

The Eighth International Symposium of Inter-Asia Research Networks

# Structural Changes in the Modern Middle East: Revolution, Constitution, Parliament

## Session 1: Islam and Search for Democratization

### Ottoman Parliamentary System and Minorities: Democratizing Conflicts?

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One of the hardest questions to answer in the Ottoman history is “why did the Empire fall apart into different nation states the moment when the parliamentary system was in operation?” This paper will not answer this question, rather will try to portrait the positions of “millets/minorities” during the establishment of the “parliamentary” system.

By the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire entered a period of change (Tanzimat) that had transformative impact over its political and social system. The reforms changed classical political system (*askeri vs reaya*), and opened political mechanism to its *reaya*. The second important impact was the change of the “rights” of non-Muslim communities, known as “millet system.”

The reasons of the change were multiple; wars, the Great Powers’ demands, and domestic claims. By the last quarter of the 18th century, the Empire was losing almost every war that it entered (esp. with the Tsarist Russia), and was becoming more dependent on the economy and politics of the Great Powers, while it encountered the demand from below that would gradually take the form of nationalism.

The impacts of the Ottoman-Russian wars were multiple; economic debts, territorial losses, and massive immigrations. Their impacts were not limited in military front, penetrated also in social and communitarian relations, mainly because of the characters of wars, which were “demographic warfare” (= total wars) and religiously oriented, as Marc Pinson coined.

The immigrants who escaped from the Christian Russian army (and its allied local population) increased anti-Christian feelings amongst Muslims. The long-lasting co-habitation was in the process of falling apart. The persecution of Christians accelerated the development of nationalist movements, which were already shaped by the nationalist ideology coming from the Europe and the provocation of the Russian Empire. These nationalist movements (e.g. *Komitaci*), mainly secret and few membered, claimed political and territorial rights. With the aim of eliminating the war alibi of the Russia, the Great Powers demanded from the Empire the political rights for non-Muslims. Thus, their security of life and wealth (*Tanzimat Fermani*, 1839), and their political rights (*Islahat Fermani*, 1856) were recognized.

The participation of non-Muslims in the political sphere was the turning point in the history of non-Muslim communities, who was ruled according to the Islamic Dhimmi act. The monotheist religions could practice their religion, in the condition they pay “head tax (*cizye*),” and they recognized the superiority (spiritual and material) and the hegemony of the Islam. However, they did not have political rights, unless they convert to Islam, i.e. *devsirme*.

Only by Tanzimat, the non-Muslim communities were officially recognized as millet, and, were permitted to have their (secular) constitutions and their councils (secular and also religious, *cismani ve ruhani*).

The new millets/minorities emerged, i.e. Syriac Catholics in 1829, Catholics in 1830, Jews in 1835, Chaldean (Catholic Nestorian) in 1846, Protestants in 1850, Bulgar Millet in 1870, and the Syriac Orthodox in 1873. The first reason for the increase of minorities was the claim by the minorities (to be recognized as a separate nation), e.g. Bulgarians. Other reasons were the missionary activities of the Catholic and Protestant states and the Ottoman governing strategy, more divided more governable.

On the other hand, as have been emphasized above, opening of the political mechanism to non-Muslims, was a turning point. “Representative system principle” according to Davison, could be backed to the Sultan’s decree (*ferman*) of January 1840, which ordered the foundation of the administrative councils. However, the representative system was gradually formed. More importantly, it was applied for the low level of administrative division (neighborhood, village) at the beginning, later sub-prefectures and provinces and finally for the whole empire (national parliament).

The main problem was the place of millets/minority in these “elected” councils. Since most of the villages and neighborhoods were homogenous, there was not communitarian discussion on the identity issue of representative (*muhtar*). Yet, the composition of the upper administrative units (*nahiye, kaza*/sub province) created problems, since most of them were heterogeneous and very few of them were Christian. Even the majority of a sub-prefecture was Christian, its representative (*nahiye müdürü*) could be a Muslim.

When the Provincial law (*Vilayetler kanunu*, 1857) put into force the representative system for provincial councils, the non-Muslims had the right to be in the second-high level of the political hierarchy. Unfortunately, this upgraded the communitarian discussions to the provincial level. The Christians claimed that they were underrepresented in the provincial councils, especially the Armenians in the eastern Anatolia provinces and the Rums (Ottoman Greeks) in the western Anatolia provinces. By 1870, the “fair” representation in the Councils became one of the claims of nationalist movements.

By the first Ottoman Parliament (1876), this question will take national level. The parliament was composed by the deputies who were chosen by the Sultan, without a proper election. The provinces where the Christian population was “considerable,” could send their representative to the Parliament. It was the parliament where the proportion of the non-Muslim deputies was maximum, 40% (46 deputies).

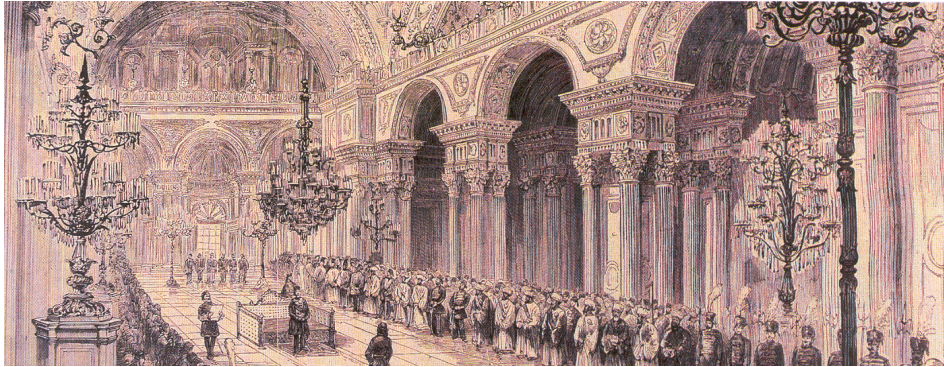
Even the Parliament had a very short life span, it left a huge impact over the subjects, regardless to their religion. One of the main claims of the Turkist-Islamist movements (notably the Committee Union and Progress, CUP) was the establishment of the parliament and constitution.

The 1908 revolution not only brought back the parliament and constitution, but it would also definitively change the politics within and between the communities. Like Turks and Muslims, the secular figures (who emphasize the ethnicity more than the religion) became more visible and determinant. For instance, the Armenian committee (Dashnak 1890 and Hunchak 1887) became more decisive than the millenarian old Armenian Patriarchate. The election following the 1908 revolution, had an important impact over the communitarian discussion/conflict. Thereafter, the issue of proportional representation became a main issue in the “minority” rights discussion. The three elections (1908, 1912 and 1914) mainly passed with the discussion of the issue of fair representation of non-Muslims.

Despite the Ottoman law considered that the deputy would be representative for all Ottomans, rather than their own community, the reality on the ground was opposite. The communities preferred that their deputies would represent their cause and defend their rights. For these reasons, the nationalist movements negotiated (even bargained) the number

and proportion of “their” deputies during all the three elections. The bargain between the minority parties and the CUP happened mainly between first and second tours. For instance, the Armenian circles claimed twenty–twenty-one deputies, the CUP thought eleven–twelve deputies, since they claimed the Ottoman census numbered Armenians as 1.1 millions, (one-hundred thousand for a deputy). The Rum circles also (including their Patriarchate) claimed more deputies than the CUP proposed. The elections that considered as solutions to the nationalist claims, even at its very beginning, created more problems. For instance, Serbian nationalists, started to think about “military struggle” since they were underrepresented in the parliament. When the first parliament met, some nationalist groups already lost the peace role of the parliamentary system.

The 1912 elections, called as “baton” election due to the use of violence by the CUP, was a turning point. The Balkan wars started just after the meeting of the new parliament. The parliament became null and void during the World War I, some non-Muslim deputies were deported, imprisoned and hanged. Yet the most democratic discussion happened in the post-war parliament, where the leaders of the CUP were absent and the CUP was abolished. Unfortunately, this parliament endured only some weeks, because of the occupation of the capital by the Victorious powers. The new parliament was composed in Ankara, which categorically neglected non-Muslims. The idea was that, as the *patria*, the parliament had to be homogenous. The Lozan Treaty (1923) only recognized three “[religious] minorities” (Rum, Armenian and Jew), without taking in consideration their population size.



Opening Ceremony of the First Ottoman Parliament at the Dolmabahçe Palace in 1876



Deputies of Third Ottoman Parliament of 1914, Published in *Tarih* Journal, No. 19, December 2015.