

Christians assess criticism of Turkey's earthquake efforts

Jayson Casper

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From delayed emergency response to poor construction, societal anger mounts at manmade failures both before and after natural disaster.

“During the earthquake, some serious mistakes were made,” said Melih Ekener, executive director of SAT-7 TURK, an evangelical satellite television ministry with offices in Istanbul. “But with the destruction of cities with large Christian populations, we are feeling more alone than ever.”

The mistakes came both before and after, he said. But the church paid a disproportionate price, as the ancient cities of Antakya, Iskenderun, and Diyarbakir collectively held the majority of Turkey's Christians—about 1 percent of the overall population of 85 million.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has pledged to rebuild affected areas. And with a local death toll of over 40,000 and one million people displaced across a 10-province region roughly the size of Switzerland, any government would struggle, Ekener said.

But nodding his head at a long list of reported failures both before and after the 7.8-magnitude earthquake and 7.5-magnitude aftershock, Ekener said trust in official institutions has been shaken.

Not all can be blamed on the government. The earthquake damaged the local airport and road systems, bottlenecking equipment necessary for rescue. Freezing temperatures, lack of electricity, and the sheer scale of devastation handicapped relief efforts.

But three or more days were lost due to poor coordination in the centralizing of effort.

“The system makes sense,” said Ekener. “But it does slow things down.”

One Turkish Christian, requesting anonymity due to the sensitivity of the situation, was blunt, warning there will be consequences for mistakes.

“Earthquakes don’t kill people; the shoddy works of men do,” said the senior ministry leader. “The government failed this test, and many who could have been saved died.”

Elections are scheduled for June but may be postponed.

Analysts remarked that after a 7.6 magnitude earthquake in 1999 killed 18,000 people in northwest Turkey, the army acted quickly to lead the emergency response. But given the nation’s long history of military coups, when the Islamist-tinged Justice and Development Party (AKP) of now-president Erdogan came to power in 2002 it established civilian control over the largely independent brass.

As an unintended consequence, the military, like everyone else, had to wait on the official Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD). And AFAD, critics remarked, is headed by a graduate of an Islamic seminary with no experience in the field.

“For years, the AKP has packed almost every institution in the country with their staunch loyalists, often purging people with real know-how and expertise,” said Mustafa Akyol, a Turkish senior fellow at the Cato Institute’s Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity and an expert in Islam and public policy. “The result has been a huge loss of quality and competence.”

Following a 2016 coup attempt, the government removed tens of thousands of civil servants, many connected to a rival Islamic movement accused of conspiracy. Other civil society organizations have also been suppressed, and Akyol said an effective, national effort against disasters is impossible in a climate of suspicion against domestic enemies.

Drawing no connection, an AFAD internal report described deficiencies in personnel and earthquake preparedness. It still consisted of more than 10,000 employees.

Erdogan acknowledged “shortcomings” in the earthquake response, pledging to care for every affected citizen. But he also blamed “dishonorable people” for spreading lies and rumors against the government.

Ekener said that after delays, overall coordination has been smooth.

But while the “after” errors have been tragic, critics point to a criminal “before.”

“They failed in this as they failed in every other issue,” stated Kemal Kilicdaroglu, president of the opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP). “This ruling party has not prepared the country for an earthquake for 20 years.”

It is not quite true.

The AKP was elected after a wave of anger at the 1999 disaster, and worked with the European Union on substantial reforms. These included building codes demanding use of high-quality concrete and steel bars, as well as the creation of agencies to monitor compliance.

An additional earthquake tax has raised an estimated \$36 billion since 1999.

But this is listed as “general revenue” in the national budget, without clear specification of use. Former officials stated it has been spent on infrastructure and the repayment of international loans. And CHP figures identify a “Gang of Five” political allies of the AKP whose companies have received 24 percent of government contracts in the last five years.

“You have been collecting earthquake tax to protect people for years,” stated Adnan Cakiroglu of the opposition Good Party. “Ten provinces are dying, and you are still waiting for financial aid.”

Millions of dollars more have been raised through “construction amnesties” that excuse the failure to bring structures up to code. In the affected area, 75,000 buildings received such license.

But many other buildings collapsed, despite their certificates of approval. Expert testimony stated that the quake, though massive, would have left properly constructed apartments standing. A BBC report exposed three specific cases in Malatya, Iskenderun, and Antakya.

Following the 2011 earthquake in Haiti, a study in the academic journal Nature recalculated that over the previous 30 years, 83 percent of earthquake deaths occurred in nations that were “anomalously corrupt,” using Transparency International’s ratings. In its 2022 report listing from clean to crooked, Turkey ranks 101 out of 180 countries and has polled consistently downward since 2013.

“Look at the debris—collapsed columns were filled with sponge-like substances,” said Ekener. “It doesn’t make any sense, but much is coming to light.”

Perhaps it will prevent similar tragedy in Istanbul. The chairman of Turkey’s Chamber of Geological Engineers warned that a minimum magnitude 7.0 earthquake is “expected” to hit the city in the near future. The mayor, meanwhile, counted 90,000 buildings at high-risk status, with another 170,000 also vulnerable.

It is too late for the southeast. Visiting the area, Erdogan appropriated the equivalent of \$530 per affected household, guaranteed rent payments for homeless families, and pledged to rebuild the ruined cities within one year.

“Our geologists say this speed is not the solution,” said Ekener, referencing the known fault lines. “But it doesn’t seem like they will be listened to.”

Even understandable reactions and stop-gap solutions are coming under criticism. Erdogan decreed that all universities will move to online education so that dormitories can receive the displaced.

Ekener, also a drama professor at Marmara University, lamented the long-term impact—following COVID—from a cadre of medical and engineering students now three years without practical laboratory experience.

The government has also gone after the contractors. More than 100 arrest warrants have been issued, with at least four arrests so far. One accused, detained while trying to leave the country, said his buildings were properly certified.

“What will happen if they confess to paying bribes?” asked Ekener. “We are very curious to see what will unfold.”

And the postponement of elections, while necessary, sparks his concern. The affected area voted 55 percent for Erdogan in 2018, but its rural and religiously conservative constituency has expressed much anger at the earthquake response.

The constitution allows postponement of up to one year, but only in the case of war. An AKP official stated such documents are not “sacred texts.”

Their own holy book makes many Turkish Protestants uncomfortable with this criticism, Ekener said. Every church prays faithfully for the president, and the great majority nurture a culture of spiritual—rather than political—focus. And for those in the pews, the strident condemnation from opposition politicians makes them appear no different from those in charge.

The Association of Protestant Churches (TeK) issued a request to all international volunteers. The church is sensitive to avoid holding to a specific political identity. It is extremely important, it stated, not to make any public critique that risks implying the church is partisan.

“We say, ‘It is not a solution to blame anyone,’” Ekener said. “The earthquake will not change this attitude.”

But the anonymous ministry leader thinks it may. On social media, he sees many Christians voice their complaint, no different than the average Turkish citizen. What keeps him—and others—from speaking out publicly is fear.

“It is hard to be courageous in Turkey, especially if you are part of a minority group,” he said. “They can ruin your life.”

Ekener takes refuge not only in God, but in his nation’s secular system.

Unlike previous governments, he said, the AKP follows constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and generally leaves the churches alone. TeK even publishes a yearly report on religious freedom violations.

They are not afraid their rights will be taken away.

“We are a democratic country, and I criticize my government as a public citizen, not from my Christian faith,” said Ekener. “Some people talk, some don’t.”