

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.

Targeting 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 several 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-Sunni religious communities. 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.

There has been a surge in the expression of anti-Christian sentiments in pro-government media, and there are increasing reports of incidents of bullying and intimidation against Christian students in schools. 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.

In October 2016 American Pastor Andrew Brunson was arrested and accused of plotting to overthrow the government. He was formally indicted in March 2017 on charges including supporting the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Gulen Movement, which Turkey accuses of orchestrating the 2016 coup attempt. Pastor Brunson was released following his fourth court hearing on 12 October 2018; however, Christians, and particularly converts to Christianity, have continued to be targeted with accusations of a variety of malpractices. In some cases, claims have explicitly sought to falsely associate Christians with Pastor Brunson.

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.

In 2016 the Transfer, Liquidation and Redistribution Committee of Mardin Governorate transferred numerous churches, monasteries, cemeteries and other assets belonging to the Syriac community in Mardin province to the Treasury. The churches, monasteries and cemeteries were subsequently transferred to the Diyanet.

The Orthodox Halki Seminary, which was forcibly closed by the government in 1971, remains shut, despite promises that it would be reopened. The reopening of the seminary faces strong opposition from Islamist and nationalist parties.

Situation of refugees and asylum seekers

In 2019, CSW reported that the situation of Iranian Christian asylum seekers residing in Turkey lacks clarity as their cases are handled directly by the Turkish authorities and not by the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). As a result, refugees do not enjoy the full protection of the UNHCR, and are vulnerable to intimidation and exploitation by the police and employers. Many refugees work 16 hours per day for half the average earnings of a Turkish employee.

Iranian and Syrian refugees express desperation and frustration at their current situation. Exploitation at workplaces and bullying at schools are common complaints, with many refugees reportedly obliged to hide their faith in order to keep their jobs, while others were sacked once their employers discovered they were Christians. In some cities, such as Konya, even Turkish Christians had been forced to leave due to the level of societal hostility towards them.

Recent developments

Father Aho

On 9 January 2020 Assyrian Christian priest, Father Sefer Bileçen (known as Father Aho), was arrested along with two other Assyrian Christians in Mardin province. Father Aho has been taking care of the 1500 year-old Mor Yakub Monastery in Mardin province for many years. He was reportedly arrested on the basis of secret testimony by a member of People's Defence Forces (HPG), the military wing of the outlawed PKK, who accused him of providing food and water to HPG fighters when they come to the monastery.

Father Aho was released on bail on 14 January, and was charged with joining a terrorist organisation on 16 January. His next hearing was scheduled to take place on 19 March but was postponed due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Hurmuz and Simoni Diril

On 11 January 2020, an elderly Assyrian Christian couple, Hurmuz and Şimoni Diril went missing from Mehre (Kovankaya) village in Beytüşşebap district in Şırnak province, southeast Turkey. Their son, Father Remzi Diril, is the priest in the Chaldean Church in Istanbul. CSW's sources reported that the couple had received several threats in the past from Turkish and Kurdish residents, and it is widely believed that they were abducted in order to scare the remaining Christians in the area into leaving their ancestral land. Mrs Diril's body was discovered near their village on 20 March 2020. Her husband remains missing.

Expulsion of non-Turkish Christians

Recent years have seen a concerning uptick in the forced expulsion of foreign Christian workers and other individuals resident in Turkey. In 2019, 35 Christian workers received deportation orders, and a further 16 were expelled in 2020.

On 5 June 2020, an American Christian received a letter from the Ministry of Interior informing her that her residency permit had been revoked. On 24 June, an American pastor was told he would not be allowed to return to Turkey as he was about to fly from Istanbul airport with his family. The pastor subsequently cancelled his flight and filed an appeal.

The Hagia Sophia

On 10 July 2020, President Erdoğan announced the decision of the Turkish government to turn the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul into a mosque after the highest administrative court in Turkey annulled the site's museum status.

CSW is concerned that the decision risks heightening religious tensions and intolerance. In a letter to President Erdoğan, the Interim Secretary General of the World Council of Churches (WCC) said: "By deciding to convert the Hagia Sophia back to a mosque you have reversed that positive sign of Turkey's openness and changed it to a sign of exclusion and division."

COVID-19

In the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, government officials, Muslim clerics and pro-government media outlets have engaged in spreading anti-Western sentiments that impacted the Christian community (which is equated with the West despite its ancient roots in the country and region), and disinformation about the pandemic, including claims that Muslim Turks have superior genes and better personal hygiene than non-Muslims.

Recommendations

- Respect, protect and fulfil the provisions articulated in the national constitution guaranteeing freedom of belief, worship and the private expression of religious ideas.
- Proactively address the increasing polarisation of society and check the erosion of fundamental freedoms.
- End arbitrary detention and ensure due process for all current detainees.
- Address hate speech and discrimination against religious minorities, thereby discouraging impunity.
- Return all property confiscated from religious minority communities.
- Ensure that Iranian and Syrian Christian refugees are afforded the full protection of the UNHCR, and take steps to end discrimination against refugees in employment and other settings.
- Conduct detailed investigations into all instances of violence against individuals on account of their religion or belief, bringing perpetrators to justice.