Turkey

With its historical metropolis, Istanbul, the only city in the world said to be straddling Asia and Europe, Turkey has long been pulled ideologically in divergent directions. In recent years, the famous secularism of Atatürk has been under tremendous pressure from the Islamist-leaning government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Turkey is a member state of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

This country is found to be declining due to a sustained assault in recent years on Turkey’s long-held secularist principles, as well as freedom of expression and social liberties generally in decline. The party in government continues to push for the Islamization of society. The response to an apparent coup in 2016 has been widely condemned domestically and abroad as a massive overreaction, spiraling into a “purge” of thousands of officials and a crackdown on civil society. There are widespread allegations of the use of torture against alleged coup plotters.

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**Legend**

**Constitution and government**

The current constitution protects freedom of religion or belief, guaranteeing equal protection before the law, irrespective of “philosophical belief, religion and sect”. It also lists secularism as one of the
fundamental characteristics of the republic. However, the principles of secularism have been under sustained assault under the ruling AKP and in particular under the presidency of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Since the founding of the Republic, Turkey has experienced deep tensions over the issue of religious freedom. For many years, Muslim women who wore headscarves were banned from attending universities and schools, working for the civil service, and even entering state buildings. The number of non-Muslims declined due to state pressure, punitive taxation, seizing of their properties, and widespread governmental and societal hostilities, which included violent attacks and murder.

In 2002, Turkey entered a new phase with the election of the AKP. On the one hand, the AKP government has lifted limits on women with headscarves, enabled non-Muslims to open associations, established a process to return seized properties to non-Muslim foundations, and supported the restoration of multiple Jewish and Christian religious and cultural heritage sites. However, there are wider concerns about Erdoğan’s Islamization of the political scene, the rollback of secular protections, and his attempts to monopolize power.

From 2012 and onward, the AKP government began attracting wide criticism for its statements and policies on a broad spectrum of political, and religious matters. Non-religious Turks, and those not from classically understood Sunni Muslim traditions, feel that they are being pressured to adopt or adhere to a particular political ideology, rooted in the ‘Hanafi’ school of Sunni Islam.

There are several constitutional provisions and other laws and state practices that infringe on freedom of religion or belief and go against the principle of secularism.

The state allocates substantial funds to provide religious services for Sunni Muslims: to pay the salaries of imams, construct mosques and oversee pilgrimage.

Following re-election in October 2015, the president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that constitutional reform is a “priority”, aiming to greatly increase the president’s own “executive” powers, a move widely seen as a further worrying signal of increasing autocracy.

There have been continuing purges by Turkey’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, following the failed coup on 15 July. The crackdown includes the night-time arrests of members of the opposition, pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP). More than 36,000 people have been arrested since the coup, and 100,000 have been sacked (mainly from state jobs).

Within a context of tension between different communities, and also the non-compromising attitudes of both the government and minority groups, the issue of religious freedom has become deeply politicized. “Most concerning, is that there is an increasing use of hate speech and derogatory language in the media, including with religious or ethnic undertones, and widespread negative attitudes towards minority religions, which often go unchallenged”. <uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/TurkeyTextbookReport.pdf>

The country is predominantly Muslim with as many as 99.8% of people identifying as such. However, a 2012 Gallup survey found that 73% described themselves as being “not a religious
Education and children’s rights

Religion classes at primary and secondary schools are compulsory. Article 42 requires this education to be conducted under the “supervision and control of the state”. While these classes cover basic information about other religions, they are predominantly about the theory and practice of Sunni Hanefi Islam.

Compulsory Religious Education

In Turkey, all children in the fourth grade and above are required to attend a compulsory class on “Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge” (except those children enrolled in private minority schools). There were some reports from Turkey’s minority communities indicating that this course and its required textbooks were problematic. If students were to opt-out from taking this course, both students and parents were required to reveal their faith publicly (a violation of the right not to be compelled to reveal a specific religious identity). The textbooks were written with a Muslim worldview and interpretation of other religions, and include generalizations about other religion or belief stances and derogatory language.

In 2014, USCIRF raised this issue with the Turkish Ministry of Education to which the Ministry acknowledged having received similar reports, but said that they had revised the textbooks in 2011. The current books are a clear improvement from previous ones. There are no derogatory statements about non-Sunni Muslim religions, and there are noteworthy passages on religion and science, religion and rationality, being a good citizen, religious freedom, and the origins of differences in Islamic thought.

However, USCIRF found that there remained some major weaknesses that needed attention. The textbooks are still written through the paradigm of the officially-sanctioned interpretations of Islam and Islamic culture. All religious minority traditions in the country are depicted within the Muslim context rather than as distinct traditions. In addition, only superficial, limited, and misleading information is given about religions other than Islam. Atheism is treated alongside a discussion of the perceived risk of Satanism, making a dangerous suggestion about people who hold no religious beliefs.

Recommendations have been made to include transitioning religious education classes to an elective subject for all children, Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Curriculum

In June 2017 Turkey removed the concept of evolution from its school curriculum, an act widely seen as the latest attempt by the government to erode the country’s secular character. Taking effect in September 2017, a chapter on evolution will no longer appear in ninth graders’ textbooks as it is considered too “controversial” an idea. “The last crumbs of secular scientific education have been removed,” said Feray Aytekin Aydogan, the head of Egitim-Sen, a union of secular-minded teachers. Over the past five years, analysts have noted how Mr. Erdogan’s government has steadily increased references to Islam in the curriculum and removed some references to the ideas of Mustafa Kemal
Ataturk, Turkey’s secularist founder. It has also increased the number of religious schools, known as *imam hatip* schools, and spoken of Mr. Erdogan’s desire to raise “a pious generation” of young Turks.

**Family, community and society**

High-level government officials including president Erdoğan continue to promote a more socially conservative and Islamic-inspired rhetoric around individual rights and freedoms.

**Government sexism**

Women have repeatedly been painted by AKP officials as ideally having a separate and more domestic role than men. Violence against women has been on the rise, and in November 2015 the Justice Ministry appeared to suggest responding to the rise by downgrading the sentences given to those found guilty of domestic and sexual abuse and violence, effectively reclassifying violence aimed primarily at women as a “petty crime”.

In a widely reported speech to mark Eid al-Fitr in July 2014, deputy prime minister Bülent Arinç said, “Chastity is so important. It’s not just a word, it’s an ornament [for women]... A woman should be chaste. She should know the difference between public and private. She should not laugh in public.” A social media backlash saw hundreds of women posting photographs of themselves smiling and laughing with the hashtags #direnkahkaha (“resist laughter”) and #direnkadin (“resist woman”). A year later during an emergency parliamentary debate on military action against Kurdish militants, he told Nursel Aydogan, a pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) member of parliament: “Madam be quiet! You as a woman, be quiet!” She later responded, “I don’t take it personally. It is an insult against all women including their own (ruling party) lawmakers.”

The AKP Government passed a law in 2017 allowing religious officials to perform civil marriages, a move which women’s rights groups argue is a step towards the weakening of Turkey’s secularism and could increase the number of child marriages. 15 percent of marriages performed in Turkey between 2008 and 2014 were made before one or both spouses had turned 18.

**Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values**

Freedom of expression is theoretically protected by the current constitution, but is increasingly not respected in practice. Crackdowns on social media in 2014, including an enforced Twitter blackout, gained attention worldwide.

Freedom of religion or belief experts, as well as secular, humanist and human rights organizations, are generally concerned by the direction of travel under the AK party regime, and unimpressed by government gestures toward improving the situation for religion or belief minorities, and wider freedoms.
Identifying ‘atheist’ prompts insults, threats, discrimination

In 2015, members of the Turkish Atheism Association (Ateizm Derneği), spoke up about receiving death threats and hate mail, how ‘atheist’ is used as an insult or equated with Satanism or terrorism, and how the presumption of Islam at birth for most Turkish citizens and discrimination in the workplace act to keep the non-religious from identifying as such.

“Blasphemy” law

Article 216 of the penal code outlaws insulting religious belief, with Article 216.3 stating:

“Any person who openly disrespects the religious belief of a group is punished with imprisonment from six months to one year if such act causes potential risk for public peace.”

The famous prosecution of renowned Turkish pianist Fazıl Say in 2013 was only one of the most prominent legal actions against Turkish artists, writers and intellectuals who have made statements about religion or about Turkish national identity. However, in October 2015 Fazıl Say’s appeal case provisionally acquitted him of the earlier conviction (see “Highlighted cases” below). It remains to be seen whether the court of first instance will accept the reversal and whether this will set any new precedent as to the unconstitutionality of the “blasphemy” law.

Highlighted Cases

The Turkish Atheism Association (Ateizm Derneği) founded April 2014, and personnel soon received death threats. The Association had its website <ateizmdernegi.org> blocked in Turkey on 4 March 2015, in a decision the Association protested was “arbitrary”.

The Association has further protested its unequal treatment as an organization in the country, saying in petition statement: “We want politicians to restrain themselves when tempted to make discriminatory statements starting with ‘even the atheists,’” and using terms like “nonbeliever” in a derogatory mode. “We want equal treatment before the law. We do not want to be treated as though we have ‘insulted religious values’ when we express our faithlessness.” The petition also challenges AKP (Justice and Development Party) rhetoric to the effect that Turkey is a country of a “single religion”, calls for the removal of religious affiliation from Turkish identity cards, and requests representation at government meetings with non-Muslim communities from which they are currently excluded.

In 2014, Armenian writer and atheist Sevan Nişanyan was given a lengthy prison sentence, ostensibly for building regulation violations, but the prosecution appears selective and is widely regarded as being linked to his writings on national identity, the Armenian genocide, and in particular his criticism of Islam. There is a campaign for his release.
In May 2014, Sedat Kapanoğlu, founder of one of Turkey’s most popular online forums, Ekşi Sözlük (Sour Dictionary) was given a 10-month suspended sentence for blasphemy. A police complaint alleging insults to the Prophet Muhammad were made on a discussion thread at the forum. Some 40 forum members were detained by police and charged with insulting religion. The court ruled that Kapanoğlu had committed the crime of “insulting the religious values shared by a group of society”. The 10-month sentence was suspended, based on the time elapsed since the crime was committed and the means used for it.

The court also gave suspect Özgür Kuru seven months and 15 days in jail on the same charges, but also suspended the sentence. The court acquitted a third suspect, Altuğ Şahin, on the grounds that it could not be detected whether he actually committed the crime of “insulting religious beliefs.” The court also decided to suspend the cases against other 37 suspects. However, all the suspects may be retried if they commit the same crime within three years.

On June 1, 2012, Turkish authorities charged Fazıl Say, an atheist and world-renowned classical and jazz pianist, with insulting Islamic values in Twitter messages. The cited message echoed the words of famous 11th-century Persian poet, Omar Khayyam, poking fun at afterlife beliefs. Say denied the charge, but was handed a suspended 10-month jail term on 15 April 2013.

In October 2015, the Supreme Court of Appeals overturned the verdict, citing Say’s own freedom of thought and expression against the prior conviction that he had “insulted” religious beliefs. The court of first instance will now consider the appeal verdict; if they dissent then the process of review will continue.

In October 2014, a woman not widely named in media reports was arrested for tweeting a picture of her stilettoed feet standing on a Quran. The tweeter was arrested after a complaint from Ankara Mayor Melih Gokcek, who has sued as many as 3,000 people for insulting him.

In 2008, Islamic creationist writer Adnan Oktar, better known by his pen name Harun Yahya, successfully sued to block the website of evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins due to “defamatory and blasphemous” content.

Testimonies

“It’s getting more and more difficult for a secular minded person to raise children unaffected from religious oppression. Some secular schools in my neighbourhood have been changed to religious curriculum. There is a mandatory “Morale and Religion” class, which teaches basics of Sunni Islam, and I’m afraid my child will be forced to take it. To avoid the class, the school management requires me to declare my religious beliefs. This is against the Constitution, and will make us exposed. Many people don’t bother and that’s how everyone’s signed up to that class. I hear from relatives that their children are compelled to select other “optional” religious courses, because science teachers are not available, but religious teachers always are.
Yesterday [4 December 2014], the National Education Council suggested religion class for kindergarten, while protesters were accused of blasphemy. That idea was dismissed for kindergarten, but recommended for the first class in primary school. See the mindset in charge? I am seriously concerned about how I am going to secure my child’s getting a secular education, just as I did myself sixteen years ago. The situation has deteriorated and is much worse than how it was in the 90’s.”
— Levent Topakoglu

“Today I found myself deleting the anti-religion and anti-government posts in my timeline. Because I can be charged with ‘causing imminent threat to public peace’ with my posts of atheist humor, according to Turkish penal law 216/3. It could be elements of criticism to religious fanaticism, or just a piece of poetry from 800 years ago. It doesn’t matter to the judges, thanks to an unnecessarily wide understanding of the law. My post doesn’t need to provoke anyone, nor cause hurt. I can be tried anyway. The same is not applied when the head of government can easily call atheists “terrorists” or condemns atheism to be an unwanted result of ‘bad’ education. In a nation where an alarmingly high percentage of citizens deem atheists the least wanted neighbours, followed by homosexuals, I cannot afford to allow our politicians to promote this unfair, non-democratic, non-secular propaganda against non-Sunni Muslims living in Turkey. Are all citizens not deserving of the same protection and consideration under the law of the country in which they reside?”
— Onur Romano