

The Republic of Turkey has traditionally identified minority citizens in terms of ethno/religious affiliation. Christian minority citizens traditionally have been of non-Turkish ethnic origin and during the Ottoman Empire, as well as later during the Republic period, they have accepted their minority status and lived according to the regulations of the Turkish governments. The rights of these ethnic minority Christians in the Turkish Republic are regulated by the Lausanne Treaty of 1923 which dates back to an era before ethnically Turkish Protestants began to emerge. Within some limits the Turkish state protected the ethnic minorities and allowed them autonomy in their own religious and cultural affairs. In the last quarter of the twentieth century a small number of ethnically Turkish citizens, members of the majority Muslim population, converted from Islam to Christianity and, consequently, they have found themselves outside the protection of this treaty.

Some, but by no means all, of these ethnically Turkish citizens who identify themselves as Protestants or Evangelicals officially changed their religious affiliation on their national identification cards. This official documentation of their change of faith was permitted, albeit often with some official opposition, by the secular state of Turkey. They refuse to call themselves “minority” citizens as ethnically they are not. We can say that ethnically they are not a minority, but in terms of religion they are. When identification of Turkish Protestants is strictly on a religious basis these citizens may be regarded as a miniscule minority in their country. They themselves estimate their numbers at three to five thousand. The major part of this community has formed a network under the title of the “Alliance of Protestant Churches of Turkey.” While this Alliance, under current regulations, has not been able to register as a legal entity, it has nevertheless been able to represent the Protestant Christian community before national and international bodies.

The major root of present difficulties lies in the fact that outside of the Sunni Muslim majority all religious groups, including the Protestants, find themselves in a legal no man’s land as there have been no laws regarding the legal identity of religious bodies. Therefore churches have been unable to own property, employ people, have bank accounts or conduct any activities on an official basis. Another root source of the problems has been the absence of laws regarding the opening of places of worship. However, in the last couple of years, through local and international pressure, there have been steps towards legal reforms in these areas as Turkey is seeking to comply with European Union standards. These reforms, theoretically, now allow for places of worship to be opened upon receiving the permission of the local authorities. Also changes in ‘Associations’ laws have now permitted Protestant churches to take steps towards being legal entities in the form of ‘associations’. However, churches and other religious communities have as yet to see the practical outworking of these changes. As a trial case a local Protestant church in Ankara applied to become an association and was ratified as such in March 2005. It remains to be seen how this will officially work.

With regard to places of worship, church buildings that have been in existence since the pre-

Republic era in Turkey remain zoned and protected as churches through international treaties. These buildings, even though many may stand empty today, are not easily available to the Turkish Protestants. (There are some exceptions of primarily Turkish Christian Protestant congregations meeting weekly for worship in ethnic minority Christian church buildings by permission from these minorities.) Therefore, ethnically Turkish Protestants have felt obliged to rent apartments or buildings not zoned for religious purposes in order to gather weekly for worship. Although there has been one exception to this recently, the great majority of those seeking to meet as congregations face a near impossible regulatory situation; and currently over twenty churches have ongoing court cases in this area including some at the European Court of Human Rights.

Turkish Protestants have been consistently granted their constitutional rights by the judicial branch of the Turkish government. However, laws, regulations or ordinances which would allow them to structure their church, are either non-existent or vague, thus leaving Protestant churches to the mercy or prejudices of the authorities.

Thankfully, ethnically Turkish Protestants do not have too many instances of human rights violations to report. However, from time to time and most intensively since the start of 2005, the popular media and other institutions, including some state officials and offices, such as the Directorate of Religious Affairs, has waged a relentless slander and blatant disinformation campaign particularly against the Protestant Christian community and any form of evangelism. An ugly picture is being continually presented of the Christian community, portraying them as a public enemy out to undermine Turkey. People have been incited to make attacks on Christian individuals and churches in a number of cities including Izmit, Samsun, and Ankara. Since these churches do not have a legal existence, individual Turkish Christians have been opened court cases against some of the perpetrating media. But this small community of faith is hard pressed to keep up with much less cope with this onslaught. Sadly, the government has turned a blind eye to all this recent increase in negative attitudes and attacks, seeming to be supportive of this 'Active Disinformation' campaign. Across the country numerous converts within Protestant churches are being harassed by members of the state security either directly or through visits to their relatives and neighbours. These tactics are aimed at denigrating and shaming these Christians among their family and acquaintances. The goal seems to be to try to install fear and separate the Protestant converts from their immediate social network.

These present activities against the Protestant community in Turkey are currently the greatest concern for this faith community. Hopefully in the coming months and years the legal process will be slowly but gradually ironed out. Until this happens, the struggle for these men, women and children will be to gain acceptance by their own government and their society as both sincere citizens as well as sincere Christians.