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Protestants exposed to discrimination, deportation and hate speech

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Providence Mag (16.05.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3wzUA49> - Only 0.1 percent of Turkey's population is Greek, Armenian, or Assyrian Christian. The collapse of Turkey's Christian communities is a result of decades-long persecution that includes [genocide](#), [expulsions](#), [pogroms](#), and [official discrimination](#).

There is also a growing Christian demographic group in the country: Turkish converts to Christianity, many of whom converted to a Protestant church. This community has struggled with many problems, including a lack of official recognition by the government.

The "[2021 Protestant Community Rights Violation Report](#)" by Turkey's Association of Protestant Churches lists the community's challenges. According to the report, Protestant Christians in Turkey lack legal recognition as a church and a faith community, which severely restricts their freedom of religion and belief. They are often exposed to hate speech in the press or social media. Since they don't have an official legal entity, they remain unable to establish their own places of worship or use existing church buildings for services. Thus, they try to use other buildings, which brings other problems with it. They also cannot open schools to train their religious personnel. Whenever foreign religious workers come to Turkey to serve the Protestant community, they face the risk of deportation.

As Protestant Christians cannot worship within their own churches, they try establishing associations or religious foundations or become a representative of other such groups. However, the government does not officially accept them as a "church" or a "place of worship." The report explains:

Because members of the Protestant community are mostly new Christians, they do not have religious buildings that are part of their cultural and religious heritage like traditional Christian communities have in Turkey. The usable number of historical church buildings is very limited. Therefore, a large portion of the Protestant community tries to overcome the problem of finding a place to worship by establishing an association or religious foundation, or by gaining representative status with an existing association or religious foundation and then renting or purchasing a property such as a standalone building, shop or depot that has not traditionally been used for worship. A very small number have been able to build their own free-standing buildings. However, many of these premises do not have official status as a place of worship and therefore they are not officially recognized as a place of worship even though they are used that way. They cannot benefit from the advantages, or the conveniences given to an officially recognized place of worship, such as free electricity and water, as well as tax exempt status. When they introduce themselves to the authorities as a church, they receive warnings that they are not legal and may be closed down.

The inability to possess legal places of worship created serious challenges for the Protestant community during the past year. Some examples include:

- The church building that is part of the Diyarbakır Armenian Protestant Church Foundation, which was turned over to the General Directorate of Foundations (despite objections and the need for a church worship place in Diyarbakır) was rented out to the Culture Ministry as a library on February 21, 2021.
- Tekirdag Protestant Fellowship started activities as part of an association in July 2021. Even though they did not bother those around them, neighbors and others filed complaints to the municipality, the governor's office, and the office of the president. As a result, the government is continually bothering the church, conducting inspections, and pressuring it to move from that region.
- The members of the Protestant community who live in Arhavi in Artvin Province have rented a property and want to do repairs and renovations. The repairmen who took on this job could not work due to social pressure; the landlord terminated the rental contract for the same reason. The congregation continues to meet in members' homes.

In addition, the Protestant community does not have the right to train its own religious personnel within the Turkish national education system. It also cannot open schools to provide religious education for the members of church communities.

Therefore, the Protestant community trains most of its religious personnel through seminars or apprentice training in Turkey. A small percentage obtains education at theology schools abroad. Presently there are not enough Turkish Protestant religious workers or leaders to meet the need of the growing Protestant community, so foreign pastors need to provide the spiritual guidance of some churches.

However, the Turkish government creates challenges regarding that as well. Many foreign religious workers and members of congregations have been deported, banned entry into Turkey, or denied residence visas, a situation beginning intensely in 2019 and continuing in 2021. Some Protestants who have lived in Turkey for years have been given entry bans for at least five years for "posing a general security threat." The report elaborates:

In court cases opened to challenge this situation, the authorities have claimed that these people are pursuing activities to the detriment of Turkey, have taken part in missionary activities and that some of them have attended our Family Conference, which our Association has held annually for twenty years or other seminars and meetings that are similarly completely legal and transparent.

Another significant problem facing the Protestant community is the increase of hate speech in social media. The authors of the report write:

There has been a noticeable increase in hate speech filled with insults and profanity directed at official church accounts, church leaders, Christianity, Christian values and Christians in general originating from the activity of social media groups that cultivate hatred against Christians and have targeted Christian websites and social media accounts.

Social media has become the center of targeting, marginalization, degradation and all kinds of discrimination and has also become the media where corruption of information is the highest. Hate speech easily finds an arena in this platform.

These types of activities [on social media] directed at all Christian denominations and minority groups creates concern in the Protestant community.

For instance, Emin T., a church employee, and the Aydin Kurtulus Church itself were threatened with messages posted on Facebook by T.U., who lives in Bursa. The church employee filed a police complaint because the content of the messages included threats to kill Christians by decapitating them or through other means. Various people living in Aydin also posted other menacing messages. One person living in Aydin was arrested but soon released. The church has not received information from the legal authorities regarding any investigation.

The members of Artvin Arhavi Fellowship were subjected to written and digital attacks. Later "certain people" harassed and pressured the landlord to evict them from his property. The district president of a political party also posted on social media statements such as "we will destroy them." The leader of the fellowship met with the district president, who then feigned to be more reasonable. But the negative response posted on social media and even openly expressed in the streets continues. The church fellowship leader still hears disdainful words like "dead priest walking" when he strolls outside.

According to the 2021 report, members of the Protestant community, as well as non-Christians who work for Christian organizations, continue to receive offers to become informants. In many cities with Protestant congregations, people claiming to be intelligence officers who made such offers reportedly used threats, promises, benefits, or money to gain information about Christians, churches, church activities, and Christian organizations. People who were offered the role of informant gave this information to members of the Protestant community.

Ali Kalkandelen, the founding pastor of the Eurasia Protestant Communities Foundation and the president of Turkey's Association of Protestant Churches, told *Providence*:

Protestant Christians have a legal existence problem. Turkish Protestant churches do not have a legal identity in the law. This situation creates many problems about our places of worship, our right to worship, religious workers, burial places, and proper representation in the protocols at government institutions, among others.

Protestant places of worship are still not legally recognized and accepted in Turkey. All our attempts and efforts for official recognition have been in vain so far. In addition, nearly 70 foreign nationals with their families and approximately 10 Turkish citizens married to foreign nationals have been deported or face deportation on the grounds that they are engaged in missionary work, have founded a church, practice Christianity, or pose a "threat to national security." While we find these accusations to be completely incomprehensible, malicious, and unacceptable, we also see them as an attempt to weaken the church.

In addition to this, there is a general misperception in society against the Protestant Christians that sees us as traitors, collaborators, sellout Turks, and enemies of religion, nation, and culture.

Pastor Kalkandelen says that “deliberate and massive pollution of disinformation in the media” is largely behind this misunderstanding. He elaborated:

Some written and visual media outlets make publications that spread this propaganda. Contents that call us or our places of worship names such as churches under the stairs, shop churches, apartment churches, sold out Turks, collaborators with foreign powers, or Turkish extensions of the crusaders are used by some media as a tool to increase their circulation. Publishing such content and showing our faith and worship in such hateful and untrue fashion is seen as “a national and spiritual value” by some media outlets. This kind of perspective unfortunately finds some approval among the general population. The public sees the Protestant Churches the way the media portrays us to be. As a result, such propaganda targeting and slandering our faith and churches has led to some protests, verbal taunts, the breaking of the signs, glasses, or crosses of our places of worship, and disrespectful writings on our church walls. Moreover, some Christians who have been actively serving in the church for years are still on death lists. State security measures have been taken to protect them.

Kalkandelen added:

Our most urgent need is the acceptance of the Protestant churches by Turkey on a legal basis with a sound definition and the provision of their representation rights as a legal entity. We also need the annulment of the court decisions against the Protestants, who are seen as a threat to Turkey’s national security and who have been deported or are about to be deported.

Soner Tufan, a member of the Board of the Association of Protestant Churches and its press and public relations officer, told *Providence*:

Having a legal entity would be a requirement that would meet most of the needs. Since we do not have a legal personality, we cannot build a church building, we cannot go beyond [the mandatory religious classes](#) at schools. We cannot create a solution to the issue of raising clergy. The fact that we as Protestant churches are not recognized as Turkish Christians deprives us of these rights.

If you ask municipal and government officials about Protestant Christians, they will say, “Of course, they have rights!” However, despite all our efforts, there is not a single building in Turkey which is registered as a Protestant church in the land registry with a signature of a governor and a district governor, nor a church which has legal personality in the last 20 years.

For comparison, there are [around 85,000 mosques](#) across Turkey that operate as part of the state-run Presidency of Religious Affairs ([Diyamet](#)).

Meanwhile, Turkey has accelerated [its campaign](#) of [opening mosques](#) across the world, including in Europe, Asia, Africa, North America, and South America. Yet Turkey, which has a secular constitution, refuses to officially recognize the Protestant community, or to allow them to operate their own churches and freely share their faith with fellow citizens. At the same time, Turkey [has converted](#) many historic churches and monasteries into mosques, stables, warehouses, mess halls, ammunition stores, or private houses.

Turkey's government officials falsely call democratic Western nations that respect religious liberty "Islamophobic," but their own Christianophobia is seismic in scale.

Photo:Blue Mosque Istanbul cap-voyage.com
