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Professor Huseyin Hatemi: The Religious Affairs Directorate must be given an autonomous juridical personality just like churches in Germany

(GUL DEMIR, ISTANBUL – Turkish Daily News)

Turkey's most dominant heterodoxy with the largest number of followers is Alawiism. It has a history of more than 1,400 years with its roots in the Shiite branch of Islam. The Alawis, over the centuries never split into segments or experienced internal conflict aside from the difficulty that geographical conditions brought and some small differences that had their roots in the groupings known as hearths and in applying rules. They never felt themselves to be a minority or a foreigner in this country. They became one of the most important issues on the agenda in the European Commission's Progress Report on Turkey. However, whether or not it was a different faith from Islam was never clarified. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said, "If Alawiism means to love Ali, I, too, am an Alawi." Discussions on Alawiism and Islam have recently become a current issue again when Religious Affairs Directorate head Ali Bardakoğlu said, "Alawiism is a sub-culture of Islam. If Alawis are regarded as a minority, as in the progress report, all mystic organizations right up to the Aczimendis may regard themselves as a minority." People from different circles expressed their view on this issue to the Turkish Daily News.

Ali Bulaç (Journalist-writer): "We can say that the prime minister's statement is not satisfactory, because every person who loves Ali is not an Alawi. Alawiism has a certain interpretation, culture, identity and color. The Alawites have some demands. The problem is how we will consider these demands. The progress report says that Alawis can be defined as a minority but I do not approve of this definition, because a minority is an ethnic, cultural or a language group that is deprived of some rights. Even if Alawis have some rightful demands, these demands are

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not a reason for us to see them as a minority. There is no minority in our culture or history. The concept of minority came to us from Europe in the 19th century. A minority group cannot have the same rights as the majority. Moreover, not every one can become a minority. The legal situation of a minority is not obvious in Europe now.

The concept of minority took shape in Europe after World War II by considering Jews. That has to say, people of another culture and faith were not given the same status. Alawiism may be a sub-group of Islam and offer a different interpretation of Islam, but in Islam, it is impossible for a Muslim to be a minority vis-à-vis another Muslim. This is a basic rule and this right should not be violated. The fact that Alawis are regarded in the progress report as a minority is advantageous in the sense that we started to discuss these issues. I think that we will arrive at a good point by debating it more. Alawis felt ill at ease because they were defined as a minority.

“I don't agree with the view of the Religious Affairs Directorate head. The government and Religious Affairs Directorate will have problems in the aftermath of Turkey's EU negotiations. Although it is claimed that Turkey is a secular country there is such an establishment like the Religious Affairs Directorate in the country. This is contrary to the soul of secularism. The directorate should be abolished. All religious services should be offered by religious communities as in the Ottoman Empire period. If the Religious Affairs Directorate continues to be affiliated with the state, then other groups including the Alawis should be represented in this department. The Religious Affairs Directorate at present does not offer a solution to Alawis. It says, 'These are a minor religious group.' If the Aczimendis have people in this country, then let them be represented. Are there drawbacks? If it is very difficult, what should be done is to abolish the Religious Affairs Directorate and transfer all religious affairs to nongovernmental organizations and religious communities. However, the Aczimendis are not a community. Tarikats -- mystic religious sects or dervish lodges -- are forbidden in accordance with the law on Dervish Lodges. If we define Alawiism as a sect, then it should be represented in the Religious Affairs Directorate. However, if we regard it as a tarikat and not a sect, then since other tarikats are forbidden, Alawiism, Cem houses and the Hacı Bektashi Veli and Pir Sultan Abdal associations should be forbidden. Here the problem is caused by the state and it cannot find a solution.”

Mehmet Metiner (Journalist-Writer): I do not believe they have the right to interfere with its citizens belonging to any particular faith. Alawis and Kurds are not a minority but Alawis are our citizens who have a different identity and faith. I think Alawis should have the right to follow their own culture and traditions freely. Our Constitution and laws should provide this guarantee for our Alawi citizens. There needs to be in this country a constitutional citizenship to make all of us free and equal. If this is achieved, discussions about minorities will be meaningless. Nevertheless, the people who think that their right to practice their own culture and faith is violated will feel excluded. Alawis and Kurds are sometimes among these people. Therefore, I

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believe that discriminatory laws should be urgently abolished to remove this feeling. We need a constitutional citizenship that regards all Alawis, Sunnis, Kurds, Turks, Greeks, Armenians and Jews as equal citizens. Turkey and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) are sincere about putting democratic reforms in place during the EU process. However, even if the prime minister has good intentions, even if there is a well-intentioned approach that gives priority to embracing and drawing near to the Alawis, I do not believe that setting about recognizing the Alawis from outside is correct. I do not approve of the statement by Bardakoğlu, who is an intellectual person. Why is Alawiism lower than Sunniism? I think we should not accept this category. There are no lower or higher identities in Islam. Does it mean that Sunnis are regarded as a higher identity just because they are the numerical majority? Alternatively, are Alawis regarded as a lower identity just because they constitute a numerical minority in the world of Islam? This approach is not reconcilable with democracy. In addition, the approach that identifies Alawiism with the Aczimendis cannot be accepted. The Religious Affairs Directorate, which is a Sunni organization, cannot represent the Alawis. This is impossible in secular democracy. That's why Alawiism should be represented like Sunniism.”

Professor Hüseyin Hatemi: “I don't understand why the concept of Alawi minority is given two-sided and provocative meanings. I do not think Alawis were regarded as a minority in the progress report with evil intent. Here, they are not talked about as an ethnic minority. This concept is used to protect the rights of Alawis. Alawis say that they are not a minority. There are people among Alawis who react when it is said that Alawiism is a different religion from Islam because all Alawis do not adopt the same opinion. Everyone defines Alawiism the way they want. For example, the Cem Foundation says one thing but the Alawi Bektashi Associations say another. Alawis living in Turkey up until the Iranian Revolution would say, ‘We are Shiite Muslims. Our sect is that of the 12 Imams, the Imam Jafari Sadik sect. We don't fast or perform namaz for historic reasons but our sect is Shiite Muslim.’ However, after the Iranian Revolution, some focal points tried to separate Turkey and the Islamic world by engaging in various manipulative activities. They were the cause for three or four definitions of Alawiism appearing by saying that the Alawis were members of a different religion. Today in Turkey, one cannot talk about a homogeneous structure like Anatolian Alawiism. Most Turkish Alawis accept that they were the continuation of Shamanism, and most of the Kurdish Alawis accept that they were the continuation of the Mani or Zoroastrian religion. Those, who came to Islam from Christianity, were shown the Bektashi tarikat as a continuation of Christianity. Actually, Alawiism and Bektashiism were confused with each other. In addition, Materialist Alawiism (Alawiism without Ali) appeared. In the book called, ‘Aleviligin Gizli Tarihi’ (The Hidden History of Alawiism), ‘Alawis should be saved from Ali. Alawiism is not related to Ali.’ Given such confusion I don't understand why there has been such a reaction shown to the statement of Europeans that Alawis are an Islamic minority as the Alawis are not the majority in Turkey.” Tomorrow: Part Two will look at reactions to the EU Progress Report from another point of view.

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