

...that Turkey's strict adherence to secularism has lead to religious freedom violations for Muslims and non-Muslims alike?

Turkey imported and enshrined the French concept of secularism, or *laïcité*, into its constitution on February 5, 1937. Often described as freedom *from* religion, Turkey's application of *laïcité* requires that religion be absent from all governmental affairs, while at the same time giving the government strict control over the practice of religion.

After the establishment of the Turkish Republic following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, solidifying secularism became a driving principal of the Republic. This principle led the government to seek to control or limit all religions in the public sphere, including in government offices, schools, and houses of worship.

Eighty plus years later, Turkey's longstanding application of *laïcité* has detrimentally impacted all religious communities, including the Sunni majority, the Alevi community, and smaller minority communities such as the Greek Orthodox, Syriac, Armenian, Roman Catholics and Jewish communities.

Because of this approach to secularism, no religious community has full legal status, which hinders their right to train clergy, offer religious education, or own and maintain places of worship. The Turkish government created the Directorate for Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) to regulate Muslim communities and the Directorate for Foundations (

Vakıflar

) to regulate all non-Muslim communities. The

Vakıflar

requires all property be registered to a “community foundation” or “community association” rather than the religious community directly.

In addition, the government nationalized all schools of higher education, including the Greek Orthodox Theological School of Halki.

Muslim women also have been prohibited from wearing headscarves in government offices or schools.

The application of laïcité and Turkey’s strict control of religion has impacted negatively the ability of all religious communities to practice their faith and worship, and has hindered the communities’ ability to promulgate their religion and pass on their religious properties to future generations. However, after nearly 80 years of comprehensive state control of religious communities, Turkey has begun to reverse many of the longstanding impediments to full freedom of religion and belief. The country has instituted new policies that allow religious communities to gain control over their properties, lifted the headscarf ban in universities and in courts of law, and currently is drafting a new constitution that may allow for greater human rights and respect for religious freedom.

