



2015 Human Rights Violations Report

Prepared by
Association of Protestant Churches

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Introduction and Summary

The Association of Protestant Churches¹ has published reports² since 2007 which explain the situation of Protestant churches in Turkey. The Association of Protestant Churches gives importance to the freedom of religion and belief for all people everywhere, and makes an effort to ensure this becomes reality. In order to serve this purpose, the Association desires to prepare and distribute this annual monitoring report which describes the Protestant community's situation. In particular, we hope this report will provide insight to discussions during this time when a new constitution is beginning to be considered.

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 continue in 2015. For the purpose of contributing to the development of freedom of belief in Turkey, this report presents some of the experiences and problems as well as positive developments that have been experienced in 2015 by the Protestant community in the area of religious freedom.³ 2015 can be summarized as follows:

- In 2015 hate crimes committed against Protestant Christians continued, as well as physical attacks against Protestants and churches. Serious and wide spread threats were faced through the internet and social media.
- Requests related to establishing a place of worship, to continuing to use a facility for worship, and to use an existing church building were met with problems
- The trend for gaining legal status through establishing associations continued in 2015. However even though the establishment of associations has helped congregations gain legal status, it has not provided a complete solution.
- There were still problems being experienced with compulsory participation in the Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge classes (RCMK) in schools along with the elective classes in Islamic religion recently added to the curriculum.
- The students excused from RCMK classes had their TEOG tests graded improperly. Even though the grades were corrected, the families had to deal with the stress and losing time in choosing a school.
- A textbook has been prepared and submitted to the Ministry of Education for Christian pupils as an elective course of Basic Religious Knowledge. Even though it has been approved by the Ministry of Education, there has not been any further progress at this point.

¹ As of Jan 2009, the "Alliance of Protestant Churches of Turkey", which started in 1989, became an association and has been carrying on its work under the title "Association of Protestant Churches".

² http://www.ProtestanKiliseler.org/?page_id=638

³ The report is limited to the Protestant community due to our limited resources and we are most familiar with this group. Our community defends the freedom of belief for everyone. This also includes the right to not believe.

- There was no movement forward in 2015 in the area of protecting the rights of Christians to train their own religious workers.
- The use of the religion blank of identity cards continued in 2015, thus continuing the risk of discrimination.
- The court case involving the killing of three Christians in Malatya in 2007 continues in an ambiguous manner.
- Several requests to hold Christmas celebrations open to the public and in the community faced problems. Several permissions that were granted the previous year were refused this year due to security issues.
- There was apprehension during Christmas and New Years because of hate filled content directed towards Christmas and New Year celebrations found in billboards, posters, newspaper reports and television programs. However, no obstacles or harassments occurred during closed celebrations.

Hate crimes, physical and verbal assaults

- On March 30th, 2015, a paper with the words "Turkish Islam Alliance" was posted on the door of the Balıkesir Protestant Church. On the empty building wall across the street from the church the words "God is one" were painted in 25 cm letters. The incident was reported to the Police Department, the police examined the paper and the writing but there has been no development in capturing the perpetrators.
- On May 16th, 2015, a man with a club came to the door of the Samsun Agape Church and uttered profanities and other insults. When he buzzed the doorbell, the police were notified. The police came, took the man's club and arrested him. The man came to the door one other time and then left. The church has not pressed charges. It is unknown whether any further action has been taken.
- The İskenderun İncil Church puts their brochures that explain the church activities and Christianity in an information box which resembles a post box. On June 27th, 2015, this information box was broken into and the brochures torn up by unknown people. The church did not register a formal complaint.
- On Sept 3, 2015, the pastor of the Izmir Torbalı Baptist Church, was shot at several times with a hunting rifle from the forest while he and his family worked in the field his family owns. On August 21, during the Friday sermon at the mosque in the village where the field is found, the use of hate speech from the loudspeaker, loud enough for the pastor to hear, led the pastor to believe that the shots fired were deliberate and he informed the police. Nothing resulted from the investigation. If the pastor is attacked again, the police were encouraged to do more searching. There has not been another incident.
- On Sept 10, 2015, a man came to the Ankara Batıkent Bereket Church, used profanity and other insults and struck the church leader. The incident was reported to the security forces who came and took the man to the local police station. The man was released with no official action taken. The man came to the church again after leaving the local police precinct and threatened the church leader in order to shut down the church. Police were again notified, but no one came. The pastor closed the church, went to the precinct and explained the incident. But no official action was

taken. The incident did not occur again.

- There was apprehension during Christmas and New Years because of hate filled content directed towards Christmas and New Year celebrations found in billboards, posters, newspaper reports and television programs. However, no obstacles or harassments occurred during closed celebrations.
- Beginning in the middle of August, many threatening messages were received that were directed at Protestant churches. These threats came via SMS, e-mail, internet sites and social media. Around Turkey the 15 churches and the approximately 20 church leaders listed below were exposed to these threats:
 - 1- Kadıköy International Protestant Church (KUT), İstanbul was threatened 3 separate times via SMS, e-mail, Facebook and through YouTube videos. The necessary complaints were registered.
 - 2- Zeytinburnu İsa Mesih Church, İstanbul received a threat via Facebook and faced an egg attack. While the congregation was inside, from time to time they heard chants of "Allahuekber" outside. The necessary complaints were registered.
 - 3- Diri Su Protestant Church, İstanbul was threatened via Facebook. The necessary complaints were registered.
 - 4- Antalya İncil Church: Was threatened via SMS. The necessary complaints were registered.
 - 5- Bursa Protestant Church: They were threatened via E-mail.
 - 6- Kayseri Protestant Church was threatened via telephone and SMS. The necessary complaints were registered
 - 7- İstanbul Yeni Umut Church was threatened via E-mail, Facebook and SMS. The necessary complaints were registered.
 - 8- Ankara Umut Church was threatened via SMS. A verbal notification was given to the security forces.
 - 9- İzmir Diriliş Church was threatened via Facebook. No complaint registered.
 - 10-Bakırköy Baptist Church, İstanbul was threatened via Facebook, e-mail and SMS. The necessary complaints were registered.
 - 11-Ümraniye Church, İstanbul was threatened vis SMS. The necessary complaints were registered.
 - 12-Tanrı Evi Baptist Church, İstanbul was threatened via Facebook. The necessary complaints were registered.
 - 13-Harikalar ve Belirtiler Church, İstanbul was threatened via SMS. No complaint was registered.
 - 14-Son Buyruk Church, İstanbul was threatened via Facebook. No complaint was registered.
 - 15-Müjde Church, İstanbul was threatened via SMS, E-mail and Facebook. No complaint was registered.

No development with regard to uncovering the perpetrators of these actions has occurred despite making known the content of the threats, the telephone numbers, email addresses, Facebook profiles and YouTube links of those making the threats in an official complaint and despite the topic being addressed on September 7th in a press release at the Parliament⁴ and a request for action. Access to the threatening video on YouTube is still possible.

Examples of the threatening content:

⁴ <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/tehdit-var-onlem-yok-30012630>

- 1- Date: Tue, 25 August 2015 20:38:11 +0000
Subject: Your end is near perverted pagans, deniers of the truth
From: cihadagidenler@gmail.com
To:
- 2- Date: Wed, 26 August 2015 16:52:19 +0000
Subject: You perverted pagans, the time for us to shoot you in the neck is near. We swear by Allah cc.
From: ihvangrubu@gmail.com
- 3- From: cihadagidenler@hotmail.com
To:
Subject: You will see Allah's wrath from our hands, pagan apostates...
Date: Thu, 27 August 2015 20:10:48 +0000
- 4- SMS 05..... "You have deceived our youth with your perversions. We swear to Allah, by Allah's command we will be wrath to you"
- 5- Facebook: 19 September 21:36
Your end is year, your end, pagan apostates...

Quran, Women: 76 - Those who believe fight in the cause of Allah, and those who reject Faith Fight in the cause of Evil: So fight ye against the friends of Satan: feeble indeed is the cunning of Satan.⁵

The threatening content, the images used, the anthems and the names used show that these threats originate with the radical terror organization ISIS. After the bombing in Ankara that killed 102 people on Oct 10, 2015 which occurred after these threats received by the churches, two ISIS suicide bombers were captured in Ankara on Dec 30. According to news reports about the confession of the two caught, they had done reconnaissance of churches in Ankara.⁶ This clearly shows that these threats should not be taken lightly, but should be given importance in investigations.

The Problems with Right to Establish Places of Worship⁷

The ability to legally establish a place of worship, an important part of freedom of religion, continued to be problem for Protestants in 2015, just as it was in previous years. In 2003, the changes to Zoning Law number 3194 as part of the European Union's 6th Harmonization Package was intended to meet the needs of non-Muslim citizens for places of worship by replacing the word "mosque" with the words "place of worship." But the negative experiences Turkish Protestants have in obtaining places of worship demonstrate the serious hindrances and rights violations that the Protestant community faces with regard to interpretation and application of this positive legal development as well as their inability to use their legal rights.

One of the significant problems with this issue is the administration officials' fear of losing

⁵ The Quran verses used in the threatening messages were written in Turkish, English and Arabic. In addition, the YouTube video link is not given to prevent it from spreading further.

⁶ <http://www.haberler.com/isis-den-turkiye-ye-karsi-intikam-operasyonu-8018347-haberi/>

⁷ You can learn more about the problem of places for Protestant worship from our long report found at this link: <http://www.ProtestanKiliseler.org/?p=802>.

votes and not wanting to be perceived as one who approves the establishment of churches. This causes applications for opening a place of worship to be rejected or to be left in a never ending bureaucratic process. Previous applications receiving either no response or a negative response is a clear indication of this situation. In addition, it is noteworthy that the institutions that request to start a church or have one approved are directed to either go to the Directorate of Religious Affairs, which expressly represents and works within the Islamic faith, or request an opinion from the Directorate of the Presidency.

Besides all of this, apart from some exceptions⁸, Christian congregations are prevented from using historical church buildings for Sunday services or holiday celebrations; these buildings are held by government institutions and being used for purposes other than as a church. Protestant communities try to overcome this issue by establishing an association or gaining representative status with an existing association or 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.

- The Istanbul Protestant Church has officially requested that the Meryem Ana Church in the hands of the City of Kayseri and in the past used as a sports center, to be assigned to Christians living in Kayseri to meet their needs for a place for worship. No written response to this request has been given. However, meetings with the City have indicated that, although not official, the church will be turned into a mosque or used as a museum. The church has continued efforts on this issue in 2015.
- Ankara Kurtuluş Church's years long effort to obtain a place of worship came up empty in 2015. Despite the positive response from the Cankaya Municipality and even being shown a place, the Çankaya District office looked with disfavor on the request and the National Real Estate General Directorate, along with the Religious Affairs Directorate indicated that the place which would become a church, drew attention to the fact that it could be a mosque and decided to build a mosque there instead. Kurtuluş Church is continuing the legal process of obtaining a church property with the European Court of Human Rights. (ECHR).
- İstanbul Pendik Protestant Church's request to open and use the historic church located in the Pendik district did not receive a positive outcome in 2015. The church continues its efforts.
- A chapel in the shopping center in the İnegöl district of Bursa was shut down due to heavy pressure.

Similar experiences over many years have rooted the belief in the Protestant community that following the legal procedure to establish or build a church is practically impossible and that this right only exists on paper. For this reason, attempts to obtain places of worship in accordance with official procedures have diminished. Instead temporary solutions like forming legal associations (dernek) have picked up in intensity.

The Right to Propagate Religion

In 2015 the legal use of this right experienced various problems. The propagation of faiths outside the majority belief is still perceived to be a threat. The Primary School 8th Grade

⁸ Orthodox churches are granted permission once a year in some historical churches. For example, Sümela Monastery, Ahtamar Church, etc.

textbook "History of the Turkish Republic Reforms and Atatürkism,"⁹ in the section on National Threats under the heading "Missionary Activities" shows that missionary activity continues to be described as a national threat.

- On March 16, 2015, İzmir Işık Church's request to set up a stand to distribute brochures and explain their faith to those interested was rejected by the Karşıyaka Municipality, even though it was granted the previous year.
- The İskenderun İncil Church puts their brochures that explain the church activities and Christianity in an information box which resembles a post box. On June 27th, 2015, this information box was broken into and the brochures torn up by unknown people.
- On Nov. 12, 2015, during Christmas, the İzmir Işık Church's request for a place to celebrate Christmas for both members and guests was rejected by the Bornova Municipality. The reason given for the rejection was there was no appropriate place.

Permissions granted in previous years for stands or celebrations in open areas were deemed inappropriate and not granted in 2015 due to particular security concerns or other reasons.

Problems Faced in Education and Compulsory Religious Class

During 2015, problems continued to be experienced with Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge classes (RCMK) and with the right of exemption from this class.

The National Education Ministry, in a missive sent to the provincial governor's offices on Feb 3, 2015, stated that only those who have Christian or Jew written on their identity cards are exempt from the RCMK classes. Those whose religion section on their identity cards is blank or Christian refugees cannot use this exemption and must attend this class.¹⁰

At the beginning of 2015, several students who had been exempt from the RCMK lessons in the previous year, despite passing the class, were shown to need to re-take the class according to the system. The systematic problem was solved when the report cards were sent to the National Education Ministry.

In 2015 the complaints made by families to us included several instances of Christian children finding difficulty in using their right of exemption, families being encouraged to have their children participate in the RCMK lessons, school administration's ignorance of the exemption right. Discussions between the families, our association and school administration solved the issues.

During 2015 families reported concerns over questions included in the middle school (TEOG) and the higher education entrance exams whose content reflected the RCMK lessons as well as having their children who used their exemption right be told that they

⁹ National Education Ministry Primary School 8. grade "Türkiye Cumhuriyeti İnkılap Tarihi ve Atatürkçülük" lesson book, page 205, Devlet Kitapları Yayınları. ISBN: 978-975-11-3073-0

¹⁰ In our country a great part of the Protestant community has Islam written on their identity cards or leave the section empty. The diminishing of the exemption right affects many families deeply. It is noteworthy that Christian refugees are forced to take this course.

would be negatively affected.

Children who were exempt from the RCMK lessons had their TEOG tests wrongly graded. Even though the problem was resolved, the families and children were stressed and lost valuable time in choosing a school.

During 2015 we were informed of more than one case of a Christian student being forced to choose an Islamic content elective class because there was no teacher, no class, or not enough students who chose the other classes to offer a Christian elective class. In some cases, at the initiative of school administrators, even though the student did not actually take the class, the student was recorded as taking and passing the class.¹¹

Even though 5th and 6th grade Christian students had a curriculum and book prepared in 2014 for elective classes to learn their faith, and despite all of this being submitted to the National Ministry of Education, there was no development in this area in 2015.

The Problem of Training Religious Leaders

In 2015, the present state of laws in Turkey still does not allow the training of religious leaders and the opening of 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, or sending students abroad.

Legal Entity / Right to Organize

The legal entity problem is the problem of all religious groups as well as minority groups in Turkey. The Protestant community has generally tried to solve this issue by setting up associations or becoming a representative of an already existing association. As of 2015, members of the Protestant community have 1 foundation, 35 church associations and 18 representative offices connected to these associations. This association forming process continues. 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 personality as a "congregation." In addition, the present "association formation" path appears complex and hard to work out for small churches. Thus, small congregations continue to be helpless in becoming either an association or a legal entity

Obligatory Declaration of Faith

The problem of the religion blank on people's identification cards continued in 2015. The section for religious affiliation on the identity cards forces people to declare their faith and increases the risk of facing discrimination in every arena of life. The problem is not solved by allowing the registration of one's belief to be elective. For example, those who want to be exempt from mandatory religious instruction do not have the right to leave the religion line blank because they have to prove they are Christian in order for their children to be exempt from religion classes. We were terribly disappointed when it was announced that the religion section will continue on the new identity cards.

¹¹ Details are not given to prevent negative consequences for the school administration, family and the child.

Malatya Court Case

It has been 9 years since the violent murder of three Christians in Malatya in 2007 and almost 8 years since the beginning of court proceedings. As of this report 109 court sessions have been held.

In March 2014 with the new law limiting custody to 5 years, the 5 suspects who were caught at the crime scene with weapons in hand, as well as all other suspects in the crime are free of custody while continuing to be prosecuted.¹² As the court case proceeds, the Protestant community is worried that the case will end with no conclusion. In addition, the lack of punishment in these type of cases are reasons for people to worry similar cases might occur and other perpetrators to feel encouraged to do further actions. In light of the economic burden of this ongoing case, both the families and the Protestant community expect the case to be concluded shortly.

Dialogue

In 2015 no Protestant community or church representative was invited to meetings of invited religious groups organized by the government or by official organizations. 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.
- It is sad that hate crimes and intolerance against Christians continued in 2015. It is important that especially with regard to crimes where complaints have been registered, that information about the ongoing process be given to the community and the victims.
- The problem of establishing places of worship for the Protestant community, which does not have historical church buildings, has been a problem for years and has not been able to be solved. This is considered a basic right of religious expression. There needs to be immediate steps taken by local and central authorities on this issue. Christians need to have the opportunity to open small worship places made available to them, similar to the masjid concept. Municipalities, the Culture Ministry and other government institutions which 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.
- The religion section on identity cards and other written records opens the way for discrimination and needs to be removed.

¹² Bülent Varol Aral, one of the accused, still remains in prison. But that is not because of the case, but rather his threatening and insulting the judges.

- Within the framework of Human Rights, certain public officials should be instructed in freedom of religion and conscience issues.
- All information and explanations that express hatred or prejudice against Christians, in particular textbook chapters that have discriminatory headings like “missionary activity,” need to be removed. Steps and the application of policies needs to be supervised in regard to forming a culture where differing faiths can live together in respect of one another.
- In light of the possibility of stigmatization and social pressure faced by Christian families and students, it is expected that the Ministry of Education 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.
- While regulations are being written with regard to elective classes, schools need to consider the non-Muslim students in the school and provide elective classes that do not contain Muslim content.
- Central and local government officials, especially by means of the Ministry of Education, need to actively place on the agenda and encourage the idea of a 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, the media needs to create its own “code of ethics”. Quick and effective control mechanisms should be established against discrimination and intolerance in the printed and broadcast media.

Sincerely,

**Association of Protestant
Protestan Kiliseler Derneği**