

Findings of a Field Survey on Turkey's Armenians: Notes on Their Political Profile

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The Armenian community is a non-Muslim minority group living in Turkey, along with other non-Muslim minority groups such as Jews, Assyrians, Yezidis and Greeks. This research report aims to discuss several findings of a field survey conducted in Istanbul on Turkey's Armenians, between November 2004 and May 2005. The purpose of this report on Turkey's Armenian community is to contribute to the literature on ethnic voting. In this research, questions on the political profile of Turkey's Armenians are basically organized in three sections.¹ The first section includes questions aiming to establish the level of interest in politics; the second section includes questions aiming to understand the relationship between Armenian identity and voting behavior; and the third section aims to understand whether or not the Armenians have the inclination to vote as a community. With these questions, this paper examines the political behavior of Turkish citizens who are Armenian. Attention is focused on the following issues: 1) examining whether being Armenian has an effect on the voting behavior of Turkey's Armenians who possess the characteristics of a community; 2) assessing the reasons for this effect in the context of the relation between ethnicity and voting behavior.

Methodology

The survey relies on data from 228 face-to-face interviews conducted over a seven-month period in the 11 districts of Istanbul where the Armenian population is concentrated. These districts include: Bakırköy/Center, Ataköy, Yesilköy, Bahçelievler/Center, Şirinevler, Samatya, Kumkapı, Şişli/Kurtuluş, Bağlarbaşı, Moda and Taksim. Other interviews were conducted in Kapalıçarşı and Sultanhamam, where many Armenians practice their traditional professions.²

¹ The original version of this preliminary research report was presented in February 2005 when the total number of the interviews had reached 115. The paper has been updated for publication, the total number of interviews at the end of the survey having now reached 228.

² Skilled trades, such as master goldsmith or silversmith, are seen, in Turkey, as the traditional professions of the Armenians. During this study, the answer received to the question concerning profession mostly referred to a trade, especially in the case of men who were middle aged and older. Apart from being goldsmiths and silversmiths—both areas in which Armenians are known to specialize widely—it was observed that they had mastery in certain other professions, such as carpet repair, and especially in the case of older indi-

Today the Armenian population in Turkey is estimated to be within the wide range of 40,000 to 80,000, but during the course of this study we came to consider 65,000 a realistic estimate. The great majority of this Armenian population lives in Istanbul. The second city is Ankara, with an Armenian population of 1,000-1,500, by far a figure too small to be compared with the numbers in Istanbul. The remainder, who are scattered around Anatolia, total a given number of 1,000. One exception to this scattered population is the village of Vakıflı of Samandağı of Antakya which is home to an Armenian population of 150. Furthermore, many interviewees mentioned a number of Armenian villages around Cudi Mountain without providing actual population numbers.³

The survey area was kept limited to Istanbul because today, as mentioned above, none of the Anatolian or Thracian cities of Turkey has a significant population of Armenians. Ankara was the only city where we had originally planned to conduct interviews, but a preparatory survey held also in Ankara showed us that the Armenians scattered in Anatolia are less conscious of their Armenian identity compared to the Armenians living in Istanbul. Furthermore, the reason for the Ankara Armenians' relatively weak relationships with the Armenian community was thought to stem from religious differences. Ankara Armenians are mostly Catholics (See Hancı 1995: 35-6).

The data used for this paper are derived from the "political profile" section of the survey. The field survey was planned in four sections. The first section aimed to create a general profile of the Armenians in Turkey in order to contribute to the sparse literature available today on the subject.⁴ The questions asked in this section related to birth date, birth place, marital status, income, residency, educational level and whether the interviewee had studied in an Armenian school. The second section sought to shed light on the social, cultural and religious ties in

viduals, blacksmithing. The second most popular type of profession after the trades is commerce. There are two reasons for this distribution. Firstly, Armenians cannot work in government and army jobs (there are some exceptions to this rule, such as being a professor or teacher). Secondly the continuity of the master-apprentice relationship is required to qualify as a master handicraftsman, which is achieved by way of family or community connections for the purpose of finding a job or learning a handicraft. Today, it is clearly observed that the scenario is changing. The main reasons are the rise of the educational level, which benefits mainly the middle class, and due to which the Armenian community has begun to work at the same level as the young generations of the other middle and upper-middle classes in Turkey, that is, by making use of their higher education.

³ For a relevant publication, see Peter Alford Andrews's *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey* (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1989), pp. 127-129, and also see: 'Istanbul Armenian Patriarch, in Radio Interview, Discusses Current Issues of Armenians in Turkey', Lraper (26 March 1999) by Talar Sesetyan, http://www.oia.net/news/articles/1999_03_29_newsfile391.html, and 'Interview with Patriarch Mesrob II of Istanbul and Turkey', (Part 1), Azg/Mirror (27 May 1999), http://www.oia.net/news/articles/1999_05_27_newsfile2721.html.

⁴ The scholarly literature written in English seems to consist of three articles: Der-Karabetian & Balian 1992, Göl 2005, and Björklund 2003.

the Armenian community in Turkey. The questions were designed to allow insight into the issues of whether the interviewees feel themselves members of the Armenian community; whether they have close contact with other Armenians; the percentage of Armenians in all their social contacts; whether they prefer Armenian schools, define themselves with the word "Armenian," and can speak Armenian; their attitude towards the Armenian Church and towards the Patriarch; and finally whether they perceive the Patriarch as their community leader or as a mere spiritual leader. The third section of the survey, which I conducted, related to the political profile of the community in terms of voting behavior, political cognition and political interest. The fourth section, on the perception of the army by non-Muslim minorities living in Turkey was conducted by Birsen Örs (see her article in this volume).

The overall survey was conducted using a procedure in which qualitative and quantitative methods were employed simultaneously. We had face-to-face deep interviews with subjects and also filled in questionnaires in accordance with the answers of the interviewees. The questionnaires enabled us to both record information and make observations, as well as to gather statistical data that would facilitate comparisons. We tried to keep the interviews within the confines of the separate titles and the specific categories as described above. The primary reason for using qualitative and quantitative methods simultaneously was to reduce, as much as possible, the difficulties and problems that each method presents individually (Bryman, 1988). Additionally, it provided a broad range of data and thus permitted us a greater depth of understanding. Moreover, we were able to establish consistent data, which allowed us to test our observations and reach valid conclusions about the social, cultural and political realities of Turkey's Armenians.

All interviews were conducted by Örs and/or me. Professional interviewers were not employed, for two reasons. Firstly, we preferred to make personal observations in order to penetrate our subjects' world and better understand what they thought and felt. Secondly, in view of the sensitivity of minority issues in Turkey, we decided that only direct, personal contacts would assure cordiality and trust between the interviewees and us.

Each interview was conducted over a broad time-span, ranging from half an hour to four hours. Various factors affected the conduct of the interviews. The most important factors that determined the length of each interview were the attention span of the interviewee and the interview's location. For example, if conducted in a busy shop, an interview would necessarily be shorter. Conversely, interviews conducted at an association of retired people might become prolonged, as interviewees would have abundant time at hand and would consider the interview a welcome diversion in an otherwise dull day.

We employed a non-traditional sampling method because the neighborhoods, gender, level of education, etc. of Turkish Armenians cannot be accurately iden-

tified from official records. In order to select a representative sample group, we initially interviewed certain Armenian politicians, the editor-in-chief of an Armenian newspaper, persons associated with the de facto Board of Directors of the Armenian Patriarchate, and Armenian intellectuals. These individuals provided a general picture of the social, cultural and economic characteristics of the Armenian community in Turkey. We also compiled a list of local Armenian churches, schools, associations and publications, and additionally contacted our own Armenian neighbors and friends, and Armenian students. Throughout, we paid special attention to assuring a representative distribution of variables such as gender, age and occupation, among others.

We used two different methods to contact interviewees. The first was to make prior appointments with individuals, who were either from our original list or were suggested by the initial interviewees. By using this method, we obtained about twenty snowballs. The second method was that, without making prior appointments, we would visit the associations, schools and workplaces on our list and ask the individuals present if they would like to participate in the study.⁵ Interviewees reached through this process led us to other interviewees.

Notes on the Political Profile of the Community

The questions posed in the political profile section were organized under three headings. The first group of questions was aimed at determining the interviewees' level of interest in politics. Questions posed in this section asked if the interviewee was a member of a political party; if he/she knew the names of the members of Parliament and the ministers; if he/she was a member of an association; if he/she had ever worked for a political party; if he/she would be willing to join active politics; and if he/she knew the name of the Armenian representatives in past Parliaments.

The second group of questions was intended to shed light on the relationship between Armenian identity and voting behavior. In this section, questions were posed concerning the attitude of Turkish Armenians towards an Armenian political party, their opinions about political parties establishing an Armenian quota, the effect of any party's formulated policy towards the Armenians, the voting of the Armenians and the effect of political parties' nominations of Armenian candidates in elections.

The third group of questions was formulated to decide whether or not the Armenians tend to vote as a community. In this category, questions relating to

⁵ Another point to be mentioned here is the gender of the researchers; being female helped in the communication process with the women (interviewees) and in gaining access to certain places such as private homes, which in this case proved easier in the conservative Armenian community. This reflects a social characteristic that overlaps with the customs and beliefs in Turkish society.

“how an ethnic group’s acting in unison is perceived by the Armenians in Turkey” have been explored. The questions in this section also aim at an understanding of Armenian voting habits in the past elections and Armenian political behavior in Turkish politics today.

Through the questions classified under the three headings constituting the third section of the survey, my intention has been to discover whether it is possible to talk about a common political pattern in terms of attitudes and behaviors held by the Armenian community. This preliminary report presented here simply deals with the results of the first two headings.⁶

Level of Interest in Politics and Voting Behavior

The act of casting a vote lies at the core of active political behavior. During the interviews it was observed that the balloting percentage of the Armenians living in Turkey is by far greater than Turkey’s overall balloting percentage. The percentage was 79.1% in the 2002 general elections. For the individuals that we interviewed the percentage was 95.5%.

Only two of all my interview partners gave a negative answer to the question whether they cast a vote. One of these two lives abroad. The high interest in voting may be explained by the effects of being part of a minority population. A community that has in many circumstances experienced a violation of the principle of equality is quite likely to be sensible in practicing its equal rights. Universal suffrage is a right they share with all the citizens of the Republic, and being an equal citizen is considered very important to all individuals who are part of the Armenian community.

Another reason for participating in voting was explained by some of our interviewees as the concept of “obeying the rules.” When we remember that voting is mandatory in Turkey, this explanation seems reasonable. One of our interviewees tried to explain the interest in voting as: “(...) are you kidding? They (the Armenians, AK) are even very careful not to get a parking ticket (...).”

As mentioned above, we asked several questions to determine the level of interest in politics, such as, for example, whether the interviewee was a member of a political party, if he/she knew the names of the members of Parliament and the ministers, if he/she was a member of an association, if he/she ever worked for a political party or would be willing to join active politics. The responses showed us that the Armenian community in Turkey is not very interested in politics or in being politically active.

⁶ For all the results related to the political profile section, see: Ayşegül Komsuoğlu, "Türkiye Ermenileri'nin Siyasal Tutum ve Davranışları Üzerine Notlar," forthcoming in *Ankara Üniversitesi SBF Dergisi*, Kış 2007.

The question asking the names of the Armenian representatives in past Parliaments aimed at assessing the level of interest with respect to the historical connection with the community and Turkish politics. One interviewee did not answer the question, 59 (25.9%) interviewees remembered one or more representatives, and 168 (73.7%) people could not remember a name or gave an unrelated name. There is no significant difference between the elder and younger generations in remembering such names because many young people attending the Armenian schools were getting the same information on their community.

The Relationship between Armenian Identity and Voting Behavior

The first question asked in this section aimed to understand how the community would think about the idea of an Armenian political party. 111 (48.7%) of the interviewees gave “positive” answers, 110 (48.2%) gave “negative” answers to the question of how they would respond to the establishment of an Armenian political party representing the Armenians. Out of 228 interviewees, 7 individuals preferred not to reply to this question. It deserves attention that in this case the percentage of these answers did not vary significantly according to sex or educational background. Further elaboration revealed that even though 48.7% gave positive answers, the interviewees were not sympathetic to the idea of a political party based on ethnicity. The Kurdish problem and its connection with the Kurdish party, the People’s Democratic Party (*Halkın Demokrasi Partisi*, HADEP) and its successor parties⁷, may be considered as one of the factors that have negatively influenced the acceptance of political organizations based on ethnicity.

Many of the interviewees emphasized that, while on an ideological level they were against any kind of ethnic political organization, in reality they actually did feel the need for a kind of political organization that would assist them in solving their problems. The idea of an Armenian party representing the Armenians was considered a possible way to contribute to a solution of the Armenian community’s problems. Several interviewees remarked that many Armenians had the idea that they were perceived “wrongly” in Turkey, and an Armenian party, by representing the Armenians, would contribute to “rectifying” public opinion in their regard. Several answers that were given to this question also emphasized the connection between the Patriarch and “representation.” The idea of an Armenian political party is seen as a balance to the political power of the Patriarch and also as a civil initiative against the influence of the Patriarchy. One answer stating there was no need for a specifically Armenian political party argued that

⁷ The successor parties are: Demokratik People’s Party (*Demokratik Halk Partisi*, DEHAP) and Demokratik Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, DTP).

“the Patriarch is like a party in terms of representation, so there is no need for an Armenian party.”

Following the question of how an Armenian political party would be received, we asked comparatively more realistic questions, in terms of current circumstances, on the subject of assigning quotas for Armenian candidates in existing political parties and on the acceptance of such a measure by the Armenian community. Responses given to these questions revealed that this idea was more warmly received. Out of 228 interviewees, 7 individuals preferred not to give an answer, 152 (66.7%) individuals answered “yes,” and 69 (30.3%) answered “no.” The most frequent response was that assigning a quota would do “justice” because Turkey’s political parties did not nominate Armenian candidates for promising constituencies. The second most common answer expressed the will to see more Armenian candidates representing the Armenian community in the elections. The interviewees’ desire to see an Armenian representative in Parliament should also be considered as an emphasis on the ever-present quest for equality. The interviewees expressed their feelings in answers such as: “to feel like a full citizen” and “why are people who have been living on this land for 4,000 years not members of its Parliament?”

Some of the political parties are supported by several groups within the Armenian community who view the party as the representative of their interests and requests. One question in the interviews was designed to find out whether there were any individuals who thought that one of the existing parties was representing the Armenian community. 39 (17.1%) individuals answered this question with a “yes.” It turned out that most of those who answered in the affirmative were interested in politics, and their approaches to political events were shaped by specific ideological ways of thinking. Whether they were asked or not, many of the interviewed individuals named the party that they supported. The majority of the interviewees who answered with “yes” supported a political party that was out of line with the Armenian community’s common political preference. For example, 6 individuals who answered “yes” supported the Freedom and Solidarity Party (*Özgürlük ve Dayanışma Partisi*, ÖDP), a socialist political party in Turkey with insignificant voter support. Among the individuals who gave an affirmative answer to this question were individuals who voted for a party such as the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), which is also out of line with the community’s common political preferences. The individuals who support AKP stated that this party had a more positive approach towards the problems of the community, when compared with the previous governments, and they also drew a connection between the Islamist identity of the party and its anticipated respect for their own religion. In their words: “(...) they are religious people so they also respect our religion (...).”

We also asked interviewees whether their voting behavior would be affected in the event that a party’s program adopted positive policies towards the Armeni-

ans. 7 individuals did not answer the question, 153 (67.1%) individuals answered “yes, I would be affected” and 68 (29.8%) answered “no, my voting behavior would not be affected by the policies towards Armenians.” The answers given to this question show that a party’s general policy as well as its approach to the issues directly concerning the Armenian community would affect voting behavior.

Two questions were asked with the purpose of understanding the correlation between some parties endorsing Armenian candidates and voting behavior. Asking two questions allowed us to deal with the local and general elections separately. The question worded as “Will your voting behavior change when political parties present an Armenian candidate in the local/general elections?” was answered “yes” by 97 (42.5%) individuals and “no” by 124 (54.4%) individuals with respect to general elections; and it was answered “yes” by 118 (51.8%) individuals and “no” by 103 (45.2%) individuals with respect to local elections.

The main reason for a difference between local and general elections is the fact that in local elections the main motive for voting was the local campaign promises. Several interviewees persistently mentioned that the personality and thoughts of the candidate were the most important point. It was observed that although a candidate may be a well-known, respected name in society and that these qualifications would bring him/her support, nevertheless, this support would possibly not be large enough to get elected. If they do not believe that a candidate will serve the community, then his/her Armenian identity will not play a role in the voting process. When we examined the behavior of the community, it was observed that political parties actually had Armenian candidates in the local elections in areas of high Armenian population but that this did not guarantee unconditional support. An apt example that proves this point is the Adalar district. Here, the Armenian population is large, and although an Armenian candidate ran for local office, the Armenian population supported the Turkish candidate. The reason for this, given by the interviewees, was “we thought that it would be better for us.” This statement seems to mean that in the local elections the promises given to the community are much more effective in securing votes than even the ethnic origin of the candidate.

As a result, for an Armenian candidate to be successful, three factors proved important: Firstly, the personality and thoughts of the individual candidate should garner the support of the community; secondly, the candidate’s influence within his/her party should be considered sufficient for serving the community; and thirdly, the candidate’s party shouldn’t be a party that is difficult to support ideologically. By this latter statement I mean political parties such as the National Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP), which is a radical Turkish nationalist party, or a party which puts a special emphasis on Islamic identity. Vasken Barın, who is the deputy of Mustafa Sarıgül, the Mayor of Şişli, Istanbul, is a case in point for such a candidate supported and elected by the Armenian community.

In the general elections, an Armenian candidate is less likely to influence the interviewees' voting behavior. Various factors such as ideological attitudes, historical continuities and economic expectations guide the voting behavior in this case. One of the most influential historical continuities is the aversion to the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyetçi Halk Partisi*, CHP) shown by middle aged and older Armenians of Istanbul. This antipathy may originate in the severe political measures applied during the single party regime, their discriminatory policies and the resulting migration, which may have nourished the belief that the CHP, in line with the *ittihat ve terakki* tradition, supported the continuation of radical Turkish nationalism.⁸ Istanbul interviewees held the ruling party (CHP) and İsmet İnönü, President of the Republic, responsible for the state's oppressive policies and harbored strong feelings against them. However, a number of Armenians who had lived in small Anatolian cities and villages did not share such strong, hostile feelings, as they had not experienced that impact of the regime's anti-minority policies in their daily lives. Poor communications and transportation systems in the Turkey of the 1930s and 1940s kept a few of the Anatolian Armenians removed from the effects of the government's oppressive policies. Moreover, the many uneducated Anatolians did not perceive the connection between the difficulties in their daily lives and the government's policies. Although almost 60 years have passed since the single party regime, the memories are still important even for the younger generations.⁹ As an example of the economic expectations that guide voting behavior, the voting behavior of male Armenian merchants and artisans can be given. In relation to their economic expectations, most of these men support liberal policies. This, however, is also in line with the traditional preferences and connections of the community.

Conclusion

The findings of the survey shed light on several aspects of how "being Armenian" affects the political behavior of Turkish Armenian citizens. As a main result, it can be said that being Armenian indeed has an effect on the Turkish Armenians' political identity and voting behavior. This effect can be summarized as:

- The Armenian community is not effective in politics because of its limited population and also due to historical and social concerns.

⁸ For some examples of these radical Turkish nationalist views, see: Maksudyan 2005, Akcam 2001, Aktar 2000, Güven 2005, Isyar 2005.

⁹ The votes given to the CHP in the last two elections were related to the political conjuncture of Turkey. Many interviewees told us they voted for the CHP because they didn't want to vote for the AKP. Furthermore, some elderly interviewees also told us that they went to the ballot boxes on Election Day to vote for the CHP but found that they "couldn't do it."

- The general sensibility with respect to being active in politics is not on a par with the general sensibility with respect to voting. Because Turkey’s Armenians believe that they can’t receive a good ranking in the general election lists, they were mostly interested in being active in local politics.
- The CHP is still an un-votable party for many of Turkey’s Armenians, especially in the case of the Istanbul Armenians.
- The past positive actions of political parties are remembered and admired.
- The well-known political patronage relations in local politics were also working well for the Armenian community. The voting in local elections was mostly defined by patronage politics besides historically and ideologically based reasons.
- All interviewed individuals showed much respect for their own political ideas. When individual ideas are very important, members of a group are less likely to reach a collective decision and to initiate collective action. The social setting sits on a democratic plane that permits a climate of freedom, and any sign of authority in the community faces reaction. The interviewed individuals, especially the ones over 60, have emphasized the difficulties that the Armenian community encountered in making collective decisions and acting in unison. Sometimes the emphasis on these factors was realized by the telling of folk stories and proverbs. The inability to reach common ground and take action, even in the districts where the demographic potential to be influential in general or in local elections existed, demonstrates the Armenian community’s difficulties in acting in unison. As a case in point, the Armenian votes given to Mustafa Sarıgül, the municipal head of Şişli (a neighborhood with a significant Armenian population) were not the result of a collective decision reached by a communication network among the Armenians, but the result of Sarıgül’s personal and team effort (the team includes the respected Armenian Vasken Barin, who helps to build connections), as well as patronage mechanisms.

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