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Association of Protestant
Churches (Turkey)

2017 Human Rights Violations Report

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Association of
Protestant Churches (Turkey)

2017
Human Rights Violations Report



The “Protestant Churches Association” had its beginnings in 1989 with the meeting of church leaders as a ‘Representative Council’ which turned into the ‘Alliance of Protestant Churches’ and finally became an official association January 23, 2009.

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Introduction and Summary

The Turkish Protestant community is made up of over 150 small and large fellowships, a majority are found in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir.

The Protestant fellowships have established 5 religious foundations, 3 foundation representative branches, 36 church associations and over 30 representative branches tied to those associations. The remaining fellowships have no legal entity status. Approximately 25 of them are house fellowships. Approximately 10 churches meet in historical church buildings. The rest use public places for worship but they are congregations that do not possess legal status.

The Protestant community does not have capability within the Turkish National Education system to train its own religious personnel. In most cases, the Protestant community trains its own religious leaders. A small percentage obtain education at theological schools abroad. Some gain necessary knowledge and skills for pastoral leadership through seminars given domestically. Because there are not enough local Protestant leaders some church's spiritual leadership is done by foreign pastors.

The Protestant community does not have a hierarchical or centralized structure. Every local church acts independently. However, church pastors began meeting together in the late 80's for the purpose of unity, solidarity and partnership between the Protestant churches. In the mid 90's this unity gained structural momentum, so they formed The Alliance of Protestant Churches, also known as TeK (Representative Committee). Due to the limitations in the old association laws, TeK continued to have problems as a representative body before the official government institutions in Turkey. As a result of the change in the Law of Associations, TeK chose to become an association. The Association of Protestant Churches was officially formed on Jan. 23, 2009. At this time the Association of Protestant Churches acts as the Turkish Protestant community's representative and institution for unity.

Since 2007 the Association of Protestant Church has published these monitoring reports which explain the Protestant community's situation in Turkey.¹ The Association of Protestant Churches attaches importance to the freedom of religion and belief and makes the effort to ensure these freedoms becomes a reality for everyone, everywhere. In order to serve this purpose and not a political one, the Association desires to prepare and distribute this annual monitoring report that describes the Protestant community's situation.

The freedom of religion and belief, as one of the basic rights found in national and international laws, as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is secured under national and international laws and constitutional authority in our country. However, from the perspective of the Protestant community some basic problems still continued in 2017. For the purpose of contributing to the development of freedom of belief in Turkey, this report has been prepared to present some of the experiences and problems as well as positive developments that have been experienced in 2017 by the Protestant community in the area of religious freedom.² The situation in 2017 can be briefly summarized as follows:

- In 2017 hate crimes committed against Protestant Christians continued, as well as physical attacks against Protestants and churches.
- Problems continued to be faced with regard to requests to establish a place of worship, to continue using a facility for worship, and to use an existing church building.
- During the Christmas and New Year season, there was some apprehension because of billboard and poster notices with hate filled slogans, brochures distributed on the street containing hate language, newspaper articles and television programs which were directed at Christmas and New Year celebrations.

¹http://www.Protestankiliseler.org/?page_id=638

²Toplumumuz, herkes için inanç özgürlüğünü savunmaktadır. Bu hak inanmama özgürlüğünü de içermektedir.

- There was an increase in hate speech directed toward Christians in some national media outlets, in local media and in social media. In addition, there was an increased coupling together of churches and terror organizations in news reports. Some churches became the direct subject of a news report and this raised concern in those churches and among their members.
- The trend for gaining legal status for the Protestant community through establishing associations continued in 2017. However, even though the establishment of associations has helped congregations gain legal status, it has not provided a complete solution. There was an increased pressure on church associations in 2017.
- There was no movement forward in 2017 in regards to protecting the rights of Christians to train their own religious workers. Some foreign church leaders were deported, were denied entry back into Turkey or faced problems with getting their residence permits renewed. A foreign church leader in Izmir remains incarcerated on the grounds of being a member of the FETÖ/PDY terror organization
- the incident was reported to the police. The suspects were released by the court pending their trial on December 5, 2017. At their trial they apologized and said they were sorry for the incident. The church withdrew its complaint.
- On August 6, 2017, the leader of a civil organization in Balıkesir demanded that the sign of the Balıkesir Church be pulled down. The complaint against this individual was retracted after talking with him and receiving his apology.
- On November 23, 2017, the window of the Malatya Kurtulus Church office was broken by someone. The perpetrator was shortly apprehended after the church informed the security forces. After the perpetrator's family apologized, paid for the repair of the window and a report received that the person in question was mentally unstable, the complaint was withdrawn.
- On November 27, 2017, the sign of the Bahçelievler Lutuf Church was stolen. The incident was reported to the security forces. Legal proceedings are ongoing.
- On December 5, 2017, the windows of the Istanbul Kadıköy International Church were broken by someone. After reporting the incident to the security forces, the perpetrator was quickly apprehended. The attacker was subsequently released by the prosecutor. The legal process continues.
- On December 7, 2017, a death threat was left under the Balıkesir Church door. The threat was directed at the church leader and the assistant working at the church. The issue was reported to the security forces and the prosecutor. After this threat was given, the assistant's home windows were broken. The security forces have increased their security precautions. The investigation continues.
- During 2017 Christmas and New Year season, there were various anti-Christmas and anti-New Year campaigns carried out. Antagonistic posters were hung on the streets, brochures were distributed, and the participation in these campaigns by various public institutions created an intense

Hate Crimes and Speech, Verbal and Physical Attacks

- On March 27, 2017, a threatening letter was sent to Radio Shema, a radio station that broadcasts Christian programming in Ankara. The incident was reported to security forces and the protective measures for the director of the radio and the station itself were increased.
- On July 20, 2017, a New Testament was burned in front of the Izmir Yeni Dogus church and the burned New Testament left at the church's door. The incident was reported to the security forces but, since the church camera system was broken, the perpetrator or perpetrators of this attack were not able to be identified.
- On the night of July 28, 2017, an Islamic slogan was written on the wall of the Balıkesir Church. Suspicious individuals were quickly caught when

atmosphere of hate. These campaigns created apprehension during the various Christmas celebrations.

Problems Related to Places of Worship

Problems with regard to establishing a place of worship or continuing to use an established place of worship, an important part of freedom of religion and belief, continued and increased in 2017 in comparison to previous years.

Protestant communities try to overcome this issue by establishing an association or gaining representative status with an existing association or religious foundation. However, in this case, meeting places are not recognized as a place of worship, but as the locale for the association. Thus, they cannot make use of the advantages given to an officially recognized place of worship

- On August 25, 2017, Istanbul Bahcelievler Lutuf Church, was in the process of renovating an additional rented meeting room, when the Bahcelievler Municipality sealed the room without giving any explanation or documentation. During discussions with municipal authorities, it was verbally indicated that they would not permit a church or a church association to be there. However, if the intent to establish a church was abandoned, they would remove the seal. After remaining sealed for about a month, in order to protect the landlord from unfair treatment through this process, the church notified the city that the room would not be used as a church meeting place. After this, the room was opened by municipal crews. The idea of establishing a church association and forming a new meeting place has been abandoned.
- On September 5, 2017, the Izmir Cigli Church, which is associated with the Isevi Topluluklar Association, had its sign removed, was sealed and closed by the Izmir Cigli Municipality in response to negative press coverage concerning the church as well as the word “church” being written on its sign. The result of talks with the municipality was that the church, which had remained closed for one week, would be reopened with the removal of the

“church” sign and that the place was to be used as an association. The church’s activities continue at this place.

- On October 25, 2017, the Izmir Karataş Church, which is associated with the Isevi Topluluklar Association, was going to be closed by the Izmir Konak Municipality because of negative press coverage and the word “church” being written on their sign. But when informed that the place was an association and as a result of the removing of the “church” sign, the building was not closed and no negative incident occurred.
- On November 3, 2017 despite having gone through a proper procedure to obtain a permit, just before the Samsun Protestant Church opened their new ministry center, the building was sealed by the Atakum Municipality. After discussions the building was unsealed, the official procedures were completed, and the building was opened for use by the Samsun Protestant Church.
- The Diyarbakir Protestant Church, other churches within the Diyarbakir Sur district, and 6300 other parcels of land were declared national property by a Cabinet decision announced in the Official Newspaper on March 25, 2016. Legal proceedings against this decision have begun. Officials have told the church leaders during this period that the church will be returned to the owners. However, the Diyarbakir Protestant Church had recently obtained the building next to the church along with 3 parcels of land they use for a garden; their concern over that real estate continues as does the legal proceedings associated with them. On Feb 15, 2017, the 6. Section of the Department of the State Council decided to block the outworking of the decision to nationalize church buildings. The demand to stop the nationalizing of the church’s annex and garden was rejected however. This decision created great frustration. The Diyarbakir Protestant community is still using their church building and worship continues there.

Place of worship issues continue to be a serious problem. The Protestant community consisting of over 150 congregations has only ten official church buildings, with most of them being historical buildings.

The Right to Propagate Religion

After the attempted coup on July 15, 2016 the Association of Protestant Churches sent a letter to all the Protestant fellowships. In order to avoid provocation or give an opportunity for people to create a provocation during this sensitive time for our country, the letter stated that it would be good and beneficial to not do evangelism or hand out brochures in public areas. Outside of a few exceptions, the Protestant churches have continued to abide by this request.

Problems Faced in Education and Compulsory Religious Class

During 2017 there has been no reported case of any negative incident with regard to Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge classes (RCMK) and with the right of exemption from this class. The Right of Exemption has been applied based on the decision by Religious Education General Directorate's Education and Learning Higher Board on July 9, 1990. The decision's first article reads: *"It has been decided that those Turkish citizens of Christian and Jewish persuasion who are receiving education in primary and middle schools outside of minority schools who can document that they are members of those religions are not required to attend Religious, Culture and Moral Knowledge classes. If they want to participate in those classes a written request is required from their parents."*

In 2017 in İzmir, Ankara and İstanbul some Protestant children were harassed due to their faith by their school mates whom we will call 'peer bullies.' The problems were handled through conversations with school authorities and respective parents.

The Problem of Training Religious Leaders

In 2017, the current laws in Turkey still do not allow the training of religious leaders and the opening of religious training schools to teach religious communities in any way. Yet the right to train and develop religious leaders is a foundation stone of the freedom of religion and faith. The Protestant community presently solves this issue by providing apprentice training, giving seminars within Turkey, sending students abroad or using the support of foreign church leaders.

In 2017, there were cases in which foreign religious workers and church members were deported, denied entry into Turkey, refused residence permits, or denied entry visas.

– On March 25, 2017 the South Korean pastor of the İzmir Karsiyaka Protestant Church, Shinhyung Kang, was fined as an illegal religious worker and was deported. Pastor Shinhyung Kang had lived and served as pastor in Turkey for almost 9 years.

In 2017, even though they were not pastors, Protestant foreign church members from İstanbul, Mersin, Gaziantep, Trabzon, İzmir, Erzurum, Bursa and other cities were deported or told to leave the country within 10 days after their residence permits were not renewed. There were several cases like these, but people involved did not want to be included in the report or we were unable to obtain solid information regarding them. In the past several years we have often run across similar operations.

The pastor of the İzmir Dirilis Church, Andrew Brunson, was incarcerated October 2016 on the charge of being a member of the FETÖ/PDY terror organization and remains in jail today. There has been no legal indictment prepared and the decision to keep his folder confidential remains in effect.

These incidents have caused great concern among foreign church members and leaders. For this reason, some have left, and many continue to leave Turkey on their own volition.

Legal Entity / Right to Organize

The Legal Entity problem is a problem for all religious groups as well as minority groups in Turkey. In 2017, the Protestant community has mostly tried to solve this issue by establishing associations or becoming a representative of an already existing association. As of 2017, members of the Protestant community have established 5 religious foundations, 3 foundation representative branches, 36 church associations and over 30 representative branches connected to these associations. This move towards forming associations continues. However, associations are not accepted as a "church" or a "place of worship." The problem of a religious congregation

becoming a legal entity has not been completely solved. The present legal path does not allow for a congregation to obtain a legal identity as a “religious congregation.” In addition, for small churches, the present “association formation” path appears complex and hard to implement. Small congregations continue to lack the means to become an association and a legal entity. This problem is trying to be resolved through forming church association representative branches.

In 2017, churches began to discuss the establishment of religious foundations and two churches applied to become foundations. If these applications receive positive answers it is expected that many other churches would apply for religious foundation status.

A fine for illegally employing someone was given to Izmir Bornova Protestant Church Association on March 3, 2017, for illegally employing South Korean Shinhyung Kang who voluntarily served as the Izmir Karsiyaka representative. The fine was protested. The legal process is continuing.

The Kilise Association which works under the name Istanbul Cayir Kardesligi had an official announcement pronounced against them from the Association Directorate as a result of its routine inspection. Along with some of the association’s other deficiencies, it was stated ‘these activities must cease, because Sunday worship meetings were being held and Turkish and Korean New Testaments were found at the center. If these activities do not cease, then the association would be forbidden from all activity.’ This document caused great concern for the Protestant Community. The shortcomings discovered during the inspection were remedied and an application to the Association Directorate was made within the legal time limit. The process is ongoing.

Obligatory Declaration of Faith

The new identity cards that have begun to be distributed in 2017 do not have a section for religious affiliation but instead have a chip that will minimize the risk of discrimination. This is regarded as a very positive step. However, the complete removal of the religion section from documents simply at the verbal request of people is requested. While it is possible to

be considered exempt from obligatory religion classes by showing a photocopy of an identity document, how this exemption will be provided through the new identity cards remains unclear.

Discrimination

In 2017, some Protestant community members who work as public officials in Izmir, Istanbul and Diyarbakir were told that because they were Christians and missionaries that their work contracts would not be renewed. Some began legal proceedings. No other details are recorded here because they did not want their names included in this report.

Media

In 2017, a serious increase of negative local press coverage against churches and their members was noted. Because these publications were similar to publications made just before the 2007 Malatya Zirve Publishing House Massacre, these new publications have created serious concern and apprehension among the churches mentioned in the publication.

Publications were observed inciting the public by connecting churches with terror organizations or foreign countries. In particular this happened in Izmir, Balikesir, Samsun and Van. Some of these had legal proceedings begun against them but these complaints were rejected by the court on the basis of freedom of the press.

Where inciting news occurred, it was noted that there was an increase in attacks along with administrative actions against churches. In addition, some public officials declared that they were moved to action as a result of the news in the press.

Dialogue

In 2017, Protestant community or church representatives were not invited to meetings of religious groups organized by the government or by official organizations.

During 2017, police security forces have continued dialogue with churches about security issues, carrying out security precautions in a way that did not disturb or abuse members and increasing security precautions resulting in the freedom of the Protestant community to worship and celebrate without incident.

The Protestant community continues to attach great importance to the development of relationships with public institutions, especially the government, the Parliament and municipalities

Recommendations

- Government or public institution dialogue with the Protestant community on issues that involve us would go a long way toward overcoming prejudice and solving problems. Those experiences that have been lived out show that when the channels of communication are open, many problems are quickly solved.
- It is saddening that hate crimes and intolerance against Christians continued in 2017. Especially in regard to crimes where complaints have been registered, it is important that information about the ongoing process be given to the victims and to the public.
- The problem of establishing places of worship for the Protestant community which does not have a historical church building has been a problem for years and has not been solved. This is considered a basic right of religious expression. There need to be immediate steps taken by local and central authorities on this issue. Christians need to have the opportunity to open small places of worship made available to them, similar to the masjid concept. Municipalities, the Ministry of Culture and other government institutions that own church buildings but use them for other purposes should at least allow church congregations to use the buildings for Sunday or holiday worship services.
- In light of the problems some church associations have seen, the rights to worship and propagate religion, in particular, need to be made more secure.

- The door to establishing religious foundations needs to be opened as another way for churches to achieve legal status.
- Within the framework of human rights education, respective public officials should be instructed in freedom of religion and conscience issues.
- In light of the possibility of stigmatization and social pressure faced by Christian families and students, the Ministry of Education is expected to proactively inform schools regarding non-Muslims' rights in schools and classrooms, as well as the issue of exemption from religion classes without waiting for the families to complain. A culture of living together and showing respect for faiths needs to be developed beyond wishful thoughts, with further steps taken and inspection of its application.
- Central and local government officials, especially through the Ministry of Education, need to actively place on the agenda and encourage the idea of a shared culture where understanding is shown to people of other religions and recognition that these people are citizens of the Republic of Turkey who possess the same rights.
- Within the framework of freedom of expression and press, there needs to be an effective and rapid oversight mechanism established with regard to the intolerance which occurs in the media and which can deal with visual and written publications which use hate speech, inciteful rhetoric and prejudice. Justice offices need to start official actions against hate crimes and speech without needing an official complaint to be filed.

With our respect and regards,
Association of Protestant Churches

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