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TURKEY: What do parents and pupils think?

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A group of NGOs have surveyed what Turkish parents and secondary school pupils think about the government's education policies in relation to freedom of religion and belief. Some welcome state actions, but others feel coerced into religious instruction and practices they disagree with.

Education has in Turkey always been strictly regulated by the state through the Ministry of National Education. States have important human rights obligations in relation to education, not least to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief for all. The compulsory Religious Culture and Knowledge of Ethics (RCKE) classes have attracted much attention, although without state action to implement in relation to RCKE courses its legally-binding international human rights obligations. There are also numerous other freedom of religion or belief issues that also need action by the state in the light of its human rights obligations.

A group of Turkish non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – one of whom has been closed after a Presidential Decree - have surveyed what Turkish parents and secondary school pupils think about the government's education policies in relation to freedom of religion and belief. The report they have published finds that religious education is not a high priority for what most parents want from public education. But they are not categorically opposed to religion being taught in schools (see below).

However, what parents want varies. Devout or pious Sunni Muslims, for example, want RCKE classes to continue to be compulsory. This is not because they want others to be forced to learn about Islam, but because they think that their own children may not opt for these courses if they are voluntary. In contrast, atheists are not opposed to religious education but want such classes to be voluntary (see below).

Parents, pupils, and the European Court of Human Rights all state that Turkey's religious education classes should change. But well-connected sources have told Forum 18 that the government does not at present have concrete plans to change either the compulsory RCKE classes, or the "compulsory optional" Islam classes introduced from 2012 (see below).

Secondary school pupils have mixed reactions to the state's actions to encourage Sunni Islamic practices in schools. For example, some pupils – including those from a Muslim background - stated that they feel compelled to participate in the Islamic namaz ritual (see below).

But the political will is lacking to implement both what parents and pupils told the compilers of the report, as well as Turkey's human rights obligations (see below).

Finding out what parents and pupils think

There has been a need to investigate these freedom of religion and belief issues from the perspective of parents and secondary school pupils. So the Centre for Public Policy and Democracy Studies (PODEM), the Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC), and the Child Agenda Association (Gündem Çocuk Derneği, a Turkish child rights NGO) interviewed parents and secondary school pupils to find out what they thought about religious education and freedom of religion or belief in Turkey's schools.

The resulting report is based on interviews conducted between March and August 2016 with 75 Sunni, 19 Alevi, 14 Sunni Shafi'i, 9 Christian, 5 Atheist, and 2 Jewish parents. These interviews were conducted and analysed by YA-DA (YaSama Dair Vak?f) Foundation. The Child Agenda Association facilitated group interviews with 38 school pupils from diverse religious backgrounds in Istanbul, Ankara, Kayseri and Diyarbakir. The report is available in Turkish at <http://inancozgurlugugirisimi.org/egitimde-cogulculuk-ve-inanc-ozgurlugu-raporu/>.

Context

The Child Agenda Association <http://www.gundemcocuk.org> had to halt its activities in November 2016, following a Presidential Decree issued under Turkey's state of emergency. The state of emergency from July 2016 and ongoing and new security threats and government actions have long-term implications for the rule of law with the freedoms of religion and belief, assembly, association

and expression (see F18News 13 October 2016 http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2224).

What do parents think about religious education?

The survey finds that religious education is not a high priority for what most parents want from public education. But they are not categorically opposed to religion being taught in schools. However, expectations vary.

Devout or pious Sunni Muslims see the religious education of children as being multi-faceted, taking place at school, at home, and in other formal or informal institutions such as religious community schools or Koran courses organized by the Presidency of Religious Affairs (the Diyanet – see Forum 18's Turkey religious freedom survey http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1916). So they do not exclusively rely on schools for children's religious education.

Despite this, pious Sunni Muslim parents want RCKE classes to continue to be compulsory. This is not because they want others to be forced to learn about Islam, but because they think that their own children may not opt for these courses if they are voluntary.

Moderately devout Muslims rely on schools (and not other public institutions, religious communities, or the home) as the places for children to learn religion and religious practices. They also think that schools are the best places for their children to learn about Islam, as they think that this will be a way of preventing "extreme" views.

However, Alevis as well as followers of non-Muslim beliefs do not prefer schools as places of religious education, and strongly emphasise the family's role in religious education. People in these groups mainly "accept" the compulsory RCKE classes, but think they should be changed to be neutral and objective courses about all religious and philosophical life stances. Atheists tend not to be categorically opposed to religious education in schools, but stress that such education should be entirely voluntary.

Compulsory and "compulsory optional" Islamic religious instruction

The RCKE classes remain compulsory, with no change in sight. This is even though Turkey has twice, in 2007 and 2014, lost cases at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg (ECtHR) as the classes do not respect parents', guardians', and pupils' freedom of religion or belief. In September 2014 the ECtHR stated that "Turkey had to remedy the situation without delay", yet this only led to the Education Ministry preparing an action plan involving wide consultation with civil society on the RCKE courses (see F18News 17 November 2015 http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2121).

Among other important changes are the introduction from 2012 of optional lessons in Islam (as well as the RCKE classes). Many have found these to be in reality "compulsory optional", but fear of discrimination, harassment from teachers and other pupils, and the slowness of the legal system have prevented many people from taking legal action to protect their rights (see F18News 17 November 2015 http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2121).

No change for RCKE or "compulsory optional" Islam classes?

As noted above, the Education Ministry prepared an action plan after it lost ECtHR cases involving the RCKE classes (see F18News 17 November 2015 http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2121). The action plan for implementing the ECtHR judgments, submitted on 15 January 2016, states that a working group with broad participation will be established to study the models in other countries and report to the Education Ministry by the end of 2016. As of 1 November 2017, no public information exists on working group participants or what it has done, and the report is not public either.

A member of the working group, who wished to remain anonymous, told Forum 18 in April 2017 that the working group decided to keep their work, and participation confidential. The working group member stated that the group held a number of meetings with various civil society organisations (the names of which are also confidential) and did submit a report to the Education Ministry. They recommended that RCKE classes remain compulsory, but that the content should be revised to be compatible with the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR).

In relation to the "compulsory optional" Islam lessons, the Education Ministry convened a commission to produce optional lessons in Christianity – but did not convene similar commissions for the Alevis, despite their requesting it, nor for atheists, agnostics, or people of other beliefs (see F18News 17 November 2015 http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2121). Umut Sahin, General Secretary of the Association of Protestant Churches, told Forum 18 in February 2017 that a curriculum and a book for optional Christianity lessons had been submitted to the Education Ministry.

But separately, a member of the commission that prepared the Christian resources (who wished to remain anonymous) told Forum 18 in February 2017 that the Ministry had told the commission that plans to offer Christianity as an optional lesson had been shelved.

Islamic religious practices only

Other moves taken by the Government have increased the visibility of only one religion – Islam. The Education Ministry has since 2011 recommended that schools hold celebrations in the week of the Islamic calendar when Muslims commemorate the birth of prophet Mohammed. No other important figure of another faith is given such visibility. Pupils are not allowed to commemorate or celebrate important figures for other beliefs. On 22 September 2014 the government lifted the headscarf ban for pupils in middle schools. But no other symbols, apart from the school badge, are allowed on clothing. The regulations state that other symbols cannot be worn; as a result, for example, a necklace with a Christian cross or Islamic sword of Ali cannot be worn (see F18News 17 November 2015 http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2121).

In 2014 the Education Ministry of Education sent a Memorandum to schools requiring the opening of a masjid (small rooms for the performance of the Islamic namaz ritual), and in 2016 the Ministry made it possible to rearrange class times to make it easier for state employees to attend Friday prayers.

What do pupils think about Islamic religious practices in schools?

Secondary school pupils have mixed reactions to the state's actions to encourage Sunni Islamic practices in schools. A pupil from a pious Sunni Islamic background, who outside school had wore a headscarf, stated: "When the headscarf ban was lifted I was in the first semester of Grade 10 [for pupils who are 15 or 16 years old] and an older girl attended the national anthem ceremony wearing her headscarf. Our headteacher said 'at least have some respect for the national anthem, remove that thing on your head'." When the ban was lifted these pupils were able to wear the headscarf.

However, an Alevi pupil from Ankara complained that teachers do not allow Alevis to enter the classroom without removing their Zulfikar necklace.

Some pupils – including those from a Muslim background - stated that they feel compelled to participate in the Islamic namaz ritual. Schools with a prayer room only have a masjid, not a neutral prayer or meditation room. So only one particular form of Islamic religious practice is accommodated, just as only participation in Islamic Friday prayers is accommodated. A Sunni Muslim student from Ankara said that he stays in the classroom during the Friday prayer time, so that others do not notice that he is not at Friday prayers.

State actions welcome and unwelcome

State actions to increase the visibility and practice of Sunni Islam in schools have been welcomed by individuals and communities for whom Sunni Islamic practices are an important part of their identity. For example, the report found that many Sunni Muslims parents and pupils have welcomed the freedom of students and teachers to wear the headscarf, and steps to accommodate participation in Friday Muslim prayers.

But the report finds that secular-minded Turks such as atheists, as well as Alevis and followers of non-Muslim beliefs, are all concerned that longstanding problems related to the compulsory RCKE classes have not been resolved. They are also concerned that the relaxation of bans on manifestations of Sunni Islamic religion or belief have not been discussed and legislated on as law through an inclusive process. They think that this contributes to these steps not being implemented in a neutral way, and so causing discrimination.

It appears that human rights law in relation to freedom of religion or belief and the prohibition of discrimination were not considered when the state took its unilateral steps. Such one-sided state actions do not contribute to the protection of freedom of religion or belief for all, nor does they facilitate the expression of Turkey's diversity in schools (see F18News 17 November 2015 http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2121).

What do parents and pupils want?

It seems unlikely that Turkey will adopt a model that completely excludes religion from schools. But, based on what parents and pupils told the compilers of the report and Turkey's human rights obligations, a radical change is necessary in the state's educational policies relating to the freedom of religion and belief. This would mean that the government should not support a particular religion, belief or philosophical view and should protect the freedom of religion and belief and other human rights of all parents, guardians, pupils and teachers. Guidelines for such a policy change are found in the Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools <http://www.osce.org/odihr/29154>.

If such a policy change were to take place, pupils and teachers would be able to wear religious or belief-based symbols (such as headscarves, beards, crosses, kippas, or peace symbols) freely and visibly. Members of different religious groups would be able to request leave to celebrate particularly important religious holidays and days of worship or rest, and would be able to celebrate and express themselves freely in a school's public space. There would be an objective and comparative course about all religions, beliefs, and worldviews, with genuinely voluntary classes on religions and beliefs. There would also be a quiet personal prayer or meditation room for different forms of worship or spiritual practice.

However, the political will appears to be lacking to implement both what parents and pupils told the compilers of the report, as well as Turkey's human rights obligations. (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkey religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1916, and the Norwegian Helsinki Committee: Turkey Freedom of Belief Initiative (NHC:IÖG) <http://www.inancozgurlugugirisimi.org>.

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.

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