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TURKEY: Hopes for 2009 disappointed

By Otmar Oehring, @oehring_otmar (https://x.com/oehring_otmar)

Hopes for improvements in the rights of religious communities in Turkey in 2009 have once more come to nothing, notes Otmar Oehring of the German Catholic charity Missio in a commentary for Forum 18. Alevi Muslims broke off formal talks with the government over denial of their rights. A high-profile lunch with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in August 2009, attended by five religious minority leaders, including Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, was followed by a visit to two Greek Orthodox sites. But no concrete improvements ensued. Intolerance promoted by Turkey's mainstream media has markedly reduced, but local and ultranationalist newspapers and websites still promote such intolerance. No verdict was reached in 2009 in the long-running trial over the 2007 murder of three Protestants in Malatya, or over the long-running attempts to prosecute two Protestants accused of "defaming Islam". Dr Oehring argues for a fundamental change in the attitudes of both society and the government.

Perhaps the biggest step forward in Turkey in 2009 came over the treatment of the country's large Kurdish minority. By contrast, religious minorities have seen no similar progress. In many ways this has been a year of wasted opportunities, of hopes for greater religious freedom dashed. One of the main signs of this has been the lack of progress in resolving long-standing problems, including the ability of communities to acquire genuine legal status and have their leaders fully recognised, and continuing ultra-nationalist attacks on the full equality of citizens who are not either ethnically Turkish, or secular or Sunni Muslim.

Equally unresolved are property problems faced by religious communities as diverse as Alevi Muslims, Catholics, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Greek Orthodox, Protestants, and the Syriac Orthodox Church (see F18News 27 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1368).

Other systemic restrictions on freedom of religion or belief remained untouched in 2009, including: the need for fair teaching about religions and beliefs in schools; the need for the right to train clergy; and the non-recognition of conscientious objection to military service.

Dialogue without action

Despite high-profile meetings of some religious communities with the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, no concrete actions have yet resulted from this. This has caused frustration among those religious communities involved. Alevi Muslims – perhaps the biggest single religious minority, with some 20 to 30 per cent of the population – even broke off formal talks with the government at the beginning of 2009 because of this frustration – for example the lack of progress on the right to train their own clergy. However, workshops continue involving the state, civil society, academics and Alevi groups. Other Muslim movements have seen no such recognition, and it remains doubtful whether the "deep state" - military, security and elite representatives who remain wedded to Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's rigorous secular ideal – would allow such movements greater freedom (see F18News 21 October 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1206).

Progress on freedom of religion or belief may depend on a change of attitude by the military, as was seen in the case of the Kurds when both the current and former Chiefs of Staff signalled a change in attitudes. However, such a change seems unlikely in the case of freedom of religion or belief – not least as changes are needed in many spheres, in legislation, and in the approach of public administrators and the public in general.

Some have seen as a positive development the inclusion at a lunch hosted by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on 15 August of five religious minority leaders – four Christian and one Jewish. However, a lunch for more than 150 guests was hardly a venue where serious discussions of the issues that concerned them could take place. One of the five who were there, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, was sitting close to the Prime Minister and was able to declare afterwards that it was good to meet and talk. It is important to note also that some leaders were not invited, including the Chief Rabbi, while several of those who were received their invitations only a day or two before.

Accompanied not only by his own entourage but by Patriarch Bartholomew, Prime Minister Erdogan afterwards visited the Buyukada orphanage, which a European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) judgment had ruled should be returned to the Orthodox Patriarchate (see F18News 21 October 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1206). They also visited the Aiya

Yorgi pilgrimage site on the island. But there have been no moves from the state side to initiate a dialogue leading to results, for example on the reopening of the Halki Seminary, despite repeated invitations from the Patriarchate (see F18News 27 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1368).

While high level engagement with certain minority religious communities may be encouraging, one should note that the format of the dialogues perpetuates the long held position of Turkey that only the ethnic/religious minority groups which it considers were recognised by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne – notably the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic and Jews – are recognised. The Treaty spoke vaguely of religious minority rights without naming the minorities, but the Turkish authorities interpret this to exclude communities such as the Roman Catholics, Syriac Orthodox and Lutherans, even though these communities have found ways to function. Because they did not exist or were not recognised in Turkey in 1923, other groups - such as the Baha'is, many (but not all) Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other even smaller groups such as atheists - still languish with no recognition at all. A more holistic and all-embracing approach, to develop and implement policies that safeguard freedom of religion or belief for all, is essential if the state wishes to overcome the precarious legal position of the various religions or beliefs that exist in today's Turkey.

Social intolerance continues

The trial of key alleged participants in the secretive underground ultra-nationalist organisation Ergenekon, which began in October 2008, has dragged on, with more and more revelations becoming public (see F18News 21 October 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1206). The case has revealed the deep cultural war between nationalists and non-nationalists in society. The people can see that a "deep state" really exists and is not merely an invention of the AKP government. The revelations during the trial about how the "deep state" targeted not only political opponents but religious minorities too have made liberals in society more sympathetic to religious and other minorities.

However, the liberal sector of the population remains small, while nationalists remain dominant and influential. This great mass of the population has little sympathy for religious minority communities and the Ergenekon trial has not changed that (see F18News 15 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1115).

The Syriac Orthodox Mor Gabriel Monastery is struggling to legally defend its property (see F18News 27 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1368). It also faces – as Forum 18 has observed in person - constant threats from local people. But despite appeals from the abbot, the police have so far refused any special protection. Even the Turkish Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee has joined such appeals for protection – in vain.

In an alarming new sign of intolerance, signs were placed in August 2009 on homes in the Kurtulus district of Istanbul, where many non-Muslim Turks live. The signs were red on the homes of the few surviving Armenians, and green for the Greeks. Some of them received letters warning them to leave, causing widespread fear and reminding them of the pogroms against Christians in the city in 1955. Even in a big city like Istanbul, everyone knows where members of religious minorities live. The latest threats mirror similar threats several years ago in Istanbul's Bakirkoy district.

The trial in the south-eastern city of Malatya of the five men accused of murdering three Protestant Christians in 2007 has drifted on since its start in November 2007 (see F18News 29 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1053). In 2009, police have avoided bringing witnesses to court on various occasions, and no verdict appears imminent. Local Protestants had hoped that impunity for those who attack Christians would be over, but they remain disappointed.

Another trial that is drifting on with no sign of a verdict is of two Turkish Protestants, Hakan Tastan and Turan Topal. They are being tried on charges of "insulting Turkishness" and defamation of Islam, following their involvement in a Bible correspondence course in October 2006. The lawyer who filed the original complaint against the two was arrested as part of the Ergenekon case (see F18News 21 October 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1206).

The Turkish media has extensively discussed links between the perpetrators and the "deep state", including the Jandarma (Gendarmerie). Documents produced in the course of the Ergenekon trials showed that the Jandarma actively followed missionary activities in Malatya region through informers, both before and after the murders. It also seems that the Jandarma knew of the intention to murder the Protestants, but did not prevent it. The MIT secret police – which also keeps minority religious communities under observation - is known to have been watching the church in Trabzon where Catholic priest Fr Andrea Santoro was murdered in February 2006 (see F18News 10 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=990).

Intolerance lessens in mainstream media but continues in other media

Defamatory coverage of religious minorities by the mainstream media has dramatically reduced since the 2007 Malatya murders. For example, one widely viewed national TV channel, ATV, has stopped broadcasting news about "illegal" churches, or the conversion of Turks to Christianity.

However, intolerant and stigmatising reporting and commentary continue in local and ultra-nationalist newspapers, as well as on websites and blogs. For example, on 22 October 2009 the news website habername.com began a series of articles entitled, "New

Trap for Young People: House Churches". According to the writer, "thousands of young people" have started losing their faith under the influence of "missionaries". A local news website, *Ilgazetesi* featured an article on 17 June 2009, entitled "Local Missionaries", stating that "The primary goal of missionary activity is to break the resistance of the people to imperialism and abuse! Making them Jewish or Christian is the second goal."

Another news website, *haberler.com*, reported on 21 October 2009 a warning to local Muslim clergy by the Mufti in Mugla that "missionaries are in town!"

Such coverage reflects the mentality that equates legitimate acts of freedom of religion or belief – such as the right to assembly for worship, printing and distribution of religious books and materials, newspaper advertisements that advocate for a religion or belief, and charitable activities by religious/belief communities - with "missionary activity" and thus something to be rejected (see F18News 29 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1053). Such a general negative perception is actively nurtured by some parts of the education system (see F18News 10 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=990).

Violent attacks continue

The intolerant mentality nurtured by the education system and some mass media is reflected in numerous attacks. In July 2009 a man followed a German out of a prominently-located Catholic church in central Istanbul and stabbed him to death on the street. "I wanted to kill a Christian that day and was visiting churches for this reason," he told prosecutors, according to the *Hurriyet Daily News*.

Exactly two weeks later, a young Turk visited a former army comrade (who had become a Christian) at a Protestant church in Istanbul, then dragged him out on the street and threatened to kill him, holding a knife to his throat. "Do you see this missionary dog?" he was quoted by Christian news service *Compass Direct* as yelling at the crowd. "He is handing out gospels and he is breaking up the country!" Police managed to persuade the man to put down the knife.

On 7 and 12 February 2009, the Word Bookshop (*Soz Kitapevi*) in Adana, which sells publications related to Christianity, had its windows broken. The attacker was identified by security cameras and apprehended by the police. In 2006 the same person was involved in a stoning attack on this bookshop, after which he left a drawing showing Jesus and his mother Mary in an incestuous relationship. The attacker received a 15 month prison sentence in the resulting court judgment. However, since no prior convictions were found, his prison sentence was postponed and he was released from custody.

Restrictions become tighter for foreign pilgrims

Perhaps seen as less important, but nevertheless annoying for those involved, foreign Christian clergy visiting Turkey are again being required to remove their church vestments before entering the country, in line with the strict ban on religious garb in public places (only patriarchs and other religious leaders are exempt). Repeated demands have been made to Georgian, Greek and Russian Orthodox clergy at various borders in 2009, though in earlier years such requirements were sometimes not enforced (see F18News 10 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=990).

To the anger of many of the participants, this happened at Trabzon airport to four Russian Orthodox priests leading a Russian pilgrimage group in August 2009 to the Sumela Monastery in Trabzon Province, long a centre of Orthodox pilgrimage as well as a noted tourist site. The priests refused to comply with demands that they also take off their crosses. Also unlike in previous years, the celebration at the monastery site was hedged with restrictions.

Wasted opportunities

Despite intermittent optimism during 2009 of concrete steps to improve freedom of religion or belief in Turkey – such as to see those who attacked and murdered members of religious minorities be convicted in a fair trial – such hopes have again been disappointed.

Turkey's Constitution acknowledges that all citizens are equal, but in practice this remains far from true. But for this to be effective, it would require a fundamental change in the attitudes not only of society but also of government. Politicians would have to demonstrate the will to change laws and practices which institutionalise discrimination and support intolerance. (END)

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More analyses and commentaries on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Turkey can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=68>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Turkey is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=mideast&Rootmap=turkey>.

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