

# The Debate on Parliamentarism in the Muslim Press of Bulgaria, 1895-1908

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The convening of the first Ottoman parliament in March 1877 was an unprecedented moment in the history of the Ottoman Empire. It was the first time that over a hundred deputies from all parts of the Empire met in the capital Istanbul to pass legislation and deliberate on its internal and foreign affairs.<sup>1</sup> The convening of the parliament, along with the promulgation of the first Ottoman constitution in December 1876, were regarded as a decisive victory of the liberal groups, represented most notably by the Young Ottomans and the pro-constitutionalist bureaucrats led by Midhat Pasha (1822-1884), and the culmination of years of struggle and reform. Yet others attached great hopes to it as the solution that would bring stability to the Empire after the series of crises that had shaken it for over a year.<sup>2</sup> The parliament, its successes notwithstanding, turned out to be short-lived. After convening for several sessions, the second Ottoman parliamentary chamber was abruptly ended on February 14, 1878 by an imperial decree issued by the Sultan citing as justification the urgent circumstances facing the Empire. Over the previous eight months the Ottomans had effectively been at war with Russia and by early 1878 the Russian army had advanced to the outskirts of Istanbul, forcing the Ottomans to sign an armistice at Edirne. At the time the proroguing of parliament was perceived as a temporary measure,<sup>3</sup> but in fact no

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The first parliamentary chamber met in the period March-June 1877 and the second convened December 1877-February 1878; on the first Ottoman parliament see Robert Devereux, *The First Ottoman Constitutional Period: a Study of the Midhat Constitution and Parliament*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1963).

<sup>2</sup> As it will be recalled, starting from 1875 through 1876 the Empire experienced a series of challenges – ill-fated revolts in Bosnia and Bulgaria, a war with Serbia, insistent demands from the liberal opposition and bureaucrats for the promulgation of a constitution, the forceful deposition of two sultans and increased great power pressure to introduce reforms favoring the non-Muslim nationalities; on these events see e.g. Roderic Davison, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire, 1856-1876*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963); Barbara and Charles Jelavich, *The Establishment of the Balkan National States, 1804-1920*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986); François Georgeon, *Abdülhamid II: Le Sultan Calife (1876-1909)*, (Paris: Fayard, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that while the request of the ministers initiating the parliament’s proroguing included the word “temporary,” the Sultan’s decree did not, a fact which in the

other parliamentary session was convened for the next three decades. As Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876-1909) increasingly consolidated his control over the Empire's government and institutions, "parliament" joined the list of words and topics proscribed or consciously avoided in public discussion. However, the memory of parliament and the idea of parliamentarianism continued to live and to be debated within Ottoman society, and they were further incorporated into the political discourse of various groups opposing the Hamidian regime, among them the Young Turks. What did parliament come to mean for Ottoman society over the three decades following its suspension until the Young Turk revolution of 1908? The current article will address this question by looking at the Muslim Turkish press coming out in Bulgaria between 1895 and 1908 since this press remained largely uninfluenced by the censorship practices that affected publications in the Empire at the time and since certain local reformist journals actively published comments of Muslims from the local community and the Ottoman state. This article explores the debates among the Muslim public in Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire regarding the principle of consultation (*meşveret*),<sup>4</sup> the institution of the parliament and the various types of political systems as expressed in three of the most popular local Muslim Turkish publications – the pro-Hamidian *Gayret* and the reformist and Young Turk publications *Sebat* and *Balkan* (Plovdiv).

*The Bulgarian Principality (1878-1908),  
the Muslim Community and the Local Muslim Turkish Press*

Given the strict control and censorship over the Ottoman press from the early 1890s onwards, as well as the widely spread practices of spying and reporting on any kind of activity deemed to be antagonistic to Sultan Abdülhamid II, one of the ways to follow the contemporary attitudes and debates within Ottoman society is through examining the Muslim press published in territories outside the Empire's effective control. Among these territories, Bulgaria had a special place because of its relationship to the Empire and the presence of a sizable Muslim community.

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light of subsequent developments was seen as an indication of Abdülhamid II's intentions, Devereux, 237.

<sup>4</sup> This principle provided religious legitimacy to the arguments for introducing representative government. According to Islamic tradition, *mashwara* (Arabic) or *meşveret* (Turkish), the principle of consultation by the ruler of his advisors, was practiced by the prophet Muhammad, the early Islamic caliphs, and was sanctioned in the Qur'an. In the 19<sup>th</sup> c., however, this concept became largely synonymous to parliament, Bernard Lewis, "Mashwara" or "Mashūra," *The Encyclopedia of Islam. New Edition*, vol. 6, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 724-725.

Bulgaria separated from direct Ottoman rule following the Russo-Ottoman war of 1877-78.<sup>5</sup> In accordance with the provisions of the Berlin Treaty, it became an autonomous principality within the confines of the Empire and maintained this status until September 1908, when it declared independence and proclaimed itself a kingdom. From the very beginning of its existence, however, the Bulgarian Principality demonstrated an inclination to act much more independently than its vassal status implied and on a number of occasions rebuffed Ottoman attempts to influence its internal affairs. The press was among the institutions that functioned independently from Ottoman control, and the various Bulgarian governments and political parties attached importance to maintaining freedom of public expression. Censorship was banned by law, which was generally observed. In some cases involving the Muslim Turkish journals, it was the Ottoman Commissioner, Istanbul's highest diplomatic representative to Bulgaria, who most often alerted the local authorities about publications offensive to the sultanate and demanded sanctions.<sup>6</sup> That being said, one must not assume that free press, even by the standards of the time, was always the norm in Bulgaria. The Principality knew cases of infringement of press freedom and indirect censorship throughout the rule of certain governments in the thirty years of its existence.<sup>7</sup> There were instances of legal prosecution or outright assault against newspaper editors and their offices, both Muslim and Bulgarian, as well as cases when journalists or publishers were forced to abandon a certain political line through paternal advice or open threat.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> On the Congress of Berlin see W. N. Medlicott, *The Congress of Berlin and After: a Diplomatic History of the Near Eastern Settlement, 1878-1880*, (London: Methuen & Co., 1938). For an overview of the history of Bulgaria during that period see Richard J. Crampton, *Bulgaria 1878-1918. A History*, (New York: Columbia University Press, East European Monographs, Boulder, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the cases involving the following Muslim journals: *Malumat*, Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Istanbul [Prime Ministry Ottoman Archive, Istanbul, henceforth BOA] Y.PRK.MK 7/50 October 17-28, 1896; *Gayret*, BOA, Y.PRK.MK 7/76 June 29 – July 13, 1897; *Feryad, Şark* BOA, Y.MTV 288/39 Ottoman Commissioner (henceforth OC) Sadık el-Müeyyed to Mabeyn, July 3, 1906; *Muvazene, Ahali, Temaşa-i Esrar, Efkâr-ı Umumiye* BOA, A.MTZ.04 127/87 OC Sadık el-Müeyyed to Sadaret, April 12, 1907; *Malumat, Fünun, Balkan* (Russe), *Gayret* Tsentralen Dürzhaven Arhiv (Central State Archive, Sofia, henceforth TsDA) f. 321k, op. 1, a. e. 1241, January 17, 1898 – June 29, 1898.

<sup>7</sup> The most well-known period of infringement upon press freedom in Bulgaria was the regime of Stefan Stambolov (1889-1894) and his National-Liberal party, although even then opposition newspapers did exist, see Crampton, 125-161 and Duncan M. Perry, *Stefan Stambolov and the Emergence of Modern Bulgaria, 1870-1895*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993). Yet, there were cases of violating this freedom in the preceding and subsequent years, see for example Vasilka Tankova, *Svobodata na pechata v Kniazhestvo Bŭlgaria i Iztochna Rumelia, 1878-1885*, (Plovdiv, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> For a case involving the Muslim journal *Balkan* published in Russe, see “Vazi’-i Kanun, Sansür Slan Şehr Muhafızı” (Turkish section), “Gradonachalnik zakonodatel i tsenzor” (Bulgarian section), *Balkan* (Russe), no. 7, June 20, 1898, 1-2, 3-4; and BOA, A.MTZ.04 56/46 OC to Sadaret, June 22, 1898; on the attacks on the offices of the Bulgarian *Vecherna Poshta* newspaper see BOA, A.MTZ.04 127/87 OC Sadık el-Müeyyed to Sadaret, April 12, 1905.

Bulgaria had a sizable Muslim population, most of it Turks, who were a living legacy of the centuries-long Ottoman presence in the region. Towards the end of the 19th c. the Muslims in the Principality numbered about 650,000 and represented a fifth of the country's inhabitants.<sup>9</sup> They were deeply attached to their native places in Bulgaria but also felt inherently connected to the Ottoman state, which they saw as their primary protector. On many occasions they referred to themselves as being part of the Ottoman nation and spoke of the Empire as their homeland. They followed closely the developments taking place there, which was facilitated by Bulgaria's geographical proximity: Bulgarian cities with significant Muslim communities, such as Plovdiv, the largest city in the country after the capital Sofia, and Varna, the major port on the western Black Sea coast were just a few hours away from Istanbul by train or ship. The exchange and spread of information was further facilitated by trade, labor migration and by the press. Even though literacy levels among the Muslims in Bulgaria were low (3.86% for all Muslims and 3.96% for the Turks in 1905),<sup>10</sup> the establishment of *kiraathanes* (reading rooms) and the widely spread practice of reading newspapers aloud and discussing their contents in coffeehouses ensured that the information they contained reached a wider public than those who could read and write.

Muslim newspapers and journals in the Principality were in a more delicate position than their Bulgarian counterparts. They had to toe a tight line between effectively advocating the interests of the Muslims in Bulgaria, including protesting against various assaults and demonstrating their loyalty to the Bulgarian state. Although rarely spoken, there was always the concern among the editors of Muslim journals that excessive criticism of Bulgarian policies and actions could jeopardize the very existence of their publications. Yet, the development of the local Muslim press and the fortunes of individual newspapers during the period under discussion did not depend only on their relations with the Bulgarian authorities, but on a variety of external and internal factors. Among them were the state of Bulgarian-Ottoman relations, Bulgarian willingness to abide Ottoman requests to ban Muslim journals accused of maintaining anti-Hamidian rhetoric and an inclination to use the issue as leverage in obtaining concessions,<sup>11</sup> concern about the protests of the political opposition,<sup>12</sup> and the editor's political alignment.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Among the Muslims, there were about 570,000 Turks, see *Statisticheski godishnik na Bŭlgarskoto Tsarstvo, 1909*, (Sofia: Dŭrzhavna pechatnitsa, 1910), 38-39.

<sup>10</sup> *Statisticheski godishnik*, 65, 72-73; it should be noted though that there were considerable variations between the literacy levels among urban and rural populations, as well as differences according to gender. Thus, among the Muslims the category with the highest literacy rates – over 20% – were Turkish men living in the cities.

<sup>11</sup> For example TsDA, f. 321k, op. 1, a. e. 1397 Agent Geshov to Bulgarian PM Ivanchov, October 21, 1899, 1, regarding the journal *Islāb*.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Bulgarian arguments for refusing to have a special Ottoman envoy investigate the actions of a group of Muslims in Russe, among them the former editor of *Sebat*

However, in comparison to the Empire at the time, the Muslim press in Bulgaria was subject to relatively lesser restrictions. During the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II the press, both local and imported foreign periodicals, book publishing and public expression in general were subjected to censorship and various other limitations. Abdülhamid II was not the person to introduce censorship in the Empire, nor was his period of rule the last time in Ottoman history when it was practiced. Yet, it was a characteristic feature of the period that left a palpable imprint on its intellectual and political life. Censorship and self-censorship made their way gradually along with the development of Ottoman print culture. In the first years after Abdülhamid's accession to power the press was relatively free, but the rules became tighter towards 1889-1890.<sup>14</sup> This was when terms like "revolution," "dynamite," "republic," "constitution" and proper names such as "Macedonia," "Armenia" and "Murad" (referring to the Sultan's dethroned brother) became extinct from public use. The Ottoman newspapers were prevented from reporting and commenting on ongoing political crises and sensitive subjects, such as the Armenian crisis of 1894-96. Furthermore, the press was not allowed to make the faintest allusion to assassination of monarchs or heads of state lest such reports engendered dangerous thoughts among any disgruntled Ottoman subjects. Thus, the American president McKinley was reported of having died of anthrax and the Serbian King Alexander and Queen Draga of indigestion.<sup>15</sup> It is against this background that the Muslim press in Bulgaria, particularly the reformist Young Turk publications, stood out. They openly discussed and opined on current developments, while some of them regularly published opinions from their readers in Bulgaria and the Empire. These letters are particularly valuable since they allow us a glimpse into Muslim popular attitudes and public opinion at the time.

The first attempts to issue Turkish Muslim journals in Bulgaria were made in the 1880s, but more active publication activity developed from the middle of the 1890s as a consequence of a series of interrelated events. In Bulgaria the political climate and press regime experienced relative liberalization after Stefan Stam-

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that will be discussed below, on the grounds of distributing Young Turk propaganda, TsDA, f. 176k, op. 1, a. e. 936 MFRA to Agent Dimitrov, July 25, 1896, 17a-18a

<sup>13</sup> In the case of *Balkan* (Russe) mentioned above, it is likely that the Bulgarian authorities pressured its editor Ahmet Zeki to close his publication not only because of insistent Ottoman requests. Ahmet Zeki was involved in the local branch of the National-Liberal party of Stefan Stambolov that was forced out of power in 1894 and replaced by Konstantin Stoilov's People's (Narodna) party regime (1894-1899). Thus, Ahmed Zeki's sympathies with the political opposition could have provided another motive to make him stop issuing *Balkan*, on his political activity see "Sair mahallarda...", *Sebat*, no. 9, March 31, 1895, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Georgeon, 162-164; Donald Cioeta, "Ottoman Censorship in Lebanon and Syria, 1876-1908" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 10 (1979), 167-186.

<sup>15</sup> For some other anecdotal cases see Süleyman Kâni İrtem, *Abdülhamid Devrinde Hafiyelik ve Sansür*, (Istanbul: Temel Yayınları, 1999), 217-234.

bolov and his National-Liberal party stepped down from power in 1894.<sup>16</sup> The other development was the arrival of Young Turk émigrés who were fleeing persecution in the Empire. Soon Bulgaria acquired the reputation of a suitable ground for Young Turk opposition activity: the Bulgarian authorities often neglected Ottoman requests to extradite the troublemakers or bring them under legal prosecution, and setting up a journal was easier. At the same time Bulgaria's proximity provided ample opportunity for smuggling Young Turk publications<sup>17</sup> and maintaining contact with sympathizers in the Empire proper. The expansion of Young Turk activity in Bulgaria had an important affect on the local Muslim community, as it contributed to the rise of a cultural and political reform movement, and intensified the debates about the place of the community in Bulgaria, with regard to the Empire and the modern world.

The polarization among the Muslims in Bulgaria from the middle of the 1890s onwards was reflected in their press. Between 1895 and 1908 out of the seven most significant Muslim journals that came out for a year or longer, two were pro-Hamidian publications (*Gayret* (Zeal) and *Rağbet* (Desire)) and the remaining five (*Sebat* (Perseverance), *Muvazene* (Equilibrium), *Balkan* (issued in Plovdiv), *Tuna* (Danube), and *Uhwuvet* (Brotherhood)) were reformist publications associated with the activity of the Young Turks. The divisions within the community were also manifested in the divergent opinions on the necessity of parliament for the Ottoman state. On one hand, there were many Muslims who saw the Sultan and the Empire as their primary protectors. Thus, they supported the existing regime and maintained that the type of government a state practiced should correspond to the character of its people. They criticized those who demanded the reopening of the parliament as having succumbed to the influence of the hostile foreign powers who wished the Ottoman Empire's dissolution. Some of them also argued that the Ottoman Empire already practiced consultation in its governance and administrative institutions. On the other hand the reformists and Young Turk sympathizers argued that reconvening the parliament, along with restoring the constitution, was the only viable solution for the challenges facing the Empire. According to them, a parliament was expected to bring equality and justice; it

<sup>16</sup> Stefan Stambolov, a highly controversial historical figure, and his National-Liberal party dominated Bulgarian state affairs between 1888 and 1894. He took guidance of the Bulgarian state in a critical moment after a Russophile officer coup had dethroned and sent into exile the first Bulgarian prince Alexander Battenberg; the subsequently chosen head of state Ferdinand was not internationally recognized and relations with Russia were severed. In the course of time Stambolov consolidated his personal hold of Bulgarian government, curbed the actions of the opposition and established very good relations with the Ottoman Empire. He stepped down in May 1894 under increasing pressure from the allied opposition and about a year later he was assassinated, see Crampton, 105-161 and Perry, *passim*.

<sup>17</sup> On the Young Turk activities in the Balkans, including Bulgaria, see Şükrü Hanioglu, *The Young Turks in Opposition*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), (henceforth *Opposition*) 89-90, 109, 122-124, 165-166; on smuggling from Bulgaria see Edhem Ruhi Balkan, *Edhem Rubi Balkan Hatıraları – Canlı Tarihler* 6, (Ankara: Türkiye matbaası, 1947), 33.

would prevent separatist tendencies among the various nationalities. While the former group saw the parliament as the cause that would ultimately lead the Empire to perdition, the latter argued that the Ottoman state would collapse unless it was reinstated. The discussions examined here are of further importance since they reflect the opinion of larger segments of Muslim society, including people from the Ottoman provinces, that allow us an insight into the popular repercussions of debates taking place among the elites in the capital and in exile.

### *Gayret: the People Deserve the Government They Get*

To present the perspective of those who supported the regime in the Empire, this section examines *Gayret*, one of the longest-running Muslim newspapers in the Bulgarian Principality. *Gayret* was first issued in January 1895 and continued appearing until 1903, when the Sultan requested its closure and demanded that its owner cede the printing equipment.<sup>18</sup> It started as a weekly but subsequently began coming out twice a week. The journal's place of publication was Plovdiv, the second largest city in Bulgaria at the time and one of the well-established cultural and economic centers in the region. *Gayret's* owner and editor-in-chief was Ali Rıza Pasha İbrahimov, a native of Plovdiv. Born in 1850, he had acquired a position of respect for being a member of the local court and one of the city's successful rice merchants. In the period 1895-1903 Rıza Pasha also ran as a candidate in Bulgarian parliamentary elections probably as an independent but was elected only once in 1897.<sup>19</sup> Even though after the Young Turk revolution he would present himself as a vocal critic of Abdülhamid II and one of his victims, at the time he was apparently deeply devoted to the Sultan and the Empire. Rıza Pasha kept close relations with the Ottoman representatives in Bulgaria, who referred to him as a "friend of the sultanate," praised his loyalty and tried to intervene in his favor in the few cases when distribution of his newspaper in the Empire was stopped because of publishing features that the Ottoman censors found objectionable.<sup>20</sup> In 1898 as a reward for his services, Rıza Pasha was given a monthly salary of 1,500 guruş from the Ottoman treasury.<sup>21</sup> *Gayret* was granted permission for free distribution throughout the Empire almost immediately after its establishment,<sup>22</sup> and it appears that it was widely read in both Bulgaria and the Empire, also reach-

<sup>18</sup> BOA, A.MTZ.04 136/40 OC Sadık el-Müeyyed to Sadaret, December 5, 1905.

<sup>19</sup> *Bûlgarski almanah*, 1897, (Sofia: 1898), XIV; *Bûlgarski almanah*, 1902, (Sofia: 1903), 680; TsDA, f. 371k, op. 5, a. e. 16, 1901 parliamentary elections, 31; February 1902 parliamentary elections, 56-57.

<sup>20</sup> See for example BOA, Y.PRK.A 9/75 Second Secretary in Plovdiv to Sadaret, January 11, 1895; A.MTZ.04 181/32, Second Secretary to Sadaret, November 10, 1895, 7; Second Secretary to Sadaret, November 25, 1895, 13; A.MTZ.04 79/1 OC Ali Ferruh to Sadaret, May 27, 1902, 1.

<sup>21</sup> BOA, A.MTZ.04 59/3 July 27, 1898 – October 31, 1898.

<sup>22</sup> BOA, A.MTZ.04 179/9 July 1895, 12.

ing other neighboring countries, such as Romania.<sup>23</sup> According to the claims of its owner, at the peak of its popularity the newspaper had over 2,000 subscribers, many of whom lived in the Empire.<sup>24</sup>

*Gayret* printed primarily reports and opinion pieces discussing current political events although it was careful not to publish anything potentially offensive to Abdülhamid even for the sake of refuting it. It explicitly advocated Ottoman interests, the policy of the existing Ottoman regime, as well as the interests of the local Muslim community. The articles rarely bore a byline, so while we know the names of a few of its contributors, it is difficult to determine the precise authorship of the various pieces.<sup>25</sup> The newspaper seldom published feedback from readers, but even then such pieces did not deal with subjects that could be politically sensitive for the Ottoman administration.

In April-May 1895 *Gayret* printed a series of articles titled “Gazi Sultan Abdülhamid Sâni” that praised the Sultan and his style of rule.<sup>26</sup> The motives for publishing this feature are not immediately obvious, but perhaps the direct occasion was the honoring of Rıza Pasha with a *Mecidiye* order along with the decoration of several other Plovdiv notables.<sup>27</sup> Another compelling reason was the desire to defend the Sultan in the midst of the unfolding diplomatic and internal crisis from growing European criticism provoked by the recently suppressed Armenian revolt in Sasun.<sup>28</sup> While it did not talk explicitly about parliament, the article addressed the issue indirectly by discussing the political system in the Empire. The piece was a eulogy of the Sultan and his contributions to the glory of the Ottoman state; it vowed gratitude for his paternal guidance and extolled the welfare of all Ottoman subjects, proclaiming their unconditional love and devotion to their ruler. Yet the last part went even further to denounce the Europeans and the critics within the Empire who accused the Sultan of despotism. It justified the Sultan’s methods of rule, which were best suited to the character of the Ottoman nation, and pronounced the government system in the Empire as a non-oppressive autocratic rule. To discredit the critics’ arguments *Gayret* contrasted the safety within the Ottoman state with the insecurity in Europe caused by the actions of radical groups.

<sup>23</sup> See the letter of some Muslims from Romania who inquired about why they were not receiving *Gayret*, “Romanya’da Toksofu Kariyesinden” followed by *Muvazene’s* comment, *Muvazene*, no. 278, May 14, 1903, 4.

<sup>24</sup> BOA, A.MTZ.04 79/1 OC Ali Ferruh to Sadaret, May 27, 1902, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Among the initial contributors were Priştineli Selim and Selânikli Hilmi, yet both were pressured to resign, the former for allegedly importing “harmful publications,” BOA, A.MTZ.04 31/62 November 4, 1895; BOA, A.MTZ.04 33/96 May 19 – June 11, 1896, 1, 2, 6.

<sup>26</sup> “Gazi Sultan Abdülhamid Sâni,” *Gayret*, no. 16, May 3, 1895, 1.

<sup>27</sup> “Teveccühât ve Nişan,” *Gayret*, no.12, April 8, 1895, 1; BOA, A.MTZ.04 76/142 Second Secretary İbrahim Fethi to OC Mehmed Nebil, January 7, 1895.

<sup>28</sup> Hanioglu, *Opposition*, 75; Georgeon, 286-309.

It is a pity that after so many great foreign and internal political and cultural successes that were the sole result of the right governance of Ottoman sultans, some greedy European politicians do not shy away from criticizing the present-day organization of the Ottoman administration. ‘... to tread on people’s freedom with tyrannical government means an insult to humanity; at the end of the 19th c. in such progressive times no society should be ruled by an absolute government.’ In such a way they are trying to confuse the minds of the people. Since such subjects always invite discord we are writing the following to those prejudiced against the government.

Personal rule, absolutist rule, constitutional government, republic, democracy, aristocratic rule – all these types of government have their special advantages and disadvantages. More precisely, the enumerated advantages and disadvantages from the point of view of society’s wisdom are nothing at the end, everything is relative. In that respect since practicing good government is quite difficult ... to say that constitutionalism is good or republic is good is nothing but stupidity. The best type of government for the noble Ottoman nation is absolutist government, because [it] suits best the morality and the condition of the great Ottoman society.

[...]

Why do the anarchists and nihilists who oppose the different European administrations and create such crises and disturbances that make governments feel as if they sit on top of a volcano emerge? Is this because Europe’s governments are good or bad? Ottoman society is secure and it has not seen anarchism, socialism or communism. The current Ottoman system of administration is not the absolutist rule of a single person but rather a non-oppressive autocratic rule. Even if this government is not the absolutely best one, it is still the best for Ottoman society.<sup>29</sup>

*Gayret’s* assertions that the system of rule a state adopted should match the people’s character and moral preparedness resembled arguments made by other pro-Hamidian journals published in the Empire. Probably the best-known example of the agenda they maintained was Ahmet Midhat (1844-1912), the contemporary writer and publicist, whose articles expressed the stance of the ruling regime. Since he enjoyed the special favor and financial support of the Sultan, he had the rare opportunity to discuss sensitive issues. In a piece published in May 1896 in the *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, Ahmet Midhat Efendi argued that representative government would be detrimental to a multi-national and multi-religious state like the Ottoman one. The parliament would pass laws that could violate the powers of the people, and thus they would eventually have to be annulled.<sup>30</sup> Yet, such

<sup>29</sup> “Gazi Sultan Abdülhamid Sâni,” *Gayret*, no. 16, May 3, 1895, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Ahmet Midhat in Hanioglu, *Opposition*, 31; on the Sultan’s views see *ibid.* 31, f. 219. Incidentally, this statement represented a significant departure from an earlier stance he expressed in 1880 in an opinion letter addressed to the Sultan. In this letter Ahmet Midhat argued that the parliament and the constitution did not intrude upon the ruler’s authority; it was their absence that threatened to strengthen the power of the ministers. He further warned that in spite of the recent war and hostility the Muslims in Bulgaria would acquire legal freedom sooner than their co-religionists in the Empire since they lived in a country ruled by a constitution. The idea of Muslims under non-Muslim government enjoying more freedom than Muslims under the protection of an Islamic ruler seemed particularly disturbing to the author and perhaps to many other Muslim Ottoman contemporaries. Ahmet Midhat Efendi, “Tavzih-i Kelam ve Tasrih-i Meram,” (May 20, 1880) haz. Cengiz

claims were also advanced by some of the members of the earlier Ottoman liberal opposition. Another “well-wisher” to the sultanate, either from Plovdiv or from among the customs officials at the Sirkeci railway station that received publications from Bulgaria for distribution in Istanbul, sent a copy of *Gayret*’s piece on Abdülhamid II together with other issues of the newspaper it deemed problematic to the Grand Vizier’s office. A note under the article in all likelihood scribbled by the sender warned that its author’s real intentions were to awaken the ideas of Ali Suavi in the capital.<sup>31</sup> Such an allegation could have serious consequences for the newspaper and its owner. Ali Suavi (1839-1878), one of the leading figures of the Young Ottoman movement, experienced a series of dramatic ideological transformations throughout the period of his intellectual and political activity. Initially, he was a staunch supporter of constitutionalism and among the first to argue that Islamic traditions commanded democratic consultation, but later he turned to criticizing this political process. Eventually he met a tragic end after leading a group of Muslim refugees in an attack on Abdülhamid’s palace.<sup>32</sup> In an article published in exile in the journal *Ulum* which was among the first Ottoman writings to use the word “democracy,” Ali Suavi argued that the type of government in each state should be chosen in consideration of the moral character and condition of its people. Ali Suavi also made a distinction between democracy and parliamentary government. While he advocated the introduction of a parliamentary system, he insisted that democracy or equality, as he alternatively called it, was not suitable for the Ottoman state because of its large size, diverse population and since its subjects were of bad morality.<sup>33</sup>

It is not clear whether the Ottoman authorities proceeded to investigate the alleged ideological connection between Ali Suavi and the political line pursued by *Gayret*. By the time they received this report, the newspaper had already been suspended, the immediate reason being a piece criticizing British policy towards the Empire with regard to the Armenian question.<sup>34</sup> Eventually Rıza Pasha was

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Şeker, *Hilafet Risâleleri. 1. cilt, II. Abdülhamit Devri*, ed. İsmail Kara, (Istanbul: Klasik, 2002), 111-138. I would like to thank Abdülhamit Kırmızı for bringing this document to my attention.

<sup>31</sup> BOA, A.MTZ.04 177/90 July 23, 1895, “when (the article) is examined well, the matter will become clear” the informer continued.

<sup>32</sup> Şerif Mardin, *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000, orig. publ. by Princeton University Press, 1962), Hüseyin Çelik, *Ali Suavi ve Dönemi*, (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1994) and Ali Suavi, “Democracy: Government by the People, Equality,” in Charles Kurzman, ed. *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940. A Sourcebook*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 138-143.

<sup>33</sup> According to Ali Suavi, in the Ottoman case such “[a] government is required that will not only satisfy the material needs but also see to the moral needs of such an immoral and leprous people,” in Kurzman, 140.

<sup>34</sup> BOA, A.MTZ.04 179/9 June 19 – August 8, 1895.

again allowed to import *Gayret* into the Empire<sup>35</sup> and became stricter in his self-censorship.<sup>36</sup>

### *Sebat: a Case of Popular Debate*

*Gayret's* article on Abdülhamid II provoked a reaction from *Sebat*, the other Muslim journal issued in Bulgaria at the time. *Sebat* openly disputed *Gayret's* claims that absolutist rule was better for the Empire than constitutional and parliamentary government, and invited men of political wisdom to express their views on the matter. Furthermore, *Sebat* published Abdülhamid II's ferman promulgating the constitution issued in December 1876, thus signaling its Young Turk leanings.<sup>37</sup> Shortly after, the newspaper received a warning from the Ottoman authorities and halted the initiative although it did not completely abandon the idea.<sup>38</sup>

*Sebat* was published in Russe, the capital of the former Ottoman Danube vilayet and the largest Bulgarian city on the Danube. Its owner and editor was İskender Mahmudov, a local notable and later a member in the Bulgarian parliament.<sup>39</sup> The journal was first published in February 1895 and came out once a week for a year, after which it closed down due to financial constraints and technical difficulties: it did not have a printing press, so until the end it was handwritten and lithographed, which cost its publishers significant efforts. At the time obtaining printing equipment with Arabic fonts was not easy and could be considerably expensive. The two closest centers from where one could purchase printing presses were Istanbul and Vienna. The export of presses from the Empire was subject to severe limitations and was allowed in rare cases only after a thorough investigation of the background of the potential publishers. On the other hand, obtaining equipment from Vienna was twice as expensive and *Sebat*, could not afford to buy it without incurring a large debt or collecting in advance the fees from its subscribers. Since the authorities in Istanbul considered *Sebat's* publishing team unreliable, they rejected its requests.<sup>40</sup> Apparently, they had enough good reason for that. As time passed and it became clear that the newspaper would not obtain a printing press, its publishing team, i.e. its owner and editor İskender Mahmudov, the translator

<sup>35</sup> BOA, A.MTZ.04 177/90 Sadaret to OC Mehmed Nebil, July 23, 1895.

<sup>36</sup> For example in September *Gayret* received a few anonymous letters which were allegedly offensive to the Ottoman state and the newspaper's agenda. *Gayret* published only vague warnings against their sender without referring to the specific charges these letters were making. "Ahvâl-ı Dahiliye," *Gayret*, no. 35, Sept. 15, 1895, 2; "Muameleye Göre Mukabele," *Gayret*, no. 36, Sept. 22, 1895, 2.

<sup>37</sup> "Filibe'de neşr olunan...", *Sebat*, no. 15, May 11, 1895, 1.

<sup>38</sup> BOA, A.MTZ.04 9/9 OC Mehmed Nebil to Sadaret, June 11, 1895, 57.

<sup>39</sup> TsDA, f. 371k, op. 5, a. e. 10 February 1902 parliamentary elections, 338; BOA, A.MTZ.04 79/75 OC Ali Ferruh to Sadaret, July 31, 1902.

<sup>40</sup> "İdarehanemizin Rica ve Hasbihali," *Sebat*, no. 17, May 26, 1895, 2; "İhtar ve İ'tizar," *Sebat*, no. 37, October 19, 1895, 1.

Ahmet Zeki and another collaborator, Muamelecizâde Emin Ağa, gradually revealed their Young Turk sympathies. In addition, one of the printers turned out to be Mustafa Ragib, a former student in the Imperial Medical School in Istanbul and a Young Turk who was sought by the Ottoman authorities. He fled the Empire in 1892 first to Berlin and then to Bulgaria.<sup>41</sup> After *Sebat*'s closure all these individuals expanded their involvement with the opposition organization,<sup>42</sup> and later they were involved in the publication of other Young Turk journals such as *Balkan* (issued in Russe), *Islâh* (Improvement/Reform) and *Feryad* (Cry).

In the autumn of 1895 *Sebat*'s columns featured a heated readers' debate about the necessity of parliamentary government in the Ottoman Empire, which was intensified by the critical events in the Empire – the Armenian revolts, their suppression and the Great Power response. The crisis originated with the ill-fated Sasun uprising in November 1894, after which the Empire came under growing European pressure to introduce reforms in the eastern provinces explicitly favoring the Armenians, but the situation deteriorated in the autumn of 1895. On September 30, 1895 the *Hunchak* committee organized a political demonstration in the capital to present a petition to the Ottoman government. However, the peaceful march turned into a violent melee after some extremists brandished guns and the gendarmerie fired on the demonstrators. The incident was followed by a series of attacks on Armenians in the capital and eastern Anatolia. The Sultan was induced to proclaim a plan for reforms and in the course of the crisis replaced four grand viziers.<sup>43</sup> The sentiments these turbulent events provoked among the Muslims in Bulgaria were well reflected in *Sebat* and to some extent in *Gayret*, which, in contrast to the Ottoman press, widely discussed the crisis. Besides the articles and editorials, *Sebat* also published readers' letters which give us an opportunity to follow the popular perceptions and debates on representative government and the current events in the Empire.

On September 22, 1895 *Sebat* published a letter from a Muslim from Varna whose name was withheld.<sup>44</sup> The letter accounted the following story: recently the author had visited Istanbul on personal business and one evening his host had taken him to a learned gathering. There the guests participated in literary and

<sup>41</sup> BOA, Y.MTV 285/69 OC to Dahiliye, March 17, 1906; İbrahim Temo, *İbrahim Temo'nun İttihad ve Terakki Anıları*, (Istanbul: Arba yayınları, 1987), 57-58. In his memoirs Temo mistakenly reports the journal's title as *Tuna* (Danube). According to the available evidence there was no such journal in Russe at the time and comparison with other developments suggests that the publication in question was *Sebat*.

<sup>42</sup> See for example the correspondence between the Ottoman Commissioner and the Bulgarian authorities, TsDA, f. 176k, op. 1, a. e. 936, May 24, 1896 – Oct. 29, 1896, 6-26.

<sup>43</sup> On those events see Georgeon, 286-296; Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, vol. 2, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 200-205.

<sup>44</sup> "Varna'dan Mektub-u Mahsus," *Sebat*, no. 33, Sept. 22, 1895, 4-6.

scholarly debates, whose grace and details stunned the visitor from Varna. Eventually, the conversation turned to the state of current political affairs. The author immediately became alert and began listening carefully so that he could write about the discussions to *Sebat*, an idea which he had entertained for some time.

First, the guests discussed the questions of Macedonia and Thessaly, and since the author was from Bulgaria, they asked him about the local state of affairs regarding these issues. The party agreed that because the Great Powers supported the Greeks and the Bulgarians they would continue to advance their plans in the contested areas. Then, the guests moved to the projects for Armenian reforms. After discussing in detail various articles in the European press on this issue, the company speculated that it would be necessary to grant certain concessions to the Armenians which would be to the disadvantage of the Turks.

Finally, the party addressed the larger question of why the various nationalities in the Ottoman Empire sought to separate from its control. Some of the guests suggested that because of their close connections with the Europeans, the Ottoman Christians had been awakened, their wealth increased and they had started looking down on the Muslims. Being subjected to Muslim rule hurt their feelings, and that is why they decided to break away. Others, however, argued that since the Ottoman state did not adopt the principle of consultation (*usul-i meşveret*), it pushed public affairs into evil hands, which led to general dissatisfaction. The majority of the attendees agreed with this second opinion.

Then a knowledgeable gentleman took the floor and enumerated the various benefits of consultation. He supported his view with Qur'anic verses, hadiths and historical examples. Then he stated that it was the Turks rather than the Armenians who deserved the sympathy of the Europeans, since they were the ones who carried the heavy duties of military service. This person urged that it was the right time to explain this to the Europeans and attract their support by using the various newspapers published in Europe. He was abruptly silenced by the other guests, who agreed with his point that consultative government was necessary but argued that it would be a disgrace for the Muslims to use the European press for such purposes. Everybody was unanimous that since the Rashidun caliphs no other Muslim state had worked as hard for the benefit of the Muslims and for the protection of religion as the Ottoman one. At that point in the text the Muslim from Varna considered it necessary to reassure the readers that no offensive word was uttered against Sultan Abdülhamid II.

At the end the party began thinking of a way to overcome "the suppression of free thought" (*mezalim-i efkar*) in the Ottoman state. The solution for that was to appeal through the foreign journals to the Sultan to rely on his people, reopen the parliament, dismiss his incapable advisors and restore freedom of the press. Even though the guests had initially deprecated the notion of using the foreign press to make their voices heard, eventually the majority accepted the idea. On this note the gathering came to an end. The Muslim from Varna promised then

and there that he would write about the issue to *Sebat* and enthusiastically appealed to the journal's editor to publish his letter for the sake of patriotism.

The letter immediately evoked responses among the Muslim public in Bulgaria that expressed divergent views. Among the first to write back was another Muslim from Varna who signed as "a Turk" (*Bir Türk*).<sup>45</sup> At the beginning the author praised the press for its role as a guide of public opinion and morals and then turned against his fellow townsman, pejoratively referring to him as an "unintelligent Turk" and then as "a person of unknown nationality." Among the Ottomans, he argued, there were people who had ideas about reform but others, like the "Western mannered Turk" in question read the lies published in the European press and complained about a great state of 650 years. He further condemned the "fake Turk turned European" for being one of the "disgraceful people."

This second Muslim from Varna admitted that the people, i.e. the Ottomans, were deprived of free press and freedom of thought but rather than appealing to the European press and thus offending the exalted caliphate, he suggested that a more successful strategy would be to plead with the Sultan to restore these freedoms. He even argued that there were already positive signs for loosening various restrictions, such as the fact that the grand vizier Said Pasha had lifted the ban on some previously prohibited books and allowed the journal *Tercüman*, printed in the Crimea, to be circulated in the Empire. Very soon, the author prognosticated, the people in the Empire would gain freedom of press and thought and would see the implementation of reforms.

The same issue of *Sebat* also published a response from Silistra signed as Muhibb-i Sadık bin Âli, who was understood to be a member of the *ulema*.<sup>46</sup> He offered a harsh response to the first letter from Varna accusing it of instigating "confusion in the minds" and being completely devoid of wisdom. Similar to *Gayret*, the *âlim* warned about succumbing to the treacherous foreign publications that only instigated disobedience and consequently brought many terrible events upon the Ottoman state. But above all, he stressed, the deed of the Varna Muslim lacked dignity: important state matters were discussed in official places, and it was not pertinent to talk about government affairs in the "*konaks*, ordinary houses, coffeehouses, and pubs" because everybody knew that in such environment no one would be safe from erring. The Silistra Muslim went on to praise the current state of the Ottoman Empire: the ruler had entrusted the government into the hands of competent officials, and there was not even the smallest reason for complaint. "If we open our eyes by thinking with fairness and mercy, we find our-

<sup>45</sup> "Muharrir Efendi...", *Sebat*, no. 35, Oct. 5, 1895, 5. Letters published in the journal were usually signed with a pen name, but their authors were required to confirm their real name and address to the editorial office, "Ihtar," *Sebat*, no. 34, Sept. 29, 1895, 8.

<sup>46</sup> "Silistre'den Mektub-u Mahsus," *Sebat*, no. 35, Oct. 5, 1895, 7-8.

selves living in a blissful age. Even the most powerful pens are weak in praising and appreciating it.” He extolled the advances of the Ottoman state and Abdülhamid II’s role in their enhancement and ended with a promise to address the question about the necessity of free press and parliament in another letter.

The debate became particularly heated after one of *Sebat*’s self-proclaimed most devoted readers, who identified himself simply as “the Sailor” (*Gemici*) joined in.<sup>47</sup> He wrote in a fiery impulsive style and appeared well informed about ongoing events in the Empire and abroad, and also alluded to his Young Turk sympathies. The Sailor expressed support for the second letter from Varna, but he scorned the *‘ālim* from Silistra for his disregard of current events in the Empire, which proved the necessity for change. To strengthen his criticism, he sought to challenge the *‘ālim* by means of religious argumentation. “I am asking if this person is really a dervish, for let him remember the words of the caliph ‘Alī ‘wherever there is no consultation there is no right’ and let him not speak against the principle of consultation proclaimed by the most glorious of prophets.” The Sailor also accused the Silistra Muslim of being one of the people anticipating awards from the Yıldız palace and ended his letter by appealing to those in charge of the homeland (in that case apparently the Ottoman Empire) to devote and if necessary sacrifice their lives for its sake and not to listen to false advisors.

The Silistra *‘ālim* responded promptly, pointing out that the Sailor had not understood his main argument: “It is admitted that even a small matter, let alone the important affairs of state, cannot be resolved without consultation; in our previous article we did not say a single word against consultation and we will never do so; such an idea does not even exist in our imagination.”<sup>48</sup> He further accused the Sailor of creating the wrong impression that Ottoman governmental affairs proceeded without consultation, an idea which “even the schoolchildren nowadays” found inconceivable. All branches and offices of the Ottoman government were bound by the Sharia and functioned in accordance with the principle of consultation. The *‘ālim* thanked the Sailor for labeling him a eulogizer, since he considered it an honor and duty to support the Ottoman state, and called upon him to declare openly his ideological convictions.

To those challenges the Sailor replied with the following statement:

O, brother! The consultation required by a constitutional government is one thing and the consultation among a few people is another. In a place where there is no constitutional government the power to issue orders to bring reforms and reorganization in accordance with the regional necessities could pass into the hands of seditious spies and corrupt officials.

In the places where there is constitutional government no matter how much evil there is, it could be prevented by trusting the people and electing patriotic representatives; all

<sup>47</sup> “Bir Gemici Taifesinden Alınan Tahriratın Suretidir,” *Sebat*, no. 36, Oct. 13, 1895, 7-8.

<sup>48</sup> “Silistre’den Mektup,” *Sebat*, no. 38, Oct. 26, 1895, 4.

kinds of benefits will ensue and evil will be averted through consultation and discussion among those respectable individuals. Even though I am a sailor, I have observed and learned this. In view of that, with respect, there is no doubt that everything in this world comes with consultation. Even we ... (the) sailors consult with each other what time to eat the *mamaliga* (maize bread) let alone the important government affairs.

So, as I've said above, constitutional consultation is one thing, absolutist consultation is another.<sup>49</sup>

After this fiery letter, *Sebat* announced that it would not publish any further correspondence on this subject. Its editor did not give any specific reasons for this decision, and while it is possible that he had received a warning, it might as well be that technical difficulties pressed him to cut the number pages by half, and thus there was no space for such lengthy readers' letters.

While *Sebat* gave the opportunity for divergent views to be expressed, its editorial team openly supported the idea that reconvening the parliament was the best way to improve the state of the Empire. This stance was initially visible from *Sebat's* first response to *Gayret*, but it became more outspoken throughout the following months. In a lead article on October 26, 1895 *Sebat* objected to the Ottoman decision to introduce reforms in the eastern vilayets undertaken in response to western pressure, since it made the Muslims "very sad."<sup>50</sup> It criticized the Istanbul newspapers which wrote and repeated one another in stating that reforms would be implemented in accordance with the preparation of the local population but did not dare to voice the people's demands. And what all the Muslims without exception wanted, *Sebat* maintained, was the reopening of the parliament. A parliament would secure peace in the east, curb the illegitimate demands of the Europeans and prevent them from interfering in the internal affairs of the Ottoman state under the pretext of humanity and protection of the Christians. The newspaper expressed hope that the Sultan would agree to issue the necessary order since this was the right thing to do.

A letter from a "Muslim patriot from Kosovo" threw more light onto the attitude towards current events and the parliament in the Ottoman provinces. The author of this letter probably belonged to the ranks of the Ottoman military since he appeared to be well informed about the condition of the army contingent stationed in the Kosovo vilayet. He also gave a clue about his Young Turk sympathies by alluding positively to a "patriotic newspaper," about to be issued in Europe, which in all likelihood was the Young Turk organ *Meşveret*. The Muslim from Kosovo spoke with anger about the recent events in Istanbul.<sup>51</sup> He protested that the Armenians were being appointed to various administrative posts

<sup>49</sup> "Muharrir efendi...", *Sebat*, no. 39, November 2, 1895, 3-4.

<sup>50</sup> "İcmal," *Sebat*, no. 38, Oct. 26, 1895, 1.

<sup>51</sup> "Kosova'dan Bir Muhibb-i Vatan Bir İslamın Sedasıdır," *Sebat*, no. 37, Oct. 19, 1895, 2-41; on *Meşveret* see Hanioğlu, *Opposition*, 77-78.

and gaining advantages at the expense of the Muslims, but that rather than being grateful, they revolted. He was also indignant at the inactivity of the press in the Empire and stated: "If we didn't get information from the newspapers issued by patriots in the Crimea, Bulgaria, Bosnia, and Cyprus, we would not know anything, but our destruction would be underway." The author asserted that the only way out of this disastrous situation was the reconvening of the parliament. Furthermore, he assured the readers that such demands did not mean that those who advanced them were against the Sultan since he also desired the best for his subjects. The author concluded his letter with the appeal "If the parliament is not reconvened we are doomed!"

The discussions featured in *Sebat* in the autumn of 1895 suggest that the debate concerning the parliament and the political system in the Empire was not the exclusive priority of the elites in the Ottoman capital or exiled in Europe but involved wider social segments. The Muslim public were interested and through various channels followed the current events in the Ottoman state and used the press published abroad to voice their opinion.

*Edbem Rubi and the Balkan Daily:  
the Activist Young Turk Perspective*

Invariably, the most vocal in their demands for parliament and their criticism of the Hamidian regime were the Young Turks. The Committee for Union and Progress (CUP), which was the organization's formal name, was founded in 1889 in opposition to Sultan Abdülhamid II by students of the Imperial Medical Academy in Istanbul, but its members developed more significant activity from the mid 1890s onwards. In 1894-95 a series of arrests among students in the higher schools in the Empire sent many of the organization's sympathizers into exile. Following the 1902 congress of the Ottoman opposition in Geneva, the organization split up into rival factions advocating different strategies for continuing the struggle, which left it weakened. Young Turk ideology was inspired by social Darwinism, positivism and science, and parliament and constitutionalism featured prominently in the organization's political rhetoric. This trait, along with the fact that the Young Turks initiated the revolution of 1908, led many historians to qualify them as a constitutional movement. This suggestion has been challenged by Şükrü Hanioglu, who has argued that the Young Turk opposition bore little resemblance to other constitutional movements, such as those in Europe and North America. For the Young Turks the notions of parliament and representative government were of little real significance beyond being symbols of modernity and an instrument for preventing Great Power encroachment upon the Empire's internal affairs. Largely influenced by elitist theories, the original members of the CUP saw the parliament as "a heterogeneous crowd" that could potentially be harmful to the "scientific" administration they sought to establish. However, as they expanded their activity and al-

lied themselves with other opposition groups, their ideology gradually evolved and modified its initial character.<sup>52</sup>

Regardless of whether the Young Turk leadership sincerely believed in the benefits of consultative government for the Ottoman state or not, calls and arguments for reconvening the parliament were regularly present in the Young Turk press, including that published in Bulgaria. Emphasis on the parliament became another way of challenging the legitimacy of Abdülhamid II's regime. To make their claims more forceful, Young Turk journals in Bulgaria often juxtaposed the Principality and the Empire, extolling the former for its parliamentary and constitutional system and its political advances. Comparing Bulgaria, one of the main Ottoman rivals on the Balkans, to the Empire in such a favorable way was sure to irritate at least a few officials in Istanbul. To present the Young Turk perspective, the following section will examine one of the most influential Young Turk newspapers in Bulgaria, which was the mouthpiece of the reform movement at the time, the *Balkan* daily published between 1906 and 1910 in Plovdiv.

*Balkan's* editor-in-chief was Edhem Ruhi, who was among the most distinguished leaders of the Young Turk organization's activist wing. Born in Istanbul, Edhem Ruhi joined the ranks of the opposition movement in the 1890s while a student in the Imperial Medical Academy. In 1898 he was arrested along with other members of the organization and sent to prison and exile in Tripoli.<sup>53</sup> After spending two years there, he managed to escape to Geneva, where he joined the Young Turk émigré circle and became involved in the publication of the organization's central organ *Osmanlı*. Soon Edhem Ruhi was appointed director of the branch, partly in recognition of his wide popularity and charismatic character.<sup>54</sup> He moved along with the newspaper to London and then, following the 1902 Congress, to Cairo.<sup>55</sup>

Edhem Ruhi sided with the organization's activist wing and gradually developed a more explicit Turkist discourse and a more radical line. According to his autobiography, while in Egypt he became tired of writing and wanted to be involved in more extreme but effective actions, "to do terror." "The only successful way to overthrow the dictatorial regime (of Abdülhamid II) was through terror" he stated in his memoirs. To carry out his plans in 1904 he traveled to Bulgaria, where he visited the reliable branches of Russe, Vidin and Varna and, among others, met with *Sebat's* former editor İskender Bey.<sup>56</sup> His plan to assassinate the Sultan, however, came to naught as the dynamite smuggled from Bulgaria via the

<sup>52</sup> On the history and ideology of the Young Turks see Hanioglu, *Opposition, passim*; and *idem*. *Preparation for a Revolution: the Young Turks, 1902-1908*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) (henceforth *Revolution*); on Young Turk views of the parliament and constitutionalism, see *Opposition*, 28-32.

<sup>53</sup> Edhem Ruhi, 6-13; Hanioglu, *Opposition*, 121.

<sup>54</sup> Edhem Ruhi, 24-25; Hanioglu, *Opposition*, 142-146.

<sup>55</sup> Edhem Ruhi, 24-30; Hanioglu, *Revolution*, 53-59.

<sup>56</sup> Edhem Ruhi, 29.

mountainous border was captured along with the direct perpetrator.<sup>57</sup> In the face of such fiascos, Edhem Ruhi decided to give up his political activity and make peace with the Istanbul regime. He was given the position of secretary at the Ottoman Commissioner's office in Sofia, where he remained for a few months in 1905.<sup>58</sup> However, another unsuccessful attempt on Abdülhamid's life threw him back into the opposition camp. Although Edhem Ruhi had no connection with the plot, suspicion fell on him and he was sentenced to death in absentia. To avoid further Ottoman persecution he married into a prominent Muslim family from Plovdiv and apparently changed his citizenship.<sup>59</sup> Soon afterwards he started publishing in Plovdiv the weekly *Rumeli* and from 1906 onwards the popular daily *Balkan*. With his straightforward ideas and at times populist rhetoric, he appealed to the growing group of disgruntled members of the organization, mostly from the ranks of the military, who advocated urgent revolutionary actions.<sup>60</sup>

A series of editorials Edhem Ruhi wrote for *Balkan* in 1907 entitled "Either a constitution or our annihilation is certain!" was an example of how he and many Young Turks viewed the parliament. Similar to the contributors to *Sebat*, Edhem Ruhi presented the parliament and the constitution as an instrument to prevent foreign intervention and a symbol of modernity. Their absence was seen as the inherent reason for the misfortunes and territorial losses the Empire had suffered in the recent decades.

There is no one who doesn't know the nature of the various calamities that have affected the imperial government over the past thirty years. Isn't counting the territories that have detached from Ottoman rule during the last thirty years mind-boggling? I don't know whether the Ottoman nation could easily forget the pain caused by the loss of the huge island of Crete given to the Greeks as a present on top of their defeat by the lion-like Ottoman soldiers who roared at Domokos, Yenişehir and Velestin. And those before Crete? Those huge territories, didn't they go for nothing? [...] There is uprising and restlessness not only in Turkey, there is bloodshed also in Russia and Romania. But they are different. No one can say anything to them, no one can pen a word on their domestic affairs. What is the reason for that? Why doesn't Europe see the wood in its eyes, why should it always see the splinter in the eyes of the Turks?

This reason is very simple. It is not because we are Muslims; it is because we have not opened our eyes earlier and did not become a member of the European balance of power and civilization through organizing and reforming our administration. To meet this necessity we had a constitution and a parliament but they were abolished thirty years ago and because of that we cannot stand up to the Europeans.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Edhem Ruhi, 30; Hanioglu, *Revolution*, 57.

<sup>58</sup> BOA, A.MTZ.(04), İrade, June 14, 1905; Edhem Ruhi, 31.

<sup>59</sup> In spite of that the Bulgarian authorities still made an attempt to extradite him, see Edhem Ruhi, "Açık Bir Mektup," *Balkan* (Plovdiv), no. 111, Dec. 15, 1906, 1; Edhem Ruhi, "Tebşir ve Teşekkür," *Balkan* (Plovdiv), no. 112, Dec. 25, 1906, 1; Edhem Ruhi, "Hakikat-ı Hal," *Balkan* (Plovdiv), no. 118, January 16, 1907, 1; Edhem Ruhi, 33; 36.

<sup>60</sup> Hanioglu, *Opposition*, 146.

<sup>61</sup> Edhem Ruhi, "Ya Kanun-i Esasi Ya Mahvımız Mutlak! - 1" *Balkan* (Plovdiv), no. 173, April 4, 1907, 1.

These lines undoubtedly touched a chord among the Muslims of Bulgaria since the events they described reminded them of their own fate. Three decades earlier Bulgaria had become one of the irretrievably lost pieces of the Ottoman realm, and the Muslims who stayed in its confines felt most immediately the consequences of this transition. This was a sentiment on which Edhem Ruhi could rely to gain support for his arguments and newspaper.

The parliament and the constitution were further seen as the guarantee for justice and law. Spying and reporting on people's actions, two practices widely spread at the time of the Hamidian regime and which were condemned by the author, would cease. "If there is a parliament and a constitution in our country those injustices will not be committed. The rule of justice will settle more or less."<sup>62</sup> Edhem Ruhi acknowledged the objections of those skeptics who believed that justice was bought with money rather than achieved by law, but argued that it was in the power of the people to bring the rule of law or neglect it. To demonstrate the benefits of constitutional government, he embarked upon a contrast between the absolutist government in Istanbul and the constitutional regime in Bulgaria, presenting the latter in an idealized light and painting a dark picture of the former.

In Bulgaria, a Bulgarian cannot even be taken out of his house without being questioned or without a ruling of the court because the constitution does not permit it. But is it like that with us? Today more than hundreds even thousands of people are separated from their homes, children and family in a beastly way and are being thrown into the deserts of Fezzan because of a simple spy report or the will of someone in the palace. Why is that? Because we do not have a constitution and a parliament. In a country that has a parliament injustice is unacceptable and cannot reach such levels.<sup>63</sup>

On various other occasions Edhem Ruhi expressed his fascination with the parliamentary system in Bulgaria calling the local parliament a "temple of freedom," "foundation of law and justice," "a sacred building, home to a young state and nation of thirty years." The Bulgarians, *Balkan's* editor asserted, had lived together with the Ottomans for 600 years, but they were at a more advanced political and social level because they had a parliament. He also pointed out how Bulgarian Prince Ferdinand evoked his subjects' love and admiration as he appeared in person to open the session of the newly elected national assembly.<sup>64</sup>

Furthermore, *Balkan* saw the lack of a constitution and parliament as the inherent reason for the hostility and conflict among the various nationalities in the Empire,<sup>65</sup> a view that echoed the letter of the Varna Muslim to *Sebat* from over a decade earlier. In this spirit *Balkan* published an appeal entitled "Brotherhood in the Ottoman Empire" from "a patriotic Ottoman Muslim" who remained any-

<sup>62</sup> "Ya Kanun-i Esasi Ya Mahvımız Mutlak! - 4," *Balkan* (Plovdiv), no. 180, April 12, 1907, 1.

<sup>63</sup> "Ya Kanun-i Esasi Ya Mahvımız Mutlak! - 5," *Balkan* (Plovdiv), no. 181, April 13, 1907, 1-2.

<sup>64</sup> Edhem Ruhi, "Sobranya'da Ne Gördüm," *Balkan* (Plovdiv), no. 485, July 3, 1908, 1.

<sup>65</sup> "Ya Kanun-i Esasi Ya Mahvımız Mutlak! - 6," *Balkan* (Plovdiv), no. 209, July 5, 1907, 1-2.

mous to the readers but was probably another Young Turk political émigré. Using Ottomanism as a banner to rally the various religious groups in the Empire, the appeal compared the Ottoman state to a big family and its population to family members. “Oh, Muslim, Christian and Jewish Ottomans! Our country, our beloved mother is groaning under oppression. She is stretching her hands powerlessly under the severity of despotism asking us for help, crying such words: ‘Oh, my dear children! Don’t separate from each other, don’t abandon each other, don’t plunge into discord, unite yourselves!’” The article criticized the current Ottoman regime as oppressive and dictatorial – a few greedy people were in charge of government affairs but they worked only for their personal benefit and robbed all the rest regardless of their religion. The only way out of this situation, the author argued, was to reconvene the parliament. It would bring about justice, freedom equality and rights, and in such a way the Empire would reach the level of the civilized foreign countries. He further called on everyone to overcome their religious differences in a spirit of secular Ottoman patriotism. “Every individual is responsible for his religion only to God, but all of us are collectively responsible to the homeland” the author asserted authoritatively and concluded: “The happiness and peace of our country and homeland are dependent upon gaining freedom and constitution. Shout until you are out of voice ‘we want freedom, we want justice, we want parliament!’ making yourselves heard all around.”<sup>66</sup>

### *Conclusion*

As seen from the examples discussed, the Muslims in the Empire and the Bulgarian Principality were divided as to whether the parliamentary system was the most appropriate form of government for the Ottoman state. Among the letters and articles of those who supported the re-opening of the parliament one can identify two main themes. First, the parliament was perceived as a major instrument for warding off European pressure from the Ottoman Empire and an institution that would be in the interest of the Muslims. Instead of implementing reforms favoring a specific group, the introduction of parliamentary government promised to bring equal treatment and representation of all ethnic and religious communities in the Empire. In fact, it would be to the advantage of the Muslims and would quell growing discontent over the granting of privileges to the Christians at the expense of the Muslims, an attitude that was demonstrated particularly by the examples in *Sebat*. This concern was also one of the reasons that turned Midhat Pasha, the major proponent of the constitution in 1876, to favor the idea of convening a parliament, although initially he had spurned it as harmful to a multi-national Empire.<sup>67</sup> Second, the parliament was seen as being an inviolable guarantee of justice, the

<sup>66</sup> “Memalik-i Osmaniye’de Kardeşlik,” *Balkan* (Plovdiv), no. 226, July 30, 1907, 1-2.

<sup>67</sup> Hanioglu, *Opposition*, 30.

common good and the proper functioning of state affairs. Thus, it was often idealized and presented as the universal remedy for all the problems the Empire experienced and the solution to the various Muslim grievances – the alleged injustice, loss of territory, Christian demands for concessions, Great Power pressure for reforms or more practical matters such as the poor provisioning of the army.

But when it came to the situation in Bulgaria, the two sides shared remarkably similar views. Those who objected to re-opening the parliament in the Ottoman Empire, believed that in Bulgaria the parliamentary institution served the interests of the local Muslim community. *Gayret*, for example, faithfully advocated Abdülhamid II's autocratic regime in the Empire, yet its owner Rıza Pasha ran in elections and made it into the Bulgarian parliament. The Ottoman representatives in the Principality also followed vigilantly the number and actions of the Muslim members of parliament,<sup>68</sup> and even the Sultan himself showed personal interest in this matter.<sup>69</sup> On the other side of the debate, *Sebat*'s owner and editor İskender Mahmudov was a member of parliament, and Edhem Ruhi agitated the Muslims from the pages of *Balkan* to take part in the Bulgarian elections and vote for representatives capable of defending their rights.<sup>70</sup> For the local Muslim community the parliament was more than an abstract and idealized notion – it was a way through which the Muslims could safeguard their interests.

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<sup>68</sup> On the insistence of the Ottoman Commissioner to have more Muslim representatives in the Bulgarian parliament see BOA, A.MTZ.04 74/22 OC Ali Ferruh to Sadaret, Feb. 23, 1902, 2; and his boastful report that the Muslim MPs finally united under his guidance, A.MTZ.04 69/62 OC Ali Ferruh to Sadaret, March 21, 1901.

<sup>69</sup> TsDA, f. 321k, op. 1, a. e. 1050 Agent Dimitrov to MFRA Nachovich, Oct. 27, 1894, 27-29.

<sup>70</sup> "Bulgaristan İntihabçılarına," *Balkan* (Plovdiv) no. 455, May 29, 1908, 3-4; see also the praises for the activity of certain Muslim members of parliament and how they served the interests of the community, "Ağzımızı Değil Gözümüzü Açalım," *Balkan* (Plovdiv), no. 388, March 12, 1908, 3; "Gözümüzü Açalım Ama Neye?" *Balkan* (Plovdiv), no. 428, April 28, 1908, 1. After 1908 he himself would be elected to the Bulgarian parliament.