

TURKEY'S 3RD UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW (UPR) – 28th JANUARY 2020

Fact Sheet on report

Freedom of Religion and Religious Persecution in Turkey

Stakeholder submission by IAHRA Geneva (International Association for Human Rights Advocacy in Geneva), in cooperation with LAG (London Advocacy).

TURKEY DOES NOT KEEP ITS UPR PROMISES

In its previous UPR cycle Turkey endorsed the following recommendations on freedom of religion:

- Improve rights of the charitable foundations of the non-Muslim communities
- Open the Halki Seminary
- Return the assets of non-Muslim communities and foundations
- Review the characterization of missionary activities as a national threat in textbooks
- Recognize the status of cemevis, the Alevi prayer houses, as religious institutions.

Turkey kept none of its promises. In fact, the overall situation got worse in the last five years.

PRESSING ISSUES OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

1. **DEFAMATION LAWS:** Turkey's Criminal Code punishes denigration of religious values of the society. This ban is used against atheist or modernist critics of Islam.
2. **BANNING OF PRIVATE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS:** Only state opens religious education institutions in Turkey, and it opens only Sunni Muslim schools in the form of Imam Hatips or theology faculties.
3. **NO PLACE OF NON-MUSLIM PRAYER HOUSES:** Municipal planning regulations discriminate against Alevi and other non-Muslim minorities.
4. **ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: THE DIYANET:** Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) have full control over the mosques and has increased its outreach to state run schools and university dormitories. The Diyanet supports religious persecution with its Friday sermons and religious jurisprudential rulings.
5. **SECOND ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: THE IMAM HATIPS:** Imam Hatips give Sunni-Hanafi Muslim education. Their alumni are favoured in public positions and have become a recruitment pool for political Islamism.
6. **COMPULSORY RELIGIOUS EDUCATION:** All primary and secondary schools' students receive compulsory religious education in Turkey. The theoretical exemption of Jewish and Christian pupils is hard to implement and cause further discrimination. Alevi have to fight in courts to be exempt from these courses.
7. **RELIGIOUS SEMINARIES CLOSED:** The Greek Orthodox Halki Theological Seminary and the Armenian Apostolic Church's theological college in Üsküdar have been closed for half a century now.
8. **INTERVENTION IN PATRIARCHAL ELECTIONS:** The Istanbul Governor's office intervened in March 2017 in the election process of the next Armenian Patriarch. Only in July 2019 the Constitutional Court deemed this intervention as unconstitutional. The patriarchal election is yet to be done.
9. **HATRED OF MISSIONARY ACTIVITY AND CONVERSION:** Widespread hatred of missionary activity and conversion from Islam to any other religion and impunity of perpetrators of hate crimes and violence against missionaries and the clergy.
10. **SPILLOVER EFFECT OF PERSECUTION OF THE GULEN MOVEMENT:** Activities and concepts like "dialogue," "interfaith," "tolerance," "mutual respect," and "peaceful coexistence," that became known as Gulenist vocabulary are erased from the policies of the government and the public discourse.

ALEVIS

1. Alevis constitute a significant part of the Turkish population, with estimates ranging from 15 to 25 percent.
2. Cemevis, the Alevi places of worship are not officially recognized as places of worship and do not enjoy the official and societal privileges the mosques or churches enjoy.
3. Assimilation policies are applied at every level of education and public services to the Alevis. There had been reports of Alevi children being encouraged or forced into enrolling to the Imam-Hatip schools.
4. The Diyanet continues to build mosques to Alevi villages, or appoint imams to obsolete buildings in these villages.
5. After the thwarted coup attempt of 2016 radio and television stations popular among the Alevis were closed.
6. The Cami-Cemevi Project, a creative way of the Gulen Movement to bypass the lack of recognition of Alevi worshipping places is halted after the coup attempt.
7. The Houses of Alevis continue to be signed with graffiti of hatred. Even if these signs are made by children, as the Turkish authorities claim, this shows the level of Alevi hatred in the public discourse.

SUNNI VICTIMS

1. The Furkan Foundation, a Sunni religious and civil society group, have first had its events cancelled by local authorities, then saw their leader Alparslan Kurtul imprisoned and finally their foundation shuttered, and assets seized.
2. Anti-Capitalist Muslims and their speaker theologian Ihsan Eliacik's public speeches and fair participations were obstructed by government intervention and he was detained and interrogated on his activities. He was eventually given a sentence of 6 years 3 months in prison on charges of "and propaganda of a terrorist organization."
3. Adnan Oktar and members of his rather libertarian religious-cultic movement were arrested in 2018. The TV channel of the Oktar Group, A9, was also discontinued by the Higher Board of Radio and Television.

PERSECUTION OF THE GULEN MOVEMENT

1. The Movement declared a "non-Islamic, perverted sect," a "terrorist organization," and finally a "heretical party" [firak-ı dâlle] in August 2016.
2. The founder of the Movement, Mr Fethullah Gulen, declared a "fake imam," "fake Mahdi," and "exploiter of religion."
3. The Diyanet, religious authority of Turkey, followed an active policy of promoting their own designation of the Movement as heretic among Sunni scholars of the Muslim World.
4. The Turkish regime banned all books published by all publication houses run by the Movement; articles written by members of the Movement erased from digital encyclopaedias; MA and PhD thesis erased from the databases of Council of Higher Education; newspapers and religious magazines like Sizinti and Yeni Umit banned and digital archives erased.
5. As of November 2019, 559,064 people were investigated on alleged links to the Gulen Movement, 261,700 people were detained and 91,287 of them were arrested. As to 20 November 2019 there were 26,950 prisoners in Turkish jails charged with membership to the Gulen Movement.
6. Gulenist prisoners face denial of religious books, prayer mats, and communal prayers. There have been cases of forceful removal of headscarves of Gulenist female prisoners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Sign and ratify the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960) and The Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1995).
2. Accelerate the restitution processes for religious minorities and include Alevis and Baha'is to the restitution policies.
3. Repeal or reform all laws banning the establishment and operation of non-Muslim theological seminaries and religious schools.
4. Ensure due process is observed in the trials of the members of the Gulen Movement and abstain from any public statement that declares anybody as heretics and repeal all such previous official statements.