

Political Alevism versus Political Sunnism: Convergences and Divergences

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It should be noted that the observations and evaluations presented in this paper as a contribution to a comparison of Alevi and Sunni political activity are essentially the comments of a journalist who has given particular attention to the examination of the Sunni Islamist movement. At the same time, I should point out that a large amount of the material utilised in this comparison was amassed during work on the preparation of a 12 day series on “Alevi Activity” for the Istanbul daily *Milliyet* in 1995. At the same time, for the reader’s information, I should like to add that I myself am a Sunni by origin, but that I spent my childhood and early youth in a predominantly Alevi neighbourhood and spent some time as a member of a predominantly Alevi left wing political movement.

Any comparison of Alevi and Sunni activity tends to be both difficult and provocative, this being a subject which tends to embarrass activists on both sides and which they would all prefer to avoid. For example, the Alevi, who present themselves as the “humanist face of Islam” are unwilling to be



Alevis paying their respect to Atatürk at his mausoleum Anitkabir, in Ankara.

placed on a level with the Sunnis, whom they regard as the “aggressive face” of the same Islam. The leaders of the Alevi movement regard themselves as “progressive” and the leaders of the Sunni movement as “reactionary”.

Perhaps we should mention here that while accepting the existence among the Alevi of an engagement in every type of theological and cultural activity, in other words, in a search for an individual identity, I regard the Alevi activity carried on in Turkey in recent years as essentially political in nature.

In the same way, the Sunni Islamists, insofar as they constitute the vast majority of the population, reject any idea of equality with the Alevi. Indeed, they go so far as to regard Alevism as a non-Islamic, heretical and deviant trend.

As in other social phenomena of this kind, each side both follows and influences the other. In other words, they are utterly dependent on each other. It is quite obvious that Alevi political activity was a direct response to the rise of Sunni Islamism in the 1980s. Thus the most important point in the Alevi political agenda is the preservation and development of the principle of secularism in Turkey and the struggle, in this connection,

with “Sunni fundamentalism”. This can undoubtedly be traced to the fact that Alevi constitute a much smaller part of the population than the Sunni.

Although it would be incorrect to claim that the struggle against the Alevi holds prime place on the political agenda of the Sunni Islamists, it is significant that the Central and Southern Anatolian regions in which, as a result of both population make-up and historical development, Alevi-Sunni tension is at its highest, are exactly those regions in which the rise of the Sunni Islamist movement which began in the 1980s has been most striking. It is no secret that the Sunni harbour a strong, though concealed, antipathy towards their Alevi compatriots and that they have therefore converted each of these regions into a fortress.

The Alevi tend to exaggerate the strength of the Sunni and by stressing their minority situation hope to win greater sympathy and support. In the same way, the Sunni Islamists endeavour to stress their majority status by underrating the strength of the Alevi presence in other words, quite apart from religious and other possible sources of tension, the Alevi-Sunni tension is of exactly the same nature as that existing between any other minority and majority group.

The Strategy of the Sunni Islamists

There is a very simple answer to the question “How do the Sunni Islamists view Alevism?” They generally just ignore it. And even when they take Alevism into consideration they form a completely superficial view of the true dynamics of Alevi activity. This superficial view is most strikingly expressed in a favourite saying of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Lord Mayor of Istanbul: “If Alevism consists of a love of Ali then I too, am an Alevi!” This statement might at first appear to be based simply on ignorance but actually it is an outright denial of Alevism. To the Alevi, this type of approach, which reduces Alevism to a devotion to Ali, is an insult to their faith.

The Sunni Islamists Combine this superficial attitude towards the problem and the denial of Alevism which it entails with a deliberate policy of assimilation. The essential aim of the Sunni Islamists is to reduce Islam to a single interpretation (that of Sunnism) and call upon all Alevi who regard themselves as Muslims to attend worship in the mosque. That is why the process of opening mosques in Alevi villages, which crowned the policy of suppression of the Alevi and their assimilation to the Sunni form of the faith implemented by the 12 September military regime, won such wide support from the Sunni Islamists.

The radical interpretation of political Islamism, which markedly increased in strength following the revolution in Iran, served as a sort of “agent” of Iran in forwarding a policy of “Caferisation”¹ the Alevi in line with the Teheran-centred strat-

¹ Ja’far *as-Şadiq* (d. 148/765), the 6th Shii imam. He is often viewed as a unifying figure of Shia, since he appeared before the split into the “seven” and “twelve” branches.



Alevi gathering in the Cem Kültür Evi in Yenibosna (İstanbul).

egy of bringing the sects closer together. As Caferism is the Shiite movement closest to Sunnism, some of the less radical Sunni Islamists have encouraged the Caferisation of the Alevi. It would appear that Çorum was chosen as a pilot area for this policy, but in spite of all efforts the strategy proved a failure.

Convergences

In spite of all the differences between them, there are also certain resemblances between the Alevi and Sunni Islamist trends. For example, as we mentioned above, Alevi activity began as a reaction to Sunni Islamism and as a sort of imitation of that trend. In the 1970s, while the Alevi were active in all sorts of associations, trade unions and professional organisations, the Sunni Islamists preferred to congregate in the more elitist foundations. At the present day, Alevi have for the first time in history established foundations enabling them to engage in social activities such as education and communication, while the Sunni Islamists have formed associations in a variety of fields and taken a more effective rôle in certain professional organisations.

At one time, the Alevi experimented with political activity in conjunction with a single party, in this case the *Birlik Partisi* (Union Party), but now they are saying “The Sunni have their own parties, why shouldn’t we have one of our own?” As a result of such discussions the *Demokratik Barış Hareketi* (Democratic Peace Movement) was founded as a specifically Alevi party. The founders of this party declare that their door is also

open to the Sunni, in exactly the same way as the leaders of the *Refah Partisi* (Welfare Party) have declared that their door is open to the Alevi.

Another point of resemblance between these two opposing movements is that although each presents a monolithic appearance neither is more than an aggregate of individual groups, trends, environments and personalities. All these different factions are locked in a fierce struggle one with the other. Both movements comprise elements opposed to the system, but in my opinion neither is under the control of revolutionary or radical elements. In other words, neither current is directly opposed to the regime.

Both currents are controlled mainly by members of the professional middle classes (engineers, doctors, lawyers, etc.) and enjoy wide support from the business community. At the same time, both currents draw their strength predominantly from grass roots organisations (more particularly the poor and destitute in the large cities, women and young people). Consequently, both currents are forced to conceal the potential for internal conflict and dissension that they both harbour by inflaming and sustaining passions against “the other”.

Alevi activity is in the left-wing political tradition, but the present Alevi leaders are intent on purging the movement of extreme left wing elements and positioning the Alevi once more on the centre left. Nor should it be forgotten that certain of them are making overtures to the centre right. Sunni Islamism, on the other hand, is traditionally placed on the right, but, under the *Refah Partisi* government (June 1996-June 1997), the *Refah Partisi* itself was obviously moving, in spite of its traditional elements, towards the centre and taking up a new position there. In this connection, the Sunni may be said to have stolen a march on the Alevi.

“Born Again” Muslims

Another common feature of both movements is that a struggle for power is being waged between the traditional leadership and those that have more recently been included within it. The leadership of Sunni Islamism, in the form of the *Milli Nizam Partisi* (Party of National Order), the *Milli Selamet Partisi* (Party of National Salvation) and the *Refah Partisi*, has moved from its traditional base among the *ulema* (doctors of Muslim theology) and the sheikhs of the various religious orders to professional politicians with a secular background and education. We are now witnessing a struggle for power between the traditional politicians and the young, new Islamists.

The same is true for the Alevi. Before the *dedes* (Alevi sheikhs) were able to recover from the loss of prestige resulting from the influence of the Marxist left in the 1970s, a group of “Alevi intellectuals” put forward their claim to leadership. A large proportion of these are former leftwing militants who have discovered their Alevism since the middle of the 1980s. In other words, in the 1970s the militants were in the forefront and religion was relegated to the background. Today religion is in the forefront, but the same militants retain, or endeavour to retain their influence.

An interesting point is that Sunni Islamists who, until quite recently, looked down upon the traditional Islamic way of life of the common people, have now, in the 1990s, discovered religious piety and, more importantly, are now turning towards the

furtherance of Islamism in terms of legislation, something which they formerly looked upon with disapproval. These old militants, exactly like their Alevi counterparts, are no longer content with a modest position in society and are aiming their sights on government positions.

Another of the more important features common to both movements is their male domination. The Sunni Islamists tend to avoid any discussion of the rights granted to women in their doctrine, preferring to point to and boast of the admission of women into the community. The Alevi Islamists, on the other hand, are never tired of holding forth on the rights granted to women in their doctrine, but never discuss the question why the Alevi woman has remained so passive in social, economic, cultural and political life. For example, not a single one of the "Alevi intellectuals" is a woman.

Conclusion

Alevism and Sunnism are seen as rival and even antagonistic movements. But this does not overshadow the fact that these two movements reinforce each other. One had better keep in mind that the political aspects of both these movements are not determinative. In other words, to try to explain the religious revival among Alevi and Sunni only in terms of politics will be a mistake, even though, as in this article, the political aspects easily get the upper hand over the religious.

