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## Turkish Alevis fight back against religion lessons

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ISTANBUL (Reuters) - Dancing to express their piety, the young women and men in a solemn circle are part of a Turkish religious community whose members say they are fighting assimilation by the government.

Turkey's largest religious minority, some 15 to 25 million people across the country share the Alevi faith. It has roots in Islam but is steeped in shamanist tradition, and has never been recognized by the Turkish state.

The status of Alevis is central to European Union concerns about freedom of religion in Turkey as it weighs up Ankara's membership bid.

A court case -- one of 2,000 or so -- opened by minority representatives against the government has become a rallying cry for recognition, and put pressure on the ruling AK Party to increase religious freedoms in Turkey, where most of the population of around 71 million practice Orthodox Sunni Islam.

The cases centre on compulsory school religion classes, which Alevis say impose practices alien to their traditions. Despite court victories for the Alevis, the government has taken them to appeal citing its own limited power.

"We've come to a point where one cannot escape the fact that freedom of religion is limited in Turkey, for Alevis and other religious minorities, regardless of the democratic claims made by the ruling party," said Ali Yaman, professor of social anthropology at Abant Izzet Baysal University in Bolu.

Turkey's ruling AK Party, which has roots in political Islam, has publicly defended the rights of Turkey's pious Muslims in officially secular Turkey.

Alevis do not attend mosques but gather every Thursday in Cem houses, houses of prayer, where worshippers -- men and women together -- listen to music on the saz, a kind of long-necked lute, and dance to experience union with god.

The women wear red headdresses, a vestige of Anatolian fire worship, and Alevism stresses tolerance and respect for all and equality between the sexes.

Alevis are also associated by many with Shi'ite Islam because of their veneration for Ali, Mohammad's cousin and son-in-law, who Shi'ites believe was Mohammad's rightful heir.

### COURT VICTORY

A court victory by Alevi mother Hatice Kose has prompted public questions over the government's commitment to minority religious rights.

In 2004 Kose sparked a long legal battle when she tried to exempt her son from mandatory religious classes in elementary school: these include lessons on praying in a mosque as well fasting during the holy month of Ramadan and the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca.

"We have our own beliefs and our own culture which is not what is being taught in schools," said Kose, who says she was ridiculed as a pupil in her religion class as a child because she didn't know how to pray.

"I can't accept them trying to impose a foreign religion on us."

In February Kose won her case in the Turkish Court of Appeals, which would have forced the ministry of education to change the content of the curriculum in religious education classes earlier this month.

But the government has appealed the decision in the Kose case, as it has other cases, saying it does not have the power to alter mandatory religion classes.

"Because religion classes are protected in the constitution there is nothing that can be done right now, it is beyond our authority," said Mustafa Oymak, a spokesman for the ministry.

### UNDEMOCRATIC STREAK

Religion classes were introduced in the Turkish constitution after the military coup in 1980 and were created to increase the government's control over religious activities.

Some 27 years later the government exercises strict control over religion through its directorate of religious affairs in Ankara which appoints imams and pays their salaries, even approving sermons for Friday prayers.

When the AK Party voted in favor of changing the constitution to overturn a ban on females wearing the Islamic headscarf at universities, party leaders said they were fighting for personal religious freedom.

But Alevis sense an irony when they hear the ruling party talk about democracy and freedoms.

"When you look at them from the outside you see a democratic party, but all their arguments about freedoms and personal rights is just for their own (constituency)," said Ali Kenanoglu, also fighting a court case to exempt his son from religion classes.

"When it comes to the Alevis, forget it," he said.

Apart from what they claim as assimilation through religious classes, Alevis have also fought to make the state recognize the specificity of their creed.

They would like a share of the religious affairs budget and help with training and paying spiritual leaders, but say any small victory would be meaningful.

"I am hopeful things can change. Even if we get what we want in the court case we have a long way to go, but at least it would be a beginning," said Izzettin Dogan, president of the pro-Alevi Cem Foundation.

(Editing by Sara Ledwith)

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