Political Participation of Turkey’s Kurds and Alevis: A Challenge for Turkey’s Democratic Consolidation

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This paper focuses on the political participation of Turkey’s two largest minorities, the Kurds and the Alevis. It argues that the political participation of Kurds and Alevis is disproportionately weak compared with their population size both for historical reasons and due to state practices. Creating an environment conducive to strong political participation of Turkey’s Kurds and Alevis will comprise a decisive step in the course of Turkey’s transformation from a procedural to a substantive democracy. Political integration of Kurds and Alevis would also mean the removal of a potential source of domestic conflict and enhance the long-term stability of the Turkish political system.

The issue of minorities has been one of the biggest taboos in republican Turkey. The insistence on a numerus clausus of three non-Muslim minorities—Armenians, Greeks and Jews—as they were defined in the Treaty of Lausanne (the founding document of republican Turkey), often defied common sense, yet it remained the cornerstone of Turkish minority policies until the 1990s. Turkey’s Kurds and Alevis were not recognized as minorities, and their freedom of expression met with limitations of varying intensity depending on the political environment. This situation gradually changed in the 1990s, when identity politics acquired increasing significance. The concurrent democratization wave contributed to the rise of a public debate on issues of identity. Turkey’s Kurds and Alevis claimed either a separate identity, which did not necessarily conflict with Turkish national identity, or adopted an inimical approach towards the Turkish state. In the more pronounced Kurdish case, while the quest for a Kurdish identity resulted in insurgency and terrorism in the late twentieth century, these acts were by no means representative of the whole Kurdish identity movement and did not significantly impact on the stance of other minority groups.

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This study will examine the question of political participation of the two largest minority groups in Turkey: the Kurds and the Alevi. After addressing the issues of political participation, democratic consolidation and minority definition, it will examine the efforts of Kurds and Alevi to increase their presence in Turkish politics. It will be argued that the political participation of Kurds and Alevi is disproportionately weak compared with their population size, both for historical reasons and due to state practices. Creating an environment conducive to strong political participation by Turkey’s Kurds and Alevi will form a decisive step in the course of Turkey’s transformation from a procedural to a substantive democracy. Political integration of Kurds and Alevi would also mean the removal of a potential source of domestic conflict and enhance the long-term stability of the Turkish political system.

On Political Participation

Political participation has been defined as ‘taking part in the processes of formulation, passing and implementation of public policies’. It refers to action taken by citizens aiming to influence decisions mostly taken by representative organs or affecting the implementation of decisions already made (Parry et al. 1992: 16). This definition attempts to incorporate a set of diverse activities, such as voting in elections and referenda, active participation in political parties, pressure groups, demonstrations and community work. Some of them focus on what political systems require from citizens, while other focus on the benefits citizens accrue from political systems (Milbrath & Goel 1965: 2). What unites all these different forms of political events is the element of public activity inherent in all of them. This differentiates it from forms of political attitude, which may remain latent and do not penetrate the public sphere. Despite having a behavioural definition, political participation is indeed a term with a very heavy normative content (Birch 2002: 104–105). Advocates of participatory democracy and adherents of the realist school of thought have long debated the importance of political participation in the democratic process. While the former stress the importance of political participation in the smooth functioning of democratic regimes, the latter emphasize the role of political elites and judge the quality of a democratic regime by checking the efficiency of checks on political elites (Parry et al. 1992: 4–5). Different models have also been developed to identify the reasons of political participation. Instrumental, communitarian, educative and expressive participation models all attempt to explain what motivates politically active citizens to invest their time, effort and money in pursuing political participation (Parry et al. 1992: 9–16). Today most would agree that political participation is an important and strongly positive feature of consolidated democracies.

Procedural vs. Substantive Democracies

Talking about political participation as an essential element of consolidated democracies requires a clarification between procedural and substantive democracies (see Huntington 1993). Procedural democracies were often linked with what was called
‘second-wave democratization’, which was prevalent in the 1970s. They were characterized by the regular occurrence of free and fair elections and the establishment of reasonably effective political institutions. Free and fair elections, however, did not mean that democracy had been consolidated. In the words of Przeworski, democratic consolidation means that democracy:

... becomes the only game in town, when no one can imagine acting outside the democratic institutions, when all the losers want to do is to try again within the same institutions under which they have just lost. (Przeworski 1991: 26, cited in Özbudun 1996: 124)

This consolidation only came about with ‘third-wave democratization’ in the 1990s and the rise of substantive democracies. In addition to what characterized procedural democracies, substantive democracies included full and effective protection of human rights, as well as a fundamental reorganization of state–society relations on more liberal lines (Öniş 2004: 490). Active political participation of all citizens regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion and race was considered one of the cornerstones of substantive democracies.

Defining the Term Minority

Before moving to the discussion of Kurdish and Alevi political participation in Turkey, one should also refer to the definition of the term ‘minority’. Complexity and political sensitivity have been the main reasons for the absence of a universally accepted definition of the term. The most ambitious attempts originated from the United Nations. Capotorti defined a minority as:

... a group, numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members—being nationals of the State—possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language. (Capotorti 1977: 10)

Meanwhile, Justice Deschênes suggested in the proceedings of the UN Subcommission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities that a minority is:

... a group of citizens of a state, constituting a numerical minority and in a non-dominant position in that state, endowed with ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics which differ from those of the majority of the population, having a sense of solidarity with one another, motivated, if only implicitly by a collective will to survive and whose aim is to achieve equality with the majority in fact and in law. (Deschênes 1985, cited in Gyurcsik 1993: 22)

Although long negotiations attempted to come up with a commonly accepted definition of the term that would then be incorporated in an international treaty, political expedience proved too high an obstacle to overcome. Thus, the definitions by Capotorti and Deschênes remain the most widely used and referred to. The combination of objective and subjective elements in the definition of a minority is of great significance, which becomes clear in cases where subjective and objective elements are not congruent. The existence of distinct ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics
may not suffice for the recognition of a minority group if there is no will among its members to maintain a separate identity. This means that individuals who are members of minorities should be recognized not only for the right to be respected as such but also for the right to give up their minority identity, i.e. to assimilate to the dominant group (Kymlicka 1996: 85–86).

**Political Participation of Minorities**

The right of all persons to take part in the conduct of public affairs, without discrimination based on race, language or other status, has been guaranteed by several international legal provisions. Article 15 of the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, Article 25 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 5 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and Article 2 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (UNDM) protect political participation of minorities (Kaya & Baldwin 2004: 12). The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), however, has developed these standards the most. Paragraph 35§1 of its Copenhagen Document requires all member states to:

… respect the right of persons belonging to national minorities to effective participation in public affairs, including participation in the affairs relating to the protection and promotion of the identity of such minorities. (Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) 1990: 20)

The political participation of ethnic and religious minorities is an issue of critical importance for the large number of democratic states whose peoples include minority groups. The ability to form associations, and political parties, and to engage in political activity in the public sphere has traditionally been viewed with suspicion by nation-states, who feared that the rise of minority political mobilization constituted a serious threat to state sovereignty and unity. Only the proliferation of liberal democracy in the second half of the twentieth century led to a gradual lifting of obstacles to minority political participation. A high degree of minority political participation is an unmistakeable signal for the quality of a democratic regime.

**Political Participation of Minorities in Turkey: The Kurds**

*Kurds in Republican Turkey*

Kurds are the largest minority group in republican Turkey. Islam and a strong sense of tribal identity were the main reasons why a strong Kurdish nationalist movement failed to emerge in the late Ottoman years. Nevertheless, when Atatürk-led republican Turkey declared its intention to break its links with its Ottoman Islamic heritage and establish a civic Turkish national identity, Turkey’s Kurds had to choose either assimilation or resistance. A series of rebellions were brutally suppressed in the 1920s and 1930s, while state assimilation policies intensified. The Kurdish issue came back to
political significance in the 1960s with the rise of political pluralism. The liberal air of the 1961 Constitution favoured the development of a wide spectrum of political activities. Political turmoil and violence between radical leftist and rightist political groups, which characterized Turkish politics of the 1970s, played an important role in the radicalization of Kurdish identity politics. The Kurdish Workers Party (Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan—PKK) became the group to challenge Turkish sovereignty in south-eastern Turkey and polarize the Kurdish question.

The 1990s Onwards

The 1990s were marked by the escalation of PKK violence, which marginalized moderate voices and minimized the prospects of effective Kurdish political participation. Voices of moderation from both sides of the political spectrum soon met with state repression. The Kurdish-affiliated People’s Labour Party (Halkin Emek Partisi—HEP) was closed by the Constitutional Court on separatist propaganda accusations, and its leading figures, Leyla Zana, Hatip Dicle, Selim Sadak and Orhan Doğan, were imprisoned in 1994. The crisis did not recede until the capture of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in February 1999 and concomitant military operations in south-eastern Turkey, which dealt a grave blow to the operational capabilities of the PKK. The declaration of a unilateral armistice from the PKK allowed for a gradual de-securitization of the Kurdish issue. Instead of addressing it as a problem of separatist insurgence, the Kurdish problem was increasingly approached as a minority rights problem linked with the greater issue of Turkey’s democratization. Although the People’s Democracy Party (Halkin Demokrasi Partisi—HADEP) was eventually closed in 2003 and succeeded by the Democratic People’s Party (Demokrat Halk Partisi—DEHAP), the situation gradually improved. In the course of reform aiming to achieve Turkey’s compliance with the Copenhagen Criteria, reform steps were taken that facilitated Kurdish political participation. In 2001, the ban on the use of minority languages was lifted from Article 26 of the Constitution, as were limitations on teaching and broadcasting of minority languages in 2002 (Commission of the European Communities 2002: 41). In 2004, the TRT commenced broadcasting short programmes in minority languages, including Kırmançı and Zaza Kurdish (Ankara Bürosu 2004). Despite bureaucratic resistance, teaching of minority languages started in private schools in several Turkish cities (Commission of the European Communities 2004: 49). A move with great symbolic significance was the release of the prominent Kurdish political prisoners Leyla Zana, Hatip Dicle, Selim Sadak and Orhan Doğan in July 2004. Their case had attracted considerable international attention and their release had become a test case for Turkey’s convergence with EU democratic standards.

The reformulation of Turkish state policies regarding the Kurds culminated in August 2005 when Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Diyarbakır (Economist Europe Section 2005). In his statements, he became the first Prime Minister to admit the existence of a Kurdish problem in Turkey. Erdoğan added that the state had made serious political and administrative mistakes in the past in its treatment of citizens of Kurdish descent and other minority groups; this, however, could
not serve as a pretext for supporting terrorism. Erdoğan finally pointed out that like many other problems in Turkey, the Kurdish issue should be dealt with within the framework of Turkey’s democratization process (İstanbul Bürosu 13 August 2005; Keskin 2005; Köylü 2005). Although Erdoğan’s statements attracted support from some Kurdish intellectuals, Turkish liberals and associations like TÜSİAD, this was not reciprocated by the Kurdish political leadership (Ankara Bürosu 2005; İstanbul Bürosu 17 August 2005; Şahin 2005). Interestingly, Turkish and Kurdish nationalists found common ground in attacking what the Prime Minister had said. The leader of the major opposition party Deniz Baykal accused Erdoğan of ‘flirting’ with the terrorists (Doğan Haber Ajansi (DHA) 2005; Yetkin 2005), while Kurdish political figures closely affiliated with the PKK showed similar discontent (Şahin 2005).

Kurdish Political Participation

Tribalism and peripheralization have been the most important determinants in the formation of Kurdish political participation patterns. While tribalism allowed for the survival of strong parochial elements in Kurdish patterns of political participation, the political and social marginalization of Turkey’s Kurds facilitated the adoption of an adversarial approach toward the Turkish state. The rise of civil society movements since the 1960s has allowed for the articulation of Kurdish political participation, while urbanization has contributed to the alleviation of its diverging points.

The tribal base of Kurdish social organization in south-eastern Turkey has had deep historical roots. When Atatürk launched his nation-building programme in the aftermath of the Lausanne Treaty, which confirmed Turkish sovereignty over Kurdish-populated eastern and south-eastern Anatolian provinces, he met with resistance, which was also based on the parochial political culture of the local population. As political space was not separated from religious and social space, there were no specialized political roles in the local society that could be undertaken by the state. Kurdish tribal groups were accustomed to a minimal presence of the central state, whose interest was limited to tax collection and male conscription without limiting the fundamental religious and social values of their micro-societies. When republican Turkey attempted to enforce its Westernization programme, it disturbed the perennial balance of state–society relations by separating the political from the social and religious. Tribal, religious and local affiliations were disregarded, and citizenship of republican Turkey was seen as the sole acceptable affiliation. The Turkish state was actively introducing a novel type of citizenship, which could not tolerate the continuation of alternative allegiances. Kurdish uprisings were suppressed by the Turkish armed forces, yet the dissemination of a civic Turkish identity among Turkey’s Kurdish population was not as successful. On the contrary, parochial elements survived and contributed in the formation of distinct patterns of Kurdish political participation in republican Turkey.

Patterns of Kurdish political participation were also influenced by the centre–periphery divide within the Turkish state and society. Since the beginning of the Tanzimat in the nineteenth century, Ottoman modernization was characterized by an effort to bring the Ottoman periphery under the firm control of the Ottoman state
administration and elites. The same struggle continued in republican years, when the Kemalist elite attempted to take Turkey’s periphery under its full ideological control. Kurds were among the biggest peripheral groups, and state efforts at ideological proselytization often met with opposition. While a significant part of Turkey’s Kurdish population was eventually co-opted, other Kurds resisted the imposition of Turkish national identity, championing the end of the centre’s domination over the periphery. In order to achieve this, they engaged in political participation activities. Kurdish political extremism and terrorism could be viewed as unfortunate outcomes of Kurdish political mobilization. The obdurate opposition of the Turkish state to any recognition of Kurdish minority rights was instrumental in this radicalization process.

Religion, levels of economic development and urbanization maintained their importance in defining party preferences of Kurds. Religiosity often meant less allegiance toward Kurdish political mobilization, which had, at least in the beginning, a distinct socialist underpinning (Poulton 1997: 209–212). Nonetheless, the case was the contrary for those observant Sunni Kurds who did not belong to the dominant Hanefi school. Shafi Sunni Kurds, quite populous in Turkey’s eastern provinces such as Hakkâri, did not tend to vote for Hanefi Islamist political parties and were more persistent supporters of Kurdish minority parties than Hanefi Sunni Kurds (Güneş-Ayata & Ayata 2002: 142–143). Levels of economic development also seemed to have a bearing on party preferences. In the western part of south-eastern Turkey, which had disproportionately benefited from the large government-funded development projects (such as the provinces of Gaziantep, Urfa and Adıyaman), support for Kurdish political parties remained considerably less than the estimated percentage of Kurdish minority population in these provinces (Güneş-Ayata & Ayata 2002: 143).

The division between urban and rural Kurds has, interestingly, led to bifurcated results. Kurdish migration towards the urban centres of western Turkey has been negatively correlated with voting for Kurdish political parties. Migrating Kurds to Turkey’s big cities have generally tended to vote not on the basis of their ethnic affiliation but rather on socioeconomic factors. They have followed the voting patterns that pertain to all Turkish citizens of their socioeconomic status irrespective of their ethnic descent. Thus, they gave considerable support to the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi—AKP) in the 2002 elections. Nonetheless, within the south-eastern provinces, Kurdish political parties tend to attract more support in urban areas, such as Diyarbakir and Batman, often populated by people displaced by the military operations against the PKK in the 1990s. In adjacent rural areas local tribal patronage networks often linked with mainstream political parties, and particularly the True Path Party (Doğru Yol Partisi-DYP), have successfully diverted electoral preferences away from Kurdish political parties. The strong hold of Kurdish political parties is compromised only in cities hosting a considerable Arab population, such as Mardin and Siirt, whose voting patterns follow general voting trends (Güneş-Ayata & Ayata 2002: 142–145).

An additional obstacle to the effective political participation of the Kurdish minority turned out to be state legislation. Constitutional and legal limitations on the freedom of association and the 10 per cent threshold for parliamentary participation of
political parties, which was set by the 1983 electoral law, were clear examples of this. According to Article 33 of the 1982 Constitution, associations were prohibited from pursuing political aims, engaging in political activities, receiving support from or giving support to political parties, or taking joint action with labour unions, public professional organizations or foundations. Associations could normally be dissolved on the decision of a judge, or suspended by the competent (administrative) authority pending a court decision in cases where delay was deemed to endanger the ‘indivisible integrity of the State with its territory and nation, national security, national sovereignty, public order, the protection of the rights and freedoms of others, or the prevention of offences’. The Law on Associations, which was also promulgated under the military regime in 1983, followed the same illiberal line (Göymen 2004: 5). Founding an association for the purpose of engaging in any activity on the grounds of or in the name of any region, race, social class, religion or sect was banned. Relations with international associations were also forbidden, and associations could not use languages other than Turkish in their official contacts. Finally, the grounds for banning an association were loosely described, so maximum state intervention was allowed (Grigoriadis 2005: 149–150).

Obstacles to Kurdish political participation were also to be found in legislation on political parties and elections. According to Article 81 of the Political Parties Law, political parties were prohibited from claiming ‘that minorities exist in the Turkish Republic based on national, religious, confessional, racial or language differences’. This Article led to the closure of several Kurdish-affiliated political parties. Additionally, Article 81§2 of the same Law prohibited using a language other than Turkish:

… in writing and printing party statutes or programmes; at congresses; at meetings in open air or indoor gatherings; at meetings and in propaganda; in placards, pictures, phonograph records, voice and visual tapes, brochures and statements.

Finally, Article 58 of the Law Concerning Fundamental Provisions on Elections and Voter Registries forbade the use of languages other than Turkish in ‘propaganda disseminated via radio or television as well as in other election propaganda’ (Kaya & Baldwin 2004: 13–15).

The 1983 electoral law proved to be an insurmountable obstacle for Kurdish political parties. While Kurdish political parties fared well in the eastern and south-eastern provinces of Turkey, where the Kurdish minority lived, it did not manage to attract the Kurdish vote in Turkey’s urban centres. Under their various reincarnations (HEP, DEP, HADEP, DEHAP), Kurdish political parties failed even to approach the 10 per cent barrier.9 Like other small political parties, the vote of Kurdish political parties was not translated into parliamentary seats, thanks to an electoral system aiming to provide strong and stable governments.

It should be noted that there were no limitations to the political participation of those Kurds who decided to discard their Kurdish identity and enter the political arena as Turks. Kurdish—and any other ethnic—descent has not been a barrier to entering Turkish politics, provided one fully adopted Kemalist civic nationalism. The highest ranks of Turkish politics,10 bureaucracy and military were open to Turkish citizens of
Kurdish descent but only under the condition that they jettisoned their Kurdish identity. As Kymlicka accurately observed:

The problem is not that Turkey refuses to accept Kurds as Turkish citizens. The problem is precisely its attempt to force Kurds to see themselves as Turks. (Kymlicka 1999: 134)

While this showed that Turkish civic nationalism did not object to the possibility of voluntary assimilation by ethnic Kurds, it also highlighted the problems faced by those Kurds who insisted on claiming a separate ethnic identity.

**Radicalism as a Result of Political Marginalization**

The worst consequence of the marginalization of Kurdish political movements has been the prevalence of intransigence and radicalism within them. This was the case not only in the 1980s but also since the late 1990s when the course of Turkey’s democratization gained speed. One would expect that the Kurdish political movement in Turkey would join forces with Turkish democratic forces in order to achieve a non-violent resolution to the Kurdish issue. Nonetheless, the Kurdish political leadership failed to adapt to the changing political environment and address the Kurdish question from a liberal democratic perspective and, thus, to contribute effectively to the debate on the democratization of Turkey. Internal differences and unwillingness to unconditionally object to PKK terrorist practices under the new circumstances of a democratizing Turkish state disillusioned those who believed that Kurdish political leaders could make a major contribution to Turkey’s democratic consolidation (see for example Belge 2006b). One expected a Kurdish political movement that would spearhead the cause of democratic consolidation in Turkey. Yet it proved to be absent from the debate that swept through Turkish society as the prospect of Turkey’s accession to the European Union catalyzed the process of democratic reform. Kurdish intellectuals proved unable to respond to the changes that took place in Turkish society in order to defend Kurdish minority rights effectively at the political level as an indispensable part of Turkey’s democratic consolidation process (Belge 2006a and Belge 2006b). Their refusal to openly denounce the terrorist activity of the PKK (which resumed its operations in 2004) under the new circumstances set by Turkey’s democratic reform process provided ammunition to those who identified the Kurdish human rights movement with terrorism and separatist nationalism. In fact, the resumption of PKK operations did anything but serve Turkey’s democratic reform process. Instead, its opponents were now able to argue that it allowed for the recuperation of the PKK operational capabilities.

**Political Participation of Minorities in Turkey: the Alevis**

**Alevis in Republican Turkey**

Alevis,¹¹ the second most numerous minority in republican Turkey, have attracted increasing attention since the 1960s, due to the largely unexpected revival of their communal identity. At a moment when differences between Sunni and Alevi Islam seemed to lose their significance in a secular political and social environment, Alevis
were expected to merge with the mass of the Turkish secular population. However, Islamic divisions retained considerable social significance (Frey 1965: 147), and Alevi identity became the focus of political and cultural mobilization for a significant part of Turkey’s population (Çamuroğlu 1998: 79–84).12

1990s Onwards

Two events marked the course of Alevi identity politics in the 1990s. In July 1993, a conference on the occasion of the Alevi Pir Sultan Abdal festival was attacked by a mob of Islamist fanatics. The hotel which served as a venue for the event was set on fire and seventeen participants died (Küçük 2002: 907–909). In March 1995, riots erupted in the poor and largely Alevi Istanbul neighbourhood of Gazi, which took on a sectarian dimension. Fifteen Alevi were killed in clashes with police forces.13 These events, reminiscent of organized attacks against Alevis in the 1970s by state-connected ultrarightist groups, raised mistrust against state authorities and a feeling of threat by political Islam. These were instrumental in strengthening a sense of common identity among Alevis. Alevi associations demanded the inclusion of Alevi Islam in state religious education curricula and official recognition of Alevi Islam not as a subdivision of Sunni Islam but as a different religious denomination with its own rich tradition (Zeidan 1999: 81), while they expanded their activities in the field of mass media (Ergün & Saymaz 7 February 2006). A considerable rise in the public visibility of Alevi identity in the 1990s provided evidence for fruitful ideological fermentation on the meaning of present and future Alevism (Şimşek 2004: 127–130).

Meanwhile, the process of Turkey’s convergence with EU democratic norms and standards had a positive impact on the status of Alevis in Turkey. Alevis found a powerful ally in their effort to claim equal status with Sunnis in the eyes of the state. Issues such as the pro-Sunni bias of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, the ban on Alevi associations and absence of any reference to Alevis in school religious textbooks were addressed by EU Commission reports and steps were made towards improvement. Reform was also translated into progress, as far as freedom of association was concerned. While republican legislation had traditionally banned associations formed on the basis of ethnicity and religion, in April 2003 the previously banned ‘Cultural Association of the Union of Alevi and Bektaşı Formations’ was granted legal status and allowed to continue its operations (Commission of the European Communities 2003: 36). The EU Commission joined forces with Alevis in demanding the reform of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, which would allow proportional Alevi access to state funding resources currently monopolized by Sunnis (Kara 2004: 194–196). While the AKP government did little to address these problems, mainstream media showed increased interest in Alevi human rights.14

Alevi Political Participation15

Alevi political participation patterns were formed under the influence of a long tradition of resistance and peripheralization. Since the Ottoman era, Alevis had been
disproportionately represented among the rural and dispossessed populations of Central and Eastern Anatolia, which had little—if any—influence on state affairs. This situation changed only marginally in the republican period, as the basic elements of centre–periphery relations in the late Ottoman Empire persisted (Mardin 1973: 308–309). Overt support of Atatürk and his modernization programme also crucially influenced Alevi political participation patterns (Shankland 1999: 152–154). Multi-party politics, urbanization and political liberalization steps facilitated the emergence of Alevi civil society movements, which aimed at renegotiating centre–periphery relations and securing greater Alevi influence in the Turkish state and society. Despite setbacks brought about by political turmoil, a growing degree of Alevi self-consciousness and mobilization has been observed since the 1960s. Nonetheless, the revival of the 1960s showed that Alevi patterns of political participation maintained a considerable degree of independence and originality (Küçük 2000: 189–192). Unlike what many had predicted, Alevis did not submerge into the Turkish left but claimed a distinct political role, albeit not through a sectarian political party. Attempts to found an Alevi political party did not meet with success.

As in the case of the Kurds, legal limitations on the freedom of association and the 10 per cent electoral threshold posed additional obstacles in the 1980s. Legislation, which has already been mentioned in the Kurdish case, equally hampered Alevi political participation. Article 81 of the Political Parties Law banned the foundation of a political party overtly representing the Alevi minority. Founding an Alevi association was also prohibited by the Constitution and the Law on Associations. Limitations to the use of minority languages for political purposes also affected Kurdish-speaking Alevis. The 10 per cent electoral threshold also minimized the chances of success for an Alevi political party as it created the opinion that a vote for such a party, which had no reasonable chances of reaching the threshold, would be a ‘lost vote’. Alevi votes have been dispersed among political parties, although a strong affiliation with the CHP has remained a common theme. Alevi identification with the Kemalist reform and the secularist nature of the state also meant that they would tend to support the party with the strongest secularist credentials.16 The rise of political Islam and the gradual return of Islam into the Turkish public sphere made the identification of Alevis with the CHP even more pronounced (Schüler 2000: 229–242). According to recent research results, 72 per cent of Alevis living in Istanbul voted for the CHP, while this percentage fell to 58 per cent among rural Alevis (Doğan 2004). It is highly indicative that even in the post-Islamist AKP, which holds about two-thirds of the 550 seats in the Turkish Parliament, there is not a single Alevi Member of Parliament (Ergin 2004). The AKP does not include Alevi candidates on its party lists, while Alevi voters respond by voting for the party in insignificant numbers. According to an opinion poll organized before the elections of November 2002, the AKP received 6.5 per cent of the Alevi vote. This rose to 10 per cent in rural areas (Doğan 2004). More recent research has again substantiated the positive correlation between Alevism and votes for the CHP and a negative correlation between Alevism and votes for the AKP (Çarkoğlu 2005: 286–287). This provides evidence of how sectarian cleavages maintain their significance in
republican Turkey as well as how urbanization affects the voting behaviour of Alevis. Alevis argue that there are insurmountable philosophical differences between them and the AKP. As the president of Cem Vakfı, one of the most prominent Alevi associations, argued:

Even if the members of the AKP who come from the ‘National View’ (Milli Görüş) say ‘we changed’, it is difficult to abandon a philosophical worldview maintained for years. They are bound to an understanding which respects the Umayyad view of Sunni Islam, and gives priority to formalism. With such an understanding, it is difficult to get along well with Alevi views which give priority not to formalism but to the essence of Islam. Just their view regarding the position of women in society suffices to show that philosophical separation. (Ergin 2004)

Finally, Alevi political participation was also affected by ambivalence as to whether they should claim a religious minority status. The negative baggage of the term in Turkish political discourse deterred many Alevis from using the term for themselves. As republican historiography had elevated Alevis to the standard-bearers of Turkishness (Küçük 2002: 901–902), these Alevis felt uncomfortable with a term that had been identified with non-Muslims, lack of patriotism, second-class citizen status and collaboration with foreign powers. According to these views, Alevi political participation could only occur through mainstream Turkish political parties and associations rather than formations that would question the Turkishness of Alevis by putting forward a minority status claim.

Conclusions

This paper has attempted to show how state policies and historical experiences have affected the formation of distinct patterns of political participation among Turkey’s Kurds and Alevis. The political participation of Turkey’s main minority groups has been relatively weak. The responsibility of state legislation and policies in obstructing effective political participation of Turkey’s Kurds and Alevis has become clear. Either through establishing a 10 per cent electoral threshold, or through limiting the use of minority languages in political campaigns and banning parties or associations based on ethnicity and religion, political participation of Turkey’s Kurds and Alevis has met with serious handicaps. On the other hand, it has also turned out that history could provide a partial explanation of the situation. This includes the inability of Turkey’s Kurds to produce a strong political movement that would clearly oppose violence and the methods of the PKK (and actively campaign for Turkey’s full democratic consolidation), and the atavistic identification of many Alevis with the CHP and its anti-minority policies.

In the case of the Kurds, political elites failed to escape the radicalization that came about as a result of long peripheralization policies and state repression. The failure to produce a party repudiating political violence has been characteristic. Had that been the case, it would be able to address the Kurdish issue as an aspect of Turkey’s general democratic deficit, and campaign for Turkey’s democratic consolidation together with like-minded Turks. The unwillingness of the leadership of the DEHAP and the released
former leaders of the HEP to cooperate and to dissociate from the politics and practices of the PKK—even in the context of democratization reforms and the start of Turkey’s EU accession negotiations—has greatly hampered the effective integration of Turkey’s Kurds into the mainstream political system.

In the case of the Alevis, the ban on religion-based parties and associations and the rise of Sunni Islam into a primary feature of Turkish politics led many Alevis to withdraw from independent political mobilization, and increasingly to identify with nationalistic secularist centre-left parties. Adopting the role of the standard-bearer of Turkishness and denying a minority status for themselves spelled no good omen for the protection of Alevi heritage. The lack of formidable Alevi political participation expressed through strong autonomous associations and political parties meant that the religious and cultural rights of a large part of Turkey’s population would not be effectively represented.

The problematic political participation of Kurds and Alevis also highlighted a serious flaw in Turkey’s democratic political system. Ever since the 1999 Helsinki EU Council decision transformed the prospect of Turkey’s EU membership into a realistic possibility, Turkey’s democratic system has undergone significant changes. Although these helped create positive steps towards its gradual transformation from a procedural to a substantive democratic model, the weak integration of Kurds and Alevis into the Turkish political system has highlighted one of the most serious remaining flaws of Turkish democracy: the ineffective political participation of minorities. In the case of the Kurds, this flaw also resulted in radicalism and a vicious circle of violence, which posed a grave threat to the continuation of Turkey’s democratization process.

Several political measures can help improve the quality of political participation of Kurds and Alevis. Lifting the 10 per cent election threshold for parliamentary representation is an example. This measure has distorted the political map of Turkey and formed a formidable barrier to political participation. Replacing this threshold with a significantly lower one would greatly contribute to the growth of effective political participation. The Turkish political system is able to accommodate a larger number of political parties, including those representing minority groups. Fears that political fragmentation would lead to instability and ineffective government may refer to experiences of the 1970s but do not necessarily mirror the political situation of a democratizing Turkey in the course of EU accession negotiations. Providing hitherto marginalized groups with a stake within a Turkish democratic political system will in fact strengthen it. Co-opting Kurds and Alevis who wish to participate as such in politics will greatly contribute to the strengthening of the minority voice—one that advocates the peaceful coexistence and resolution of existing human rights problems, and that will marginalize radical views. The effect will be similar of the lifting of all remaining restrictions in the use of minority languages in political party activities and the formation of political parties and associations. These steps are also required in the context of the reform of human and minority rights legislation. Achieving active political participation of all its citizens regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion and race will remove a serious obstacle to Turkey’s democratic consolidation and will enhance the long-term stability of its political system.
Notes

[1] For more information on Turkish minority policies, see Alexandris (1983), Yıldız (2001) and Aktar (2000).

[2] The two groups also coalesce, as there are a considerable number of Alevi Zaza-speaking Kurds in the province of Tunceli.


[5] The case of the Turkish author and columnist Ahmet Altan is characteristic. Altan was found guilty for an article in support of Kurdish rights in Turkey. See Altan (1995).

[6] The fate was similar of three successor parties of the HEP, the Freedom and Democracy Party ( Özgürlük ve Demokrasi Partisi-OZDEP), the Democracy Party (Demokrasi Partisi-DEP) and the People’s Democratic Party ( Halkın Demokrasi Partisi-HADEP), which were shut down in 1993, 1994 and 2003 respectively (Güney 2002: 122–127). The HADEP was succeeded by the Democratic People’s Party (Demokratik Halk Partisi-DEHAP), which is still in operation.


[8] The migration of a large part of Turkey’s rural Kurdish population from eastern and southeastern Turkey to urban centres in the west of the country, part of a gigantic urbanization trend in post-Second World War Turkey, greatly facilitated state homogenization programmes. These populations, uprooted from their original communities and in need of recognition in their new social environment, were more prone to assimilation.


[10] Many of the leading political and military figures in republican Turkey were claimed to be of—at least partial—Kurdish descent, Turgut Özal being the prime example.

[11] Alevis represented heterodox Islam in the Anatolian provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Their version of popular Islam comprised a blend of orthodox Sunni Islam with Shiite Islamic, Christian and other local religious and cultural elements. Sunni Muslims classified Alevis as infidels (gâvur), and Alevis were exposed to Ottoman state discrimination, which was positively correlated with the rising role of Sunni Islam as a shaping factor of late Ottoman politics and identity. For more information on Alevis, see Olsson et al. (1998), Melikoff (1999), Kaleli (2000), Erman and Göker (2000), Schüler (2000), Shankland (2001) and Canbakal (2005).

[12] Although estimating the number of Alevis in Turkey is a notoriously difficult task given that dissimulation (takiyye) is a common practice between them, it is believed that Alevis account for 15 to 20 per cent of the Turkish population. Some scholars raise this figure to 25 per cent. See Vorhoff (1995: 32–33) cited by Zeidan (1999: 74).


[15] Studying Alevi political participation patterns has been complicated by the incidence of Alevi dissimulation. As many Alevis prefer to hide their identity, identifying an Alevi through opinion polls can often become a very arduous task (Çarkoğlu 2005: 281–283).


[17] Yet in recent years there has been evidence that Alevi voters have increasingly supported non-Islamist parties coming from the centre and the centre-right (Poulton 1997: 254–255).

[18] The ‘National View’, founded in the late 1960s, was the first Islamist political movement in republican Turkey.

[19] When the EU Commission reports used the term ‘minority’ to describe Alevis, it was protested by some Alevi representatives (İstanbul Bürosu 2004). This resulted in the use of the


References


