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Freedom Status: Free

Aggregate Score: 81 (0 = Least Free, 100 = Most Free)

Freedom Rating: 2.0 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Political Rights: 2 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Civil Liberties: 2 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

OVERVIEW

The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) is a self-declared state recognized only by Turkey. It has a democratic, multiparty political system, and civil liberties are generally upheld. Ongoing concerns include undue political and economic influence from Turkey, corruption, discrimination against minority communities, and human trafficking.

Key Developments in 2017:

- In January, nine Turkish army colonels were detained in the TRNC and deported to Turkey on suspicion of involvement with the organization of U.S.-based Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen. After the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, the TRNC had declared the group a terrorist organization; a small number of related arrests were reported in 2017, but nothing on the scale of the crackdown in Turkey.
- After UN-brokered reunification talks with Cyprus collapsed in July, partly over the issue of the Turkish military's presence on the island, the Turkish Cypriot side adopted a strategy of unilateral moves to change the status quo, including plans to open three Maronite villages in the north for resettlement by their former residents.
- In November, under pressure from the opposition to hold early elections, the ruling coalition agreed to move the legislative balloting forward from April 2018 to January 2018.

POLITICAL RIGHTS: 31 / 40 (-1)

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 11 / 12

A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

The president, who serves as head of state and represents the TRNC internationally, is popularly elected to five-year terms. In 2015, Mustafa Akıncı – backed by the social democratic Communal Democracy Party (TDP) – prevailed in a runoff election with just over 60 percent of the vote, defeating incumbent Derviş Eroğlu, who was supported by the right-wing National Unity Party (UBP).

The president appoints the prime minister and cabinet members, who must have the support of a legislative majority. During 2017, Prime Minister Hüseyin Özgürkün of the UBP headed a governing coalition with the center-right Democratic Party (DP). In 2016 the UBP had broken with its previous coalition partner – the center-left Republican Turkish Party (CTP), which seeks reconciliation with the Greek Cypriots and European Union membership – to pursue policies that were seen as more closely aligned with Ankara.

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

For elections to the 50-seat Assembly of the Republic, the TRNC employs a proportional representation system with a 5 percent vote threshold for parties to win seats. Members serve five-year terms. In the 2013 elections, the CTP led the voting with 21 seats, followed by the UBP with 14, the DP with 12, and the TDP with 3. In November 2017, the governing parties yielded to opposition pressure and agreed to move the next elections, initially scheduled for April 2018, forward to January 2018. Campaigning was under way at year's end.

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 3 / 4

The Supreme Election Committee is an independent body composed of judges, and elections in the TRNC are generally considered free and fair.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 13 / 16 (+1)

B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 4 / 4

Turkish Cypriots are free to organize in political parties, and several parties compete in practice, with four represented in the legislature as of 2017. Under a 2015 law, parties that receive at least 3 percent of the vote may obtain state funding.

B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 4 / 4

There have been multiple democratic transfers of power between rival parties in both the presidency and the premiership over the past 15 years, with Akıncı ousting the incumbent president in the 2015 election. Opposition parties maintained a strong presence in the legislature as of 2017.

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 3 / 4 (+1)

Although Turkey continues to exercise considerable influence over the TRNC, it has little direct control over voters, many of whom have recently supported candidates and parties that display independence from Ankara. Even Turkish settlers with TRNC citizenship have reportedly distributed their votes among a variety of parties. The opposition's push for early elections and other criticism in 2017 illustrated its willingness to defy a government that had moved closer to Turkey.

Score Change: The score improved from 2 to 3 because many Turkish Cypriot voters and politicians have displayed relative independence from Ankara in recent years.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 2 / 4

All adult citizens may vote, but minority rights remain a concern. The few hundred Maronite and Greek Cypriots living in the TRNC are issued special identity cards and are unable to vote in TRNC elections. In 2017, President Akıncı opened one Maronite village to resettlement and announced plans to open two more, while a team began discussions with Maronite leaders that included the possible expansion of their political rights.

Women have full political rights, and a 2015 law requires 30 percent of a party's parliamentary candidate list to consist of women. However, women's political participation is limited in practice, particularly in leadership positions, and just four women won seats in the legislature in the last elections.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 7 / 12 (-2)

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 3 / 4

While elected officials generally develop and implement policies and legislation without direct interference from Ankara, the TRNC remains diplomatically and financially dependent on Turkey – which also maintains a military presence – and this dependence affects policymaking. In recent years Ankara has pushed for austerity and privatization measures that opponents said would shift control over key assets from the TRNC government to Turkish companies that are close to the Turkish state. A dispute over such changes contributed to the breakup of the CTP-UBP coalition government in 2016.

C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 2 / 4 (-1)

Corruption, cronyism in the distribution of civil service jobs, and nepotism are serious impediments to good governance, and the media have exposed a number of scandals in recent years. Among other cases in 2017, Serdar Denktaş, the finance minister and deputy prime minister, approved a plan to transfer public land to his son, Rauf Denktaş, for the construction of a university to be named after the finance minister's father, founding TRNC president Rauf Denktaş. The government appeared to backtrack on the plan in the face of public criticism, though it was not clear at year's end that the project had been abandoned.

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 due to a series of corruption scandals, including a 2017 case involving the allocation of public land to the finance minister's son.

C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 2 / 4 (-1)

Although there is a law providing for access to information, there has been very little progress in making government records available to the public in practice. Information is not always kept in an accessible form, and officials reportedly withhold data on sensitive topics such as naturalization of Turkish settlers as TRNC citizens. In 2017, the government was accused of improperly granting citizenship to individuals including the prime minister's girlfriend. Officials must periodically disclose their personal assets, but the disclosures are not made public.

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 due to the government's failure to properly implement constitutional and legal guarantees on public access to information.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 50 / 60 (+2)

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 15 / 16 (+1)

D1. Are there free and independent media? 4 / 4 (+1)

Freedom of the press is guaranteed by law, and TRNC authorities generally respect it in practice. Journalists sometimes face obstruction or threats from the subjects of their reporting, and the owners of certain outlets are believed to influence coverage. Nevertheless, the media often carry sharp criticism of both the TRNC and Turkish governments. For example, the newspaper *Afrika* has reported critically on Turkey's treatment of its Kurdish minority despite police questioning of its staff, and in December 2017 it carried a Greek cartoon of the Turkish president, drawing protests and threats of legal action from Ankara.

Score Change: The score improved from 3 to 4 due to the media's pattern of critical reporting on the local and Turkish governments despite some pressure from authorities.

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 3 / 4

The TRNC is a secular state and legally guarantees freedom of worship, which is mostly respected in practice. However, authorities continue to impose some restrictions on access to churches and otherwise interfere with church services. Christians and non-Sunni Muslims have complained that the government favors Sunni Islam in its policies on religious education and places of worship. The government's Religious Affairs Department staffs Sunni mosques with imams.

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 4 / 4

Academic freedom is generally respected. While large numbers of teachers and professors have been fired or jailed for political reasons in Turkey since 2016, no similar purges had occurred in the TRNC as of late 2017.

D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 4 / 4

There are no significant restrictions on freedom of private discussion, and individuals generally do not face repercussions for expressing their political views on social media. However, in one prominent case in January 2017, Turkish fashion designer Barbaros Şansal was arrested and deported to Turkey for a social media post in which he used vulgar language to denounce corruption and human rights abuses in Turkey.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 11 / 12

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 4 / 4

Freedom of assembly is guaranteed by the constitution and generally upheld in practice.

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 4 / 4

Numerous nongovernmental organizations are registered in the TRNC, and they typically operate without restrictions. Many such groups have worked with Greek Cypriot partners to advance reunification efforts.

E3. Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 3 / 4

Workers may form independent unions, bargain collectively, and strike, and collective bargaining is reportedly common in the public sector. However, the government can limit strikes in ill-defined essential services, and employers are reportedly able to obstruct unionization in the private sector without legal repercussions.

F. RULE OF LAW: 13 / 16 (+1)**F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 4 / 4 (+1)**

The judiciary is independent, and courts have often ruled against the government in recent years. The system is overseen by the Supreme Council of Judicature, which is headed by the president of the Supreme Court and includes that court's seven judges as well as one member each appointed by the president, the legislature, the attorney general, and the bar association. The council is responsible for judicial appointments, promotions, assignments, and disciplinary measures.

Score Change: The score improved from 3 to 4 because the judicial system is structurally independent and has displayed its autonomy in practice in recent years.

F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 3 / 4

Although due process rights are typically respected, police have been accused of violating protections against arbitrary detention and coerced confessions in some cases, for example by improperly denying suspects access to a lawyer.

There were no large-scale purges of security forces or other public employees in connection with the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey as of 2017, but due process was a concern in the cases that were reported. Nine Turkish army colonels were arrested and deported to Turkey in January for alleged links to the banned Gülen movement. A small number of Turkish Cypriot civilians were arrested on similar charges during the year, and dozens of police officers were screened or investigated. Use of the encrypted messaging application ByLock was often enough to raise authorities' suspicions.

F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 3 / 4

The population is generally free from threats to physical security, but police have been accused of abusing detainees, and prisons feature overcrowding and other harsh conditions.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 3 / 4

Women enjoy legal equality, but in practice they encounter some discrimination in employment, education, housing, and other areas.

The tiny Greek and Maronite minorities live in enclaves and face social and economic disadvantages. In September 2017, the TRNC government began taxing UN aid deliveries to the enclaves. The small Kurdish minority reportedly suffers from discrimination in employment. Both groups have complained of surveillance by TRNC authorities.

LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people reportedly face social stigmatization, though same-sex sexual activity was decriminalized in 2014, and discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity is prohibited by law. Gay pride events were held without interference in 2017.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 11 / 16

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 3 / 4

Movement within the TRNC territory is generally unrestricted. However, travel abroad is hampered somewhat by the TRNC's lack of international recognition. The only direct flights from the TRNC are to Turkey. Most governments do not accept TRNC travel documents, so many Turkish Cypriots carry Republic of Cyprus passports, for which they are eligible. Movement across the UN buffer zone dividing the island has improved since 2004 due to a growing number of border crossings.

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 3 / 4

The authorities recognize the rights to own property and establish businesses. The TRNC formed the Immovable Property Commission (IPC) in 2006 to resolve claims by Greek Cypriots who owned property in the north before the island's 1974 division. In 2010, the European Court of Human Rights recognized the commission as an "accessible and effective" mechanism. However, its work has been seriously impaired in recent years by a lack of funding from the government and Ankara.

G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 3 / 4

Personal social freedoms are generally respected, though women's organizations have criticized the government for failing to adequately address the problems of rape and domestic violence. According to a 2017 poll, one in three women have experienced violence in the home.

G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 2 / 4

While TRNC citizens generally have access to economic opportunity and protections from abusive working conditions, noncitizens often experience exploitation and lack mechanisms for appeal. Human trafficking and forced prostitution are serious problems, despite a nominal legal ban on prostitution. Thousands of African students pursuing higher education in the TRNC are vulnerable to labor and sex trafficking. The TRNC lacks adequate antitrafficking legislation and does not fund antitrafficking efforts. Observers also report that some authorities are complicit in trafficking.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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