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Religious freedom and reform in Turkey

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 7, 2013 All Things Catholic

In the spotlight this week is Turkey, where burgeoning protests represent the strongest challenge to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan since his rise to power a decade ago. The opposition charges Erdogan with authoritarianism, demanding greater democracy, and there's also fear that his Islamic-inspired regime is eroding the country's secular identity.

From the outside, it's tough to know whether the cure may be worse than the disease. Do the protestors represent the promise of positive change or something potentially more worrisome?

Here's one acid test: whether they commit themselves to religious freedom, especially protection of Turkey's tiny Christian community. Experts say a society's treatment of religious minorities is a reliable bellwether for its human rights record across the board, and the situation facing Christians in Turkey offers a compelling case in point.

In the early 20th century, the Anatolia region, traditionally one of the epicenters of Eastern Christianity, still had a Christian population of almost one and a half million. Today, there are just an estimated 150,000 Christians left in Turkey amid a population of 75 million that's 97 percent Muslim.

Those Christians live with the daily burden of *de jure* and *de facto* discrimination. Emblematic is the Halki Seminary, once a premier Orthodox center of learning, which has been closed by state edict for more than 40 years. In 2009, Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople told "60 Minutes" that Turkey's Christians are second-class citizens "crucified" by a state that wants to see them die out.

Anti-Christian resentments can turn violent, as a tick-tock of recent atrocities illustrates.

In January 2006, a Protestant church leader named Kamil Kiroglu, a Muslim convert to Christianity, was beaten unconscious by five young men. Kiroglu reported that one of the attackers, wielding a knife, shouted, "Deny Jesus or I will kill you now." Another reportedly screamed, "We don't want Christians in this country." As the attackers departed, they left behind a 3-foot-long curved knife as a warning.

In February 2006, an Italian Catholic missionary named Fr. Andrea Santoro was gunned down by a 16-year-old Muslim in the small city of Trabzon. The assailant reportedly shouted "Allahu Akbar" as he fired. After his arrest, the young man told police he was angered by Danish cartoons insulting the prophet Muhammad.

Three other Catholic priests were attacked shortly afterward. Slovenian Fr. Martin Kmetec was threatened by nationalists in the city of Izmir while a mob chanted, "We will kill you all." A French priest named Fr. Pierre Brunissen was stabbed in Samsun while a French Capuchin named Fr. Hanri Leylek was beaten in Mersin.

In January 2007, a prominent Turkish journalist of Armenian descent named Hrant Dink was assassinated in Istanbul. Dink, a prominent Protestant, was known as an advocate for human and minority rights.

In April 2007, three Protestant Christian missionaries, two Turks and one German, were tortured, stabbed and strangled to death in Malatya. Their five assassins all reportedly had links to nationalist groups.

In June 2010, Bishop Luigi Padovese, the longtime vicar for Anatolia and president of the country's Catholic bishops' conference, was killed by his driver and aide. Padovese received multiple stab wounds and was then beheaded.

As the saying goes, once may be an accident and twice could be coincidence, but three times (or more) is a conspiracy.

Every time one of these assaults occurs, Turkish authorities invoke what we might call the "Captain Renault defense" from the movie "Casablanca," professing themselves "shocked." They usually style it as a random act of madness rather than a symptom of a deep cancer.

In truth, such claims don't pass the smell test.

The extent to which an anti-Christian mentality grips Turkish society is evident from an EU-financed public opinion survey conducted in 2008. Among the findings:

- One-third of Turkish Muslims would object to having a Christian as a neighbor.
- More than half believe Christians should not be allowed to express their religious views in printed publication or in public meetings.
- More than half are opposed to Christians serving in the army, security services, police force and political parties.
- Just under half believe Christians should not be allowed to work in health services.

As John Eibner, CEO of Christian Solidary International, observed in 2011, "The road from such views to outright discrimination and a heightened threat of violence is very short indeed."

Turks with their eyes open know they have a problem. In December 2011, a journalist with the daily *Zaman* actually complained that "the Vatican is not doing anything" to ensure that the investigation of Padovese's death "is handled in a serious manner." Columnist Orhan Kemal Cengïz wrote that if the Vatican would apply greater pressure, it would "contribute to the well-being of all non-Muslims" and offer "a huge contribution to the promotion of human rights and freedom of religion in Turkey."

The rebuke was arguably justified, given that in the wake of Padovese's death the Vatican seemed to play along with the Renault defense. The murder came just one day before a trip by Pope Benedict XVI to Cyprus, which many observers believe was no accident. Aboard the papal plane, Benedict said that while he had "very little information ... what is certain is that it was not a religious or political assassination."

While the pope may have been trying to avoid inflaming the situation, his statement left many Turkish Christians and human rights advocates deeply disappointed.

Although a more forceful reaction from Rome might well be apposite, ultimately it's up to Turks to decide what kind of society they want. If those leading today's protests were to embrace real religious freedom, it would be a powerful sign that the pro-democracy ferment isn't just talk.

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