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TURKEY: What chance for religious freedom in Turkey's elections?

By Otmar Oehring,

Turkey is due to hold parliamentary elections on 22 July, which will have a crucial impact on the presidential election due in autumn. Both elections will strongly influence the chances of greater freedom of thought, conscience and belief, Otmar Oehring of the German Catholic charity Missio notes. Turkish religious minorities Forum 18 News Service has spoken to are highly concerned about the outcome of the elections. For, as Dr Oehring observes in this personal commentary for Forum 18, Turks who want to see genuine freedom of thought, conscience and religion have little expectation that either the parliamentary or presidential election will bring any improvement. No political party with any chance of gaining real power wants either to tackle the dangerous media intolerance of religious minorities or to take the dramatic changes necessary to usher in genuine religious freedom.

No Turkish presidential candidate has been found who is acceptable to both parliament and the "deep state," the nationalist circles in the army, police, National Intelligence Organisation (MIT) secret police and state administration which regard themselves as the custodians of the Atatürkist legacy. Turkey is now due to hold parliamentary elections on 22 July, which may have crucial impact on the presidential election. A presidential election is due in autumn 2007, but no firm date for this has been set. At the time of the failed presidential election earlier this year, debate was fierce on what role Islam should play in the state. This debate remains unresolved, with both sides as far apart as ever.

Politicians have been preoccupied with the political crisis over the failure of parliament and the "deep state" to agree a new president, leaving President Ahmet Necdet Sezer to continue until a new candidate is agreed, most probably in September. No senior politicians have shown any interest in granting greater freedom of thought, conscience and belief to non-Muslim religious minorities. Debate has instead focused on whether the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) is a party in line with Turkey's interpretation of secularism.

Religious minorities face increasing threats of physical violence. Murders of religious minority leaders have been increasing – one Catholic priest in 2006 (see F18News 26 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=817) and three Protestants in April 2007. Turkish Christians have told Forum 18 that a key factor in these murders is the overt intolerance of non-Muslim minorities promoted by the media – and that unless this is tackled, more murders will take place. Politicians have made no serious attempt to tackle this serious threat to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (see F18News 10 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=990).

The one major religious minority that has not suffered violence or been excluded from the political process are the Alevi Muslims, who make up about 20 per cent of the population. However, they have faced discrimination over recent years and their right to be accepted as a religious community independent of the state-run Sunni Muslim majority community has never been accepted by the Turkish state (see F18News 12 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=670 and 26 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=817).

Several political parties of differing views are trying to recruit Alevis as candidates in the forthcoming election. The governing AKP has tried to entice leading members of the Cem Foundation, the Alevi body closest to the government, to become candidates. Most of the main parties view the Alevis not as a religious minority whose right to religious freedom should be respected, but as a source of votes.

The optimism that many in Turkey and Europe had in 2006 and earlier that the political establishment was ready to begin tackling the discrimination against non-Muslim minorities has disappeared (see F18News 18 January 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=901). Why has nothing happened?

It could be because of the election campaign – no-one has the time or the interest to promote the rights of people in religious minorities. Even AKP politicians, who might be in favour of EU accession despite the freedoms for non-Muslim communities this may bring, see EU accession – if it happens – as taking place in the distant future. During the election campaign the AKP has behaved as nationalistically as other parties, so it will not commit itself to doing anything for non-Muslim minorities. These are seen

by many Turks – and are depicted in the mass media - as traitors or as alien people in Turkey.

Religious minorities Forum 18 has spoken to are highly concerned about what the outcome of the parliamentary elections will be – and about who will also take over as President. This is because the outcome of the elections will be a major factor in determining the chances of greater freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Turkey. Opinion polls currently put the AKP ahead of the other parties. Indeed, all the major parties likely to get seats in the new parliament are nationalistic, with varying levels of hostility to non-Muslims.

If the AKP wins the parliamentary elections, this could mean that it held two-thirds of seats in parliament, which would give it the power to pass changes to the Constitution in an Islamist direction. Whoever becomes the President might veto these changes, which makes the election of a new President another major factor in determining the chances of greater freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Turkey.

The way the new President will be elected has proved highly controversial. According to the law passed by parliament with AKP backing on 31 May 2007, this should be by popular vote but President Sezer rejected this. With parliament and president at a stand-off, the issue is now to be put to a referendum, though no date has been set. If the AKP wins the parliamentary elections, they will probably present Abdullah Gül again as their candidate for President. If an AKP candidate is elected President, this would allow the AKP to introduce constitutional changes, in the knowledge that an AKP President would not veto them. Nobody however knows what the army and wider "deep state" would do, if that happened.

The "deep state" has a well-known commitment to "defending" the Atatürkist "secularist" heritage, as it sees it. And in Turkey, "secularism" means Islam being a branch of the state and no other religious community – including Muslim minorities – having legal status as a religious community (see F18News 22 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=875).

When the army General Staff issued a statement in late April 2007 defending Turkey's "secular" system and describing itself as the "absolute defender of secularism" this was interpreted as a "cold coup". However, it was also a sign of its weakness – it seems the army no longer felt able to launch a real coup. The AKP government led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan merely carried on as before. It presents itself as no longer being afraid of anyone and ready to do what it wants without looking over its shoulder.

In reality, Erdogan has shown that he has heard the army's warning that it wants to decide on matters it considers vital for Turkey. On two occasions Erdogan stated that politicians would not oppose the army, if it decided to invade Iraq. After stating this for the first time, he denied saying it – but then said it again. Erdogan has also indicated that his fellow politicians would not oppose other decisions of the army leadership.

The mass demonstrations against the AKP in April and May 2007 did not necessarily show that large parts of the population wanted Turkey to become more open and democratic. Many of the demonstrators were supporters of rival parties, some of them just as nationalist in outlook as the AKP. Indeed, it seems the Republican People's Party (CHP) stirred up many of the protests. Party members see themselves as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's heirs, even if it is doubtful that he would recognise them as such.

Some of the protest organisers and demonstrators certainly did want Turkey to be less nationalist and more open and democratic, including the small minority who want Turkey to have genuine freedom of thought, conscience and belief. But those who demonstrated consisted of people who had no one unified goal: old Kemalists who are anti-EU and xenophobic to varying degrees; secularists who are afraid of any Islamist project; intellectuals who do not share a Kemalist worldview; anti-AKP and anti-Islamist Westernisers.

Turkey's Western-oriented intellectuals think that if Turkey continues with negotiations over EU accession, this will not only benefit them but will help promote democratic change. However, they are acutely aware that they are becoming an ever dwindling minority.

If the AKP does take over both the parliament and the presidency, it is still unknown how it will behave. Will it go down the Islamist road or carry on with the European project? It seems that Erdogan and his current foreign minister (and AKP presidential candidate) Abdullah Gül have both moved away from their Islamist background. Yet this still remains unknown. And even if the AKP does not take over the parliament and presidency, the majority of those who oppose the AKP are – apart from the true democrats - mainly xenophobic nationalists.

If other parties come to power in the elections, the already tight controls and restrictions on religious minorities (and indeed on Islam) are highly unlikely to be loosened. The other parties are more nationalistic than the AKP and so even less willing to do anything to improve conditions for non-Muslim minorities. If they were willing to ease the restrictions on non-Muslim minorities, there would be pressure for them to also loosen the subordination in law and practice of Islam to the state (see F18News 22 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=875). These parties certainly do not want this.

The AKP has done little practical to help non-Muslim communities since it came to power (see F18News 18 January 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=901). But some in Turkey, including the head of the Armenian Church, Patriarch Mesrop, still see a new AKP government - theoretically committed to pursuing the EU application - as the only hope within Turkish

politics for even slight improvements.

Those Turks who want to see genuine freedom of thought, conscience and religion have little expectation that either the parliamentary or presidential election will bring any improvement. No political party with any chance of gaining real power wants either to tackle the dangerous media intolerance of religious minorities or to take the dramatic changes necessary to usher in genuine religious freedom. (END)

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More analyses and commentaries on religious freedom in Turkey can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=68>

A printer-friendly map of Turkey is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=mideast&Rootmap=turkey>

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