

“Government-Alevi relations face tough challenges”

Interview YONCA POYRAZ DOĞAN

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There are millions of Alevis who have become more demanding of the government, and there is the government, which has become more open to meeting their demands; however, the rift between them is still wide. Why?

The query was among many other questions that journalist and writer Oral Çalışlar tried to find answers to in his new book “Aleviler: Vali de Olmak İstiyoruz General de” (Alevis: We too Want to Be Governors and Generals). For that he interviewed the most prominent members of the Alevi community, a religious group thought to have between 6 million and 12 million adherents.

Çalışlar told Sunday’s Zaman that the most striking discovery for him in the process has been that “the crisis between the Alevis and the government has been deep.” He said this is partly because of the government’s approach to the problems of the Alevis, and partly because the Alevis are not homogenous.

“For example, even though the most influential civil society leaders of the Alevi community do not want their religious leaders [dedes] to be granted a monthly salary, the government wants to do it,” Çalışlar said.

Asked how the government would be able to act on the issue, which does not have universal support among several Alevi organizations or Alevis on the street, Çalışlar said the government should not try to define the issue at hand according to its own terms.

“The government defines some things without having a right to define them,” he said, referring to some government leaders’ efforts to communicate with only some Alevi leaders.

Spearheading the attempt is Reha Çamuroğlu, a deputy of Alevi origin from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party). Some Alevi leaders have been complaining that Çamuroğlu has had meetings with some Alevi leaders who emphasize their identity as “Muslims” and not the others.

“The government has no right to define Alevism for the Alevis themselves. There are indeed more Alevis who do not stress their identity as ‘Muslims’ but other qualities of Alevism. The government should see those differences as richness in their own belief system,” he said, adding that otherwise the issue would serve to create a deep division within the Alevi community, which is already too skeptical toward the government’s approaches.

Çalışlar stresses that “the lack of homogeneity among the Alevis” over the issue of making dedes government employees presents a problem for the government but that there is a need to understand that Alevi culture, which has rural roots and rituals, has been going through an identity crisis in urban areas.

“Alevism has been a civilian institution throughout its history. They have never come under government or a civilian authority. If you bring their dedes under the authority of the government, Alevism would no longer be Alevism,” Çalışlar said.

This idea has been stressed by the Alevi Bektaşî Federation (ABF), which has about 200,000 members and

more than 200 Alevi organizations under it. In November, they organized a “Grand Rally” in Ankara, gathering thousands of Alevi demonstrators together to draw attention to their problems and demands. Those demands included the abolishment of compulsory religion classes in public schools, the recognition of Alevi prayer houses (cemevis) as places of worship, the abolishment of the Prime Ministry’s Directorate of Religious Affairs and the creation of a museum at the site of the Madımak Hotel, where 37 Alevis were killed 15 years ago.

Even though most Alevis agree on those demands voiced at the rally, some Alevi organizations, including the Cem Foundation, oppose them. Foundation Chairman İzzetin Doğan, who emphasizes Alevis’ “Muslim” identity, claimed that the people participating in the rally were Marxists who were cooperating with the pro-Kurdish movement and don’t know anything about Alevi beliefs. Supporters of the rally, on the other hand, argued that Doğan’s aim is to be the chairman of an Alevi department in the Directorate of Religious Affairs if such a department is established. Currently, the directorate only finances the religious affairs of the country’s Sunni majority.

‘Government tries to reconcile’

The government has continued its reconciliation efforts with the Alevi community. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan attended the fast-breaking dinner that was held on Wednesday for the month of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar. Muharram is a time of mourning and fasting for Alevis because Husain, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, and his family were murdered on the 10th of this month in 680. Erdoğan first attended the Alevi fast-breaking last year.

Çalışlar said ABF President Ali Balkız was not invited to the fast-breaking but Doğan was. Balkız has been critical of the government and said the AK Party is trying to divide the Alevi community so as to render it ineffective and to create an “Alevi Islam,” meaning “moderate Islam,” a term first used by the United States.

“If the Alevis want to solve their problems with the government, they should not take everything coming from the government as ‘dangerous’ and as a ‘threat.’ Sunnis try to change their attitudes as well. The government is trying to establish an environment allowing dialogue with Alevis,” Çalışlar said.

And the government has some concrete plans on how to address some of the demands of the Alevis. Among them, paying the electricity and water bills of cemevis, which are Alevi places of worship. The government is also planning to make state-run religious classes noncompulsory in 2009. Alevis claim that forcing children to attend compulsory religion courses, which largely focus on Sunni Islam, violates individual rights and freedoms, and say these courses should be abolished.

Another government plan to win Alevi support is to turn the Madımak Hotel, where, in 1993, Alevi intellectuals were killed in a fire set by an angry mob, into a museum. The hotel is still operating today.

At the end of last year, there was an apology from Culture and Tourism Minister Ertuğrul Günay. Delivering a speech at the Alevi Research Institute, he said, “As a current member of the government, I apologize for all of the mistakes that have happened in the past.” He emphasized that Alevis have endured horrific incidents such as the Kahramanmaraş massacre in 1978, the events that took place in Çorum in 1980 and the fire at the Madımak Hotel. He added that despite serious provocations, Alevis have remained loyal to their country.

Also recalling the past events that Alevis were subjected to, Çalışlar said there has been a long period of mistrust by Alevis toward the government and that it will take time to heal.

Meanwhile, he said Alevis struggle to cope with the changes with their evolving identity in cities. “They go through a crisis in expressing themselves because traditional Alevism is based on a rural culture,” he said. “It has its own rituals, but in the cities, they live it differently.”

An example is the cemevi, which does not exist in Alevi villages.

“There is no cemevi but rather cem [Alevi ritual] in their villages done in regular houses,” he said.

“Cemevis in the cities serve not only as places of worship but also as cultural centers. There are some other cultural institutions like this. Dedes, for example, traditionally do not go through a formal education. The Alevi community is now discussing whether dedes can be formally educated.”

Sources

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