



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing

Turkey Post-Referendum: Institutions and Human Rights

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Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good morning. I join my colleague and co-chair, Congressman Hultgren, in welcoming you to this briefing on institutions and human rights in Turkey, in the aftermath of the attempted coup of July 2016, and the recent vote to approve major changes to the Turkish constitution. I also welcome our distinguished panelists and thank them for sharing their expertise with us today. And I thank the Helsinki Commission for co-hosting this briefing, and for its important work over many years promoting democracy and human rights throughout the OSCE region.

What to do about Turkey, a NATO ally that has turned toward authoritarianism? We are here this morning because we all need answers to that question.

Former Prime Minister and current President Erdogan has been in power since 2003. During his time in office he has steadily increased his power over the military -- something that those of us who care about human rights usually welcome. In August 2014 he won Turkey's first-ever popular election for president, and there is no doubt that his party, the ruling AKP, has a large popular base.

Yet for at least the last ten years, most observers agree that democracy has lost ground to creeping authoritarianism.

Turkey is an example of the use of democratic means to pursue anti-democratic ends. To be more precise, it's a case of the use of elections and parliamentary majorities to consolidate the power of the executive; reduce the independence of the judiciary; stigmatize and criminalize the opposition and the media; restrict protest; and generally undermine the rule of law.

One morning, the folks who don't support the dominant party wake up and realize that the democracy they thought they were living in has turned into an authoritarian nightmare. It doesn't happen overnight; it happens over years.

In Turkey, last summer's coup attempt served as an excuse for the government to intensify repression. In the last 9 months, human rights abuses have occurred on a massive scale that has suddenly made the deterioration of democracy very evident and very visible to the whole world.

As many as 130,000 public workers have been fired, 45,000 people have been arrested, hundreds of journalists have had their credentials revoked and dozens of media outlets have been shut down, all without due process or recourse. Thousands of businesses, schools and associations have been closed. Human rights groups have documented intimidation, ill-treatment and torture of those in police custody. And in the ongoing conflict with the Kurds in southeast Turkey, we on the Commission have received reports of allegations of war crimes committed against civilians.

In a country that's a NATO ally, this is a mind-boggling record.

Most analysts of the April referendum have concluded that the constitutional changes further weaken the independence of the justice system and reinforce Erdogan's power. Thousands more people have been purged from the civil service and the military since the vote took place.

Victims of the government's abuses who have spoken with us – journalists, doctors, lawyers, judges and scholars -- are searching for what to do next to protect themselves and others.

And all of this is taking place against the backdrop of the conflict with the Kurds, the ongoing wars in Syria and Iraq, and the fight against ISIS – conflicts in which Turkey's interests and those of the U.S. and Europe do not always coincide.

I think it is clear that we are at a crossroads in the U.S.-Turkey bilateral relationship. Turkey is a strategically important country. But I do not believe that repressive regimes that consistently violate fundamental human rights make for reliable allies. Nor do I think massive repression is effective for countering extremism – it more likely feeds it.

So I am eager to hear what our panelists think the U.S. government, and particularly the Congress, may be able to do to help get Turkey back on track, and in the meantime, to protect those who are getting trampled by the Erdogan government.

I now turn to Everett Price, Policy Advisor at the Helsinki Commission, who will moderate the briefing and discussion.