

## A CHALLENGE FROM TEACHING TO POLITICAL MOVEMENT: BEDIÜZZAMAN SAID NURSI'S STRUGGLES FOR MODIFICATION IN TURKEY

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**Abstract:** Bediüzzaman Said Nursi became concerned with reviving Islamic ethics together with traditional Islamic sciences in a highly secularized world. He sacrificed his life for the preservation of Islam in a society dominated by westernization and secularization. Throughout his life, he encountered significant reformations and revolutions in political, educational and social aspects. The present study focuses on the impact of Nursi's political movement that he established. To conclude, Nursi's political movement and struggles in the society investigate to understand the roots and subsequent growth of the contemporary Nur community and their movement which has spread all over Turkey and different parts of the world. Charisma and leadership attracted the attention of many scholars, politicians and the masses of his time. After his death in 1960, this charisma, reflected in his texts and movement, continued to attract the attention of all levels of society, young and old alike.

**Keywords:** The Old Sa'id, Nursi, Turkey.

### INTRODUCTION

Bediüzzaman Said Nursi divided his life time into three significant periods namely, the Old Sa'id, the New Sa'id and the Third Sa'id period. He led a political movement using his influence, charismatic leadership and personal political activities during his Old Sa'id period. During his political movement, Nursi mostly produced his early works such as *Münâzarat*, *Dîvân-ı Harb-i Örfî*, *Hutbe-i Şâmiye*, and *Hutuvât-ı Sitte* etc. Next is a discussion about Nursi's political movement, and struggles.

### POLITICAL MOVEMENT

Nursi's concern with social issues usually resulted in political suspicions about him. The first suspicion was by the governor of Mardin in 1892 during the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II, who had him handcuffed and exile. The second political suspicion on Nursi was while he was staying in the mansion of Tahir Paşa, the governor of Van in 1903. A debate he had with Tahir Paşa, turned into a dispute and caused him to be driven to Bitlis. The governor of Bitlis, learning about the situation, did not allow Nursi to enter the city. Fully aware that Nursi was capable to carry on propaganda against him because of his influence among the Eastern communities, Tahir Paşa called Nursi back to Van and reconciled with him.

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When Nursi came to Istanbul in 1907, he found himself directly involved in political life. Nursi's coming to Istanbul in strange clothes (Nursi, 2003) that inhabitants were not used to see, challenging the intellectuals of Istanbul, and his willingness to address the Sultan with his petition for *Medresetü'z-Zehra* project made the officials of the Sultanate suspicious. The same effects his debates with the *ulema* in the East had created among the officials of the area, was now created by his successful debates with the more qualified *ulema* of Istanbul on the government in Istanbul, which was the center of politics. The officials' suspicions towards Nursi resulted in sending him to custody in a mental hospital and then in *nezârethâne*. *Nezârethâne* is a detention room where newly arrested suspects are held. Through the suspicions of the officials, Nursi was sent to a mental hospital with a medical report by the officials' intentional plan. By another doctor's contra-report, Nursi was brought out from the hospital and then he was kept in *nezârethâne* (custody). The Minister of Public Security, Şefik Paşa, offered a salary with the order of the Sultan in return of going back to East but Nursi refused it. The offered salary was one thousand *Kuruş* or ten Liras. Furthermore, he was promised to increase it up to twenty to thirty Liras for the future.

As Nursi had not followed the curriculum of *medrese* during his childhood, he did not want to follow the official procedure and to be a scholar, taking a salary from Istanbul or from the provincial government in East. Although he preferred to act freely, he did not expect that the result of the petition of his project would be confinement in a mental hospital and *nezârethâne*. However, while the Ottoman Empire was experiencing a period of so-called oppression, Nursi's ideas and actions were not acceptable (Badıllı, 1998). After he was cleared of suspicions of being insane and freed from custody, he started to be recognized among the *ulema* and the politicians. Everybody was now aware Nursi's strangeness and started to accept him as he was. He was not well-known by Istanbul *ulema* and politicians. Nursi's being seen in Istanbul public for an educational reform with his unusual cloth caused a strange look and suspicion towards him among public. His being released from insane asylum and *nezârethâne* provided *ulema* and politicians to receive him as he was.

The Sultanate government which was later accused governing oppressively and the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) which wished the oppression to be stopped and Constitutional Revolution to be announced were having a war of words. CUP was a committee that was organized secretly in 1890 by the students of Martial School and Martial School of Medicine against Sultan Abdulhamid's so-called despotism. Afterwards the committee became stronger among army officers and the civilian officials such as Prince Sabahaddin, Talat Paşa, Enver Paşa, and Niyazi Paşa that led the Constitutional Revolution of 1908. The founders of the committee were known as Young Turks in Europe. (Akgündüz, 1999). Nursi supported freedom, but he wanted it to follow the way of *Şerî'at*. He wanted those

in power to follow the Islamic law together with the freedom it guaranteed (Kürdi, 1909). He was against absolute oppression and absolute freedom. He hoped for a government lying within the circle of *Şerî'at*, giving the examples of the reigns of İmâm-ı Ömer, İmâm-ı Ali and Selahaddin Eyyûbî-i Kürdi as the models (Nursi, 1999).

According to Nursi, the middle-age Europe had been savage and there had been obligation to show savagery and intolerance against them. After Europe had become civilized in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was no more need for intolerance and enmity. According to him, the civilized can only be defeated through persuasion but not by force, which works against the savage who could not understand words (Kürdi, 1909). In this way, Nursi wanted to guide the government which had governed for thirty years with autocracy. However, Sultan Abdulhamid II had practiced this so-called oppression to prevent the Masons\* from having the political organizational structures which had prevented Muslims generally from having a share of it. The Masons had been active and effective in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Ottoman State. They had started to influence and control the palaces of the Sultans. They had especially succeeded to influence the candidates for the Sultanate since their childhood and tried to get some of these candidate Sultans as their supporters. Sultan Abdulhamid was aware of their political aims and their connections with the Armenians, Greeks, and especially their cooperation with the British to demolish the Empire (Koloğlu, 2001).

Nursi appeared in the political arena with his influential speeches to public. He was apparently starting a political movement which would support freedom, within the limits set by the Islamic law, rather than an absolute freedom. In 1908, after the announcement of the freedom, Nursi gave several speeches in Istanbul and Salonika, where a large crowd gathered at the freedom square in Salonika. This speech was about supporting the freedom as long as it was within the bounds of *Şerî'at*. Later on his speech was published in the *Misbah* newspaper (Kürdi, 1908). During the same period he visited the areas where the Kurds had been living, to inculcate in them the idea of freedom integrated with *Şerî'at* (Nursi, 2003). He also gave speeches about the wisdom of the *Şerî'at* and Constitutionalism in the mosques of Ayasofya, Bayezid, Fatih and Süleymaniye. He telegraphed to the Eastern tribes through the office of the Grand Vizier (*Sadrızamlık*) to protect Constitutionalism.

Both in the Old Sa'id period and in the New Sa'id period, Nursi did not intentionally have a conflict with the administrative powers of his time. He preferred to help each government with his Islamic political ideas. While doing this, he effectively used the press or media to relay his warnings and political or social messages. However, for his entire life he was a victim of political plots and suspicions. The misconduct of some of the traditional hind-sighted people of *medrese* and their intentions to stage rebellions, which Nursi never supported, also made the politicians to suspect Nursi. At one time, when signs of rebellion appeared

among the soldiers during when the CUP was in power, Nursi advised the soldiers to obey their commanders. According to him, obedience to the chief administrators was obligatory in Islam. Even if the chief was wrong from the standpoint of his piety, it does not justify having a physical clash with him, which causes more harm to the society than his disobedience can cause. On 7<sup>th</sup> Safar 1323(31<sup>st</sup> Mart 1321)/13 April 1909, the 31<sup>st</sup> March Incident happened involving the uprising of soldiers as a reaction against their officers who were accused of immorality. Nursi tried to cool down the rebellion to a certain degree by writing articles in three newspapers, *Mizan*, *Serbesti*, and *Volkan*, on 15<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> April 1909 addressing the soldiers. On Friday 16 April, he went to the Defense Ministry and gave a speech to the soldiers about the necessity of obeying their officers.

On the other hand, the CUP which struggled to stop the so-called oppression started to dominate by putting pressure on the supporters of *Şerî'at*, the Sultan, and the *ulema* under the name of freedom. The 31<sup>st</sup> March Incident, which was conducted by the supporters of the *Şerî'at* and the Sultans, was a pretext for them to increase their pressures. It was thought by the religion-based people that the leaders of the CUP were influenced by the Masons or Masonic organizations, to enable the Masons to easily control the government (Mardin, 1989). However, a secular tendency soon became visible in the Committee's approach to Islam (Mardin, 1989). The CUP (*İttihadve Terakkî Cemiyeti*) found another committee, the Committee of Muhammedan Union (*İttihad-ı Muhammedî Cemiyeti*), which was considered to be opposed to them, as it supported the power of the Sultanate. The rules of the Committee were announced and the communications were provided through the *Volkan* journal that belonged to the Committee.

The Committee of Muhammedan Union was established in the management office of the *Volkan* journal on 6 February 1909. Nursi was a member of this committee, but his purpose was to ensure that it did not engage in inappropriate activities, since it carried a sacred name. After the 31<sup>st</sup> March Incident which lasted ten days, on 30 April 1909, three thousand suspects including Nursi were arrested by the CUP government and *Hareket Ordusu* (the Action Army) which came from Salonika to suppress the rebellion. All the suspects were charged with wanting to revive the *Şerî'at* and inciting the soldiers to stage a rebellion. Sixty-two of them were executed. Derviş Vahdeti, the owner of the *Volkan* journal in which Nursi had published several articles, was among those executed. On 5<sup>th</sup> Jumada I. 1327 (12<sup>th</sup> Mayıs 1325)/25 May 1909, Nursi was released after his famous defense, which was later published as a booklet under the title of *Dîvân-ı Harb-i Örfî*, in the Court Martial.

Although the court accused Nursi of his wanting *Şerî'at* Nursi never refused it and he described what kind of *Şerî'at* he wanted. He wanted *Şerî'at* not like the ones who rebelled but in the way of dialog and democracy. The second accusation was his membership for the Committee of Muhammedan Union (*İttihad-ı Muhammedî*

*Cemiyeti*). Then he replied them he was proudly a member by asking a question that whether there is a Muslim who is not a member of the Committee of Muhammedan Union that is to say being Muslim in the path of the Prophet Muhammed. Then he explained how he helped current government by his sending telegraphs to the eastern areas to support Constitutionalism and his awakening speeches for ulema of Istanbul in the mosques in AyaSofya, Bayezid, Fatih and Süleymaniye and for Kurdish society who were living in Istanbul about real Constitutionalism which conducts the reality of *Şeri'at*. Furthermore, he reminded them he suppressed the probable excessive actions by his subscribing their memberships of some committees, writing in some newspapers that addressed the Sultan and the soldiers, and speaking influentially to the high tensioned public and soldiers in the different times and places just before and during the revolt. On 28 April 1909 Sultan Abdulhamid was dethroned and his brother Mehmed Reşad acceded to the throne. It seems here that the so-called oppression, that Sultan Abdulhamid allegedly practiced, had delayed for thirty years the unfortunate incidents such as the 31<sup>st</sup> March Incident and the executions following it. Later, after losing in the First World War, those who had no link with Masons among the members of the Committee understood that they had been mistaken, but it was already too late (Akgündüz, 1999).

The political conflicts Nursi experienced in his short stay in Istanbul made him decide to return to the East. The eastern society learned of the happenings in Istanbul, the political center and capital city, from far through journals or newspapers. On his return, Nursi undertook to enlighten the eastern societies about the happenings and political issues in Istanbul. He was aware that the eastern societies might be in despair of the future of the Ottoman Empire and even of Islam. Nevertheless, their despair might lead them to stage a rebellion or be affected by provocations from outside. In the first half of 1910, he left Istanbul for Van, and in the second half of 1910, he left for Damascus to call the eastern people and the scholars to unity, and to give them the good news of a bright future for Islam. Immediately after he gave his famous sermon in Damascus, in Rabi' II. 1329(Nisan 1327)/April 1911, Nursi went back to Istanbul for the second time to offer his *Medresetü 'z-Zehra* project to the CUP government. He joined the second anniversary ceremony of the Sultan Mehmed Reşad's ascending the throne. Then, he met Sultan Mehmed Reşad for the first time and he was introduced to the Sultan. On 7<sup>th</sup> Jumada II. 1329(23 Mayıs 1327)/5<sup>th</sup> June 1911, at the invitation of the Sultan, Nursi accompanied the Sultan on the Rumelia, journey as a representative of the Eastern Provinces. Nursi was now known in Istanbul as a prominent Kurdish *âlim* representing the Eastern provinces.

When they went to Kosovo, there was an attempt for the establishment of an Islamic University. Then Nursi found an opportunity to offer that the need of the East for that kind of University was greater. The Sultan and the important leaders of the government promised Nursi that they would establish the proposed University.

One year later, Nursi was busy in printing and publishing all the books he had written till that time. When the Balkan Wars broke out on 26<sup>th</sup> Shawwal 1330 (25<sup>th</sup>Eylül 1328)/8<sup>th</sup> October 1912, twenty thousand gold *liras* were transferred to Nursi's Eastern University from the proposed university in Balkans by government. At the end of 1912, taking with him one thousand gold *liras* from this money, he went to Van to lay the foundation of his *Medresetü'z-Zehra*. In the summer of 1331(1329)/1913, he laid the foundation of his *Medresetü'z-Zehra* in a big ceremony supported by Tahsin Bey, the governor of Van, in Artemit on the shore of Lake Van.

Before the First World War, many political events occurred. Some of the *şeyhs* tried to rebel against the government complaining of the irreligiousness of some leaders and their secular activities. They sought support from Nursi, who declined arguing that we cannot accuse the whole army because of a few officers' irreligious actions. Then the Bitlis Incident happened. At the same time, the Armenians began to establish a guerilla movement. Nursi armed his students against them. However, being aware of the rights of the innocent as the Qur'an instructed him, he did not allow his soldiers to hurt Armenian women and children. A few months after that, the First World War started. All these events delayed the construction of *Medresetü'z-Zehra*. The start of the First World War impeded it further.

Nursi's efforts and struggles during the First World War made his concept of *jihad* clearer. However, he used to argue that physical struggle was only applicable to situations when we are responding against attacks from outside the country but not from inside. Otherwise terror and wrongdoings would be inevitable in which many innocents might be hurt. Nursi practiced his concept of *jihad* when it was a foreign attack case and avoided a physical *jihad* inside the country. Moreover, he also tried to protect people from misunderstanding *jihad*. The First World War was the first and last experience for Nursi to practice physical *jihad*. On 19<sup>th</sup>Teşrinisani 1330R/2<sup>nd</sup> December 1914, the Russians declared war against the Ottomans and supported the Armenians to cooperate with them. Nursi then was appointed as the commander of the volunteer militia force and mobilized his volunteer students for the war. After around two years of fighting, on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1916, Nursi was captured by the Russians in Bitlis. He remained in captivity in Russia for around two years. One of the political suspicions on Nursi also occurred in Russia when he gave the religious lectures to the prisoners during his captivity. One of the Russian commanders (Vahide, 2005) suspected that he was giving them political speeches inciting them against Russian army. As a result, he was stopped from giving speeches, only to be allowed later after they understood that his speeches had nothing to do with politics but focused solely on religious matters.

The defeat of the Ottoman State saddened Nursi. In the war, hundreds of thousands of Muslims were martyred including many *ulema*. The despair overwhelmed the Muslims who became worried about the future of Islam. However,

according to Nursi, this despair was a more dangerous disease than the defeat in the war. On 8<sup>th</sup> Temmuz 1334R/8<sup>th</sup> July 1918, after his escape (Vahide, 2000) from captivity which took around two and a half months, he reached Istanbul. His arrival in Istanbul was reported in several newspapers of the time. He was clearly exhausted from the four years' struggle. But the politics did not want to leave him in peace yet. As a reward for his struggles, he was registered to the *Dâru 'l-Hikmeti 'l-Islamiye* as a member against his will. From that time onwards, Nursi led the way in search of a cure for the despairs of Muslims, which he considered a kind of spiritual disease. He served at *Dâru 'l-Hikmeti 'l-Islamiye* for around one and a half years.

After the conquest of Istanbul by Fatih Sultan Mehmed in 1453, Istanbul had always faced the utmost danger of falling into the hands of the British. On 26<sup>th</sup> Jumada I. 1338 (16<sup>th</sup> Şubat 1336)/16<sup>th</sup> February 1920, Istanbul, the capital city of the Ottoman Empire which Europe called the sick man, was occupied by the British. At the same time, Greece invaded the Aegean part of Turkey. Unhappy with all this and seeking for a way out, Nursi attacked the British attitude with his work *Hutuvât-ı Sitte*. When the British authorities in Istanbul heard this, they ordered Nursi to be killed. However, upon learning of his influence in the East and his heroic works, they withdrew their order. During the invasion of Istanbul, there were two separate governments in Turkey. One was in Istanbul under the Sultan, and another was in Ankara under Mustafa Kemal, the President of the Grand National Assembly, who was appointed by the Sultan Vahdeddin to encourage the Anatolian people for national struggle. The Sultan had given all the privileges to Mustafa Kemal to enable him work towards saving the country from the British occupation forces and Greece. The National Struggle resulted with the victory of the army of Islam over the Greeks. The Grand National Assembly heard about Nursi's heroic struggle against the British in Istanbul and they called him to Ankara to support the national struggle. Nursi had also supported the national struggle but he believed that conducting the struggle in the most dangerous place would be more effective. Initially, he refused their calls but he could not resist the insistence of his old friend Tahsin Bey, a deputy in the Assembly and former governor of Van came to Ankara in 1922.

Nursi had already gained a unique prestige in the Ottoman territories with his unusual appearance, works and struggles. This prestige influenced the Turkish political authorities who conducted the national struggle. The authorities tried to benefit from his scholarly influence for the national struggle and for a new regime. On 2<sup>nd</sup> Rabi' II., 1341 (22<sup>nd</sup> Teşrinisani 1338)/22<sup>nd</sup> November 1922, Nursi visited the Grand National Assembly where he was given an official reception. They asked him to pray and give a speech. In his speech, he encouraged the Assembly to protect the meaning of the Caliphate and to perform their prayer (*Namaz*). Then he published a declaration about performing prayers and gave copies to the deputies. Mustafa Kemal was apparently not pleased with this declaration. Later, they had a heated debate in the presence of a large number of the Deputies in the Assembly. Mustafa

Kemal agreed that Nursi was on the right, cooled down his anger, and apologized to him (Vahide, 2000).

When he was in Ankara, Nursi officially proposed to the government to establish his *Medresetü'z-Zehra* project for the last time. His offer was accepted by the approval of 163 (or in another narration 167) deputies including Mustafa Kemal, who was then laying the groundwork for his revolutions, under directions from the British. He sent some commanders and *Hojas* to Nursi to make some inquiries on his ideas about the acceptance of the European system. Nursi explained that a whole imitation of Europe was not logical (Nursi, 1993). When he understood the actual aims of Mustafa Kemal and his friends, he left Ankara for Van without waiting the result of his offer. His leaving Ankara for Van may be evaluated in two ways. First, if the bill of the law on *Medresetü'z-Zehra* was not to go into effect, there would be no need to stay longer in Ankara. In that case, it was inevitable that Ankara government would appropriate the European system and they would not listen to Nursi. Secondly, if the law was to go into effect, Nursi already would have gone and been ready for establishing his *medrese* in Van. However, the first happened to be true. After the declaration of the Republic, on 29 October 1923, the European system was implemented. Nursi preferred not to interfere further in politics and withdrew himself into solitude.

## CONCLUSION

Indeed, Nursi's struggles were against materialism and communism which had spread over the world, especially the Muslim world. However, Nursi had to suffer politically because materialism and communism used politics as tools. On the other hand, the essence of politics then was based on materialism and communism, which were both against religion. That was the reason behind the endless suspicions of politicians on him. Nursi appropriated an approach to Islam which is both textual and based on rational and empirical investigation, rather than the classical and imitative approach to Islam. He focused on preserving the spiritual values which were the foundation of the demolished Ottoman Empire.

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