secular (laik) view of life. Alevis have historically been the minority which has stood almost uniformly behind the secularist regime since the beginning. Alevis consider the secularist principles as their protection against Sunni infringements upon their religious freedom. Among Sunnis, there are various conservative traditions which can be described as ‘pro-Islamist’. They support a religious revivalism in reaction to the secularist policies of the Republican establishment. The two divides, between Sunnis and Alevis on the one hand, and among the Sunnis themselves on the other, are at the source of political tensions in the country. The protagonists here are, on the one side, the secularist state establishment and its centrist mass public support (consisting primarily of Alevis) and, on the other, the Sunni peripheral masses of pro-Islamist inclinations.²

The Alevis are thus not a powerless minority; in the center-periphery dichotomy they side with the center, in other words, with the secularist state establishment. Hence, whatever marginalization they may suffer from, due to the sectarian division, is partially compensated by the power gained as they position themselves on the right side of the cultural divide between ‘religious’ versus ‘secular’. Yet, the nature of the secular regime prevents the full recognition of Alevi identity, Alevi religious and cultural practices, and Alevi political preferences concerning the recognition of their identity. Our aim in this chapter is primarily to explore the contours of political empowerment and disempowerment among Alevis in Turkey. We will first give a brief description of Alevism, followed by details about population

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² We adopt here the center-periphery framework of Şerif Mardin (1973). According to this framework, Turkish politics is built around a strong and coherent state apparatus, or the “center”, run by a distinct group of elites dominated by the military and bureaucracy. The ‘center’ is confronted by a heterogeneous and often hostile ‘periphery’, composed mainly of peasantry, small farmers, and artisans. Kemalist secular principles form the founding ideology of this center which runs a nationalist modernization program. The ‘periphery’ is built around hostile sentiments towards the coercive modernization projects of the center and includes regional, religious, and ethnic groups with often conflicting interests and political strategies.