

INDIVIDUAL FREEDOMS IN TURKEY

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Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has witnessed economic success and launched major reforms, in particular writing a new constitution, negotiating with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, passing four judicial reform packages, and installing an ombudsman. In sharp contrast, the AKP's exclusive reliance on its election victories for legitimacy and increasingly authoritarian practices in the fields of freedom of cultural expression and coexistence of different lifestyles are at odds with its stated objective of establishing an advanced democracy. Popular discontent with these practices and unending restrictions on media freedom resulted in major protests in May and June 2013.

Key Findings

- The government has introduced more conservative norms in various fields, such as cultural policy, the dress code, education, women's lifestyles, and alcohol sales.
- Freedom of cultural expression of citizens of Kurdish origin has been restricted by the government as part of the conflict between separatist Kurds and the state.
- The government has increased ideologically oriented project funding, imposed its political preferences on arts and culture, and has not consulted with the cultural sector.
- The ruling party has ramped up efforts to impose its own religious-conservative views on society, using the majority it acquired in three successive legislative elections as justification. The coexistence of different lifestyles is not a goal.
- The government has responded to recent protests with a divisive narrative and heavy-handed law-and-order policies. It has used aggressive language against specific people, groups, and institutions both in Turkey and abroad.

Steps Turkey Should Take

Abide by commitments to the Council of Europe on cultural policy. The state should formulate and manage a neutral policy on culture and the arts reflecting Turkey's vast ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity.

Create a cultural policy workshop. A nongovernmental-organization-driven forum composed of cultural associations, filmmakers, civil society organizations, academics, and other cultural actors should be created. It would allow all concerned stakeholders to freely discuss cultural issues, to define an agreed upon concept for Turkey's cultural policy, and to consult on issues of tolerance and coexistence in this field.

Prioritize a policy that supports tolerance and the coexistence of lifestyles. In a liberal-democracy framework, the ruling party should avoid imposing its preferred lifestyle and value system on the entire society and recognize that diversity benefits the country.

Create a culture of dialogue and consensus. Legitimacy that stems solely from ballot-box results is not sustainable in an advanced democracy. Dialogue and consensus should be built systematically at local and national levels.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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