

Turkey's Christians Could Face Nationalist Backlash

Religion was kept out of the public square for centuries in Turkey, but the country has become more Islamic with the "Islamic-oriented" AKP government in power for a decade. Turkish nationalists, who believe in secularism—and are the main persecutors of Christians—have become more active out of their disappointment, and could turn their anger toward religious minorities.

Historically, Turkey has welcomed Westernization, imbibed a secular mindset, seen itself as more European than Middle-Eastern, and completely banned religion from the public square, keeping it firmly under state control.

However, thanks to the government of the Justice and Development Party, locally known as the AKP, which came to power in 2002, the nation now sees itself as more Middle-Eastern than European, and considers other Muslim countries as brother nations. The AKP, presently in its third consecutive term, has been gradually contributing to Turkey's new Islamic political ethos.

As a result, Turkey now embodies a unique blend of Western ways and Islamist politics not seen anywhere else in the world.

The influence of Islam in the political sphere has not been welcomed by Turkish nationalists who, though they think only Muslims can be Turks, believe in **secularism**. For them, being Muslim is about identity and not faith. The nationalists have, therefore, become more active, which jeopardizes the security of Christians, mainly the Protestants.

Turkish nationalists see non-Muslim minorities as a threat to national security. So much so, that a Turkish atheist is less

of a problem than a Turkish Christian, which they consider to be an oxymoron.

A report titled "Human Rights Violations Report 2012" by the Association of Protestant Churches in Turkey, records at least 10 major attacks on Protestant Christians and churches in the year.

In April 2012, four young men threatened a church leader with statements like, "This is a Muslim neighborhood, what business does a church have here? Unless you recite the Muslim creed we will kill you." They hit him and then fled the area.

Throughout the year, a church official in the city of Izmir faced verbal threats and egg attacks from youths in his neighborhood. Finally, after he was threatened with a gun, the church threatened to take legal action. Under pressure from neighborhood leaders and family members, the young men apologized and the church withdrew its threat of complaint.

Last February, a church building in the city of Samsun was vandalized. The man was quickly identified and apprehended. When he confessed, the church retracted its complaint and he was released. It should be noted that this kind of discrimination is commonplace in the region.

The 2012 report was, however, soft on the AKP government and noted some improvements on the side of the authorities.

After years of persecution, the AKP government holds more promise for religious freedom than its secular and more nationalist, predecessors, the report indicated. Although bureaucratic hurdles still remain, it is now easy to open houses of worship. The state has even offered either compensation for, or the return of property that had earlier been confiscated from non-Muslim community foundations.

In 2012, work began on the possibility of Christian students being given lessons on **Christianity**. The textbooks and

curriculum are being prepared with the help of local congregations. The Protestant community was invited to the Constitution Reconciliation Committee, and was granted the opportunity to give their opinions about the new constitution being written. There were no places of worship closed in 2012, even though one facility used for worship received a closure notice.

However, responses of the international community to the AKP government's moves need to be cautious, given that increased Islamization can eventually threaten the well-being of the religious minorities.

Besides, the AKP's new reforms, while some of them were positive, are not enough to guarantee protection for religious minorities from hyper-nationalists who continue to see Christians as a threat to Turkish identity and security. Their discontentment is rising with the new direction that the nation is taking under the AKP leadership. As they become more insecure about the future, Christians in Turkey might also become more vulnerable to anti-religious reactions.

As Turkey tries to find its voice as a secular nation ruled by religious Muslims, it will need to amend its understanding of secularism to be more inclusive and less nationalistic. It will need to protect the religious freedom of all faith communities from the backlash of secular nationalists by granting them legal rights, status and protection. The future of Turkey looks to be unlike anything in its history, but today it needs to give its people the freedom to choose their religion without being seen as a threat to the Turkish identity.