



## PERSPECTIVES

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### The Limits of Erdoğan's "Nation"

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's recent strategy of allying with the far right and his turn to nationalism are limited by the Sunni sectarian nature of his politics. A closer examination of the failure of his Alevi reform initiative of 2009-2010 reveals the structural obstacles Turkish Islamists encounter in their attempts to reach beyond the Sunni community to coopt Turkey's Alevi electorate. In a similar manner, Erdoğan's nationalist policies will continue to exclude Alevis, entrench sectarianism further, and expose the limits of belonging to his Sunni "nation."

Since Turkey's abortive coup of July 2016, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has attempted to consolidate power and attain legitimacy by [embracing nationalism](#) not only in his rhetoric, but also by deepening his tactical alliance with the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP). Erdoğan's brand of nationalism is versatile, and can even accommodate Turkey's Kurdish citizens to the extent that they distance themselves from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and join ranks with their Sunni Muslim brethren within Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP).

One constituency that continues to be excluded from Erdoğan's purported national consensus is the Alevis, Turkey's second-largest faith community. A closer look at the AKP's "Alevi Opening" initiative of 2009-2010 and its failure to coopt the Alevi community provides clues to the sectarian limits of Erdoğan's current "nationalist" project.

Turkey is nominally a secular republic. The principle of secularism (*laiklik*) is [enshrined](#) in the Turkish Constitution's preamble as well as its articles 2, 13, 14, 68, 81, 103, 136, and 174. However, most Turkish politicians and voters across the political spectrum fail to perceive secularism as "separation of mosque and state" and freedom both "for and from" religion. Hence the term continues to

be [perceived and implemented](#) as “state control over religion.” In practice, this peculiar understanding leads to a [sectarian regime](#). Sunni Islam of the Hanafi rite, the government’s preferred and privileged form of faith, dominates all other faiths and confessions.

One of the clearest signs of Turkey’s institutionalized sectarianism is the [systematic exclusion of and discrimination](#) against Alevi citizens. Turkey’s Alevi religious community continues to lack a legal persona, and Alevi places of worship (*cemevi*) still have no legal status. The country’s state-funded Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*) only employs and serves Sunni Muslims. Alevi grievances include [compulsory religious education](#) in all public and private schools between grades four and twelve, which indoctrinates Alevi children with Sunni theology. Alevi citizens face [systematic discrimination](#) in everyday life from employment to military service.

Although there have been various attempts to reform Turkey’s exclusionary and discriminatory system over the course of the republic, none were successful in institutionalizing equality and pluralism, and, thereby, in remedying Alevi grievances. The history of successive failed attempts is not well known, however, and often conveniently forgotten.

In 2010, then Prime Minister Erdoğan [claimed](#) in his foreword to the final report of the Alevi Workshops that “for the first time in our history, our Alevi citizens have been received as interlocutors at this level and with this degree of sincerity.” Erdoğan also drew attention to the landmark nature of the initiative by [referring](#) to it as “*milat*,” or “year zero.” This odd framing, a deliberate attempt to erase earlier attempts to tackle the Alevi question, was a telling symptom of the shortcomings of the Islamist-rooted AKP government’s overall grasp of and approach to the issue.

Almost fifty years before Erdoğan’s initiative, in 1963, Prime Minister İsmet İnönü, of a CHP-led coalition government, encouraged by President Cemal Gürsel, [proposed](#) establishing a Directorate of Sects (*Mezhepler Dairesi*) under the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*). The Directorate of Sects was to have included an Alevi Desk (*Alevi Masası*). This initiative was stifled following a vitriolic [sectarian campaign](#) in the Islamist media defaming the Alevi faith and community.

The attempt was repeated in 1975, when Senator Bahriye Üçok, during Turkey’s short-lived bicameral experience, [drafted an amendment](#) to institutionalize once again a Directorate of Sects. This effort, too, was blocked in the Senate.

In 1998, President Süleyman Demirel, speaking at the annual festival of the Alevi saint Hacı Bektaş Veli, [called on](#) the Alevis to consider themselves “first-class citizens,” a sign of the Turkish government’s rekindled efforts to engage them. The same year, for the first time in Turkish history, a sum of 425 billion liras was allocated from the state budget to 19 Alevi organizations in what was perceived as an incomplete but nevertheless *de facto* recognition of the Alevi faith and community.

These efforts were furthered during Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit’s term (1999-2002, culminating in the [public funding](#) of *On the Trail of Saints (Erenlerin İzinden)*, a 13-episode documentary on Alevi faith, culture, and history broadcast on the state-run TRT2 channel. This was an unprecedented allocation of national airtime to the Alevis.

The AKP’s Alevi Opening, the last major reform initiative targeting Alevi citizens, came after almost 50 years of palliative initiatives that fell short of moving the country from sectarian discrimination to inclusion and equality. Ironically, the Islamist-rooted AKP rose to power in 2002, in part owing to its promise to overhaul Turkey’s exclusionary regime and discriminatory policies. However, the AKP’s outreach to the Alevis, an ill-designed initiative insensitive to basic Alevi sensibilities, was welcomed neither by the Alevis nor by the AKP’s Sunni conservative base. The Alevi Opening, despite raising expectations at the outset, failed completely, and ended up marginalizing Alevis to an even greater extent.

The key shortcomings of the Alevi Opening stemmed from a failure to grasp the need for transparency, participation, and trust-building, as well as an unwillingness to acknowledge the inter-communal; i.e., Alevi-Sunni, nature of the conflict by reducing it solely to relations between the Alevis and the state.

The first workshop of the Alevi Opening that involved Alevi faith and community leaders received criticism from Alevis for its opaque and discriminatory selection criteria for participants. This tension was particularly evident in the second; i.e., the academic, workshop. The workshop coordinator kicked off the meeting by laying out the [selection criteria](#): “Our guests who attend this session are not invited as Alevis or Sunnis, believers or unbelievers, seculars or anti-seculars. Each participant who is here joins us because of their academic merits.” The first participant to take the floor following the coordinator proceeded to [state](#) that he had never carried out any studies on Alevis. Another participant, known for his pro-government views, called Alevis “putschists” (*darbeci*) as part of his blunt and unscholarly comments, igniting a heated verbal duel that [almost brought the workshop to an end](#) right there.

The selection of participants continued to haunt the Alevi Opening in subsequent workshops. The invitation of Ökkeş Şendiller, a leading culprit of the 1978 massacre of Alevis in the province of Maraş, was the straw that broke the camel's back. A journalist [warned](#) the government that the invitation extended to Şendiller would lead to the "absurdity of an Alevi workshop without Alevis" since Alevis could not be expected to deliberate their grievances with one of the most notorious figures in recent history.

It was clear right from the start that the AKP had devoted little time and energy to building trust with the Alevi stakeholders. Furthermore, there was little or no reflection on the part of the ruling Islamist party into their electoral base's role in the victimization of Alevis. Rather than recognizing the central role of the intercommunal dynamics of sectarianism, Alevi grievances were simply reduced to a problem between the state and its Alevi subjects.

These shortcomings were not at all surprising to scholars studying Alevi politics. Six months before the first Alevi workshop, for example, I [penned an op-ed](#) in the pro-government daily *Star* (which the editors have since removed from the daily's website) warning of the pitfalls that could derail a prospective reform initiative, including the need to design a transparent, participatory, and trusting process, and emphasizing the importance of inter-communal dynamics. Sadly, these turned out to be key deficiencies of the Alevi Opening.

Ultimately, the AKP's failure to make any progress with the Alevi Opening had as much to do with the government's lack of competence in conflict resolution and reconciliation as with its sectarian limits and chronic democratic governance deficit.

It is important to grasp that Turkey's Alevis are not mere passive victims. Beginning in the 1960s, benefitting from the new political rights and social opportunities provided by the 1961 Constitution, Alevis explored a range of strategies to ameliorate their situation. Especially since the 1990s, [a key Alevi strategy](#) has been to establish nongovernmental and nonprofit organizations to attain quasi-legal persona, provide faith services, and resist Sunni discrimination and assimilation. Through these faith-based organizations, Alevis have established formal and informal negotiation channels with government officials and civil servants to wrestle rights and freedoms from Turkey's exclusionary establishment. In a political context, where Alevis failed to achieve *de jure* granting of equal citizenship rights, they turned to securing *de facto* concessions for their faith and community. These makeshift tactics, born out of a learned skepticism towards Turkey's Sunni-dominated regime, have ensured day-to-day survival for Alevis.

The AKP's Alevi Opening had major shortcomings in framing, design, and implementation. It is difficult to ascertain whether Erdoğan had any genuine intention of addressing the grievances of the Alevi community at any point during the initiative. What is certain is that the AKP's purported reconciliation process was doomed to fail owing to its structural shortcomings. It not only wasted another Alevi generation's hopes for equality, rights, and freedoms in Turkey, but also continued to impede the prospects of future reconciliation attempts. For Turkey's Alevi citizens, the recurrent failures of reform initiatives over the decades not only repeatedly exposed the sectarian limits of Turkey's incorporative capacity but also undermined the trust and will required for future initiatives.

President Erdoğan's attempt to fortify Islamism with nationalism in the aftermath of the 2016 abortive coup, limited by Turkey's entrenched sectarianism, which he helped to reinforce over the past decade, has no pretensions to reach across Turkey's sectarian divide. On the contrary: portraying the main opposition CHP as Alevi and the HDP as Kurdish-separatist bogeymen serves to solidify the ranks of Erdoğan's "Sunni nation." Mobilizing a Sunni majority through an exclusivist and sectarian nationalism continues to be essential for the Turkish president's reelection prospects in the November 2019 elections.

Following the fiasco of the 2009-2010 Alevi Opening, neither Erdoğan nor Turkey's beleaguered Alevis have either the interest or the will for another attempt at reform. The Turkish president knows full well by now that the country's Alevi electorate is not interested in any Faustian bargains with the AKP. In the absence of any opportunity to coopt Alevi voters, Erdoğan will be committed to what is true to his heart and what he does best – entrenching sectarianism and delineating the limits of his Sunni "nation."

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