

Turkey's Religious Freedom Record Slides

Sentiment against Christians in Turkey has persisted long enough for a U.S. religious rights monitor to recommend it as a "Country of Particular Concern," and pastor Orhan Picaklar knows such anti-Christian hostility firsthand.

Picaklar, of Agape Church in Samsun, lives in the Black Sea region, a bastion of Turkey's unique Islamic-imbued nationalism, where Christians live under increasing pressure. He has seen his building attacked and his family and congregation threatened.

"Just as it is difficult to belong to Jesus all over the world, unfortunately it is the same in Samsun, if not worse," Picaklar said. "We have been here for 10 years, and people here still treat us like cursed enemies. Our families feel anxiety. On the hour my wife calls me and I have to say, 'There's no problem,' as if to say, 'I'm still alive.'"

Picaklar's son received death threats on Facebook last September. A man in his early 20s caused minor damage to Picaklar's church building last month, the latest in a series of aggressions that has led the church to file charges after long declining to do so.

Police called Picaklar in the middle of the night on March 4 to tell him to come to the police station because a young man had disturbed neighbors near the church building. Neighbors heard the suspect, Eren Cilce, yelling, "Corrupt, perverted Christians, we are going to bring this church down on your heads, get lost," among other threats, Picaklar said.

The church was housing visitors who had traveled from Romania, he said. Visitors, especially foreigners, attract unwanted attention from local nationalist groups, he added.

The assailant's threat was nothing new. In June a man broke into the church building and painted threats on the wall. When authorities captured the perpetrator, he asked Picaklar for forgiveness. The church didn't press charges.

Though Picaklar's congregation has never pressed charges for previous hate crimes, last month they decided to formally complain.

"We are always forgiving, but since the threats are continuing in aggression and we are innocent, we decided as a congregation for the first time to press charges," he said.

A court hearing will likely take place in May, and Picaklar said he expects the culprit will be fined. Police informed him that Cilce was drunk, and Picaklar said he hopes the court doesn't dismiss the case on that basis. The congregation does not have a lawyer.

Of the 50 members of his church, only a dozen have made the brave move to change the religion status on their identification cards from Muslim to Christian, or at least to leave it blank, Picaklar said.

Many in Turkey see Christians as corrupt elements of the West out to shake the integrity of Turkey and Islam; this portrayal has been propagated to some extent in media and literature, including school textbooks. Though constitutionally Turks are allowed to share their faith with others, the word "missionary" carries negative connotations, including the mistaken notion of undermining Turkish sovereignty. In recent years a series of assassinations of Christians in Turkey has brought to the fore deep-rooted prejudices against Christians.

Country of Particular Concern

Such indiscretions are one reason the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) last month recommended that Turkey be designated as a "Country of Particular Concern (CPC)," among Iran, Saudi Arabia and Sudan,

for religious freedom violations.

The report cited the government for “systematic and egregious limitations” on religious freedom, stating that Turkey, “in the name of secularism, has long imposed burdensome regulations and denied full legal status to religious groups, violating the religious freedom rights of all religious communities.”

Restrictions that deny non-Muslim communities the rights to train clergy, offer religious education and own and maintain places of worship have led to their decline and in some cases their disappearance, the report stated. The Greek Orthodox community of Turkey has dwindled to around 2,500 from tens of thousands early in the 20th century.

The report called some of the positive steps the government has made in the area of property, education and religious dress as “ad hoc” that have not led to systematic constitutional and legal changes.

Religious restrictions in Turkey have not increased in the last year, but the report stated that continued legal discrimination against non-Muslim groups was a dangerous trend.

Turkish officials called USCIRF’s recommendation to the U.S. Department of State “null and void.” Turkey’s parliament is in the process of drafting a new constitution, and a special parliamentary committee has met with members of Turkey’s non-Muslim communities to hear from them how the new constitution could better represent their communities.

A researcher on religious freedom in Turkey, Mine Yildirim of ABO Academy in Finland, told Compass that USCIRF’s portrayal of religious freedom in Turkey is correct but that the country did not deserve to be designated as a CPC.

“I think it was an unfair attestation, and though they wanted

to give a strong message to Turkey, it backfired because the ministry said it was null and void and they wouldn't take it into account at all," said Yildirim, a Turkish Christian.

Yildirim acknowledged that religious freedom violations against Protestants had increased in 2011, noting that with few exceptions they are still unable to establish places of worship. Most of Turkey's churches function as civil associations and can therefore meet in buildings.

Malatya, Five Years Later

Five years after the murder of Turkish Christians Necati Aydin, Ugur Yuksel and German Christian Tilmann Geske in Malatya, no verdict has been issued due to Turkey's slow judiciary. This has not helped Turkey's religious rights image.

The Malatya Third Criminal Court is making some progress in shedding light on a shadowy group that was allegedly behind the murders, experts said, but the process has been painfully slow.

A new indictment due last month against the alleged "masterminds" of the murders is still not ready, prosecution lawyers said, setting back hopes for progress at hearings this week.

"Nothing is going to happen," plaintiff lawyer Erdal Dogan said before today's court hearing. "We are still waiting for the new indictment."

The court decided to re-convene on June 18.

The April 2007 murders are believed to be part of a conspiracy to overthrow the current pro-Islamic government.

Prosecuting lawyers and members of the local Protestant community still hope that the new indictment due ahead of the June 18 hearing will be a step forward in bringing the

perpetrators to justice.

"I believe the indictment will uncover many details we are not aware of," Umut Sahin, coordinator of the Legal Committee of the Association of Turkish Protestant Churches (TEK), told Compass. "I think it might surprise us."

Sahin said he believed the delay of the new indictment was due to its complexity and length and not any unwillingness to advance the case.

Since 2008 there have not been similar bloody attacks against Protestants, but according to TEK, 2011 saw a spike in hate crimes against the association's 4,500 members.

Commenting on the slow proceedings of the Malatya trial, researcher Yildirim of the ABO Academy said that the judiciary and Turkish "problems of rule and law" were partially to blame, but that the forthcoming new indictment would be a positive step.

"For Malatya, if you put aside the slowness, now finally a new indictment is being prepared to find the instigators," she said. "So this is a positive effect. It's not what we expect from justice, but even though it is slow, this is a positive outcome of the trial."