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Turkey blacklists foreign evangelist without explanation

Another US citizen takes case against government after authorities fail to renew residency

World Watch Monitor (17.12.2013) - A Canadian-American street evangelist left Istanbul on Saturday (Dec. 14) after Turkey's Ministry of Interior repeatedly denied him a residence permit with no explanation.

David Byle, Chairman of the Bible Correspondence Course (BCC), has opened a court case against Turkey's Ministry of Interior in an effort to remove his name from the country's blacklist.

In the last three years, Byle, 44, has been arrested, taken to court, been denied entry to the country and threatened with deportation. He has also spent time in prison. But the final straw for him has been in the last two years when he has repeatedly been denied a residence permit without any explanation. (He has lived in Turkey since 1999).

Authorities refuse to explain why Byle is on their blacklist, but Byle says it is because of his Christian evangelism in Istanbul, where he and teams from the BCC gather crowds on the streets with the use of a sketch-board.

His lawyer has requested a written explanation from the authorities, who have stayed silent and advised that Byle apply for a visa from his home country. To that end, the US citizen flew to Chicago, leaving behind in their Istanbul home his wife, who is German, and their five children aged between eight and 14.

And this is not the last the Turkish government will hear of Byle. The court case he opened this week against the Ministry of Interior (in an effort to remove the restriction on his file) adds to another case launched four years ago.

In November 2009, when Byle was arrested after doing some open-air 'street evangelism' in Istanbul, Turkey's Ministry of Interior accused him of "forceful missionary activity" and "disturbing the peace".

Byle won in 2011, but the Ministry appealed. The case is stuck in a bureaucratic backlog, but Byle's lawyers expect Turkey's high court, Danistay, to consider it in 2014.

They say his case is important because it could set a precedent for other missionaries in Turkey. And if they do not win the case in Turkey, they plan to take it to the European Court of Human Rights.

Byle said he and his team from the BCC, which he helped gain official recognition as an association, have been taking to the streets to talk about Christianity for nearly eight years. The association's Turkish name is officially "Association for the Propagation of the Bible".

The BCC was approved by the Governate of Istanbul in 2009 and, as its title and mission statement, says its main purpose is to disseminate information about the Bible. Turkey's Constitution states all people have the right to share their faith and it is a crime to stop someone from doing so.

"Even if David and the BCC's methods are a little aggressive, theirs is an important service to our country and the Turkish church," said Umut Sahin, member of the legal committee of Turkey's Protestant Churches. "David and the BCC are in no way guilty before the law. David is innocent and does not deserve to be thrown out of the country." Sahin is a Turkish convert to Christianity from Islam; Turkey has approximately 5,000 Turkish Protestant converts.

Member of the German Parliament, Frank Heinrich, has taken interest in Byle's case and has written to the Turkish authorities on his behalf. Heinrich is also a member of the German Parliament's Committee for Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid.

Heinrich told World Watch Monitor he was well aware that Byle has been working in Turkey as a non-profit volunteer for over a decade. (Byle and his family gain their living from donations from supporters in the US and Canada and he does not earn anything from the BCC).

"He has never breached any law," Heinrich said. "Religious freedom is a positive right, and it includes sharing one's faith. A democratic state with guaranteed religious freedom must allow people to share their faith."

International Conference calls on Turkey to address religious freedom and human rights issues

The 2nd Archon International Conference on Religious Freedom deemed historic

Archon (06.12.2013) - The Order of St. Andrew the Apostle, Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate(*), in cooperation with the Patriarchal Liaison Office to the European Union and the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Germany, hosted its 2nd Archon International Conference on Religious Freedom December 4-5, 2013 at the historic Adlon Hotel in Berlin, Germany. Taking place in the shadow of the Brandenburg Gate, the theme of the Conference was, "Tearing Down Walls: Achieving Religious Equality in Turkey."

The Conference focused on religious freedom issues affecting minorities in Turkey stressing the concepts of equality, state neutrality and pluralism as they relate to religious freedom and the status of religious freedom under Turkey's current and proposed new constitutions.

His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, as well as Hillary Clinton, former U.S. Secretary of State, United States Senator and First Lady, both addressed the participants by video.

His All Holiness stated in his message to the Conference:

"Ultimately, our struggle for religious freedom and our respect for the conscience of every human being are proof of the triumph of love over hatred, of unity over division, and of compassion over the numbing sensation of indifference that is rooted in contemporary materialism. True freedom of conscience is based on the conviction that our relationship with "the other" is not separate from but integrally related to our relationship with ourselves. After all, again in the words of St. Paul, "we are all members of one body."(Romans 12.5)"

In her remarks, Secretary Clinton stressed:

"Religious freedom is a fundamental human right. It is also bound up with other important human rights: the right of people to think what they want, say what they think, associate with others, assemble peacefully without the state looking over their shoulders, or prohibiting them from doing so. ... In particular, I want to salute His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. Through my years of friendship with His All Holiness, I have admired his commitment to build bridges across religious and cultural divides in Turkey and around the world. We've worked together to encourage positive steps, like continuing to push for the re-opening of the Halki Seminary and to encourage constructive dialogue."

In addition, the conference featured over 35 world-renowned speakers and panelists from the interfaith, diplomatic, journalistic, legal, and academic communities. From the civil sphere, there were politicians, diplomats, human rights lawyers and activists, scholars, journalists, and political commentators. From the religious sphere, there were members of religious minorities, including Alevi Muslims, Armenians, Catholics, Jews, Orthodox Christians, Protestants and Syrians. All of these diverse participants came together to discuss freedom of faith issues in Turkey and to discuss the day-to-day

challenges religious minorities encounter in order to survive and how to overcome those challenges.

In his remarks, Archbishop Demetrios of America observed:

What is true in the realm of politics and economics holds with even more validity in matters of religion, in matters of conscience and heart. Man is not made for oppression; man is not made to exist without the freedom of his own religious conscience; that truth is perhaps even better proved by the oppressor than by the oppressed.

Anthony J. Limberakis, MD, National Commander of the Order of St. Andrew the Apostle stated,

"This Conference was held in Berlin because this is where hope triumphed over hatred and where peace overwhelmed enmity. We came to Berlin to manifest our determination to bring down every wall of religious intolerance and obstruction. We came to Berlin to advocate for the full liberty of conscience that every human being deserves. And in particular, we came to bear witness to and address the issues that are facing Turkey, as it seeks a wider role in the region and inclusion, not only in the European Union, but also in the wider family of leading Nations of the world"

One of the most critical discussions at the conference was on the forcible closure of the Halki Theological Seminary. The shuttered seminary has become the Berlin Wall of religious freedom, exemplifying the repression of religious minorities. This repression was exposed to the world by the CBS News program, 60 Minutes in their December 2009 segment titled The Patriarch in which His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew boldly stated that he felt "crucified in his own country."

For more information on the conference, the Archons and to view a complete list of speakers and panelists who participated, please visit <http://conference.archons.org>

(*) The Order of St. Andrew the Apostle is comprised of Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate who have been honored for their outstanding service to The Orthodox Church by having a Patriarchal title, or "offikion," bestowed upon them by His All Holiness, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. Those upon whom this title of the Mother Church has been conferred are known as "Archons of the Great Church of Christ," and the titles are personally conferred by the Exarch of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in America, His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios.

The Order of St. Andrew's fundamental goal and mission is to promote the religious freedom, wellbeing and advancement of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which is headquartered in Istanbul, Turkey.

Turkey's secret ancestry codes track non-Muslim minorities

HRWF (04.12.2013) - In the shadow of the Brandenburger Gate in Berlin, a conference organized by The Order of Saint Andrew The Apostle Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate under the title "Tearing Down Walls: Achieving Religious Equality in Turkey" denounced the coding of Turkish citizens according to their religion. This policy which has been kept secret for a long time was revealed this summer by Orhan Kemal Cengiz, a Turkish human rights defender and newspaper columnist, in Al Monitor, a new media website providing original reporting and analysis by prominent journalists and experts about the Middle East. Below the breaking news disclosed in August in Al Monitor:

"It all started when a mother in Istanbul..... Perhaps the country will make use of this opportunity."

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/08/turkish-ancestry-codes.html>

Hagia Sophia set for another conversion

- The Turkish deputy prime minister has expressed his desire to convert Istanbul's Hagia Sophia, a museum for the past 80 years, back into a mosque.
- He has rekindled a long-held dream of some Turkish Muslims.

Le Soir (23.11.2013) - When the Istanbul *muezzins* sing in unison to call the faithful to prayer, the Hagia Sophia alone remains silent, with all due respect to its four minarets. Visitors flock to admire the angels and the virgin and child, brilliant Byzantine mosaics under the dome, but centuries have gone by since the last mass.

It began as a church in 537 under the emperor Justinian. In 1453, following the conquest of Constantinople, the sultan Mehmed II converted it into a mosque. When the Ottoman empire in turn faded away, the young republic turned the old structure into a symbol of secularism, neither Christian nor Muslim. In 1934, on the orders of President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the Hagia Sophia was transformed into a museum. It has dominated the list of the most visited sites in the country, boasting 3.3 million tickets sold in 2012.

Hagia Sophia's status has always been under dispute. At times Muslim organizations prayed under its windows, right on the street, for the recovery of "*their mosque*". A chamber of the State Council even had to confirm the building's status. The Turkish executive, meanwhile, did not appear to be listening.

That might be about to change. The deputy prime minister and government spokesman, Bülent Arınç has publicly stated his wish for "*the Hagia Sophia mosque to smile once again*". Pious proclamations? Or viable plan? So far, neither the prime minister nor the minister of culture in charge of the monument, have reacted.

The proponents of the idea are rejoicing, just like the Anatolian Youth Association, which has launched a campaign named "*Break the chains so the Hagia Sophia reopens as a mosque*". Its former Istanbul director, Serhat Akçay, now local party vice-president, considers that it's "*completely unjust that a Muslim place of worship be turned into a museum*." When he's reminded that the Hagia Sophia was first a church before becoming a mosque, Akçay invokes "right by conquest".

He promises that nothing will change for tourists. "*How do they enter the Blue Mosque? They cover their heads and legs at the entrance. The same would go for the Hagia Sophia. Even better, admission would be free.*" This is opposed to the 25 lira (about nine euros), the current admission price, which is a true financial boon for the State.

Another sign of "hope" for these pious Muslims: two other Hagia Sophias, the one in the western city of Iznik and that of Trabzon on the Black Sea coast, both former churches turned to mosques and then museums, have once again opened their doors to Muslims as of 2011. This is a troubling trend in Saffet Emre Tonguç's eyes. He's a tour guide and the author of several bestsellers set in Istanbul. "*Inside Hagia Sophia, you have the names of Allah, of the prophet Mohammed and mosaics of Jesus and the Virgin Mary side by side. Why transform this beautiful symbol of friendship between the religions into a*

mosque?" he asks. According to him, "these debates are nothing other than demonstrations of religious dominance. The Hagia Sophia mosaics are among the most beautiful of the Byzantine period. Would we have to cover them if it turned back into a mosque?"

The Turkish deputy prime minister has also revived old quarrels with its Greek neighbor. Athens expressed its anger in a Ministry of foreign affairs communiqué: *"The repeated statements by the Turkish policy makers regarding the conversion of Byzantine churches into mosques is an insult to the religious sensibilities of millions of Christians (...) and is an anachronistic and incomprehensible act by a country that hopes to become part of the European Union".*

Ankara's response was quick and terse: *"Turkey has no lessons to learn from Greece in the matter of religious freedom".* And to further drive the point home: *"Athens is the only European capital without a single mosque open for worship, despite the fact that hundreds of thousands of Muslims live there."*

ANNE ANDLAUER

Secular Turkish government permits religious symbol

New York Times (31.10.2013) - Before Thursday, the last time a female lawmaker entered Turkey's Parliament wearing an Islamic head scarf was in 1999. She was taunted, expelled from the building and later [stripped of her Turkish citizenship](#) after it was revealed that she also carried an American passport.

But today there is a different Turkey, reshaped over a decade of governing by the Justice and Development Party, which has its roots in political Islam, and so when four of the party's female members entered the Assembly on Thursday wearing head scarves they were largely accepted, even as it represented, for some, an unwelcome break with Turkey's secular traditions. For many others, inclined to see the issue as one of personal freedoms, it was an important marker of Turkey's maturing democracy.

After the session, Mevlut Cavusoglu, a senior lawmaker in the governing party, sat in a garden outside Parliament and said, simply, "This is democracy."

Earlier, Gulay Samanci, a member of Parliament from Konya, a religiously conservative town in central Turkey, had walked into the Assembly, watched by a horde of Turkish journalists, wearing a black-and-white silk scarf on her head and was greeted by colleagues with hugs, kisses, handshakes and the snapping of cellphone cameras.

The issue has long been a divisive one in Turkish society, pitting secularists versus Islamists. But the entrance of female lawmakers wearing head scarves on Thursday was seen as a milestone for Turkey. And it underscored the depth of change within the society over the last 10 years under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, an Islamist leader whose party, known by its Turkish initials A.K.P., has sought to allow a great role for religion in the public sphere. The lifting of the head scarf ban was part of a package of democratic changes Mr. Erdogan unveiled in September.

While some opposition lawmakers from the secular Republican People's Party, or C.H.P., expressed opposition, much of the Turkish public seems ready to move beyond the issue: More than 70 percent of the public, in an October survey, supported lifting the ban, according to Ozer Sencar, the director of Metropoll, an Ankara-based polling firm.

"It's an unnecessary and useless debate," said Saban Kardas, a professor at Ankara's University of Economics and Technology. "C.H.P. is digging itself deeper."

"Last weekend, I was at a wedding and the bride was wearing a head scarf and the witness was wearing modern dress and a short skirt," Dr. Kardas added. "This is modern Turkey."

Still, some lawmakers protested: one female member of C.H.P. wore a T-shirt that bore the face of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who founded the modern Turkish republic from the remnants of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and imposed a secular system.

Another C.H.P. member made a different argument: that the head scarf issue, while portrayed by the governing party as an advancement for individual liberties, has served to mask a spotty record on women's rights.

"I expect them to explain why my country is 120th in a global ranking on women's rights," the lawmaker, Safak Pavey, said in Parliament. She added, "The greatest insurance for religious freedom is not about controlling our future with religious guidance but providing flawless secularism."

The ban on head scarves in Parliament was not enshrined in law but part of the Assembly's traditional dress code. The code also bans pants for women.

The lifting of the head scarf ban comes at a time of deep polarization here, even if the country is not as divided as it once was over the matter of female dress. Those divisions — between the rural, pious classes and a more secular urban elite — were laid bare by [violent protests](#) that began in May in Istanbul and swept across the country.

The protests represented the most severe political crisis faced by Mr. Erdogan in his decade in office, and highlighted the degree of anger against his style, which a growing number of Turks view as authoritarian. While advancing democracy on a number of counts — including overcoming a history of coups by securing civilian authority over the military — he has [alienated a significant segment of the population](#) by telling women how many children they should have (sometimes it is three, sometimes five), and involving himself personally in controversial urban development projects in Istanbul, the original catalyst for the protests.

Still, Mr. Erdogan, who maintained his core constituency of religious conservatives, who make up about half the electorate, emerged from the protest crisis with much of his domestic power intact, even as his image was tarnished abroad.

The C.H.P. chairman, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, said the lifting of the head scarf ban was timed by Mr. Erdogan to rally his base before an election cycle that will begin in the spring with a vote for municipal leaders, followed by a presidential election in the summer and end in 2015 with parliamentary elections.

Outside Parliament on Thursday afternoon, Nurcan Dalbudak, an A.K.P. lawmaker, cast it in different terms.

"There is no longer this issue in Turkey, it has been excluded from the agenda," she said. "Today is a historical, beautiful day."

Turkish lawmakers enter parliament wearing headscarves, breaking an old taboo

AP (31.10.2013) - Four female lawmakers wearing headscarves walked into Turkey's parliament in Ankara on Thursday, marking an end to the ban on the Muslim symbol in the chamber that was imposed in the early days of the Turkish Republic.

Still, the issue of where women can wear headscarves remains a highly charged one in this Muslim-majority country, which was founded in 1923 under strict secular principles, but where a desire for public religious expression has spread in recent years.

The restrictions on headscarves in government buildings were loosened as part of reforms aimed at boosting democracy unveiled by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in September. The ban remains in place for judges, prosecutors and military and security personnel.

The four lawmakers — Sevde Beyazit Kacar, Gulay Samanci, Nurcan Dalbudak and Gonul Bekin Sahkulubey — are members of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party, abbreviated as AKP, which has Islamist roots and has gained a strong following in this nation of 74 million.

The AKP's reform package has been criticized by Turks fearing the rise of Islam in the official sphere, but lawmakers from the main secular opposition party, CHP, said it had decided not to react to the four lawmakers' actions Thursday, although some of its members accused the ruling party of trying to exploit the issue for political gain.

The CHP was formed by Turkey's founding father, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, who championed headscarf bans in the 1920s.

The secularists' relatively cool reaction Thursday contrasted with outrage at an earlier incident involving headscarves in parliament.

In 1999, a newly elected member of parliament, Merve Kavakci, tried to take her oath while wearing a headscarf. The left-leaning prime minister at the time, Bulent Ecevit, told lawmakers to "put this woman in her place." Kavakci left the building while some of her colleagues chanted for her to "get out." Kavakci lost her seat in 2001.

AKP lawmakers cast the ban on headscarves as a civil rights issue that had prevented religious women from expressing themselves freely in Turkish politics.

"I have always said that we overlooked the problem of equality between men and women, but today I think we are finally solving this problem," said Ozgur Calik, a member of the ruling party.

What women can wear has been a political battleground in both Muslim and non-Muslim countries.

Women are required to cover their hair in public in Iran, which is overwhelmingly Muslim, a rule many of them detest. France, meanwhile, in 2011 became the first European nation to ban the public use of face veils, infuriating many Muslims who felt their religious community was being singled out for discrimination.

Turkey lifts generations-old ban on Islamic head scarf

Reuters (08.10.2013) - Turkey lifted a ban on women wearing the Islamic head scarf in state institutions on Tuesday, ending a generations-old restriction as part of a package of reforms the government says are meant to improve democracy.

The ban, whose roots date back almost 90 years to the early days of the Turkish Republic, has kept many women from joining the public work force, but secularists see its abolition as evidence of the government pushing an Islamic agenda.

The new rules, which will not apply to the judiciary or the military, were published in the Official Gazette and take immediate effect in the majority Muslim but constitutionally secular country.

"A regulation that has hurt many young people and has caused great suffering to their parents, a dark period, is coming to an end," Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan told a meeting of his AK Party, which has its roots in Islamist politics.

The debate around the head scarf goes to the heart of tensions between religious and secular elites, a major fault line in Turkish public life.

Erdogan's critics see his AK Party as seeking to erode the secular foundations of the republic built on the ruins of an Ottoman theocracy by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1923.

His supporters, particularly in Turkey's pious Anatolian heartlands, say Erdogan is simply redressing the balance and restoring freedom of religious expression to a Muslim majority.

"There was a witch hunt for civil servants with a head scarf," said Safiye Ozdemir, a high-school teacher in Ankara who for years had to remove her head scarf at work against her wishes, but had started to defy the ban in recent months.

"Today it became clear that we've been right. So we are happy, and we are proud. It's a decision that came in very late, but at least it came, thank God."

Intrusiveness

The lifting of the ban, based on a cabinet decree from 1925 when Ataturk introduced a series of clothing reforms meant to banish overt symbols of religious affiliation for civil servants, is part of a "democratisation package" unveiled by Erdogan last week.

The long-awaited package - in large part aimed at bolstering the rights of Turkey's Kurdish community - included changes to the electoral system, the broadening of language rights and permission for villages to use their original Kurdish names.

An end to state primary school children reciting the oath of national allegiance at the start of each week, a deeply nationalistic vow, also took effect on Tuesday.

But Erdogan's opponents have found little to suggest he is curbing what they see as his puritanical intrusiveness into private life, from his advice to women on the number of children they should have to his views on tobacco and alcohol.

They leapt on the dismissal on Tuesday of a television presenter - after she was criticised by AK Party deputy chairman Huseyin Celik for wearing a revealing evening dress - as evidence that the government's tolerance went in only one direction.

"These policies ... show not only the government's attitudes to women but also its understanding of freedoms," said Sezgin Tanrikulu, deputy head of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), which was founded by Ataturk.

"There are countries which interfere in the outfits worn by television presenters, but in those countries we can't talk about democracy," he said in a statement.

Celik dismissed such criticism, emphasising that he had not specifically named the television channel or presenter involved.

"As an individual, a TV viewer or a politician, it is my right and freedom of expression to express my opinion," he said on his Twitter account. "To exploit my comments by saying it is intervention in lifestyles is malicious."

Package proves disappointing for non-Muslim communities

Today's Zaman (30.09.2013) - Turkey's non-Muslim communities have mainly expressed disappointment at the government's democratization package announced on Monday, while noting the package does include some positive points.

The democratization package makes no mention of the Greek Orthodox seminary on Heybeliada, which the government has been considering reopening, a demand long pursued by Turkey's Greek community.

The Greek Patriarchate is an institution under the protection of international law as guaranteed by the Treaty of Lausanne. It has long complained about the status of the Halki Seminary as well as other property issues in Turkey. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I has repeatedly said that the reopening of the seminary is of vital importance to the survival of the Greek Orthodox clergy. Established in 1844 on the island of Heybeliada off İstanbul, Halki Seminary was closed in 1971 under a law that placed religious and military training under state control.

But the package does openly say that all the legal obstacles in the way of the Mor Gabriel Monastery -- a Syriac Monastery in Midyat, Mardin, whose ownership has been in dispute since 2005 -- being given to the Syriac community will be removed. The package also includes provisions that introduce harsh punishments for crimes committed purposefully against members of an ethnic or religious minority.

But members of non-Muslim groups say they would have liked to see more and profounder changes in the package. Editor-in-Chief of the Syriac-language Sabro newspaper Tuma Çelik told Today's Zaman: "This attitude of 'returning' Mor Gabriel, as if it ever belonged to the state, is wrong. The land [on which Mor Gabriel is situated] already belonged to the [Syriac] foundation. They just did the right thing."

He also said international pressure on the government was high regarding the fate of Mor Gabriel. "We were going to get it back anyway. It should have come earlier. Minorities are seen as secondary communities, so they weren't considered in the package." He said,

however, it is positive that provisions that will introduce punishment for discrimination on the basis of religion are being introduced.

However, Çelik said the democratization package only seeks to alleviate international reaction, and it is not a solid step toward real democratization. "It is not a package that is based on a fundamental desire to democratize. It was drafted with the concern of decreasing international pressure."

Laki Vingas, the elected representative of non-Muslim foundations at the Council of the General Assembly of the Directorate General for Foundations (VGM) and a member of the Greek Orthodox community, said: "The returning of Mor Gabriel Monastery land is important, but the seminary issue was delayed to a later time. The minority issue could have been more actively dealt with. The inclusion of hate crimes is a positive development. There are positive aspects but also there are important steps missing. It is the government's responsibility to remedy these." He said that the seminary issue would be left hanging, adding that he has been skeptical about the reopening of the school for a long time. Many expected the package to include a provision that would allow the reopening of the school.

Kuryakos Ergün, chairman of the Foundation of the Mor Gabriel Monastery, said the Syriac community of Mardin was very happy about the decision. "This decision has caused us great happiness," he said. He recalled that the status of Mor Gabriel had been the subject of a series of court proceedings, including at international courts. "That the prime minister personally stated that our demands will be met has shown that we are nearing a solution," Ergün said. He also thanked those civil society organizations and media outlets that kept the issue alive and on the government's agenda. "We hope that the democratization package will be implemented soon," Ergün said.

Yetvart Danzikyan, a Radikal columnist, said the package was a disappointment for minorities. "The package in its entirety is positive, but there is nothing about Alevi, and Kurdish as the language of education is only allowed in private schools. The failure to reopen the seminary has caused disappointment not only among the Greek community, but all minority groups."

Metropolitan of Bursa Elpidophoros Lambriniadis was brutally honest in his comments. "We are hugely disappointed," he said, regarding the exclusion of the Halki Seminary from the package. "We were really hopeful [as the Greek Patriarchate]. This is not what we were expecting from the government." He said the Greek community will continue to express this demand.

Another Byzantine Church becomes Mosque in Turkey

Al-Monitor (07.08.2013) - Perched on a grassy hill overlooking the Black Sea, the Hagia Sophia church in the northeastern port city of Trabzon is hailed as one of the finest, and pitifully rare, examples of late Byzantine architecture still standing in Turkey. As *The Economist's* Bruce Clark put it in *Twice a Stranger*, his much acclaimed history of the population exchange between Turkey and Greece in the early 1920s, "the frescoed biblical scenes in the church of Hagia Sophia ... are evidence that the Greek spirit flowered with particular brilliance in the 13th century."

Today, the Greek spirit at Hagia Sophia has been all but extinguished, its frescoes determinedly concealed by tenting stretched under its central dome, and its magnificent

tilled floors obscured by crimson carpeting. A Turkish flag hoisted by a newly erected preacher's pulpit drove the message home: Hagia Sophia is ours. What had happened?

Sadly, it came as no surprise that Hagia Sophia had been converted into a mosque. Built in the mid-13th century, the church had been at the heart of a long-running dispute between Turkey's secularists and its Islamists. Its outcome has dramatic implications for the world-famous Hagia Sophia in [Istanbul](#) and flies in the face of the ruling Islam-based Justice and Development Party's (AKP) moves to [restore various Christian monuments](#) across the country.

Mosque or museum?

The debate over Hagia Sophia is cloaked in historical legalese, but its essence is political. The Islamists claim that Mehmet II, the Ottoman sultan who wrested Istanbul from the Byzantines in 1453, converted the church to a mosque in 1462 following the conquest of Trabzon. Therefore, the Islamists argue, Hagia Sophia in Trabzon must remain open to Muslims for worship, otherwise the sultan's legacy would be breached. The secularist argue that Hagia Sophia did not become a mosque until a century later and contest the claim that it belongs to the sultan, asserting there are no documents to prove this.

In fact, for the past 50 years Hagia Sophia in Trabzon was neither a church nor a mosque. After being rescued from dereliction by a team of archeologists from Edinburgh University between 1958 and 1962, the church reopened its doors to the public as a museum. This stemmed from a practical formula devised to get around the dispute and one that was successfully tested at the Istanbul Hagia Sophia, which has been a museum since 1935.

In December 2012, however, a local court ruled in favor of the General Directorate of Pious Foundations, or Vakiflar, the government body responsible for the country's ancient mosques, declaring that the mosque was an "inalienable" part of the foundation of Mehmet II. The Ministry of Culture, the court held, had been "illegally occupying" the building. The government swiftly embarked on the conversion, and it was declared complete on July 5, when the mufti of Trabzon and other citizens [gathered there for the first Friday prayers](#) of the holy month of Ramadan.

The move provoked an outcry in the academic world. "The [conversion into a mosque](#) is nothing but tragic. It will inevitably lead to damage in the structure and its priceless decoration, both sculpted and painted," Veronica Kalas, a Byzantine historian told *Al-Monitor*.

Antony Eastmond of London's Courtauld Institute has closely studied the church and agrees. "The paintings at the Hagia Sophia are important as the best surviving imperially sponsored paintings in Turkey. They are vitally important in understanding the nature and development of the empire of Trebizond, the offshoot of the Byzantine Empire that was established in the city in 1204 and outlasted Constantinople, only to fall in 1461," he told *Al-Monitor*.

"What I find most alarming in the recent changes is the fact that most of the discussion is done through a discourse of 'conquest' [*fetih*]. It does fit with the AKP's neo-Ottoman ambitions and pretensions," said Tugba Tanyeri Erdemir, a Turkish art historian.

Such views are widely, and somewhat unusually, echoed in Trabzon, a city notorious for its ultra-nationalist leanings. As news of my presence and mission to report on the conversion spread, locals flocked to me, eager to convey their anger. Zeki Bakar, the headman for Fatih, the neighborhood where Hagia Sophia stands, noted that there were

"more than enough mosques" to go around "without adding another." "Half of them are empty," Bakar asserted.

Suat Gurkok, who heads the Black Sea branch of TURSAB, the national lobby for tourism agencies, claimed that since the conversion, tourists, for whom the city has little else to offer other than Hagia Sophia, had begun canceling their bookings.

"There is nothing left for them to see. Come and look," pleaded Ali Kaynar, a local businessman who said his souvenir shop had been deserted for days. Thus I succumbed to yet another depressing tour of Hagia Sophia. Stripped of its museum status, the church lost the security guards charged with protecting the ancient sculptures and tombstones scattered across its once verdant garden.

"Anyone can come and steal these at any time," Kaynar fumed. Meanwhile, a trickle of unsupervised tourists snap pictures with their flashes on, which can damage to the few frescoes that remain in view.

Two down, one to go?

The fate of Hagia Sophia in Trabzon appears to have been sealed in July 2012, before the court ruling, when Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc, whose portfolio includes the Vakiflar, inaugurated a mosque in the western town of Iznik. The new mosque had until then also been a Hagia Sophia museum, or more precisely, [Hagia Sophia of Nicaea](#), as Iznik was known during early Christendom. Here bishops from across the Roman Empire gathered to reach consensus about the Christian faith at the First Ecumenical Council in the year 325.

In a speech to mark the conversion, Arinc heralded the happy news: "We have opened the Iznik Ayasofya mosque to worship. Insha'allah, we will be delivering that of the opening of the Ayasofya mosque in Trabzon as well. The mosque has been turned into a museum, such things cannot happen during our rule. Mosques are places of worship to Allah," he said.

With two Hagia Sophia's converted to mosques in such rapid succession, the question now preying on many a mind is whether the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul is next. There is a small but noisy campaign being led by Islamists and ultra-nationalists pushing for conversion. Mazhar Yildirimhan of the Vakiflar in Trabzon argues that the legal case for its conversion is airtight, and he makes no secret that he would like to see Hagia Sophia in Istanbul become a mosque. "It is what Fatih [Mehmet II "The Conqueror"] ordained," he said to *Al-Monitor*.

Western diplomats warn that the court ruling for the Trabzon Hagia Sophia has set a dangerous precedent. Even so, converting Hagia Sophia in Istanbul seems far-fetched. Restoration work on the famous basilica has continued throughout a decade of AKP rule, and new frescoes have been uncovered. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has himself dismissed speculation about Hagia Sophia's future. Drawing around 3.3 million [visitors in 2012](#), the museum is in the words of Kalas, the Byzantine historian, "a money-generating machine." Kalas believes Hagia Sophia will not be converted into a mosque "precisely for this reason, ... not because [the government] doesn't want this to happen," she concluded.

After 12 years, Turkey closes the door on American church volunteer

Pastor detects an official 'discomfort with foreign Christians'

World Watch Monitor (29.07.2013) - After 12 years serving a church in Turkey voluntarily and peacefully, Jerry Mattix suddenly is on the country's blacklist.

Officially, the government has deemed Mattix a threat to national security. Yet the police have told him he is "welcome" to apply for a visa.

Such is the perplexing state of affairs in [Turkey's southeast province of Diyarbakir](#), where Mattix and several other once-welcome Christian foreigners have become *personae non gratae*.

In April and June, Turkey denied Mattix, a U.S. citizen, a religious-worker visa. When he and his family tried June 7 to re-enter the country, they were turned away.

He and his family had lived in Diyarbakir for over a decade, helping the local church. Mattix also has authored several books, in Turkish, explaining Christianity.

"What exactly they cite as my crime that is so threatening to national security I do not know," Mattix told World Watch Monitor from the United Kingdom, "but I can only guess that it has to do with the fact that I have been serving the local Turkish churches all these years."

Diyarbakir is known for its diverse mix of Turks of Kurdish, Arab and Syrian ethnic background. It also is located near the epicenter of ongoing clashes between Turkish military and Kurdish rebels, and not far from Turkey's border with Syria, over which thousands of Syrian refugees have fled, overwhelming local authorities. These issues have made the region politically sensitive for Turkey's ruling AK Party, which is trying to marry democratic principles with modern Islam.

Mattix and his family are not the only ones who have discovered their welcome has worn out. In the past two years, at least six other foreign-born families have either been deported or denied renewals of their residency permits.

"Sadly, this is not just a personal vendetta on the part of the government," Mattix said. "Several other Christian workers in our region and connected to our church have been forced to leave in the last year."

Since May, when protests against the ruling government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan erupted in Istanbul's Gezi Park, some foreign nationals have expressed apprehension about the government's view of them. Turkish authorities arrested seven foreign nationals June 5, on suspicion of helping to provoke the riots, which sparked demonstrations nationwide, [Hurriyet Daily News reported](#) .

For their part, churches in southeastern Turkey say they've been deprived of their right to obtain help and support from foreigners.

The 2010 charter granting association status to the Protestant church in Diyarbakir specified it could employ local or foreign clergy or religious workers on a paid or volunteer basis for the purpose of educating its members. Turkey's constitution, furthermore, grants all citizens freedom to choose, study, and communicate their religion.

Ahmet Guvener, pastor of the Diyarbakir Protestant Church for the last 16 years, said losing Mattix has left them ill-equipped to do so.

"This is leaving us in a really difficult position," he told World Watch Monitor, "because we don't have a religious worker and in Turkey it is forbidden to train our own [Christian] theologians. We invite foreign Christian workers, but here we encounter serious residency problems and we are left at a loss as to what to do."

The troubles for Mattix began in September 2012, when undercover police attended a Sunday-morning service at the church. Four months later, in January, Mattix was fined 679 Turkish lira (US \$352) for "illegal work." Diyarbakir Church was fined 6,795 lira (\$3,530) for employing Mattix illegally.

"The police came and observed our service and in their internal police report said: 'Jerry Ian Mattix preached for 30 minutes and then prayed.' That was 'work' for them," Guvener said.

A lawyer for the church and Mattix is appealing the fines, claiming Mattix is a self-supporting volunteer who has never been paid by the church for his ministry involvement.

For the last 12 years Mattix and his family have resided in Turkey under a long-term residency visa, as do most foreigners who are not employed with a formal work permit. Renewal of the residency visa was refused in November 2012, prompting his church sponsors to seek a religious-worker visa for him.

There are very few known cases of foreigners living in Turkey under religious-worker visas, although the law in theory permits churches to hire foreigners.

"We want Jerry as a religious worker to serve here, and though we applied for the appropriate visas for him, the authorities refused him" in April and June, Guvener said. "On top, they fined us (in January), which means the government had already made a decision."

It wasn't until Mattix tried to enter Turkey at Ataturk International Airport in June that he discovered from police that he had been officially blacklisted, on two counts. The first was his fine for "working," which he had already paid. The second one alleged Mattix was involved in activities that threaten national security.

"In other words, they had declared me an enemy of the state, on a par with terrorists," he said.

Mattix said he also learned that the second count against him had been placed March 29, prior to the government's first denial of a religious-worker visa.

"For 12 years he never did anything but be a peaceful man," pastor Guvener said. "But when he applied for the 'religious worker' status, the government had already decided he was a national threat to the point that they blacklisted him, with no chance of him returning to the country indefinitely."

The church's lawyer asked the government why Mattix had been blacklisted, denied a visa and denied entry to Turkey. In response, the police sent a letter that avoided those questions and invited the American to apply for an appropriate visa.

Mattix and Guvener said they believe the deportation of Christian foreigners could spread across the country.

"All in all it seems like a planned and systematic effort to root out foreign Christians who are ministering alongside local Turkish Christians, especially in the eastern provinces," Mattix said.

"It is the easiest and most natural place to begin this purging," he said, "because there are fewer foreigners in the eastern provinces and the region in general is rife with political tensions, which serve as ample justification for this type of cleansing."

Guvener said he fears for the future of the local churches in the southeast.

"There is a discomfort with foreign Christians here, and slowly they will clean them out. In the end the churches in the east will become weak and scattered, because there are no mature Christian workers among us."

There are an estimated 4,500 Protestant Christian Turks living in Turkey, concentrated mostly in Istanbul. The church in Diyarbakir claims 80 members who are converts to Christianity. It is located in a traditionally Christian district of Diyarbakir, on the same street as the Syrian Orthodox community's Virgin Mary Church. Today about 2,000 Syriac Christians still reside in their traditional homelands in the southeast. More than 15,000 others have moved to Istanbul in recent decades. The city was once also home to a bustling Armenian community.

Constitutional Court justifies more freedom of religion or belief restrictions

By Mine Yildirim, Norwegian Helsinki Committee

Forum 18 News Service (09.07.2013) - Turkey has been gripped by widespread protests following the 31 May police repression of environmentalists protesting at Istanbul's Gezi Park development plan. The protests rapidly grew to encompass many policies of the current Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, particularly the authoritarianism of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Many in Turkey argue that the government must work to find common ground wide enough to accommodate the rights and freedoms of everyone in Turkey's seemingly increasingly polarised society.

Yet surprisingly little attention has been paid to an 18 April decision of the Constitutional Court (Anayasa Mahkemesi – AYM) concerning the constitutionality of the controversial 2012 Education Reform Law. The decision goes much wider than simply the field of education in schools: it establishes new jurisprudence on "Turkish secularism" (laiklik). This has important implications for the protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief in Turkey.

(The Education Reform Law has led to many concerns over its implementation, in particular in relation to optional Islamic religion lessons – see forthcoming F18News article.)

The Constitutional Court's new jurisprudence allows more unjustifiable state interference and involvement in freedom of religion or belief matters. It accepts the existing restrictions on non-state organisations or individuals providing religious teaching outside the public education system. From this basis the AYM attributes to the state a positive obligation to provide Islamic religious services – for example in school education. This approach has wide and possibly unforeseeable implications.

This AYM decision fails to meet the expectations of religious or belief communities from the promised new Constitution. These hopes focused on real equality and a neutral role for the state, with the effective protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Is AYM reflecting the AKP approach?

The April AYM decision sets out, apparently for the first time in an official document, a new interpretation of laiklik. This comprises, firstly, an acceptance by the AYM of the existing state involvement and restrictions on the right to manifest religion or belief in, for example, training religious leaders. Secondly, and simultaneously, the AYM attributes a positive obligation on the part of the state to provide religious services which inevitably leads to the promotion of the state's interpretation of Islam.

It is not possible to state with certainty that the AYM decision represents the AKP policy as it affects freedom of religion or belief. In the past, the AYM would have been critical of AKP approaches. But in recent years the composition of the court has changed. Nine of the 17 member court being appointed by President Abdullah Gül and two have been appointed by the Turkish Grand National Assembly. The April AYM decision matches the observable AKP approach to freedom of religion or belief.

The AKP has emphasised the protection of freedom of religion or belief in its political statements. But it has yet to establish a legal framework that is in line with Article 9 ("Freedom of thought, conscience and religion") of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR).

The AKP's discontent over constraints under "Turkish secularism" on Islamic practice has long been clear, for example over women wearing headscarves in the workplace. But – if the Constitutional Court decision truly represents the mentality behind the AKP's policies concerning freedom of religion or belief – the AYM decision sets it out much more clearly.

Existing "Turkish secularism"

"Turkish secularism" (laiklik) is strongly protected in the current 1982 Constitution. The way "secularism" has been interpreted in Turkey has been crucial for the exercise, and indeed interference in, the right to freedom of religion or belief in Turkey. In practice it means close state supervision of any exercise of freedom of religion or belief, including a ban on religious communities from acquiring independent legal personality.

In a 1971 decision, the AYM viewed laiklik as compatible with Diyanet personnel and imams being civil servants, i.e. to be paid from the taxes of all citizens irrespective of their religious or non-religious beliefs. Yet laiklik has also made it possible for Turkey to protect the right to change religion or belief, despite the fact that many would consider this action against Islamic religious law.

The Diyanet, or Presidency of Religious Affairs, is a state body reporting to the Prime Minister's Office. Espousing only Sunni Hanafi Islam, it has a monopoly over significant parts of Islamic activity including administering all mosques and appointing all imams. Massive state financial and institutional support of the Diyanet along with its activities – including biases against certain Muslim and non-Muslim beliefs – contribute to the difficulties people in Turkey face in exercising freedom of religion or belief.

Discussions around the drafting of the new Constitution have made it clear that there are multiple interpretations of Turkish secularism. Some of these interpretations would help Turkey implement its international human rights obligations to respect freedom of religion or belief.

The new "Turkish secularism"?

The AYM's new theory of laiklik is in some ways an improvement on the old idea of laiklik. It states that "individual preferences and the ensuing lifestyles remain outside the interference of the state, instead, they are under the protection the state". It goes on to state that one of the purposes of the secular state - which does not have a religion - is to establish a political order where, while protecting social diversity, individuals of different beliefs can live together in peace. Secularism, the AYM states, ensures the state's neutrality in the face of religions and beliefs.

Accordingly, the AYM concludes that the state must take the necessary measures to ensure an environment where freedom of religion or belief can be realised. This implies, the AYM notes, that the state will refrain from interfering in the freedom of religion or belief of individuals unless it is necessary. It also implies, in the AYM's view, that the state should remove obstacles to freedom of religion or belief.

Yet the AYM's application of these ideas is disappointing.

The Constitutional Court's April 2013 decision justifies the existing preferential treatment of Islam by saying that "from the beginning in Turkey the principle of secularism, both at the constitutional level and in practice" has not excluded the institutional relationship between the state and the Islamic religion. While the Constitution does not explicitly refer to a particular religion, "it foresees certain mechanisms to meet the needs, such as belief, worship and education, of those belonging to the majority religion".

Here the Constitutional Court goes on to give examples of these mechanisms and religious services, such as the Diyanet and educational institutions training imams. The AYM concludes that the Constitution perceives religious services as social needs which the state is under an obligation to meet.

Yet the AYM does not consider how this preferential treatment for Islam can be reconciled with a state that is neutral toward all religions, as the AYM outlines in its theory of the new secularism.

Not discriminatory?

Referring to the 2012 Education Reform Law specifically, the Constitutional Court considers whether the preferential treatment of Sunni Islam creates inequalities.

Among other things, the Education Reform Law introduced optional lessons within school hours in Koranic studies, Basic Religious Knowledge (Islam) and the life of the Prophet Mohammad in middle and high schools. The new religion lessons began in September 2012, and many in Turkey have complained that their implementation has failed to respect the rights of parents and children to freedom of religion or belief (see forthcoming F18News article).

The AYM claims that, for two reasons, preferential treatment of Islam in schools is not discriminatory. Firstly, it states that no rule prevents the Education Ministry from providing religion lessons for members of other religions. Secondly, the AYM claims that the arrangements for minority religions named in the 1923 Lausanne Treaty are satisfactory. For these two reasons, the AYM concludes that the arrangements for the new lessons are not discriminatory.

The Constitutional Court's perception of Turkish society is striking. It appears to think that people in Turkey can be subdivided into only two groups: those belonging to the

majority Islamic community, which it sees as a monolith; and non-Muslim ethnic/religious communities named in the Lausanne Treaty. According to the AYM, the state is responsible for Islamic activity, and the Lausanne Treaty arrangements cover everyone else. This approach misses both the diversity of Turkish society, and the binding international human rights standards on freedom of religion or belief which Turkey has undertaken to implement.

The AYM appears to ignore that the Islamic community is very diverse - even within the Sunni, Sufi, Alawite and Alevi communities - and thus their needs for religious education may differ. There is also great diversity among other parts of Turkish society, far greater than the Lausanne Treaty encompasses.

The Constitutional Court also ignores the fact that the Turkish state has so far interpreted non-Muslim minorities restrictively to mean those affiliated with the Jewish community, Greek Orthodox and Armenian community, and unlawfully interferes in their leadership choices. Other religious communities such as the Syriac Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestant community - as well as atheists and agnostics - are not able to benefit from the limited rights enshrined in the Lausanne Treaty.

The Constitutional Court similarly overlooks the fact that even what may be called the Lausanne minorities are denied the right to establish private educational institutions to teach their own beliefs, for example to train clergy. The most well known example of this is the forcible closure in 1971 of the Orthodox theological seminary on the island of Heybeliada (Halki).

This means that the state continues to have a monopoly on deciding what, if any, form of education to do with religions and beliefs can be provided, and to have a total monopoly of how this is provided.

Positive change?

Any changes in the jurisprudence of the high courts on the interpretation of "Turkish secularism" need to be closely watched. The Constitutional Court has by its April decision opened the way for even more state involvement in teaching religion, in particular the state's interpretation of the Islamic faith to everyone in Turkey. In doing this, the Constitutional Court also ignored the real situation of freedom of religion or belief in Turkey.

This decision will not encourage the state to open the way to protect the right to manifest religion or belief in teaching, for example, by way of establishing religious schools or seminaries.

The Chief Judge of the Constitutional Court, Hasim Kilic, went as far as to claim on 24 April that the decision made "a positive change, and thus, an understanding of secularism which is more liberal and which advocates more freedom".

As Kerem Altıparmak of Ankara University observed in an opinion published on Bianet on 24 April: "As much as the old Constitutional Court went too far to exclude religion from social life, the new Constitutional Court, by considering the provision of religious education a positive obligation, has gone too far to place religion at the centre of law - the consequences of this approach cannot be foreseen."

Lost opportunity

Not only was the April Constitutional Court decision a lost opportunity to reach a principled decision on the Education Reform Law, upholding human rights for all in the area of education. It also provides a legal underpinning for future decisions that might uphold restrictions on freedom of religion or belief.

Indeed, given the Constitutional Court's role as the leading Turkish court in providing determinations on constitutional and human rights issues, its ruling may make it more difficult to win cases in Turkey upholding the right to freedom of religion or belief for all. This may result in increased applications to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in Strasbourg.

Since it has become possible to bring individual complaints to the AYM, those who wish to lodge cases with the ECtHR have, since 24 September 2012, had to take their cases first to the Constitutional Court as the last court of appeal within Turkey. This significantly increases the length of time and financial cost of cases that will eventually go to the Strasbourg court. It also increases the importance of the ECtHR as a defender of human rights in Turkey. The Constitutional Court, however, has the opportunity to rule in a way that will uphold the protection of human rights as protected under the ECHR in Turkey so that applicants will not have to take their cases to the ECtHR.

The Constitutional Court decision also demonstrates that - whatever references to freedom of religion or belief, secularism or neutrality there may be in the new Constitution - it is the interpretation and application of these terms which will determine whether human rights are respected in practice or not. The April decision does not give hope to those who would like the right to freedom of religion or belief for all to be unequivocally enshrined in the new Constitution.

For the Constitutional Court to affirm unequivocally the principle of freedom of religion or belief for all - which it claimed to support in the initial part of the April decision - it would have to reconsider the application of these principles in the rest of the decision. To achieve this, the AYM would need to establish a new understanding of secularism that is indeed not only "more liberal and which advocates more freedom" in theory, but is also in practice in line with Turkey's international human rights obligations.

Turkish-Armenian scribe sentenced to 13 months for blasphemy in blog post

Hurriyet News (22.05.2013) - An Istanbul court has sentenced Turkish-Armenian writer Sevan Nişanyan to 58 weeks in prison for an alleged insult to the Prophet Muhammad in a blog post.

The prosecutor had been seeking one and a half years of jail time for Nişanyan on charges of "insulting the religious beliefs held by a section of the society."

The sentence cannot be converted to a financial penalty, but Nişanyan has the right to appeal.

He was charged with blasphemy after writing a blog post titled, "[We] need to fight hate speech."

"Making fun of an Arab leader who claimed he contacted Allah hundreds of years ago and received political, financial and sexual benefits is not hate speech," Nişanyan said in his post last year. "It is an almost kindergarten-level test of what is called freedom of

expression.”

On May 22, the day of the sentencing, Nişanyan retweeted his blog post, writing, “Let’s share the article that was sentenced to 13-and-a-half months at the Istanbul 10th Criminal Court for insulting religious bla-bla.”

Last month, renowned Turkish pianist Fazıl Say was also handed a suspended 10-month prison sentence for blasphemy, after a case that drew national and international reaction.

Say had been the focus of a legal battle after he retweeted several lines, attributed to poet Omar Khayyam in April 2012, saying, “You say its rivers will flow in wine. Is the Garden of Eden a drinking house? You say you will give two hours to each Muslim. Is the Garden of Eden a whorehouse?”

Plot to kill orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew uncovered by Turkey

Reuters (10.05.2013) - Turkey is investigating an alleged plot to assassinate Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, spiritual leader of the world's Orthodox Christians, and has stepped up security around the patriarchate in Istanbul, his spokesman said on Friday.

Spokesman Dositheos Anagnostopoulos said the patriarch had not received any direct threats but had learned of the alleged plot from Turkish media, which was later confirmed to the patriarchate by Turkish police.

"Later in the day, police informed the patriarchate of a possible threat and dispatched additional police officers," Anagnostopoulos said.

Turkish broadcaster NTV said one man had been arrested in relation to the alleged plot, after state prosecutors in central Kayseri province received an anonymous letter saying there was a plan to assassinate Bartholomew on May 29, the anniversary of the Ottoman conquest of present-day Istanbul.

It said police were still searching for two men in relation to the alleged plot.

The Ankara chief public prosecutor's office, which local media said is leading the investigation, could not be immediately reached for comment.

There has been at least one previous assassination plot against Bartholomew in recent years but the patriarchate sought to play down Friday's reports.

"The patriarch is not taking this too seriously. He doesn't believe there is a serious threat," Anagnostopoulos said.

Known often by his full title Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople, the historical name for Istanbul, he is the spiritual head of worldwide Orthodoxy, which split from the Roman Catholic Church in 1054.

Previous attacks on Christians have raised concerns about the safety of religious minorities in Muslim Turkey, which has around 100,000 Christians out of a total population of 76 million.

In 2010, a leading Catholic bishop was stabbed to death at his home in southern Turkey by his driver and in 2006, a Roman Catholic priest was murdered in the Black Sea town of Trabzon by a teenager with suspected links to ultra-nationalists.

In 2007, three members of a Bible publishing company, one of whom was a German citizen, were tortured and killed in Malatya in central Turkey.

Is Islam the source of intolerance?

Today's Zaman (22.04.2013) - The conviction of a well-known Turkish piano player to 10 months' imprisonment for insulting religious sentiments received broad coverage in the world media. Some American friends of mine sent me messages wondering about roughly the following questions: How is it possible that a famous piano player can be convicted for only expressing his views? Why is it that there are so many journalists imprisoned in Turkey? Why are Muslim-majority societies so intolerant? This briefly is my response:

There is no doubt that freedom of expression and respect for diversity are the foundation stones of contemporary, universal civilization. This civilization, which cannot be said to have been consolidated, does not belong only to the West. Traditions that support pluralism, respect for diversity of views, identities, rights and democracy exist in every culture and civilization, and one of them certainly is the Islamic civilization.

To equate Islamic culture and civilization with Islam's fundamentalist conceptions, with Islamism and in particular radical Islamism is a grave mistake. The World Values Survey has indicated that values that support human rights and democracy in Muslim-majority countries are not at all behind the Western world. The memories of some of the most intolerant regimes in history, the Nazi and fascistic dictatorships of the West, have not yet faded away. Islamophobia, which seems to have replaced anti-Semitism in the West, is on the rise.

Restrictions on freedom of expression and displays of intolerance in Muslim-majority countries today can be explained not by Islam but mainly by political regimes that have for decades suppressed freedoms. Consider the Arab world. Secular nationalist autocracies established in most of these countries, following liberation from colonialism at the end of World War II, strangled freedom. Islamism, attempting to formulate a political ideology out of Islam, and its radical conceptions evolved in reaction to secular dictatorships. With the revolutions of the recent years, most of the Arab world is now in search of establishing liberal democracies, but it will certainly take more than a few years for this to succeed.

Take Turkey. It was never a colony, but fought a war of liberation against foreign invasion and partition at the end of World War I, in the wake of which a secular nationalist single-party regime was established. More than 60 years after the introduction of a multi-party regime controlled by the military, it is still struggling to establish a liberal democracy on European Union norms. Freedom of expression in Turkey is still substantially restricted mainly by laws introduced in the effort to suppress the Kurdish armed insurgency led by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). These laws are the main reason why there are many journalists affiliated with pro-PKK media outlets in prison. There are also a few other journalists in prison who have been prosecuted on charges of involvement in conspiracies to overthrow the elected government. In the course of the current peace process Turkey is gradually bringing its laws in line with EU norms.

There is no doubt that in democracies atheists as well as believers have the right to express their views. There is no doubt that religious beliefs are open to criticism as well

as atheism. Freedom of expression is, however, restricted with the obligation to respect others' religious beliefs. This is why European and Turkish, if not United States law, criminalizes religious insult. Balancing freedom of expression with respect for religious belief or non-belief requires separate treatment in each case. Ergun Özbudun, a distinguished professor of constitutional law, provides a highly commendable treatment of the issue. (See "Freedom of expression, religious insult and hate crime," Turkish Review, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2013, pp. 56-61)

Fazil Say is surely a famous piano player, but he is certainly no champion of freedom of expression and religion as he claims. Those who want to have their beliefs respected must respect others' beliefs. Say's statements on Twitter, however, cannot be judged as a threat to "social peace," and therefore cannot be deemed in violation of the law in Turkey. If I were the judge, I would have acquitted him on that ground.

Tweeting Turkish pianist given suspended sentence for blasphemy

By Can Sezer & Ece Toksabay

Reuters (15.04.2013) -A world-renowned concert pianist was given a suspended jail sentence in Turkey on Monday for insulting religious values on Twitter, a case which has become a cause celebre for Turks alarmed about creeping Islamic conservatism.

Fazil Say, also a leading composer, went on trial in October for blasphemy - a crime that can carry an 18-month sentence - for a series of tweets including one citing a 1,000-year-old poem.

"The fact I've been convicted for an offence I didn't commit is less worrying for me personally than it is for freedom of expression and faith in Turkey," Say said in emailed comments.

His case has stirred up passions about the role religion should play in Turkish public life and highlighted how much has changed since Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's AK Party, which has roots in Islamist politics, swept to power a decade ago.

A judiciary once renowned for defending the secular republic against Islamist influence - notably jailing Erdogan himself for reciting a religious poem - now finds itself in hock to religious conservatives, government opponents say.

"The verdict is unacceptable, and an indicator of the AK Party's vengeful conception of the law," Ilhan Cihaner, a lawmaker from the main opposition CHP party, told Reuters.

Say retweeted a verse in April last year in which 11th-century Persian poet Omar Khayyam mocks pious hypocrisy. It is in the form of questions to believers: "You say rivers of wine flow in heaven, is heaven a tavern to you? You say two hours await each believer there, is heaven a brothel to you?"

In another tweet, he poked fun at a muezzin, someone who makes the Muslim call to prayer. "The muezzin finished the evening prayers in 22 seconds ... Why are you in such hurry? A lover? A raki table?" he asked, referring to the aniseed-flavored spirit popular in Turkey.

The series of more than half a dozen tweets led prosecutors to accuse the 43-year old pianist of "explicitly insulting religious values".

An Istanbul court gave him a 10-month prison sentence but suspended it by five years on condition that he does not commit the same crime again in that period.

"Say did not repeat the words of a poet, but attacked religion and the holy values of religion, completely with his own words," said plaintiff Ali Emre Bukagili, a civil engineer and follower of a prominent Turkish creationist, who has brought a series of such cases against public figures.

Divided Opinion

Say, who has performed with leading orchestras from Tokyo to Berlin, as well as the Israel Philharmonic and the New York Philharmonic, denied the charge.

"Fazil Say" became a top trending topic on Twitter immediately after the ruling was announced, with comments reflecting Turks' strong but divided opinions on the role of religion in public life.

"Scandalous and disgraceful," one tweet said of the ruling. "I wouldn't be surprised if a witch hunt for non-believers starts."

Another disagreed: "Finding religious values silly is one thing, provoking people through insults another. The court ruling is not wrong."

Erdogan's AK, its initials spelling out the Turkish word for purity, was elected in 2002 with a landslide. A decade since then of unprecedented prosperity is admired among Western allies keen to portray NATO member Turkey as a beacon of political stability in a troubled region.

But Erdogan's opponents accuse him of posing a threat to the modern, secular republic founded by Kemal Ataturk on the ruins of the Ottoman empire 90 years ago.

The courts have helped silence opposition and emasculate a military which was long the self-appointed guardian of Turkish secularism. It pressured an Islamist-led government from power in 1997 but has since been forced into retreat under AK rule.

Erdogan himself served time in prison in 1998, when military influence still held sway, for reciting a poem that a court ruled was an incitement to religious hatred.

The poem Erdogan had read contained the verses: "The mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets and the faithful our soldiers."

Police break up plot to assassinate Turkish pastor

Two of the suspects 'were like family' in the church

World Watch Monitor (17.01.2013) — Police in Turkey say they thwarted an assassination plot against a Christian pastor Tuesday when they arrested 14 suspects, two of whom had been part of his congregation for more than a year.

Emre Karaali, pastor of Izmit Protestant Church and the target of the alleged plot, said two of the arrested suspects were regular members, feigning interest in Christianity. One of them, he said, participated in a baptism in July.

Some of the other suspects also had visited the church, Karaali told World Watch Monitor. He said three of the suspects are women.

"These people had infiltrated our church and collected information about me, my family and the church and were preparing an attack against us," said Karaali, 33, a native Turk and a convert to Christianity. "Two of them attended our church for over a year and they were like family."

Accounts of the arrests in Turkish media reported that the suspects were planning to murder Karaali this week during a series of evangelistic outreach meetings.

"They caught them last minute," said Hakan Tastan, an Istanbul Christian who was visiting Izmit Wednesday. "If they had waited one week, we would have lost them," he said, referring to the pastor, his family and potentially other church members.

The 14 had collected personal information, copies of personal documents, created maps of the church and the pastor's home, and had photos of those who had come to Izmit to preach. In one of the homes raided by police, two guns were found, Turkish media reported. Police have recorded the telephone conversations of the 14 suspects.

Press reports said the Izmit anti-terror police decided to close in when they learned the network of suspects had brought in someone from Diyarbakir, in eastern Turkey, to carry out the murder.

The police are not talking about the arrests, claiming their investigation is ongoing.

Karaali said he learned about the arrests reading the morning newspaper Wednesday. Later that day, he said, the police called him in for questioning and a briefing that lasted more than five hours.

He said police showed him photos of some of the 12 suspects who, unlike the remaining two suspects, had not been regularly attending the church. He said he recognized some of the 12 as occasional visitors. Karaali said his treatment at the hands of the police was "exceptional."

The pastor said he has been working with police since January 2012, when he informed them of a death threat he had received.

"I received a threat by phone and that's when the police started to investigate," Karaali said. It's not yet publicly known whether any of the suspects arrested Tuesday are connected to that initial phone threat.

Karaali said he declined police protection that was offered at that time, though his wife and two young children did move into an apartment building with better security. Another threat was made during the summer.

"They said, 'You talk too much. We're hearing your voice everywhere and we're going to break your head.' They didn't say they'll kill me exactly, but that if I didn't shut up it would be bad." Police have not revealed whether any of the 14 suspects arrested this week are suspected of making the threat.

Izmit, about 100 miles east of Istanbul, is the heart of an industrial region of about 1 million people, known for the devastation it faced in the earthquake of 1999 that claimed thousands of lives. The Izmit Protestant Church, operating for 13 years, is a small congregation, ministering to 20 people, all of whom are Turkish converts to Christianity.

Karaali and his wife have served the church for four years, in an environment he described as difficult.

"Every region of Turkey has its challenges," he said. "What is difficult about our city is that the people here are closed and there are many radical groups making it a hard place for the church. The anger towards us continues."

A Christian visiting the Izmit Church this week described a group of children yelling insults at those who were leaving an evening meeting. Earlier this week, a passerby threw rocks and hurled expletives at the church.

"There is hate and this hate feeling continues from people here," Karaali said of the attitude of the locals toward the church. "They look at us strangely. Unfortunately that continues. We've been trying to make known what Christianity is about. There are those who come to us who are warm and well-intentioned, but ones who hate us also come unfortunately."

Karaali's predecessor, Wolfgang Hade, a German, also had received death threats during his time as pastor in Izmit, and was under police protection for a year after the 2007 murders of three Christians in the eastern city of Malatya. The accused ringleader of the Malatya murders had said he was planning on killing Hade next.

The Istanbul Protestant Church Foundation, of which the Izmit church is a member, denounced the alleged assassination plot in a press statement Thursday.

"These types of assassination attempts are a black stain that some want to spread on Turkey making it a spectacle to the world," the statement read. "We stand against those who attack different faiths in our country. Instead we prefer the upholding of the virtues of love and brotherhood, which is the core of tolerance."

Karaali said he intends to continue to pastor his small flock.

"Two years ago I almost lost my life because of my health, but the Lord brought me back to life and he has done this for me again," he said. "He protects us, so we believe this means the Lord has work for us to do. We haven't lost our confidence. On the contrary, we feel the Lord is with us because he didn't allow this (assassination) to happen, and we will continue to do what the Lord asks. We will continue. We will continue."

Turkey was ranked No. 31 on the 2012 World Watch List, a ranking of the 50 countries where life as a Christian is most oppressed, as measured by Open Doors International, a ministry to persecuted Christians. Turkey did not rank among the top 50 in the 2013 World Watch List.
