

Government shuts seven mosques, prepares to expel 40 Turkey-funded imams

Decision shows failure of Austria's Islam Law, according to human rights organizations

Vienna, 10.06.2018 (HRWF/FOREF Europe) - On Friday, June 8, the government of Austria ordered the closing of seven mosques and the termination of the residence permits of 40 Turkish imams. "Parallel societies, political Islam or radical tendencies have no place in our country," Chancellor Sebastian Kurz of the conservative people's party (ÖVP) explained at a news conference announcing the move last Friday.

Human Rights Without Frontiers and the Forum for Religious Freedom – Europe, both of which have been sharply critical of political Islam as a totalitarian political movement, said that subjecting Islamic religious communities to special regulations contradicts human rights and Rule of Law principles, and is an obstacle to the development of moderate and peaceful Islamic communities in Europe that uphold a separation of church and state.

The measure coincides with the run-up to the Turkish presidential election on June 24. Turks living in Austria and in other countries already have begun casting absentee ballots. Last May, 10.000 expat Turks travelled to Sarajevo to attend an election campaign event in Bosnia-Herzegovina's capital Sarajevo in support of the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as Germany, Austria and the Netherlands had prohibited election campaigns of Turkish politicians in their countries. The event was hosted by the Union of European Turkish Democrats (UETD), an organization that is considered the foreign branch of Erdoğan's party AKP. Around half of the supporters came from Germany and about 2.000 from Austria. In his Sarajevo talk, the Turkish president criticized the European countries that banned his campaigns as anti-democratic and asked his supporters to "demonstrate the strength of European Turks to the whole world", the Austrian newspaper [Die Presse](#) reported.

Against this backdrop, the Austrian government's plan to expel imams supported by Turkey and to crack down on mosques run by controversial organizations is widely understood as a reaction against the promotion of political Islam in Austria. Government officials, however, have [denied](#) any connection of their measure to the upcoming Turkish presidential election. The decision has been justified by claiming that two provisions of the amended "Islam Law" (Islamgesetz) of 2015 have been breached:

First, according to the law, imams in Austria are prohibited from being funded by foreign countries. However, 40 imams of the Turkish-Islamic Union in Austria (ATIB) have been funded by Turkey via a [personnel leasing company in Belgium](#). This was also admitted by ATIB representatives who defended their actions by stating that possibilities for the training and support of imams in Austria were insufficient. The process to withhold or withdraw residence permits of the 40 imams has already been initiated, government officials have announced. Additionally, at least another 20 imams associated with ATIB are going to be investigated.

Secondly, the Islam Law of 2015 explicitly requires Islamic communities to hold a "positive attitude towards society and the state", a term which is open to a broad range of interpretations. This provision was allegedly violated by a Vienna mosque run by the [Nizam i-Alem](#) ("world order") association, which is a member of the European umbrella organization of the splinter party (BBP) of the Turkish ultra-nationalist party MHP. (The far-right youth organization [Grey Wolves](#) has close links to the MHP as its political arm.

Several media outlets have identified the Nizam i-Alem mosque as an associate of the Grey Wolves.) According to the Islamic Community in Austria (IGGÖ), the largest Muslim umbrella organization in the country that includes the ATIB as its leading constituent member, confirmed that the mosque was operating illegally without its permission.

Six out of the seven mosques to be shut down, however, do not have any ties to Turkey. These belong to a non-registered association called "Arabic Religious Community" (arabische Kultusgemeinde), a [member](#) of the Austrian Islamic Community that allegedly entertains ties with the European network of the Muslim Brotherhood. (The chairman of the Arabic Religious Community, the Egyptian [Moussa Hassan](#), was convicted last year for embezzling public funds provided for Islamic kindergartens in Vienna.) The mosques are to be closed due to "Salafist statements" by their representatives. The Arabic Religious Community [announced](#) that it will take legal action against the government's measures.

[Another controversial mosque](#) in Vienna run by ATIB is still under investigation. In April this year, pictures emerged that showed children re-enacting scenes of the World War I battle of Gallipoli (1915) on the premises of the mosque and playing martyrs dressed in paramilitary uniforms. Already at that point, Chancellor Kurz announced that the case will be investigated and that the funding of Islamic associations and kindergartens would be scrutinized.

Reactions: Austria "islamophobic" and "racist"

Regular visitors of the mosques affected by the crackdown have denied the accusations and call the government action "politically motivated".

The Islamic Community in Austria (IGGÖ) remarked indignantly in its [statement last Saturday](#) that illegal activities of any association used to be monitored by the interior ministry regardless of religious affiliation. However, with the amended Islam Law now entering into effect, the whole IGGÖ was being discredited when illegal activities of individual actors were penalized "in calculated political manoeuvres".

Statements in reaction to the move of the Austrian government came not only from religious representatives, but also and especially from political figures. Turkish government officials have responded by portraying the action as an attack on Islam itself. Ibrahim Kalin, a senior presidential adviser and spokesman of Erdoğan, [condemned Austria's decision on his Twitter feed](#). "Austria's decision to close seven mosques and expel imams is a reflection of the Islamophobic, racist and discriminatory wave in this country," he stated. "It is an attempt to target Muslim communities for the sake of scoring cheap political points."

Erdoğan threatened with retaliations against Kurz, and claimed in a [speech in Istanbul](#) last Saturday that the actions of the Austrian Chancellor could lead the world into "a war between the cross and the crescent moon".

Turkey's eye on Austrian Muslims

Despite their occasional public protests, the IGGÖ officials in fact cooperated intensely with the Austria's former government, a socialist-conservative (SPÖ/ÖVP) coalition, in drafting the Islam Law of 2015. Their aim was to strengthen the status of the IGGÖ as a representative body of Muslims living in Austria. On the other hand, according to scholar of Islam Ednan Aslan, there were [three main factions](#) within the IGGÖ that struggled to advance their political interests in Austria: the Muslim Brotherhood, the Egyptian government, and the Turkish government. As of June 2016, the Turkish-Islamic Union in Austria (ATIB) has taken control over the IGGÖ, thus cementing the influence of Turkey on Austrian Muslims and [effectively removing](#) the Arabic Religious Community from power.

(Correspondingly, the IGGÖ has stated on Saturday that they have [no problem](#) with the government's announcement to shut down the "private mosques" of the Arabic Religious Community.)

There are an estimated 600.000 Muslims living in Austria, a country with a total population of 8.8 million. About 360.000 are of Turkish origins, among whom one third holds Turkish citizenship. ATIB was founded in 1990 and serves as an umbrella organization for 62 member associations with an estimated 100.000 members. At par with DITIB in Germany, the organization is known to function as the Austrian [branch of the Diyanet](#), the Directorate of Religious Affairs in Turkey, and is bound by instructions of the Turkish Embassy.

Since August 2017, Austria's public prosecutors are investigating ATIB due to allegations that the organization has been used by Turkey to spy on members of the Gülen-movement. If confirmed that ATIB was involved with intelligence collection, the organization could be [dissolved](#).

Human Rights Activists: Islam Law is discriminatory and seeks to regulate thoughts and attitudes

The provisions of the Islam Law mentioned above have been now implemented by the government for the first time.

The controversy surrounding the government's move underlines the weakness of the all-inclusive-package of the amended Islam Law, which includes both privileges and highly questionable discriminatory provisions.

The ban on foreign funding is a discriminatory security measure to tackle the political influence of Turkey, Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

But according to Willy Fautré, Director of *Human Rights Without Frontiers*, "A law that indiscriminately criminalizes all forms of foreign financial assistance to a specific religious community is discriminatory and incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights. It should be abrogated. Such a law looks like a twin sister of Putin's law against 'foreign agents'."

What is more, by demanding a "positive attitude" toward society and the Constitution from a specific religious group, the law is both discriminatory and an illegal intrusion into the freedom of thought.

"When any law gives a state the power to penalize citizens for their attitudes and thoughts on the basis of vague language, it is inconsistent with basic human rights, and an invitation for political manipulation," stated Dr. Aaron Rhodes, president of the Forum for Religious Freedom – Europe.

Both organizations strongly urge that Austria's Islam Law not only needs to be reformed, but it needs to be dissolved and new legislation for religions must be put in place that will ensure the equal treatment of all religions before the law. Such legislation should enable a clear procedure for Islamic associations to register as faith communities independently from umbrella organizations vulnerable to political instrumentalization.

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