

Turkey: Freedom of religion or belief

September 2018 · For public use

Introduction

Although officially a secular state, Turkey is caught between its secular and Islamic identities. A significant deterioration in human rights occurred in the aftermath of the foiled military coup of July 2016. Since then, thousands of journalists, academics, activists, writers, teachers, judges and thinkers have been arrested and accused of being ‘traitors and collaborators against national interests’. Others have been forced to adopt lower profiles and live in anticipation of being arrested, or to seek asylum in another country.

Persecution of religious minorities

In the prevailing atmosphere religious minorities are increasingly vulnerable, despite the existence of comprehensive legislation that protects freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). The constitution provides for freedom of belief, worship and the private expression of religious ideas, and prohibits discrimination on religious grounds. In recent years the government has taken some positive steps to address the concerns of religious minorities and to uphold FoRB. However, problems remain in some areas, including the media, education, and the registration of church buildings.

The current government has increasingly conflated religious and national identities by publicly endorsing a move towards a Sunni Muslim identity for Turkey, including by showing partiality towards Sunni Islam within the policy of the Diyanet (the Presidency/Directorate of Religious Affairs).

The promotion of ultra-nationalism has contributed to a rise in discrimination and in hate speech that encourages violence towards non-adherents to Sunni Islam. Such incitement is visible in a variety of sectors ranging from education, the workplace and religious practice, to day-to-day administrative procedures.

Alevi Muslims, Bahai’s and Christians, particularly those who have converted from Islam, face daily societal pressures. Hate speech and occasional hate crimes targeting religious minorities have continued, including attacks on places of worship, with perpetrators generally enjoying impunity.

Educational books can fuel societal hostility against, and distrust of, religious minorities. For example, textbooks denigrate missionary activity and describe it as a means of dividing the nation.

There has been a surge in the expression of anti-Christian sentiments in pro-government media, and incidents of bullying and intimidation against Christian students in schools are also being reported increasingly.

Foreign missionaries have been arrested, deported or denied entry to the country, most notably the American pastor Andrew Brunson, who was arrested along with his wife on

7 October 2016. The couple was told that they were to be deported as they posed ‘a threat to national security’. His wife was subsequently released, but Pastor Brunson was held in an immigration detention facility before being transferred to a prison in Izmir after a court appearance. Allegations were made linking him to the Gulen organisation, which has been blamed for instigating the attempted coup on 15 July 2016, and to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Pastor Brunson denies all these charges, but if found guilty he would face up to 35 years in prison. The case against him is reportedly based on digital evidence and the testimony of witnesses, including three secret ones and some former members of his church.

On 25 July 2018 the pastor was escorted by police convoy from prison to house arrest.

Places of worship

While plans for new mosques are authorised by officials, religious minorities – particularly Alevis, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Christians – continue to face restrictions on the construction of new houses of worship. Despite previous government promises to return confiscated land owned by the Mor Gabriel Monastery, only half of the land, totalling 244,000m² or 60 acres, was handed back to the monastery in February 2014; the remaining land was returned in May 2018 after extensive advocacy efforts.

In 2016 the Transfer, Liquidation and Redistribution Committee of Mardin Governorate transferred numerous churches, monasteries, cemeteries and other assets of the Syriac community in the districts of Mardin to the Treasury. The Mor Gabriel Monastery Foundation appealed the decision, but the liquidation committee rejected their appeal in May 2017. The churches, monasteries and cemeteries whose ownerships were given to the Treasury were then transferred to the Diyanet.

After a wave of protests, the Turkish authorities announced the return of legal ownership of the cemetery belonging to the Mor Gabriel Monastery to their community in November 2017. On 22 May 2018 the Turkish government returned 55 title deeds, representing nearly half of the church properties in south-east Turkey; 50 deeds were handed to Archbishop Timotheos Samuel Aktaş, Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan of Tur Abdin, and to Kuryakos Ergün, chairman of the Mor Gabriel Foundation. The remaining five deeds were returned to another Syriac foundation in Mardin.

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The Halki Seminary remains shut, despite promises that it would be reopened, after it was forcibly closed by the government in 1971; there is strong opposition to reopening it from Turkey's nationalist and Islamist parties. After a meeting on 25 April 2018 with President Erdogan and Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I stated that he was "optimistic" after both "assured him that the School would soon reopen".

Negotiations regarding the reopening of the seminary remain ongoing. However, in August 2018 Turkish authorities announced a plan to build a new Islamic educational centre less than one kilometre away from the Orthodox seminary, where no lessons have been held since 1971, following the introduction of a law banning private higher education institutions. The plan was officially announced by the president of the Dinayet, Haydar Bekiroglu.

Recommendations

- Call on the government of Turkey to respect the provisions for freedom of belief, worship and the private expression of religious ideas, as articulated in the national constitution, and to ensure freedom of religion or belief in its entirety.
- Urge the government of Turkey to be proactive in addressing the increasing polarisation of society and to halt the erosion of fundamental freedoms.
- Call on the government of Turkey to end arbitrary detention and to ensure due process to all who are currently detained.
- Encourage the government of Turkey to address the issues of hate speech and discrimination against religious minorities, in order to erode impunity.
- Call on the government of Turkey to facilitate the release of Pastor Andrew Brunson as a matter of urgency, allowing him to return to his family and country.
- Urge the Turkish government to remove educational material from the national curriculum which fosters suspicion or hatred of religious minorities, replacing it with teaching material that encourages respect for all the country's religion or belief communities.
- Call on the government of Turkey to return all properties confiscated from religious minority communities.