

Infrastructures of Urban Religious Management: Who Should Pay for the Utilities of Cemevis in Turkey?

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In Turkey, electricity and water expenses for houses of prayer, such as mosques and churches, are covered by the state. Cemevis, places of worship for Turkey's marginalized religious community of Alevi, however, cannot benefit from this regulation. By analyzing the political negotiations between the Turkish state and Alevi about cemevis' utility bills, this article argues that unequal distribution of infrastructural funds becomes a means for

governing religion in urban contexts. In so doing, I focus on a less studied dimension of infrastructural governance as an arena both to reproduce and to contest hegemonic state religiosity.

Keywords: Infrastructure, religion, state, religious minorities, electricity and water.

Introduction

On a rainy Istanbul day in December 2014, the meeting hall of the Yenibosna Cemevi, a place of worship for Turkey's marginalized Alevi religious community, was packed with excited *dedes*, Alevi religious leaders. They had travelled to Istanbul's Yenibosna neighborhood from various other cemevis across Turkey, together with journalists from Turkey's major news networks in order to attend the press declaration of the Cem Foundation, a major Alevi civil society organization. The panel of Cem Foundation representatives facing the curious audience was detailing the recent European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) decision on the status of cemevis in Turkey. Turkish law declares that electricity and water expenses for houses of prayer, such as mosques, synagogues, and churches are paid by the state budget.¹ Cemevis, however, cannot benefit from this regulation, as the state does not recognize cemevis as places of worship. Upon the case filed by the Cem Foundation, however, the ECHR ruled against the Turkish state's practice and ordered that cemevis were places of worship similar to mosques, churches, and synagogues so their electricity and water expenses should be covered from the state budget. After the representatives finished their prepared remarks, a dede from

the crowd, in a voice trembling with excitement, asked the one question everyone was curious about: “Was the Turkish state going to comply with the ruling?”

Drawing on the current controversies over who should pay for the utilities of *cemevis* in Turkey, this article examines how unequal distribution of the state’s infrastructural budget becomes a means for both reinforcing and contesting religious hierarchies in urban contexts. Although the Turkish constitution defines the state as secular, *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, (the Directorate of Religious Affairs, hereafter the *Diyanet*), a major state institution founded in 1924, establishes the hegemony of Sunni Islam in the country with its massive budget that only sponsors Sunni Islamic practice. As a community that has major religious differences from Sunni Muslims, Alevi have been marginalized for decades by this state-sponsored hegemony of Sunni Islam.² Unlike Sunni Muslims, the majority of Alevi “do not abide by the “pillars of Islam”: they do not make the pilgrimage to Mecca, do not perform the daily prayers (*namaz*), and do not fast during the Ramadan” (Es 23). The community prays in *cemevis*, which are named after their major ritual *Cem*.

Although the legal status of *cemevis* became a major arena of negotiation between the state and the Alevi community in the 1990s, in the 2000s the discussions around *cemevis* increasingly centered on their utility bill sponsorship. This focus on utility bills has in part emerged as a way around the *Diyanet*’s refusal to recognize *cemevis* as places of worship. The *Diyanet* defines its own rendition of Sunni Islam as impartial and objective, and hence as being inclusive of all variations within Islam. Under this framework, Alevism is considered an Islamic variation and Alevi are defined as already included Muslims (Shakman Hurd 418, Dressler 190). Considering the mosque as the single place of worship for all Muslims, the *Diyanet* and (hence) the state representatives resisted Alevi’s demands for official recognition of *cemevis*, on the grounds that Alevi do not need a second place of worship (mosques being the first).³

Drawing on this consistent refusal to grant place of worship status to *cemevis*, this article unravels how the state in Turkey attempts to manage the *cemevis*’ recognition problem by reducing it to a mere issue of economic distribution, ignoring the religious, social, and political inequalities that created such a situation in the first place. The discussions about a recent

reform attempt in 2014 directed at Alevi, an attempt that in fact was not put in action, revealed this situation in a striking manner. In order to reform Alevi’s status, the government proposed to expand the law that covers the utility expenses of places of worship to include *cemevis*. While doing so, however, the officials also suggested a distinction between a place of worship and a prayer room and categorized *cemevis* under the latter. Even though not actualized, this suggestion showed that the government considered covering the electricity and water expenses of *cemevis* from the state budget as an alternative way to avoid legally recognizing *cemevis* as places of worship. In so doing, it attempted to reduce the demands about *cemevis*’ legal status into a mere utility bill problem in ways that prevented Alevi having an equal footing with Sunni Muslims.

Whereas the government tried to utilize utility bill sponsorship to avoid recognizing *cemevis* as places of worship, Alevi activists, however, promoted the idea that utility coverage was in fact a way of claiming *cemevis* as places of worship. After the government did not go forward with its suggested reform plan in 2014, Alevi stopped paying for *cemevis*’ utility expenses as a counter political strategy to

highlight their status as places of worship. As the state refrained from financing infrastructural expenses, views about how to cover cemevis' electricity and water expenses came to express more strongly whether or not one considered cemevis places of worship especially for oppositional political actors.

This article focuses on such religious consequences of infrastructural governance—a rather less studied dimension of infrastructural research—and argues that the discussions surrounding the distribution of the state's infrastructural budget are a contentious political arena in which religious hierarchies are forged and contested in urban contexts. Recent ethnographic work highlights how the generation, distribution, and consumption of electricity and water, together with disruptions in any of these steps, both reinforce and challenge modes of state governance (Larkin 327, Anand 542, Von Schnitzler 20, Collier 23, Limbert 26, Schwenkel 520, Mains 3, Gupta 555, and Harvey 76). Although this literature analyzes how such governance reproduces class-based hierarchies, the question of how infrastructural management produces religious hierarchies is rarely examined. Drawing on and moving beyond these scholarly discussions, I suggest that

the state's infrastructural budget also undergirds a strategy of religious governance, rendering certain religiosities legitimate in the urban context while discrediting others. Therefore, in what follows, I examine the utility bills of cemevis in an urban setting in Turkey as a “problematic materiality” (Schwenkel 521) that is both a signifier of a group's position in the hierarchically organized realm of religion and a ground to contest state governance—a ground that feeds into the formation of counter-hegemonic political action (Coleman 458).⁴

Alevis in the Cities: Emergence of Cemevis and Alevis' Political Demands

Constituting approximately 15-25 percent of the population, Alevis compose Turkey's second largest faith community after Sunni Muslims. Although Alevis do not define themselves as Shia Muslims, the community strongly identifies with Imam Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Mohammad, and with the Karbala parables. *Ayin-i cem* or cem is at the heart of the Alevi belief. It “functions as a rite of initiation for adolescents, as a commemoration ritual for revered figures in early Islamic history [such as Ali], and as a site for the adjudication of social disputes among members of the community” (Tambar 655). The frequency and the tim-

ing of its conduct vary among different Alevi groups, as well as its duration—some cem ceremonies can last for hours. Led by a dede, the ceremony is “structured around a set of practices called the twelve services,” which, in a certain order, include rites, such as, saluting the dede, lighting candles, and turning *semah*—a dance that consists of the whirling of men and women participants in circular form, accompanied by music played by *bağlama* (Öztürkmen 252).

Cemevis, which literally mean “a house for cem or union” in Turkish, are products of the urbanization the community has experienced since the 1950s, when massive industrialization resulted in a wave of urban migration in Turkey (Tambar 23, Massicard 27, Yalçınkaya 19). Having mostly lived in predominantly Alevi villages until then, Alevis used to “gather in the houses of dedes or one of the community members,” although lodges and shrines were sometimes used as places for cem ceremonies (Es 28). Alevis founded cemevis in the cities partly because the smaller rooms of apartment buildings were not large enough for the cem gathering. In time, cemevis became the major centers for reproducing Alevi sociality in the urban contexts. They served as sites for not only carrying out essential commu-

nal services such as funerals and sacrifices but also for organizing a wide array of social and political activities—from computer and English classes to panels on Alevi problems.

As the number of cemevis in İstanbul alone increased from 3 in 1993 to 64 in 2013 (Seufert 163, T24, 15 March 2013), they “have gradually become established as “cultural centers,” which is the only viable legal status a cemevi can possibly attain” in contemporary Turkey (Es 32). This official classification is another way for maintaining the Sunni-centered description of Alevism as an Islamic variation. According to Ali Bardakoğlu, the former president of the *Diyanet*, although cemevi and mosque existed together in Turkey’s history, “the mosque existed as a place of worship, while cemevis were places of culture (*kültür evleri*) in which the traditions of a group within Islam flourished” (Tambar 662). Legal recognition of cemevis as places of worship emerged in response to this official approach to cemevis as cultural centers.

Recognition of cemevis, however, is part of a series of other demands by the rising Alevi movement since the 1990s that aim to prevent the marginalization of the community in not only religious but also social,

economic, and political terms. This multifaceted marginalization culminated in massacres such as the Sivas Massacre of 1993, in which Sunni Islamist mobs burned 33 attendees of an Alevi festival to death, and the Gazi Events of 1995, which resulted in the death of 23 individuals during the protests in an Alevi neighborhood. Besides igniting violence, unequal treatment at times has taken the form of a glass ceiling preventing Alevis from reaching high-ranking state jobs. Moreover, various other forms of daily discrimination have pushed members of the community to hide their identity in public.⁵ In order to prevent similar massacres and to achieve equal public footing, Alevi activists called for the abolition or the reformation of the obligatory religious classes in schools that only teach Sunni Islam, the provision of equal employment opportunities to Alevis in state and private sector jobs, the abolition or reformation of the *Diyanet*, and the provision of equal citizenship rights promised by the secular constitution.

Cemevis, Utility Bills, and Urban Religious Governance

In 2009, the ruling *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party, hereafter AKP) government started a process named the Alevi Initiative (*Alevi Açılımı*), which consisted of a series of

meetings between AKP officials and Alevi representatives. Although the purpose of these meetings was to address Alevis’ demands, the initiative, which lasted for almost a year, ended in 2010 with no tangible changes in legal policy (Lord 2). In the following years, the government revived reform attempts, especially during politically critical periods such as elections, and mainstream media presented such attempts as in continuity with this initial period of “Alevi Initiatives.” These subsequent reform attempts are important sites to examine how the state officials aim to address the “Alevi problem” in a reductionist way, which ignores the major expectation informing the community’s demands: achieving an equal and, more importantly, a secure public footing.

During the periods preceding the general elections, with the hopes of attracting Alevi votes, the government consistently brought the issue of cemevis’ electricity and water expenses to public attention with promises of reforming the community’s status. Similarly, in October 2014, approximately eight months before the upcoming June 7 elections in 2015, then-Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu mentioned that he was working with his team on a new reform process targeting Alevi citizens with details soon to be announced.

As revealed in officials' public statements and articles published on pro-state news media outlets, this recent reform project specifically targeted granting some form of official status to cemevis (A Haber, 23 Oct. 2014). According to an article in the pro-state newspaper *Yeni Şafak*, the prime minister and his team had two plans for reforming the status of cemevis both related to infrastructural support (*Yeni Şafak*, 13 Nov. 2014). The first plan was to cover the electricity expenses of cemevis from the state budget. The article pointed to a relatively new cabinet decree issued in April 2002 which stated that "the electricity expenses of the places of worship (mosques, prayer rooms, churches, and synagogues) are to be covered" from the state budget. The team was working on an amendment to this decree to include cemevis. The second plan was to execute the same decree to cover cemevis' water expenses.

There was no word, however, either in the article published in the pro-state newspaper or in the public statements of the prime minister about recognizing cemevis as places of worship. A statement of Prime Minister Davutoğlu revealed the reasons of this silence:

We are now working on the legal status of cemevis. There is a [...] trend [...] to organize Alevism as a separate religion. They see no difference between a cemevi and a church, a synagogue, or a mosque. We are looking for a formula that is different than this (*Milliyet*, 10 Nov. 2014).

This statement openly underlines that the government was willing to finance cemevis' utility costs as long as such coverage would not also confer the status of a place of worship on cemevis. His words highlight the concern that a laxly crafted legal formula that grants cemevis a share from the state budget could simultaneously assign the faith the status of a religion similar to other recognized religions. Such recognition would then be in contradiction with official claims about the objectivity and inclusivity of state Islam vis-à-vis Alevism. The legal formula that would allocate some of the state's infrastructural funds to cemevis, therefore, must be crafted in such a way that it would not leave any room for equating cemevis with mosques, synagogues, and churches—a rendition, in the official articulations, that could open the way for depictions of Alevism as a similarly equal religion.

Another news article more openly revealed that such reduction was a way for reinforcing, rather than dismantling, the prevalence of Sunni Islam (A Haber, 23 Oct. 2014). While covering the utility bills of cemevis from the state budget, the officials were planning to propose a distinction between a *mabet* (temple) and an *ibadet yeri* (prayer room) to clarify the legal status of cemevis. With this classification, the description went, the mosque would remain the single temple of all Muslims and its superior status would not be open to debate. Cemevis then could be considered prayer rooms. As stated in the article, the idea behind this distinction was that "every religion has only one temple that is the mosque for Islam but Muslims can pray in different places such as cemevis (*Müslümanlar cemevi gibi farklı yerlerde ibadet edebilirler*)." This was the suggested political formula that would grant legal status to cemevis as prayer rooms in a way that would not jeopardize the mosque's position as the only place of worship for all Muslims. This distinction maintained the idea that the mosque was Alevi's place of worship too, even if they preferred to pray in cemevis which had an inferior status as prayer rooms. Cemevis thus were by no means an equivalent to the mosques in this formulation.

By the end of November 2014, Davutoğlu made a public declaration to list the steps included in the Alevi reform package (Hürriyet, 23 Nov. 2014). Despite promises about covering the utility expenses of cemevis, his public address did not mention any of these plans. The prime minister's speech that day revealed that a legal formula that would guarantee cemevis a share from the state's infrastructural budget without recognizing them as places of worship was simply not possible. The preceding debates over how to cover cemevis' utility bills, however, showed how the state attempted to address the "cemevi problem" by breaking it down into the components of economic and religious demands. For the government, meeting the economic demand could only be possible as long as the demand for equal treatment in the religious realm could be isolated. Even if not executed, this plan, therefore, aimed to reinforce, rather than demolish, religious hierarchies.

Utility Bill Debates and the Possibilities of Counter-Politics

The announcement of the ECHR decision about the electricity and water expenses of cemevis in December 2014 coincided with the aftermath of Davutoğlu's reform statement.⁶ The co-occurrence of these two conflicting developments, the Turkish

government refusing, once again, to recognize cemevis while the ECHR conferring such recognition, rendered the utility bills a political hot topic. Emboldened partly by the ECHR decision, various cemevis across Turkey started a civil disobedience movement and stopped paying their electricity and water expenses. Moreover, the oppositional *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (Republican People's Party-CHP) and *Halkların Demokratik Partisi* (Peoples' Democracy Party-HDP) announced that their municipalities would cover cemevis' utility bills—in an attempt to recognize cemevis as places of worship despite the state's refusal.

These actions aimed to counter the reductionist approach of the government by endowing cemevis' utility bill coverage with even more political, religious, and affective significance and potential. By not paying or not charging cemevis' infrastructural costs, these activists and parties reinforced the idea that positions about the payment of utility bills were in fact a way of attributing place of worship status to cemevis. If the government abstained from covering cemevis' utility bills so as not to confirm this status as places of worship, with their counter political actions, Alevi activists and oppositional political parties turned the utility bill payments into

a strong political reaffirmation of cemevis' status as places of worship. In so doing, they highlighted that the sponsorship of cemevis' infrastructural expenses cannot be isolated from demands for religious equality.

Endowing utility bill payments with such political significance was a culmination of prior political actions taken by parties and activists. In 2008, for instance, the parliaments of Kuşadası and Didim municipalities, which were then run by CHP, recognized cemevis as places of worship. The first action they took after this decision was not receiving payment for the water expenses of cemevis. In 2011, a major Alevi association, *Pir Sultan Abdal Kültür ve Dayanışma Derneği*, organized one of the most creative protests in reaction to the unofficial status of cemevis. A group of *Pir Sultan* members broke down the electricity and water meters they brought to İstanbul's famous Taksim Square in order to highlight that cemevis are places of worship similar to mosques, synagogues, and churches. These actions reinforced the idea that positions about utility costs communicated views about cemevis' place of worship status.

In order to counter the protests following the 2014 reform attempt, the government

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began to cancel electricity and water services of cemevis due to their unpaid balance. This action imbued utility services with more religious significance. On March 23, 2015, for instance, Garip Dede Cemevi in Istanbul received a notice that their water service had been cancelled due to their 2232 Turkish Liras (~630 USD) worth of unpaid water bills. Members of several Alevi associations immediately gathered in front of the cemevi to protest this execution. During the protest, Rıza Eroğlu, the president of *Alevi Dernekler Federasyonu* (The Federation of Alevi Associations), stated that “they left Imam Hüseyin go without water in Karbala and now they are leaving us go without water in cemevis (*Kerbela'da İmam Hüseyin'i susuz bıraktılar burada cemevinde de bizleri*).” By establishing a historical continuity between the contemporary moment and Imam Ali's son Hüseyin's murder during the 7th century Karbala Battle, Alevi activists reinforce the idea that cemevis' utility bill demands cannot be reduced to a mere issue of economic distribution. These demands carry a history of marginalization and unequal treatment within themselves.

These political reactions in the wake of the ECHR decision and failed reform highlight how forms of state governance forged by infrastructural transformations open up

new spaces for collective action “in terms *beyond their actual material organization*” (Coleman 460, my emphasis). In this sense, controversies over who must pay for cemevis' utility bills not only reinforced existing religious hierarchies in the urban space. They also created a new political arena to contest such hierarchies.

Conclusion

Since the foundation of this country, in fact since the Ottoman times, we are an essential part of this land but we could never have our rights. We still have to pay for the electricity and water expenses of our cemevis. They do not charge mosques for those expenses but they charge us! What else can I say (April 2015, *Personal Interview*).

These are the words of an Alevi man in his fifties, describing how he feels excluded in his own country. Although he is not an active member of either an Alevi association or a cemevi, the electricity and water expenses of cemevis is one of the first things that crosses his mind when he describes his marginalization. The disparity in how the state allocates its infrastructural budget among different religious communities, therefore, not only turns the debates about infrastructures into an

arena of religious governance and negotiation; it also informs how individuals construct their religious identities as minoritized. In this sense, “ordinary” Alevis' conceptions of themselves as Alevis and their self-understanding of their place in the society emerge partly amid such contentions around “who should pay for the utility expenses of cemevis in Turkey.” In Turkey and elsewhere, therefore, infrastructural allocation becomes a technique of modern governments to cultivate religiously marginalized identities. The inequalities informing such allocation are devices through which citizens imagine both their identities and their states as a religiously marked one.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jessica Winegar, Elizabeth Derderian, Jessica Pouchet, and two anonymous readers for their critical feedback on the earlier drafts of this article.

Notes

¹ This is a relatively new cabinet decree [#2002/4100 - 2(f)] that was issued in April 2002 as part of the European Union (EU) accession reforms. The decree states that "the electricity expenses of the places of worship (mosques, prayer rooms, churches, and synagogues) are to be covered by the *Diyanet* budget."

² Although Alevis' marginalization dates back to the Ottoman Empire period, this paper limits its analysis to the Turkish Republican era.

³ There is an ongoing discussion about how to define Alevism in relation to Islam, a debate that also informs questions about whether or not cemevis are Islamic. Although the majority of Alevis define themselves as Muslims, their identification with Islam is in tension with the state's overall portrayal of Alevis as already included Muslims. As the state uses this blanket description of Alevis as Muslims to discredit the community's demands for legal recognition, Alevis' and cemevis' relation to Islam needs to be articulated carefully, by paying special attention to the tension between the state's articulation of Alevis as Muslims and Alevis' very own identifications with Islam.

⁴ I collected the data used in this article during my dissertation fieldwork at the newsrooms of major Alevi television networks in İstanbul from September 2014 to January 2016. In addition to participant observation, I also conducted in-depth interviews with both activist and non-activist Alevis and collected news articles about Alevis from the archives of major news outlets in Turkey.

⁵ One such daily discrimination is the prejudiced renditions of cem ceremony that accuses the community of engaging in incest during the ritual.

⁶ The ECHR rulings are binding for Turkey according to mutually signed agreements. Although Turkey implements some of the court's decisions, there are politically contentious cases wherein the state ignores ECHR rulings, as with the cemevi decision. In 2013, Turkey was ranked second after Italy in not implementing the ECHR decisions, with 1241 unimplemented decisions out of 2400 finalized cases (Hürriyet 5 March 2013).

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