

Between Sacredness and Worldliness: The Involvement of Ulama Households in Ottoman High Politics – The Case of Şeyhülislam Feyzullah Efendi (1695-1703)

Michael Nizri

The 17th century saw the rise of the *kapı* (élite household) as the main political, social, and economic unit of Ottoman elite society. The residential compound of a high-ranking official, perhaps the most visible feature of a household, did not merely serve as a domicile for the various household members - slaves, servants, wives and concubines, officials, and other clients but rather, was patterned after the sultan's household on a smaller scale. It also accommodated a variety of activities: recruitment and training of manpower for staffing governmental posts, accumulation of wealth and property, conduct of administrative-military affairs, building of social networks, and advancement of political interests.

This article focuses on the household of *Şeyhülislam* Feyzullah Efendi, who stood at the head of the *İlmiye* (the academic-judicial-religious establishment) during the reign of Sultan Mustafa II (1695-1703). It was primarily through Feyzullah Efendi that the Sultan tried to curb the growing power of the *vezir* and *paşa* households. The *Şeyhülislam*, the Sultan's beloved mentor was given unprecedented executive power. Far beyond his traditional role, he directed internal and foreign policy matters instead of the Grand Vizier. Small wonder, then, that Feyzullah's household rose to preeminence in the center of the Ottoman Empire during the period in question.

This study examines the process of household-building, and discusses the political strategies adopted by Feyzullah to secure the continued influence of his dynasty in the *İlmiye* as well as to seal his political domination. It turns out that his behavior paralleled that of the ambitious *vezir* or *paşa* of his time. Namely, Feyzullah had many protégés not only in the academic-religious establishment, but also in the palace, military, and bureaucracy. In addition, he effectively achieved an iron grip on the affairs of the *İlmiye* by monopolizing the highest posts for sons and relatives. At the same time, protégés were nominated to important positions in the civil bureaucracy too. Moreover, while following the

dominant pattern of marrying into purely *ulama* families, Feyzullah used marriage alliances as a means to link his household to households of distinguished families of other branches like the *Köprülüs*.