

Testimony of Haydar Baki Doğan

Chair Hartzler, Vice Chair Asif Mahmood, Distinguished Commissioners,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today. It is an honor to testify on behalf of the millions of Alevi citizens in Türkiye and the diaspora whose voices have not been adequately represented in national and international discussions. As someone who has long worked within civil society and Alevi communities, I hope to offer not only an analysis of religious freedom conditions in Türkiye but also a personal and historical insight into the unique challenges faced by Alevis today.

Alevism is a centuries-old spiritual path rooted in the Islamic tradition but shaped by unique theological, mystical, and cultural elements. It is based on a profound love and reverence for the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.V), his family (Ahl al-Bayt), and the Twelve Imams. Alevism emphasizes inner knowledge, social justice, human dignity, and equality of men and women in religious life.

Alevis gather in “Cemevi”, our places of worship. Our central ceremony, the “Cem”, combines music, poetry, spiritual teachings, and symbolic ritual. Unlike formal Sunni practice, Alevi rituals are inclusive and communal — deeply intertwined with the social fabric of Anatolia and the broader regions where Alevis live.

To understand Alevism’s uniqueness, it is important to clarify how it differs from Sunni Islam:

- Sunni Islam is guided by state-sanctioned clerics and formal Islamic jurisprudence, while Alevis follow “dedes”—spiritual leaders who provide moral and spiritual guidance, not legal rulings.
- Sunnis worship in mosques; Alevis gather in “Cemevi”, where worship includes music, poetry (“nefes”), and ritual (“semah”).
- Sunni practices in Türkiye use Arabic, especially in prayer; Alevi rituals are conducted in Turkish.
- Sunni mosques often separate women and men during prayer, while “Cemevi” welcome men and women praying side by side. Women also participate as spiritual leaders.
- Sunnis fast during Ramadan; Alevis observe fasting and mourning during Muharrem, commemorating Imam Hussein’s martyrdom.
- Sunni Islam emphasizes “sharia” as a legal framework; Alevism focuses on inner spirituality, ethics, and personal conscience.
- Sunni teachings are formal and state-backed; Alevi traditions are passed orally within community and family, emphasizing lived experience.

These differences are significant and reflect fundamentally different approaches to faith and community. However, Turkish institutions often treat Alevism as folklore or a deviation from “true” Islam. This erasure has real consequences: our children are miseducated, our places of worship unrecognized, and our faith denied legal standing.

Structural Discrimination and Violations of Religious Freedom

Religious nationalism has contributed to the ongoing marginalization of Alevis. We are often reduced to a cultural identity rather than acknowledged as a faith community. This erasure manifests in multiple systemic ways:

- Non-recognition of Cemevi
- Religious Education Bias
- Barriers to equal representation and access in public institutions

One emblematic example of structural marginalization is the Türkiye has yet to fully implement the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) concerning Alevis. In landmark cases brought by the Cem Foundation (“Cem Vakfı”), the ECHR found in 2016 that Türkiye discriminated against Alevis by denying recognition of “Cemevis” as places of worship and excluding Alevis from public religious services and funding. These rulings mandate equal treatment and recognition, yet the Turkish government has not implemented the decisions in any substantive way. This persistent non-compliance underscores the systemic nature of the inequality faced by Alevis in Türkiye.

Legal Foundations for Alevi Demands

The Alevi community’s legal expectations are grounded in both Turkish and international law. Specifically:

- Article 10 of the Turkish Constitution (equality before the law)
- Article 24 (freedom of religion and conscience)
- Article 90 (precedence of international human rights treaties)
- Law 6701 on the Human Rights and Equality Institution of Türkiye.

Positive Developments and Remaining Gaps

The state’s establishment of the Alevi-Bektashi Culture and Cemevi Presidency, along with limited financial support for “Cemevis”, are notable. However, these are insufficient in addressing the deeper legal and institutional exclusions. Beyond symbolic steps, lasting solutions will require structural adjustments in constitutional, legislative, and administrative frameworks — particularly regarding the DİB’s exclusive role in defining and managing religion in Türkiye.

While the Alevi-Bektashi Culture and Cemevi Presidency (ABKCB), established in 2022 under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, appears to acknowledge Alevi needs, it falls short of recognizing Alevism as a faith tradition. Instead, it treats Alevi belief systems as part of Türkiye's cultural heritage, not as a religious identity. As a result, "Cemevis" have not been granted legal status as houses of worship, and the spiritual leaders who serve them ("Dede", "Baba") remain without legal standing or public recognition. This structure, while offering limited financial assistance, has contributed to the perception of Alevism more as cultural heritage than as a recognized faith tradition thus denying the Alevi community access to their fundamental rights as a religious group.

Core Demands of the Alevi-Bektashi Community

1. The legal protection of Cemevis as official houses of worship, equivalent to other religious institutions, and the granting of public servant status to personnel serving in Cemevis.
2. Recognition and public status for Alevi religious leaders (Dede, Baba) as spiritual officials.
3. Ensuring that Alevi citizens are evaluated for public employment based on merit, equality, and impartiality, without being subjected to faith-based discrimination.
4. Making mandatory religious education courses optional and ensuring that Alevism is adequately and accurately represented within them; in addition, introducing independent and inclusive elective courses on Alevism to properly convey the faith.
5. The legal integration of Alevi-Bektashi Culture and Cemevi Presidency (ABKCB) directly under the authority of the Presidency of the Republic.

Conclusion

Alevis seek the most basic of rights: to live their beliefs with dignity and equality under the law. Today, Alevis remain second-class citizens in Türkiye — this must change. Recognition of our religious identity would represent a meaningful alignment with Turkey's legal commitments and an opportunity to strengthen social inclusion. We do not ask for privilege — only for fairness, freedom, and respect.

Thank you for your attention. I remain at your disposal for questions and further discussion on how we can advance religious freedom and minority rights together.

Haydar Baki Doğan

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