



***Dersimli* Kemal for President?**



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Summary

- As of 6 March 2023, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, chairman of the CHP, is the joint candidate of the largest Opposition alliance. As such, for the first time, an Alevi has the chance of occupying one of the highest positions in Turkey. Since he is also Kurdish, he represents the two largest ethnic and confessional minorities.
- Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu (74) was born in a small village in Dersim/Tunceli province. He managed to become the director of a state institution and has been the chairman of the CHP since 2010.
- The Alevi are by far the largest non-Sunni religious group in Turkey, representing roughly 15–20 percent of the population.
- There are huge differences in the definition of what an Alevi is, ranging from Anatolian Muslims to a branch of Shia Islam and from a religion in its own right to a culture.
- In both the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey, Alevis have been subject to persecution, discrimination and exclusion.
- In 1937/38, the state committed large-scale atrocities against the population of Dersim.
- The burning of a hotel in 1993 during an Alevi festival proved to be a turning point for Alevi awareness and civil society organization.
- The AKP launched an ‘Alevi opening’ in 2008 to address issues including recognition for Alevi places of worship and religious instruction; although the initiative continued until 2011, nothing concrete was achieved.
- Prejudices, discrimination and the othering of Alevis continue to this day.
- Since 2018, Kılıçdaroğlu has been the architect of the National Alliance; consisting of six diverse parties since 2022, the opposition group has been dubbed the ‘Table of Six’.
- In the summer of 2022, Alevi Cem Houses were attacked. President Erdoğan subsequently visited a Cem House for the first time in 15 years; in fall 2022, he announced the creation of a Directorate to deal with Alevi issues.
- On 14 May 2023, in the Republic’s centenary year, an Alevi could become president of Turkey. After many years of polarization, this could send out a message of unity, of differences bridged and differences accepted.

Introduction

Because in a Turkey where an ordinary Alevi can barely hope to become a simple civil servant, his candidacy is truly something new.

Early March 2023 witnessed what was a political roller coaster, even by Turkish standards. Before the opposition Nation Alliance (the Table of Six: CHP, İYİ, Saadet, Deva, Gelecek, Demokrat) presented the CHP Chair, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, as their joint presidential candidate, one party (İYİ) left the alliance on Friday (4 March) due to their opposition to his candidature. However, İYİ subsequently re-joined the alliance after a weekend packed with inner and outer party turmoil. Which means that the biggest Opposition block has had a joint candidate since 6 March. That the head of the biggest Opposition party and second biggest party over the last 20 years should be that candidate would be no cause for surprise, were it not for his ethnic-religious background. Because in a Turkey where an ordinary Alevi can barely hope to become a simple civil servant, his candidacy is truly something new. After two decades of rule by a party with roots in political Islam, Alevis remain marginalized with minimal representation in the state bureaucracy, politics and big business. None of the Turkey's 81 appointed governors is an Alevi. Not one government minister or well-known presidential advisor is an Alevi.

After its unsuccessful Alevi initiatives, which addressed issues including the recognition of Alevi places of worship and the integration of Alevi belief into the education system, the AKP shelved the issue. After years of political and societal polarization, Kılıçdaroğlu's candidature, backed as it is by three parties with roots in political Islam, one Turkish nationalist party and a conservative party, could help bridge differences and bring society closer together by encouraging greater and broader acceptance of ethnic and confessional differences. The fact that Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy was announced at the headquarters of Saadet, the party which, together with Milli Görüş, represents the very core of Turkish political Islam, with Atatürk posters hanging on its façade while the crowd chanted "Turkey is secular and will remain so", could not have been more symbolic of a more united Turkey. [On 14 May](#) (and perhaps 28 May, should a second round prove necessary), the majority Turkish-Sunni electorate will decide whether to give an Alevi Kurd from Dersim a chance to rule the country.

"I am Kemal from Dersim, Kemal the revolutionary /progressive. I love my people. I am a child of the Republic."

Dersimli Kemal

["I am Kemal from Dersim, Kemal the revolutionary/progressive. I love my people. I am a child of the Republic."](#) These were the words of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu at the 18th extraordinary CHP party congress in September 2014. Kılıçdaroğlu was responding to rumours that the CHP would now be drifting towards the right. For the head of the Kemalist party responsible for committing massacres of the Kurdish Alevi population of Dersim in 1937-38, this was quite courageous and somewhat unpopular within his own party. However, it was also one of the very few occasions on which Kılıçdaroğlu referred to his regional origin, which is synonymous with Zaza-Kurdish Alevism. Dersim is also the only of Turkey's 81 provinces with an Alevi majority.

Kılıçdaroğlu was [born in a small village, Ballica \[Bolciyan in Zaza\], in the Nazimiye district of Tunceli](#), which has been the province's official name since 1935, when the name Dersim was officially banned. When he was born in 1948, his last name was not Kılıçdaroğlu, either; his father changed it from Karabulut in the 1950s. His family belonged to the [Cebeligiller clan of the Kureyşan tribe](#), a Zaza-Kurdish tribe. Since the *Cebeligiller* were among those targeted by the state, Kılıçdaroğlu also revealed that parts of the family were Turkmen who had migrated to the Dersim area from around Konya.¹ He has generally shied away from referring to his origins, because Dersim is definitely a negative marker: both Kurdish and Alevi, considered "non-assimilable" by the state, discriminated against by the state, but also viewed with moral prejudice

¹ He also repeated this aspect during an interview with the author in 2011 for the German FAZ daily.

by large parts of the Sunni majority. And now someone with a background of this sort is to become president?

Despite his background, Kılıçdaroğlu managed to make a career in state institutions.

Despite his background, Kılıçdaroğlu managed to make a career in state institutions, something that has not been possible for more than ten years now, as examples will later show. He worked in ministries, as an accountant bureaucrat, and [rose to the top of the social security institutions Bağkur and SGK. In 1994, he was named Civil Servant of the Year](#) by a business newspaper. He was always grateful to the Republic for making it possible for him to make a career for himself, even though he came from a poor rural background.

In 1999, he stepped down from his positions and briefly joined Bülent Ecevit's DSP. Ahead of the 2002 elections, he joined the CHP and became an [Istanbul MP in 2002. Since then, he has been re-elected in every national election](#) and became the CHP chairperson in 2010 after his [predecessor Deniz Baykal resigned following revelations about his private life](#).

Kılıçdaroğlu's record as head of the CHP is rather weak: the party has lost [every parliamentary and presidential elections under his leadership, as well as two referenda](#). Nor has the CHP been able to sustainably increase its support.

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However, since 2018, Kılıçdaroğlu has been the main [architect of the opposition alliance](#) which, since 2022, has consisted of six very different parties. Without Kılıçdaroğlu, the National Alliance would not exist and [the mayorships of Istanbul, Ankara, Adana, Mersin and Antalya would not have been in the hands of the opposition since 2019](#). And now, this same alliance could even win him the presidency in 2023 against Erdoğan, who seemed unbeatable and seemed even to favour Kılıçdaroğlu as an opponent, because he seemed weaker than, for instance, Istanbul mayor Imamoglu, who was removed from office by means of legal trials. Erdoğan has dubbed Kılıçdaroğlu "Bay Kemal", underlining that he is not "one of the people" in the AKP sense of the phrase, but an outsider, since ['Bay' is generally used for non-Turks, non-Sunnis and for converts](#).

The other (non-)Muslims?

Known for his work on minorities, emeritus professor Baskin Oran defined the state's concept of a model citizen as "*LaHaSüMüt*", which stands for Secular-Hanefi-Sunni-Muslim-Turkish: "[All groups that do not fit into this scheme are routinely discriminated against in Turkey](#)." What's more, the state considered it its task to assimilate any groups that did not fit into these categories, by means of incentives but also coercion. By and large, this *nation-building* project has been somewhat successful from the state's point of view, turning Balkan and Caucasian peoples into citizens who view themselves as Turks and are accepted as such.

For a long time, those groups that did not want to become Turkish Sunnis had little scope for demanding recognition for their identity by peaceful and legal means. For most of the century for which it has existed, the Turkish Republic has been an authoritarian state allowing little pluralism. This only changed for a period between the late 1990s and the beginning of the EU integration process through until [2013 \(and the Gezi protests\), when Turkey took a more authoritarian turn](#) once again, which intensified further after the failed coup attempt in 2016. These fifteen or so rather free years witnessed a lively debate, taboos being broken, demands being made that Turkey recognize—not deny—the pluralism within it. Although this pluralism is considerably less than it was 100 years ago, it has not disappeared completely, and ethnic, religious, denominational and linguistic groups continue to exist alongside the Turkish Sunni majority.

Although the state likes to emphasize the fact that Turkey's population is [99 percent Muslim, as TRT Haber was still claiming in 2014](#), surveys put the actual number at 89 percent in 2019. With

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hardly any Christians or Jews left (max. 0.15% of the population), [the missing 11 percent define themselves as deists, agnostics or atheists](#). But whether the Muslim population is 99 or 89 percent, the Alevi are still subsumed into it as Sunnis, whereas they are in actual fact by far the largest non-Sunni group. It is very difficult to determine their numbers, however: while Alevi organizations speak of Alevi accounting for 25–30 percent of the Turkish population, in a [Konda survey from 2019, only 4 percent declared themselves to be Alevi](#). Of course, the latter figure could indicate that many Alevi are uncomfortable about openly declaring their religious affiliation. In the slipstream of the Kurds (the majority of whom are Sunnis of the Shafite school), Alevi have begun to organize and make demands for legal recognition. Veteran columnist Oral Çalışlar, who published a book on the Alevi and their political demands in 2009, put it thus: “Now, the Alevi finally exist. Now, there is a discussion about where the state should place them, and under which identity it should meet their demands” (Çalışlar 2009: 14).

Part of Islam or an independent religion?

Alevi agree that they differ fundamentally from Sunni Muslims in their religious practice. They do not pray in mosques, using so-called *Cem* Houses (meeting house) for their religious rituals; do not go on pilgrimage to Mecca; and they do not fast during Ramadan, though they do in a different manner at a different time. Alcohol is not forbidden to them, and there is no separation of the sexes during religious rituals. However, opinions differ considerably when it comes to the question of what constitutes Alevism exactly. There are Turkish and Kurdish Alevi, with the latter speaking both *Zazaki* and *Kurmanci*. Distinct from them, are the Arabic-speaking Alawites (or Alawis), who are clearly part of Shia Islam, live in Hatay province, and have little in common with the Alevi, [even if the New York Times infamously conflated them](#) in 2012. In addition to the ethnic distinction, however, there are also very different religious interpretations. Selahattin Özel, the long-time chairman of the Alevi-Bektashi Federation, described the different currents and their institutional representations:

“First, there are the Cem Foundation and related groups that accept Alevism as a Turkish interpretation of Islam. Then there is the Ehlibeyt Foundation, which places Alevi within the Shiite denomination, and third, associations such as Hacı Bektaş Veli and Pir Sultan Abdal, which see Alevism as an independent faith and culture (Çalışlar 2009: 55–56).

The first two groups see the origin of Alevism in Ali, the fourth caliph and son-in-law of Muhammad. For Dressler, a German scholar specialized in Alevism, the Islamic context of the historical foundation of Alevism marks it as “Islamic” as does “its terminology, which is markedly Sufi and Twelver Shi’ite” (Dressler 33). For the third group, Ali is merely a symbolic figure representing injustice, suffering and resistance, not a historical figure from the 7th century. For them, Alevism is composed of various religious influences, with shamanism playing a central role among Turkish Alevi and the faith of Zarathustra among Kurdish Alevi (see Massicard 2007: 18).

This latter group, which views its faith as an independent syncretic religion, has spoken out especially in the years of the ‘Alevi openings’ between 2008 and 2011. One of the best-known representatives of this school of thought is Erdoğan Çınar, who has published several books on Alevism. In *The Secret History of Alevism*, Çınar, who comes from Imranlı in Sivas province, points out the special nature of Alevism: “Just as the Torah is the holy books for the Jews, the Bible for Christians and the Koran for Muslims, so their oral tradition is for Alevi” (Çınar 2004: 17). For Çınar, “Alevism is not a Muslim denomination with Ali at its centre; it has been part of the “faith inventory” of Anatolia for a long time (ibid.: 20). Kazim Genç, then president of the Pir Sultan Abdal Cultural Association, argued in 2006 that Alevism “differs completely from and is independent of Islam in both its teaching and philosophy, as well as in its religious practices” (Aleviyol 2006). Representative of the most radical wing of this group is Faik Bulut's book *Alevism*

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without Ali, but a number of other Alevi and non-Alevi experts consider themselves to be outside Islam. For example, Elise Massicard concluded that "Alevism is a faith synthesis in its own right" (Massicard 2007: 112), while Erdoğan Aydın, author of the book *Alevism in the Identity Struggle*, also concluded after analyzing the different interpretations that "Alevism is an independent faith synthesis" (Aydın 2008: 112).

Nevertheless, Alevis who interpret Alevism as being within Islam are clearly in the majority in the public discourse. Reha Çamuroğlu, for instance, states "We are Muslims. I especially emphasize that. But our Islam is fundamentally different from their [Sunni] understanding of Islam" (Çalışlar 2009: 70). İzzetin Doğan, the long-time president of the Cem Foundation, spoke of an "Alevi understanding of Islam" (ibid.: 59), while Ali Çoban, the president of Elazığ's local Alevi association, announced that he would go so far as to sue Alevi representatives who maintained that Alevism stands apart from Islam (Alatürk 2006). This view is embraced by a majority of Turkish Alevis and nationalist Turkish non-Alevis.

European institutions had also been leaning towards an interpretation of Alevism which places the faith within Islam, though cautiously with a recent change of position. The European Commission's reports on Turkey label Alevis a "Muslim minority" (2004), a "non-Sunni-Muslim community" (2005), and an "officially unrecognized Muslim community" (2006). From 2007 on, the Commission avoided taking a position on the issue (see Dressler 2022: 17–18), speaking simply of the Alevi issue or question.

A history of persecution

Sunni Muslims have always been suspicious of the Alevis, no matter how they defined themselves. In the Ottoman Empire, the Alevis were considered heretics, especially after the empire took over the Caliphate in 1517, and brutally persecuted.

Whether Alevis define themselves within or outside Islam has never impacted on whether they are discriminated against or not. Sunni Muslims have always been suspicious of the Alevis, no matter how they defined themselves. In the Ottoman Empire, the Alevis were considered heretics, especially after the empire took over the Caliphate in 1517, and [brutally persecuted](#). As a result, the majority of Alevis moved to remote and inaccessible areas, remaining there into the 20th century with little contact with the authorities and the Sunni majority. In the Ottoman Empire, the Alevis' religious practices gave rise to numerous prejudices among the Sunni majority. The most serious was that [Alevis engaged in incest during religious ceremonies, after "putting out the candles."](#) Since Alevis often had to practice their faith in secret at that time, candles were indeed extinguished when there was a risk of discovery, but this had no sexual connotations. For the Sunni majority, the mere presence of women and men dancing and singing in the same room was grounds enough for scepticism. [Some Sunnis will not accept food or drinks prepared by Alevis, who they consider to be unclean/impure](#), and this can still be seen today in both the countryside and big cities of western Turkey.

Based on their experiences in the Ottoman Empire, the Alevis supported the founding of the Republic in 1923, seeing in it the possibility of living as equal citizens in a secular state. These hopes were dashed from the start, however, and their status as second-class citizens of the Republic has changed little to this day.

Although the Caliphate was abolished, it was replaced in 1924 by the [Ministry of Religious Affairs \(Diyanet\)](#). However, this body is only responsible for Sunni Islam; being left out, Alevis have seen their tax money spent on paying for Sunni clerics, mosque construction and (Sunni) religious education. Of course, all three have also been used to proselytize the Alevis; just as efforts were made to turn the Kurds into Turks, so too attempts were made to [Sunnify the Alevis](#).

Cautious reappraisal of a bloody history

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Violent massacres of Alevis in the republican period after 1923. The harshest state action against Alevis took place in 1937-1938 in the Dersim region.

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In addition, there were violent massacres of Alevis in the republican period after 1923. The harshest state action against Alevis took place in [1937–1938 in the Dersim](#) region. The local population remembers these massacres as the “*Tertele*”. The Turkish military forced the Kurdish Alevis living there [to resettle under a 1934 law that aimed to relocate Kurds \(Sunnis and Alevis\) to Turkish villages in western Turkey](#) in order to facilitate their assimilation. The resistance mounted by local groups led by the cleric Seyit Rıza was put down by the army. According to the comprehensive study by Hüseyin Aygün (an Alevi from the Dersim region, also a CHP MP, 2011-2015), between 7,000 and 12,000 people were resettled over these two years, and between 40,000 and 70,000 were killed (Aygün 2009). The leader of the resistance Seyit Rıza was hanged with his son and at least eleven others on 15 November 1937. In addition to Aygün's book, a number of documentaries have begun to deal with the events of 1937, including *38 Dersim Documentary* by Çayan Demirel and [Two Bundles of Hair](#) about the fate of girls who were separated from their families at that time.

In the summer of [2010, at the Munzur Festival in Tunceli, the local BDP-led municipality \(the BDP was the predecessor of the HDP\) erected a statue to Seyit Rıza](#). Though the statue was sited not in the central square in front of the city hall, but some 250 meters away from it, this was a marker both of Kurdish-Alevi self-confidence, and of how far removed the local population's take on these historical events is from the official ideology. For the state, the rebels were traitors and enemies of the state; for the local population, they were heroes.

Even after 1938, Alevis fell victim on several occasions, especially to radical right-wing groups close to the Grey Wolves (Ülkü Ocakları). Several hundred [Alevis were killed in attacks in Maras and Çorum in the 1970s](#). But Alevis were also victims of organized attacks as late as the 1990s: [In 1993, the Madımak hotel in the north-eastern Anatolian city of Sivas was set on fire when an Alevi festival was being staged inside](#); thirty-six people died. And in 1995, riots broke out in the Gaziosmanpaşa district of Istanbul.

Turning Point: Sivas 1993

For Çalışlar, the bloody attack in Sivas was a “turning point”: “Galvanized by this great pain, the Alevis quickly organized and presented their demands more openly” (Çalışlar 2009: 18). Dressler agrees with this view: “The emergence of an active Alevi public and a reinvigorated Alevi identity discourse accelerated following the Sivas massacre” (Dressler 2022: 25).

In response to these events, more and more associations and foundations emerged, followed by Alevi television and radio stations. However, this civil society organization has yet to be mirrored in politics; indeed, power politics in Turkey today is virtually an Alevi-free zone. Currently, there is not a single Alevi among the 81 appointed provincial governors, there is no Alevi minister, and no high-ranking Alevi officers in the armed forces. That is why the subtitle of Çalışlar's book is “We want to become governors, too, and generals”. Fourteen years have passed since the book was published, but these aspirations remain unfulfilled.

The Alevis have been safe votes for the CHP. The Kemalist CHP, Atatürk's party, was seen by the Alevis as a guarantee against the strengthening of political Islam. Cafer Solgun points out that many “Alevi clubs look like they are Atatürk clubs, while pictures of Atatürk hang in the Cem Houses beside religious pictures” (Solgun 2008: 51). For Mehmet Bayrak, however, this show of love is not mutual: the CHP has never stood up for Alevi rights, either: “The Alevis' attachment to the Kemalist system is nothing but a one-sided affair” (Bayrak in Çalışlar 2009: 86). That is why

The Kemalist CHP, Atatürk's party, was seen by the Alevis as a guarantee against the strengthening of political Islam.

Solgun sees something of the "Stockholm syndrome" in this relationship. However, even if the party does little to nothing to promote Alevi demands, it is still a party with many Alevi MPs—some say a majority—, and many of its voters are Alevis. There are also those who accuse Kılıçdaroğlu of turning the CHP into an Alevi party, including the former CHP MP İhsan Özkeş, a former mufti who said in 2016 that the [CHP leader had been sectarian from the very beginning](#) in 2010. In an interview, Özkeş criticized the CHP for "[heading towards complete marginalization and confessional sectarianism](#)." This is a minority view held by someone who left the party. As Nuray Mert put it: "[The CHP is the party of the Alevis, but it is not an Alevi party](#)."

Not an Alevi Party (anymore)

Thus, the Alevis and their concerns are only poorly represented in official politics. After the 1980 coup, there was no successful attempt to establish an Alevi party, either. The best-known example of such a party was [the Birlik Party, which was founded in 1966 and renamed the Türkiye Birlik Partisi after the 1971 military intervention](#). But success here was also relative: the party achieved its best election result in 1969 with a total of 2.8 % nationwide. That said, the results were quite respectable in some cities: in Amasya, for example, the party won 23 percent, in Çorum 17%, in Erzincan 13%, in Malatya 12%, in Sivas 16.7% and in Tokat 17.7%. All in all, this was enough for eight deputies. Sabır Güler has written a comprehensive study of the BP or TBP. For Güler, the BP presented a "Kemalist, Atatürkist, secular and leftist-socialist image." Particularly under Chairman Özbey, there was a strong emphasis on the Kemalist line, which alienated Kurdish Alevis. The party is also a good example of the "never-ending divisions and trench warfare" (Güler 2008: 80) within the Alevi movement. In the 1970s, the party's influence waned; after the 1980 military coup, the party was banned and never re-established itself. [In the 1990s, there was a short three-year episode involving the Peace Party](#), which participated in the 1999 elections, winning 0.25% of the votes, and dissolved itself soon afterwards.

However, when its second election victory in 2007 consolidated its power, the AKP charged their only Alevi MP, Reha Çamuroğlu, with setting up an initiative to address Alevi demands.

The Alevis and the AKP

The first AKP term (2002–2007) is sometimes described as the [golden years](#) in the light of the democratization, Europeanization and improved human rights record it presided over. What is interesting is that, while problems with Christians and Jews were tackled, the Alevis did not play any role at all in that first AKP-term. For Dressler, "The AKP inherited the fear of the Turkish state tradition that recognition of the Alevis as different from Sunnis on religious grounds would harm the national unity of the country" (Dressler 2022: 22). He goes on to argue that there are "continuities between Kemalism and AKP Islamism, both of which have little tolerance for a plural conception of Islam that could integrate Alevism as a legitimate religious tradition" (Dressler 2022: 21).

However, when its second election victory in 2007 consolidated its power, the AKP charged their only Alevi MP, [Reha Çamuroğlu](#), with setting up an initiative to address Alevi demands. This led to the so-called "Alevi Opening", which formed part of the larger "Project for National Unity and Brotherhood." The "Alevi Opening" was organized differently from other openings, such as those towards the Kurds and Roma, taking the form of a series of monthly workshops between June 2009 and January 2010. Boravali/Boyraz call this a "costless strategy", because it gained the government credit for tackling the issue "without creating an immediate commitment to making any specific promises for reform" (Boravali/Boyraz 2022: 47). [Çamuroğlu resigned from his position in June 2008](#), speaking of resistance within the AKP and the bureaucracy, but this did not mean the initiative was over. [Minister Faruk Çelik](#) took over as chairman and [Necdet Subaşı](#), a well-known Alevi, became the coordinator. Both expressed satisfaction with the progress and

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results, as [Subaşı laid out in an article for *Insight Turkey*](#). However, Subaşı also considered the range of views and schools of thought on Alevism to hinder the joint work: “There is no agreement on whether Alevism is a religion, a culture, an ethnicity or an ethno-religious structure.” Subaşı found agreement, however, on the need to improve the legal situation of the Cem Houses, as well as their integration into the state system, including the appointment of religious personnel. “[All these demands should be met, because secularism requires the state to treat all faiths equally.](#)” However, even though the issues of recognizing Cem Houses as official places of worship and changing the curricula for religious instruction were discussed further, no decisions were taken. To cut a long story short, nothing concrete came out of the workshops and many Alevis felt even more disillusioned than they had before the openings. To date, this situation has still not improved. [More and more Cem Houses are being built, generally by private Alevi associations or foundations](#), and [some municipalities have recognized them as places of worship](#), but general recognition is still lacking and no changes have been made to religious instruction. During all the negotiations and workshops, the line taken was to integrate the Alevis into an existing system rather than changing the system at all. But the current system, centred as it is on the Diyanet, is not compatible with a secular state and the separation of religion and state. However, this more general debate had only just started when it was shelved again, since it requires an approach to religion as independent of the state, which no party [except the HDP](#) currently dares to propose.

As with other decisions on human rights causes and the imprisonment of political prisoners, ECHR decisions made no impact, either. Despite ECHR verdicts requiring Turkey to change the system so non-Sunni pupils can be exempt from the religious studies class, “the state has not taken any substantial steps” (Boravali/Boyraz 2022: 56). In fact, in the face of growing domestic problems, the AKP opted to consolidate its electoral base and push a Sunni agenda. The third Bosphorus bridge was named after Sultan Selim the Grim (Yavuz in Turkish), who persecuted the Alevis. Boyraz is disillusioned: “What started out as an ‘opening’ ended as a clear ‘closing’ that proved even more dangerous for Alevis in Turkey (Boravali/Boyraz 2022: 58). While the Alevi issue faded in importance for the government, it returned to the agenda in the summer of 2022 when [five Cem Houses were attacked in Ankara in one day](#) and a dede (Alevi religious authority) was violently assaulted in Istanbul. Following these attacks, [President Erdoğan visited a Cem House](#) for the first time in 15 years and [in October announced the establishment of a Culture and Cemevi Presidency](#). The reactions of the Alevi organizations were mixed at the very least: few welcomed the move, and most considered it insincere and motivated largely by the upcoming elections.

Will the majority vote for a member of a minority that is discriminated against and Othered?

Alevis are a minority representing roughly 15–20% of the total population. Even if they voted unanimously for one party or candidate, that party/candidate would need at least another 30% of the non-Alevi population to vote for them. If the Alevi were a respected, positively viewed group, this might not be a major issue, but that unfortunately is not the case. There are not many studies on Alevi discrimination, especially quantitative ones, most likely due to the sensitivity of the issue. In 2014, the conservative Sunni human rights NGO [Mazlumder published a qualitative study for which 17 Alevis](#) were interviewed. All of them reported some form of discrimination, e.g. facing prejudice and/or issues at school, the neighbourhood or the workplace. Another widespread prejudice reported was that food and drinks prepared by Alevi are impure. One respondent said: “We gave aşure (a traditional Alevi sweet) and then found out it was poured down the sink. There are both Alevis and Sunnis in an apartment building. That family brought aşure and said we dumped it. We also saw the meat of the sacrifice in the garbage.” This same prejudice was also widespread among Sunnis living in the Rumelihisarı neighbourhood in Istanbul. In a [documentary shot in 2008 by the ESI think tank](#), Alevi families reported that Sunni neighbours

would not enter their houses or drink their tea. However, their children walked to school together and visited one another's homes, rejecting the prejudices of their parents' generation.

In relation to professional life, interviewee E69E told Mazlumder: 'It is difficult to get a job if it is known.' So, a frequent strategy is for Alevis to hide their identity. This was confirmed to the author in conversations with Alevi businesspeople from the Dersim area who work in Istanbul: "It is impossible to do business with Sunnis if they know you are Alevi, so we hide our beliefs and say we went to Friday prayer or pretend to fast during Ramadan."² Another aspect of this issue was revealed to the author by a professor at Bosphorus University. Her best student visited her some months after graduating to tell her that all their applications to state institutions had been unsuccessful. The academic could not believe it and called her husband, who was a high-ranking bureaucrat at a state institution. She told him about the issue on the phone; later, her husband asked her to ask her former student if he was Alevi. When the student affirmed that he was, the situation became clear: there were no civil service jobs for Alevis.

IYI Party chairwoman Akşener opposed Kılıçda-roğlu's candidacy.

More anecdotal evidence was shared with the author by a close friend, whose family is Kurdish Alevi from Sivas province. His cousin applied to the Social Security Directorate in 2017 and passed the written exam with one of the highest scores. He was then invited to the oral interview, which at that time took place in the applicants' homes. The family prepared the house, buying several Islamic journals and placing them around the flat. However, the state functionaries' questions were focused exclusively on his own and his family's religious beliefs. He did not get the job and moved to a city on the Mediterranean to work for a private company.

Conclusion—Dersimli Kemal for president?

Given this situation in which Alevis are discriminated against, viewed with suspicion and have to conceal their identity, it is already surprising that a Kurdish-Alevi should be standing as the presidential candidate of the largest Opposition alliance. Of course, this was not easy. IYI Party chairwoman Akşener in particular opposed Kılıçda-roğlu's candidacy, arguing that mayors of Istanbul and Ankara were more popular candidates. She even quit the alliance over a week-end in March, only to return three days later (on 6 March). Even if she did not say as much, the fact that the candidate would be a Kurdish Alevi could have been a factor in Akşener's opposition to him. Turkey is now used to candidates, presidents and ministers of Kurdish origin beyond the Kurdish political movement (Turgut Özal, İsmet İnönü, Hikmet Çetin, Mehdi Eker Hüseyin Celik, Bekir Bozdağ etc.). However, this acceptance has been conditional on their not voicing Kurdish demands. An Alevi in a high position would be a new phenomenon; to date, there have only ever been a handful of Alevi ministers, such as [Müslüm Doğan, who was Development minister](#) under prime minister Davutoğlu for less than a month in 2015. Akşener's argument about the winning candidate does not seem to hold water: if all the Nation Alliance parties backed the candidate, that would in itself make them a potentially victorious candidate. This is precisely what is currently at stake.

The Alevi issue will be a decisive factor in the decisions voters take in the 14 May 2023 elections.

Interestingly, it does not appear that the Alevi issue will be a decisive factor in the decisions voters take in the 14 May 2023 elections. Murat Sarı, the director of Konsensus Research, said that only one percent answered that "[they wouldn't vote for Kılıçda-roğlu because he is Alevi](#)." According to a HDP survey of Kurdish voters, published in January 2023: "[85 percent of the respondents said that they would support an Alevi candidate](#)."

However, even if, in mid-March, Kılıçda-roğlu is ahead in the published polls by a significant margin, the race is still open. Erdoğan is too experienced a campaigner to abandon the race. And

² Several meetings with the author between 2007 and 2018.

it has to be said that, as an Alevi backed by parties of political Islam and nationalists, Kılıçdaroğlu contrasts starkly with Erdoğan, a master at polarizing the electorate and galvanizing their sectarian and nationalist feelings. Islamists set the hotel in Sivas on fire in 1993, nationalists were responsible for several 20th-century massacres. Kılıçdaroğlu's election would send out a huge message of reconciliation: another Turkey is possible. Whether this Turkey will be more democratic and free, less corrupt and more transparent will remain to be seen. But Turkey would have that chance, at least.

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