

Testimony to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom
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Thank you for inviting me to share my views on the state of religious freedom in Turkey, my country.

If I were to speak about the state of freedom in Turkey in general, I would say that the gravest concern is freedom of speech. That is evident in the prosecution of more than 60 thousand people in the past five years for violating the country's most severe blasphemy law: Not insulting God, or a prophet, but "insulting the president."

Regarding religious freedom, the scene is not that dark, but not very bright either.

For, on the one hand, Turkey's religious minorities have their places of worship, some of which have been even restored by the current government — including the Grand Synagogue of Edirne or Bulgarian Orthodox St. Stephen Church in Istanbul. Even Istanbul's new airport now has a synagogue, serving Jewish passengers many of whom head to Israel. In the past several years, the Turkish government has also rightly returned some of the properties of non-Muslim communities that were confiscated decades ago.

On the other hand, Turkish authorities interfere in the autonomy of religious minorities, by not allowing them to hold elections for the administrative boards of their religious foundations. The Halki Seminary of the Ecumenical Patriarchate remains closed despite all the promises. Non-Sunni Muslims, especially the Alevis, rightly complain from the lack of recognition and support for their houses of worship, or the Sunni-oriented compulsory religion classes in public schools.

All such problems are carefully noted in the USCIRF Annual Report 2019, and I do not disagree with them. But allow me to present a political perspective regarding the complex dynamics at play here. Because the rights of minorities in Turkey largely depend on the political mood in the nation, less than assurances secured by law and institutions.

Many of the religious freedom limitations your report has noted are rooted in Turkey's almost century-long synthesis of an over-centralized state, monolithic nationalism and illiberal secularism.

When the Justice and Development Party, or the AKP, came to power in 2002, it promised to replace this status quo with a reformist program of freedom for all, including the AKP's own base —

Sunni conservatives, who also have suffered from discriminative measures of the state such as the bans on Islamic headscarves.

Then, for about a decade, the AKP government, in tandem with the European Union accession process, indeed realized significant reforms. Non-Muslims gained more access to government and also became more visible in public. It became possible, for the first time, to discuss what really happened to the Ottoman Armenians in the tragic year of 1915. Meanwhile with the so-called “Alevi opening,” the authorities at least began to hear the rightful demands of the Alevi organizations.

However, after its first decade in power, the AKP gradually devolved into something very different: A parochial, paranoid and authoritarian party which sees conspiracies by the West and its imagined fifth columns under every stone. This new combative mood ended the reformism of the early years and even reversed it in many aspects. The “Alevi opening” died out without any result. Ultimately, the AKP’s promise for freedom for all turned out to be freedom mainly only its own political base — the Sunni conservatives.

Yet even in the Sunni realm, there emerged a big crisis, as noted by the recent USCIRF report: The religious community headed by the US-based cleric Fethullah Gülen has been the target of a massive purge. But I must say that this is a complicated issue which needs some nuance.

The complication is that the Gülen Community, as described by various people who broke from the group, has both an overt and a covert side. While the former side is involved in legal, harmless activities such as education, charity or media, the covert side has followed a strategy of infiltrating of key state institutions — especially the police, the judiciary and the military — to gradually take over them. The AKP first considered this “state within the state” as its greatest ally against the old regime, only to regret later.

Today in Turkey, not just the government but also all opposition parties and most independent observers agree that this covert Gülen network is responsible for a series of crimes such as stealing central exam questions for bureaucratic jobs, illegal wiretapping, creating fake evidence to jail critics, and ultimately the failed coup attempt of July 2016. So, in my view, the Turkish government’s accusations against this covert side of the group, which involves Gülen himself, should be taken seriously.

However, by losing all nuance, especially after the bloody coup attempt, the same government has targeted anyone who is even loosely related with the group. So, mere journalists, academics or school teachers have been jailed for being “terrorist,” in what proved to be the most ferocious witch-

hunt in Turkish history. The purge grew in waves, as conspiracy theories turned into legal indictments, which wronged tens of thousands of innocent people, including Pastor Andrew Brunson. I believe the US government can help Turkey here by first acknowledging that there is a real case against the Gulenists, but also urging to deal with this issue — and all other legitimate security concerns — within the boundaries of rule of law.

In fact, on not just on religious freedom but in all other key components of liberal democracy, Western governments may still help Turkey by preserving their institutional ties with the country and seeking more dialogue with its officials. The alternative would be to push Turkey further away from the free world — to find new allies for itself, such as Russia and China. Some may argue that this geostrategic shift is already happening, but I see no wisdom in catalyzing it. Moreover, after the major electoral defeat the ruling party had in Istanbul last Sunday, I believe it is really too early, if not unfair, to write off Turkish democracy as a lost cause.