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Turkey (2006)

Polity:

No polity available

Political Rights:

3

Civil Liberties:

3

Status:

Partly Free

Population:

72,900,000

GNI/Capita:

\$2,800

Life Expectancy:

69

Religious Groups:

Muslim [mostly Sunni] (99.8 percent), other (0.2 percent)

Ethnic Groups:

Turkish (80 percent), Kurdish (20 percent)

Capital:

Ankara

Additional Info:

[Freedom in the World 2005](#)

[Freedom of the Press 2005](#)

[Nations in Transit 2004](#)

[Countries at the Crossroads 2005](#)

Overview

Turkey continued in 2005 to implement the many reforms that it had passed in recent years as part of its effort to join the European Union (EU). However, outside observers agreed that the pace of reform slowed during the year. Meanwhile, violence increased in the southeast as the separatist Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) fought Turkish security forces.

Turkey emerged as a republic following the breakup of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. Its founder and the author of its guiding principles was Kemal Mustafa Ataturk ("Father of the Turks"), who declared that Turkey would be a secular state. Ataturk sought to modernize the country through measures such as the pursuit of Western learning, use of the Roman alphabet instead of Arabic script for writing Turkish, and abolition of the Muslim caliphate.

Turkey stayed out of most of World War II, but joined the Allies in February 1945. After the war, the republic joined NATO in 1952 to guarantee its protection from the Soviet Union. However, modern Turkish political history has been unstable, and the army has overthrown civilian governments in three coups. The army, which sees itself as a bulwark against both Islamism and Kurdish separatism, has traditionally expressed very influential opinions on the functioning of government.

The role of political Islam has been one of the defining questions of Turkish politics in the 1990s and early twenty-first century. In 1995, an Islamist party, Welfare, won the general election but failed to obtain a majority. Initially, two other parties formed a majority coalition without it, but the breakup of that coalition in 1996 led the True Path Party (DYP) to form a coalition with Welfare. The following year the army-ever protective of Turkey's secular roots-forced the coalition to resign. Welfare prime minister Necmettin Erbakan was replaced by a member of the Motherland Party. The Welfare party was banned in 1998 on the grounds that it was seeking to introduce Islamic rule.

The governments that followed failed to stabilize a shaky economy, which culminated in an economic crisis in 2001. Voters wanted change, and in November 2002, the Justice and Development (AK) Party, whose roots lay in the then-disbanded Welfare, won a sweeping majority in the general election by promising to end governmental corruption and put the country on a firm path toward European Union (EU) membership. The AK sought to distance itself from political Islamism, but its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a former mayor of

Istanbul, had previously been banned from politics after he was convicted of crimes against secularism for reading a poem seeming to incite religious intolerance. Abdullah Gul served as prime minister until parliament changed the constitution to allow Erdogan to replace him in March 2003.

Erdogan has used his party's large parliamentary majority to push through successive wide-reaching reforms that are crucial to Turkey's application to join the EU. In December 2004, the EU gave Turkey a long-awaited pledge to begin accession negotiations on October 6, 2005. After much last-minute haggling, negotiations began as scheduled. Turkey still faces considerable EU resistance to its membership, however. Especially contentious is Turkey's nonrecognition of Cyprus, which as of 2004 is an EU member. The increase in anti-Turkey rhetoric in the EU after the rejection of the EU constitution in France and the Netherlands made it clear that Turkey will face an uphill battle to membership. Moreover, the EU stated that the pace of reform in Turkey slowed in 2005. Meanwhile, while the Turkish population remains in favor of membership, support dropped in 2005 according to polls. The change has raised fears of a rise in Turkish nationalism.

The year was also marked by a rise in violence in the southeast, where Kurdish separatists fought a 15-year guerrilla war against Turkish forces that ended after the capture of their leader, Abdullah Ocalan, in 1999. The Kurdish separatist Kurish Workers Party (PKK) ended its five-year ceasefire with the government in June 2004, because, it claimed, not enough had been done to meet its demands. Clashes between separatists and security forces have worsened, with deaths on both sides.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Citizens of Turkey can change their government democratically. The 1982 constitution provides for a 550-member parliament, the Grand National Assembly, which is elected to five-year terms. The prime minister is the head of government, but the Assembly chooses a mostly symbolic president as head of state-currently Ahmet Necdet Sezer. Democratic choice has been undercut by the army in the past, the last time being in a "soft coup" that forced the government of the religious Welfare party out of office in 1997. Recep Tayyip Erdogan of the AK became prime minister in March 2003. The November 2002 elections were widely judged as free and fair.

A party must win at least 10 percent of the votes cast nationwide to have representation in parliament. As a result, although a large number and variety of parties participated in active campaigning in 2002, only two parties-the AK and the Republican People's Party (CHP)-won seats. Nevertheless, both of these parties had been in the opposition, thus attesting to the ability of the electorate to precipitate change. Several members of parliament changed their party affiliations in 2005, bringing the total number of parties in parliament to six. The Motherland Party, which was voted out in the last election, now holds more than 20 seats; no other party besides the AK and CHP holds more than five seats. The AK, which holds more than 350 parliamentary seats, appears to have abandoned its former Islamist aspirations, but much of its base is very

religious. Although the party has supported some loosening of restrictions on religious activity, it has not made any attempt to undermine Turkey's secular underpinnings, but instead has steadfastly pursued a start to EU negotiations.

In 2003, legal amendments loosened restrictions on party names and candidates and circumscribed the reasons for closure of a political party. However, a party can still be shut down if its program is not in agreement with the constitution, and this criterion is broadly interpreted. The Communist Party and parties representing Kurdish interests face court cases threatening their closure and can function only minimally.

Recent reforms have increased civilian oversight of the military. The National Security Council, once dominated by the military, had its policy-setting role downgraded to a purely advisory one in 2003, and a civilian was chosen to head the council for the first time in 2004. Significantly, the military did not intervene when Erdogan was chosen prime minister, despite its known reservations. Nevertheless, the opinions of the top generals on subjects much broader than military concerns continue to generate press attention, and the possibility remains of military meddling in controversial policy making.

Turkey struggles with corruption in government and in daily life. The AK Party-"ak" means "pure" in Turkish-came to power amid promises to clean up governmental corruption, and it has adopted some anticorruption measures, including ones aimed at combating corruption in public procurement. However, enforcement is lacking, and a culture of tolerance of corruption pervades the general population. Parliamentary immunity prevents prosecution. Transparency has improved through EU reforms, although implementation lags. Turkey was ranked 65 out of 159 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2005 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Impediments remain to freedom of the media, although recent reforms are having some positive effect. New legislation allows (somewhat restricted) broadcasts in minority languages. Journalists continue to be jailed and are sometimes prosecuted under the penal code instead of being sued according to the press law. However, prosecutions and, in particular, convictions are less common. In 2005, an Austrian journalist who covered the cases of political prisoners was temporarily jailed for belonging to a terrorist organization about which she had often reported; she was ultimately acquitted for lack of evidence. Prime Minister Erdogan launched defamation suits against several members of the media in 2005, including two cartoonists who were sentenced to pay fines. Turkey's Supreme Council of Radio and Television (RTUK) continues to sanction broadcasters if they are not in compliance with a broadly defined set of principles. Nearly all media organizations are owned by giant holding companies with interests in other sectors, which contributes to self-censorship. The government does not restrict the internet beyond the same censorship policies that apply to other media.

Vaguely worded laws that were not changed with the reform of the penal code allow journalists to be prosecuted for coverage of controversial subjects such as the division of Cyprus and the 1915 mass killings of Armenians by Turks. Most

prominently, Orhan Pamuk, an internationally renowned Turkish author, will go before a court in December 2005 for comments he made to a Swiss newspaper earlier in the year. Pamuk's views on the 1915 mass killings have resulted in death threats and protests against him.

Turkey is a predominantly Muslim country, and much of its population is very devout. Three non-Muslim groups-Greek and Armenian Orthodox Christians, and Jews-are officially recognized. Other groups lack legal status, and their activities are subject to legal challenges. While the constitution protects freedom of religion, the Turkish republic was set up on the premise of secularism, in which state and religious affairs are separated. In practice, this has meant considerable government control of religion. Women wearing headscarves are not allowed in public universities and government offices, and observant men are dismissed from the military. There are periodic protests against the headscarf ban, and a March law gave amnesty to students expelled since 2000, including those expelled for wearing a headscarf. Meanwhile, the European Court of Human Rights has ruled repeatedly in favor of the ban as legal, and the AK dropped its attempt to introduce an easing of the ban in the 2004 penal code reforms. The government does not restrict academic freedom, although self-censorship on sensitive topics, such as the role of Islam and the Kurdish problem, are common.

Restrictions on public demonstrations have been relaxed, but police sometimes monitor public meetings of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In March, police used excessive force against a peaceful demonstration for International Women's Day; several policemen involved were subsequently suspended. A 2004 law on associations should reduce state interference in civil society, but 2005 implementing legislation allows the state to restrict groups that might oppose its interests. Members of local human rights groups sometimes receive death threats. Nevertheless, civil society plays an increasing role in Turkish politics.

Trade union activity remains restricted in practice, although laws to protect unions are in place. In May, a high court overruled two previous decisions in favor of the teachers' union, whose statute calls for education in mother tongue languages in potential violation of the constitution. The union had to withdraw the clause from their statute to avoid being closed down.

The Turkish constitution establishes an independent judiciary, but the government can influence judges through its control of appointments, promotions, and financing. The judiciary continues to be strengthened by structural reforms. The 2004 overhaul of the penal code along with implementing legislation, which largely brings criminal law in line with European standards, was due to take effect on April 1, 2005. However, this was delayed until June 1 as a result of vocal protests by press groups concerned about provisions such as increased fines for crimes when they are committed through the media. The latter provisions were removed just before the code went into force, though journalists can still be sentenced to jail time, in contravention of the press code. Despite these and other residual problems, if it is fully implemented, the new code will have wide-reaching positive effects on the

criminal justice system.

The death penalty was fully abolished in 2004, as were State Security Courts, where many human rights abuses occurred. Still, some trials last so long as to become an inconvenience and financial burden to the defense; in cases against security forces, trials might last beyond the statute of limitations, and therefore by default the accused is acquitted.

A retrial is ongoing in the case of Leyla Zana and three other Kurdish former members of parliament who were convicted of belonging to the PKK in 1994 in what was widely condemned as an unfair trial; they are no longer in custody. The four were considered by many to have been political prisoners, and the trial is considered symbolic both of Turkey's flawed judicial system and of the push for Kurdish rights.

The Erdogan government has a "zero tolerance" policy concerning torture, backed up by new laws and training to improve implementation. However, while there continue to be reports that torture has decreased, particularly in its harshest forms, rights groups still cite cases and highlight the fact that perpetrators are not consistently punished. The government has established a variety of bodies to investigate and field complaints on human rights, but so far, impact has been limited. Prison conditions, including overcrowding, are improving but can still be harsh. Most controversial are the F-type prisons, which are criticized for isolation of prisoners. An especially contentious imprisonment is that of Abdullah Ocalan, former leader of the Kurdish guerrilla movement, who is serving a life sentence in solitary confinement on an island off the Turkish coast; Ocalan allegedly has not had adequate access to his lawyer and to visitors. In May, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Ocalan did not receive a fair trial; he will most likely be retried.

The legacy of the 1990s conflict in the southeast, in which more than 35,000 people were killed, remains in the form of discrimination and lingering tensions. Since the PKK ended the ceasefire in June 2004, violent fighting between the PKK and the government has increased, with deaths on both sides. There are allegations of violations, including extrajudicial killings, by security forces. In November 2005, a bomb explosion in a bookstore was linked to members of the Turkish security forces; violent clashes between civilians and police erupted almost immediately and continued for several days, resulting in some deaths. The government launched investigations into the bombing and charged three security officials.

Turkey claims that all Turkish citizens are treated equally, but its unwillingness to recognize Kurdish differences results in de facto unequal treatment under the law. Because minorities are defined solely by religion, Kurds are denied recognition, and a traditional emphasis on Turkish identity over multiculturalism has left the Kurds facing restrictions on their language, culture, and freedom of expression. The situation has improved with the EU harmonization reforms, but official and informal discrimination remains. Although recent laws have allowed for Kurdish-language courses in private schools, those courses that had opened were shut down in summer 2005 because of a lack of enrollment that was very

likely caused by bureaucratic and financial obstacles.

Property rights are generally respected in Turkey. The most significant problem is the tens of thousands of Kurds who were driven from their homes by government forces during the conflict in the 1990s. The government has initiated a project to compensate these people and return them to their villages. However, local paramilitary "village guards" have allegedly used intimidation and violence to prevent some from returning to their homes. Turkey has not fully complied with European Court of Human Rights rulings on investigations of cases and right of return.

Constitutional amendments in the spring of 2004 included a provision granting women full equality before the law, but women face discrimination in employment and are underrepresented in government. Domestic abuse and honor crimes are found predominantly among rural populations. However, honor killings have reportedly increased as conservative families from rural areas move to large cities, where their daughters are exposed to a more liberal lifestyle. The new penal code contains many provisions designed to improve women's rights, including increased penalties for crimes against women and the elimination of sentence reductions in cases of honor killing and rape. In October 2005, two brothers were convicted for the murder of their sister after she had a child out of wedlock; one was sentenced to life in prison, but the other, who was a minor at the time of the shooting, received a lesser sentence. Homosexuals in Turkey face discrimination in Turkey, but their relationships are legal. A new law on the disabled was adopted in July 2005.