



Christians in Turkey face increased persecution - U.S. watchdog

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With the rise of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Islamist party, Turkey has slowly pulled away from its historic position as a bridge between East and West and increased its persecution of Christians, said an analysis for U.S. advocacy group International Christian Concern (ICC).

Last month, a U.S. commission on religious freedom held a congressional hearing about Turkey, during which several prominent analysts testified. Turkey has long been one of the most moderate Muslim-majority states, with significant religious minorities. But their numbers have declined sharply in recent decades, as many have faced increasing persecution.

Mustafa Akyol of the Cato Institute told Congress that Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) had gone from pushing pro-freedom reforms to becoming "a parochial, paranoid and authoritarian party which sees conspiracies by the West and its imagined fifth columns under every stone".

Lisel Hintz, assistant professor of international relations at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, said in today's Turkey there was a clear preference for the dominant segment of Turkish citizens. "To be a good Turk, you have to be not just a Muslim, but a Sunni Muslim," she said.

Writing for ICC, Colton Grellier, doctoral candidate at Liberty University School of Law, and Alyssa Heisey, an ICC intern, argued that officially secular Turkey showed tell-tale signs of wanting to become a Sunni Muslim state.

"While religious persecution there is more restrained than in other Sunni countries, Turkey is gradually moving further east," they said, falling more in line with its less tolerant neighbours.

They pointed to the case of Pastor Andrew Brunson, who also testified at the hearing. Turkey's government accused Brunson, who was then working as a missionary in the country, of spying and imprisoned him for two years. Yet the United Nations' Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded earlier this year that he had been persecuted because of his Christian faith and U.S. nationality.

Brunson is not the only Christian who has faced pressure from the state. "The Turkish government has accelerated the expulsion of Christian foreigners from Turkey," he said in the hearing. "Over 50 Protestant families have had to leave the country in recent years."

According to Brunson, this has led to increased concern from Turkish Christians. “After the foreigners are sent away, what will the government do to us?” Brunson said they had wondered. He predicted that “the accelerated deportation of church leaders is a sign of very dark times to come. Turkey is not there yet, but it is careening in the wrong direction.”

Turkish former parliamentarian Aykan Erdemir pointed out at the hearing that the Turkish government had used the government-funded restoration of Christian churches to gain control of who could perform services there. In addition, Erdoğan has proposed returning Hagia Sophia, the UNESCO-protected Byzantine cathedral that the Ottomans turned into a mosque and the Republic of Turkey made a museum, back into a place of Islamic worship.

“There is still a high degree of freedom for Christians relative to other Muslim countries in the region, but I am concerned that all the signs point to this changing very soon,” Brunson warned.