

Hidden Armenians in Turkey expose their identities

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Gaffur Türkay, a prominent Diyarbakır Armenian who identifies himself as a Sunni Muslim, says that ‘the religion is not important but I want to learn my language.’

The stories of Armenians who had concealed their identities for decades have begun surfacing over recent years as Turkey continues treading its path toward democratization. Many of them live under their Sunni - Muslim or Kurdish - Alevi identities, although they still define themselves ethnically as Armenians.

“Race, identity and religion are distinct affairs. I’ve been raised as a Sunni-Muslim, and live as one, but I deny neither my past nor my culture. Religion is not important, but I want to know my language,” Gaffur Türkay, a prominent Diyarbakır Armenian who identifies as a Sunni Muslim, told the Hürriyet Daily News last week.

Türkay was 15 when he learned that his real surname is Ohanyan. His father was a pilgrim, and Türkay grew up with Sunni-Muslim culture. Muslim Armenians in the southeastern province of Diyarbakır recognize each other, he said.

“The perception of Islam [in Diyarbakır] is very important,” he said. “[The people in Diyarbakır] can tolerate you up to a certain point when you say you are Armenian. Things change, however, when you touch upon Islam.”

Türkay added that Christian Armenians look down upon Muslim Armenians.

“[They behave] as if we had a choice in the matter. The Armenian identity must bond around race, not religion. Religion can be chosen, but not race,” he said.

Yusuf Halaçoğlu, the former president of the Turkish Historical Society, or TTK, said the situation in Diyarbakır could be seen in other parts of the country. “There are hidden Armenians not just in Diyarbakır but all across Turkey, and now they are also revealing their identities,” he told the Daily News over the phone. Halaçoğlu was removed from his post at the TTK following public response to his remarks claiming that Kurds living in Turkey were actually Turcomans and that Kurdish - Alevi were of Armenian descent.

“My remarks were falsely conveyed to the public,” Kalaçoğlu said. “I shared this information with the deceased Hrant Dink as well. I tried to highlight under which identities those Armenians who supposedly died in 1915 still continue to exist,” he said, adding that he possessed records of Armenians who concealed their identities.

“This is information emanating from records [contained] in the United States archives. I have records [that indicate] the villages and locations they reside in, and the names of the clans they live under,” said Halaçoğlu.

İsmet Şahin, a Hemşin researcher and politician, said that, despite a grain of truth in Halaçoğlu’s comments, his remarks were intended to insult Armenians,

Islamicized Armenians who live in the provinces of Artvin and Rize in Turkey’s eastern Black Sea region define themselves as Hemşins and speak a dialect of the Armenian language. Hamshenite Armenians still maintain their Christian traditions, even though they define themselves as Muslims, according to Şahin.

His research indicated that a large portion of hidden Armenians in Turkey live under the Kurdish - Alevi identity, Şahin added.

“The numbers of Armenians who changed their identities [can be found in Turkey’s] state archives,” he told over the phone. Turkey’s state archives contain many documents about this subject, Şahin further noted and added that Halaçoğlu had access to this information as well.

“There were elements of truism in [Halaçoğlu’s] remarks, academically speaking,” Kazım Gündoğan, a researcher and documentarian, told the Daily News in a phone interview, but “[Halaçoğlu] treated this subject matter as political material.” Gündoğan’s family lives under the Kurdish - Alevi identity in the southeastern province of Tunceli, formerly known as Dersim.

“Despite the fact that [covert Armenians in Tunceli] define themselves as Kurdish - Alevis, they have connections with the churches in Istanbul. They pray out in nature,” added Gündüz who said he conducted his research by appealing to witnesses.

Sources

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