

Unjust Treatment and Intolerance: The Dynamic of Religious Politics and Christianity in Türkiye



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ABSTRACT: Türkiye was the centre of Christianity until the Ottoman Empire invaded Constantinople in the 15th century. The Ottoman Empire granted rights and protection to the Orthodox Christians, but major conversions to Moslems with political purposes occurred during this period. In 1924, Türkiye became a modern state based on the secularism of Kemal Ataturk and then controlled religious affairs. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has held power since 2003, amended the constitution and strengthened Islamic politics in Türkiye in the last decade, benefiting conservative Muslims. Therefore, this study aimed to elaborate on the impact of religious political dynamics in Türkiye from the Roman Empire to the Erdogan regime on Christianity in the country. The theory of religious politics and a qualitative methodology with a historical comparative approach was adopted. The result showed that the political transformation in Türkiye, from the Ottoman Era and Kemal's secularism to Erdogan's Islamism, did not change the political attitude of the Turkish government towards Christianity. Regrettably, Christians continue to experience unpleasant and discriminatory treatment from the government, particularly after the failed 2016 coup, due to the perception that Christians are often associated with the interests of the US and Western countries.

KEYWORDS: Türkiye, Kemal's secularism, Islamic Politics, Erdoganism, Christianity in Türkiye

INTRODUCTION

In November 2019, during a meeting at the US White House, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan assured the Turkish government would restore churches damaged by the civil war in northeastern Syria. In reaffirming this commitment, he reiterated to Western leaders the guarantee of the Turkish government on the security and freedom of worship for Christians, as minorities in the country. Due to its fragile condition in the past decade, the US and Western European countries expressed deep concern regarding Christianity in Türkiye. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by President Erdogan, came to power through electoral victories in 2002 and has since implemented a series of political and civil rights reforms that have steered Turkey towards a more centralized, authoritarian style of governance often referred to as *Erdoganism*. Such a policy will likely threaten Christians' security and freedom to worship in Türkiye¹.

The pressure on Christians in Türkiye intensified after being linked to the failed coup in 2016. Several priests were accused of involvement and cooperated with the CIA to carry out the coup². According to Demir³, some pastors were also charged with terrorism and conspiring to help Kurdish separatism, as they gave bread and water to the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) members. The Turkish government also seems reluctant to accept and protect the Eastern Christians who returned to their ancestral lands southeast of the predominantly Kurdish state. In early 2020, a distressing incident unfolded when a Chaldean Catholic couple, who had recently resettled

¹ Smith, S., "Erdogan Vows to Protect Christians in Syria, Says Their Churches will be Rebuilt", *The Christian Post*, November 14, 2019: <https://www.christianpost.com/news/erdogan-vows-to-protect-christians-in-syria-says-their-churches-will-be-rebuilt.html>

² Socolovsky, J., "Turkey post-coup crackdown also targets US Protestants", *Regilion News Service*, December 4, 2016: <https://religionnews.com/2016/12/04/turkey-post-coup-crackdown-also-targets-us-protestants/>

³ Demir, M., "Assyrian priest suspected of 'terrorism' to go on trial on 3 November." *Asianews*, September 29, 2020: <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Assyrian-priest-suspected-of-'terrorism'-to-go-on-trial-on-3-November-51161.html>

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in their ancestral village on the Türkiye-Iraq border disappeared. The mutilated body of the wife was found only two months later, while the husband remained missing⁴.

Interestingly, Türkiye is a country that has strong historical ties with Christianity. However, Christians are often portrayed as part of Western powers that could undermine Türkiye's identity, leading to the arrests of Christian leaders recently⁵. According to the report of Christian Network Europe (CNE) in January 2023, Türkiye has the highest persecution of Christians in the European region. Such a situation has raised concerns for the US, EU member states, and other international communities regarding religious intolerance and the restriction of freedom of worship in Türkiye. It is worth noting that the US is the main ally of Türkiye in NATO, and the EU countries are its largest trading and investment partners⁶.

This study mainly discusses the impact of religious politics in Türkiye, from the Ottoman Empire to the current days, on Christianity in the country. It also elaborates on the history of Christianity in Türkiye and how political dynamics in Türkiye have brought consequences towards Christianity and religious life in the society. Using the concept of religious politics and the methodology of qualitative, particularly the historical-comparative approach, it was discovered that the political dynamic in Türkiye over the last decade has exacerbated human rights violations mainly to the Christians. Such a situation provokes pressure from the US and EU countries, whereas Erdogan needs their assistance to deal with the country's national economic issues.

This study concludes that the political transformation of Türkiye, from the Caliphate to secularism and lately Islamism, brings no significant change to Christianity. Regrettably, Christians continue to experience unpleasant and discriminatory treatment from the government, during the Ottoman Sultanate, secular government, and Erdogan regime with Islamist's influence in the politics. The persecution of Christians increased dramatically during the 2016 coup, as they were accused of supporting the US and Western interests that intended to undermine Turkey's nationalist identity. To discuss the topic, this study initially describes the history of Christianity in Türkiye and the political dynamics in the country, from the Ottoman Sultanate to the Erdogan regime. Finally, the study explained the impact of the current political system on the lives of religious communities in Türkiye, mainly the Christians.

STUDY METHODS

This study uses a qualitative design, mainly a historical-comparative approach. The majority of studies used the qualitative method because it emphasizes the importance of social and political contexts to understand social and political phenomena. According to Neuman, social and political studies understand that the meaning of social and political action depends on the context in which the phenomenon arises. It is believed that social and political phenomena do not occur due to a single factor but are always related to other phenomena. Therefore, qualitative studies pay attention to previous occurrences and do not view the current situation as a single event. Although the context is critical, sociopolitical studies also recognize that the same event or behavior has different meanings in different cultures or historical periods⁷.

In contrast to quantitative methods, which typically collect information specific to many cases, qualitative use case or comparative study approaches to collect large amounts of information on one or more cases. This study adopted the historical-comparative approach as it is appropriate for explaining a particular social-political system and distinguishing shared and unique values. The method is also appropriate to show what is learned as part of a historical event that also exists in a cultural context. It also provides opportunities for study analysts to generate new concepts and broaden perspectives by examining historical events⁸.

This study used secondary data from various sources, such as books, journals, news, and documents, as well as notes of history written by actors in the past or observers and scholars who understand the context of Christianity and religious politics in Türkiye. Historical records are employed in this context to depict past events and serve as a basis for analysis, enabling interconnection and comparisons with current situations. The study also conducted interviews with resource persons who understand the situation and political dynamics in Türkiye, particularly during the Erdogan era. The data collected from these various sources were further triangulated to ensure their suitability and completeness from various perspectives. This approach aimed to provide an accurate overview and draw well-founded conclusions.

⁴ Erdemir, A. and Maenza, N., "Turkey Needs to Change its Policy and Rhetoric Toward Religious Minorities." *Newsweek*, 2021, April 29, 2021: <https://www.newsweek.com/turkey-needs-change-its-policy-rhetoric-toward-religious-minorities-opinion-1586803>

⁵ Kilinc, R., "Christians have lived in Turkey for two millennia – but their future is uncertain." *The Conversation*, November 21, 2021: <https://theconversation.com/christians-have-lived-in-turkey-for-two-millennia-but-their-future-is-uncertain-127296>

⁶ Robinson, K., "Council on Foreign Relations.", *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 24, 2022: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/turkeys-growing-foreign-policy-ambitions>

⁷ Neuman, L. W., *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, Seventh Edition. (Edinburgh: Pearson Education Limited, 2014).

⁸ Blaikie, N., *Designing Social Research: The Logic of Anticipation*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ali Mubarak confirms a close relationship between religion and politics as both aimed to acquire power and use it to achieve their goals despite the differences in their methods. Religion uses the religiosity of its followers to gain their support for gaining power. On the other hand, politics uses various intrigues and diplomacy to win public opinion democratically or even seize power with the help of the army in more traditional societies⁹. Riaz Hassan elucidates the case of Islamization in Pakistan as an example of a regime employing religion to establish its political legitimacy. The instrumental utilization of religion is accompanied by social and political forces, including using the military for political purposes¹⁰.

Peter Berger concludes that when religion has been institutionalized, religious violence and intolerance are likely to occur¹¹. Berger's study confirmed that religious intolerance emerges when religion, previously shaped by human beings and their interactions, undergoes a transformation, becoming a mechanism of control through norms and religious values. As an institution, mainly with a political framework, religion makes its supporters capitalize on various methods, from the most subtle ways to the acts of violence, in achieving their interests. Therefore, the International Christian Concern (ICC) reported to the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, saying that religious intolerance around the world is often deeply rooted in legal and political structures. Such structures serve as a basis for persecution, institutionalizing national identity under one religion, creating a legal system for discrimination, and in some cases providing persecutors for their actions¹².

Regarding the relationship between religion and the state, John A. Titaley explained some forms of the state. First, a secularistic state, in which religion is prevented and its existence is not supported. In this case, religion is not recognized as part of the state and has no role in the public sphere. Second, a secular state, in which religion exists and is recognized by the state, but may not be involved in political life. The third is a religious state, where one religion, usually the majority, is recognized as the official religion of the country. Therefore, public rules are carried out by referring to the rules codified in that religion to a greater extent. It is conceivable that other religion, other than the official, is relegated to a subordinate position, becoming second-class religions¹³.

The political system of Türkiye has undergone a drastic change from the Caliphate system during the Ottoman Sultanate to a secular system under Kemal Attaturk, and more recently evolving into Islamism under Erdogan in the past decade. The Ottoman caliphate system placed religion in an important position in politics. Islam plays a very strong role in the political and socio-cultural systems. According to Daver, Islam was not only perceived as a faith and creed under Ottoman Empire but also a legal system that regulated all aspects, including political, social, criminal, and cultural lives. In 1924, Kemal Ataturk abolished the Caliphate and the Ministry of Religious Affairs to establish a modern state with a secular system¹⁴.

Bülent Daver confirmed that the secularism of Kemal was different from the West. It is true that Kemal banned religious orders in 1925, in 1926, the Western style of Civil Law was introduced, and in 1928, the Constitution was amended and deleted the Article of State Constitution stating that "the state religion is Islam." Kemal even suspended religious teachings in public schools and announced that the prayer language is Turkish, not Arabic. However, Kemal perceives Turkish secularism as not only an attempt to isolate the influence of the dominant religion from public life, it also aims to liberate society from the clutches of Islam. Therefore, according to Daver, the secularism of Kemal is nationalist, positivist, and anti-traditionalist¹⁵. Based on these considerations, the Turkish government controls religious affairs and made it a state department. Furthermore, the government disbursed a lot of money from the state budget for religious matters, including paying salaries of the Islamic clergies.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Christianity Before Modern Türkiye

⁹ Mubarak, A., "Religion and Politics: Integration, Separation and Conflict", *Irenees.net*, 2009: https://www.irenees.net/bdf_fiche-analyse-884_en.html

¹⁰ Hassan, R., 'Islamization: An Analysis of Religious, Political and Social Change in Pakistan.' *Middle Eastern Studies* 21:3 (1985), 263-284.

¹¹ Berger, P., "Religion and Global Civil Society." In M. J. (Ed.), *Religion in Global Civil Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 11-22.

¹² ICC, International Christian Concern., "Religious Intolerance in International Law and Policy," Report Prepared for the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, May, *International Christian Concern*, 2020: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Religion/Submissions/CSOs/36.international-christian-concern.pdf>.

¹³ Titaley, John A., "Asian Models of Religious Diversity: The Uniqueness of Indonesian Religiosity" in Pye, Michael, et. al (Eds.) *Religious Harmony: Problems, Practice, and Education*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006).

¹⁴ Daver, Büllent., "Secularism in Turkey", in Ankara University SBF Dergisi, 43:01 (1988).

¹⁵ Ibid.

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Christianity in Türkiye, formerly known as Asia Minor, began in Jerusalem around 30-33 A.D. The book of Acts 12:19-26 records that due to persecution against the Christians in Jerusalem, they spread to Phoenicia (now in Lebanon and Syria), Cyprus (southern Türkiye), and Antioch (now Antkya). They preached the gospel to the Jews and the Greeks in these cities. Historian Eusebius of Caesarea and Syriac Church tradition mentioned that Apostle Peter evangelized in Antioch in 37 AD and founded one of the first apostolic churches in Christianity¹⁶.

Christians under Roman Empire experienced persecution, specifically during the reign of Emperor Nero in 37-54 AD (Miltetti 2016). Nevertheless, the Edict of Milan issued by Emperor Constantine I in 313 AD relieved Christians. This decree ended the prosecution of the Roman Empire and returned the confiscated properties of Christians during the previous empires. Christians began to worship freely without fear of torture or imprisonment¹⁷. Interestingly, Emperor Constantine I, initially driven by the intention to safeguard Christians from persecution and grant Christianity equal standing with pagan beliefs via the Edict of Milan, eventually ascended to become the first Roman emperor who professed the Christian faith. Emperor Constantine then encouraged Christianization in the Roman Empire¹⁸ and simultaneously held church and religious power. Such religious politics strengthened the influence of Christianity and played an essential role in the Roman Empire and its domination. In many ways, the Roman Empire governed through the church, while the church, in turn, exerted its influence through the government. The two were closely related and influenced each other¹⁹.

In addition to putting Christianity into politics in the Roman Empire, Constantine moved his power to Constantinople, or present-day Istanbul, in 330 AD. Constantinople became the centre of the Byzantine Empire after Rome was divided into two, namely Western (centred on Rome) and Eastern (centred on Constantinople). Following the disintegration of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century due to many rebellions and attacks from the Germans, the Eastern Roman Empire continued to survive until the XV century²⁰. According to Shepard, the Byzantine Empire survived for over 1,000 years due to its ability to maintain an efficient mix of Christian-based communities with organized administrative institutions and good defense capabilities²¹. In contrast to the Western Roman Empire, which often invaded its neighboring areas, the Byzantine Empire developed good relationships through trading by building important ports to connect the Western and Eastern regions²².

The Byzantine Empire finally collapsed when the Ottoman Sultanate, under Sultan Mehmet II, conquered Constantinople in 1453. The young Mehmet saw the siege of Constantinople as a means to demonstrate his authority before the Ottoman ministers and nobles, ultimately emerging triumphant. On the other hand, the failure of Constantine XI and the Pope to enlist the support of Western Kings made Constantinople eventually submit to the authority of Sultan Mehmet II²³. The newly powerful sultanate quickly reconstructed all Byzantium relics, including its religious life, and continued to survive until the XX century²⁴.

Benjamin Braude (2014) stated that the Sultanate of Ottoman implemented two systems against non-Muslims, namely *surgun* and *devshirme*²⁵. *Surgun* is a forced population transfer system that was conducted with three purposes: (1) punitive deportation against certain groups, (2) ethnic engineering influencing the entire communities and regions, and (3) socio-economic development. This system profoundly impacted Greeks, Jews, and Orthodox Christians residing in the Ottoman territories of Türkiye as they were forcibly displaced from the region. However, it was less effective during the reign of Sultan Mehmet II as it would only endanger his leadership in the new region.

¹⁶ Farag, L., "The Middle East". In P. P. (Ed.), *Christianities in Asia*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2011), pp. 233-235.

¹⁷ Lenski, N., "The Significance of the Edict of Milan." In A. E. (Ed), *Constantine: Religious Faith and Imperial Policy* (London : Routledge, 2017), pp. 17-47.

¹⁸ Mitchell, S., "A History of the Later Roman Empire AD 284-641". (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2015).

¹⁹ Opoku, F., "Constantine and Christianity: The Formation of Church-State Relations in the Roman Empire", *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies* 5:1 (2015), pp. 17-34.

²⁰ Mitchell, S., "A History of the Later Roman Empire AD 284-641". (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2015).

²¹ Shepard, J., "Approaching Byzantium." In J. S. (Editor), *The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire c. 500-1492* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 7-8.

²² Subroto, L. H., "Kekaisaran Romawi Timur: Sejarah, Masa Kejayaan, dan Keruntuhan", *Kompas*, Januari 14, 2022: <https://www.kompas.com/stori/read/2022/01/14/120000979/kekaisaran-romawi-timur-sejarah-masa-kejayaan-dan-keruntuhan?page=all#:~:text=Kekaisaran%20Bizantium%20mampu%20berkembang%20pesat,penguasa%20besar%20pertama%20Kekaisaran%20Bizantium.>

²³ Harl, K. W., "The Ottoman Empire." (Virginia: The Great Courses, 2017).

²⁴ Kermeli, E., "(Byzantine Empire." In B. A. Ga'bor A'goston, *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), pp. 107-111.

²⁵ Braude, B., "Introduction." In B. B. (Editor), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Abridged Edition* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014), pp. 43-48.

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The *devshirme* system emerged after *the surgun* was considered less effective for the treatment of Christians. The *devshirme* system aimed to foster loyalty among Christians towards the new Ottoman government. As part of its initiative, Ottoman authorities went to the countryside and identified young rural Christians who were ready to be trained in the service of the sultan in the military and administration of the Ottoman. A condition for participation is to embrace Islam. This initiative benefited most Christians since they earned adequate salaries to improve their social and economic status. Such strategic implementation was considered more effective and led to large-scale conversions. The Ottoman sultanate imposed the obligation to pay taxes or *jizya* for non-Muslim residents in exchange for their protection (*dhimmi*). This condition is considered detrimental to Christians, specifically those who live in poverty, thereby prompting conversion as a rational choice for such individuals.

Despite the conversion, the Sultanate maintained harmonious relations between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in Istanbul and its entire domain through regulations that support multi-religious and ethnic life. The Ottoman Sultanate exercised control over a vast territory spanning from the Atlantic region to the Euphrates, from Russia to the Sahara Desert in Arab, and from the Middle East to North Africa, having racial, cultural, and religious diversity. Such a situation forced the Ottoman to value diversity and provide protection to the people. According to Hakim, the Ottoman protected the construction of Greek churches for gaining the loyalty of Christians in the territory since there was hostility with the Church of Orthodox Serbia²⁶.

Richard Fletcher mentioned that during the Sultanate of Ottoman rule, the population of Istanbul was divided into a proportion of 60% Muslim and 40% Christian. This indicates that the population of Istanbul at that period was predominantly Muslim but the number of Christians was still reasonably significant. Christians got protection in their daily lives, including worship²⁷. Despite the fact that the non-Muslims, such as Christians and Jews living in the Ottoman territory, paid higher taxes and were rejected to hold higher positions in government, they were still treated well. They remained occupied with honorable societal positions, such as doctors or diplomats²⁸.

Political Dynamics in Modern Türkiye: From Secularism to Islamism

After surviving for approximately 500 years, Ottoman power weakened in the 1900s. This was partly due to the backwardness of Türkiye compared to European countries which had experienced the industrial revolution in the 18th century. When World War (WW) I broke out in 1914, the Ottoman Empire, which was initially neutral, altered its stance and forged a treaty with Germany. The defeat in the German camp in 1918 made Ottoman Empire lose their powers in some territories. The defeat of the Ottoman Empire and its consequences prompted a socio-political revolution in Türkiye. In its National Congressional Conference in July 1919, members of Congress decided to appoint Mustafa Kemal Pasha, an army chief, to lead representatives of the Committee to negotiate a settlement of the war with the Allies as the victors. According to Zurcher, Mustafa and other nationalist leaders rejected the decision imposed by the Allies and resisted any attempt to separate parts of Turkish territory from the Ottoman²⁹.

A peace treaty was concluded in early 1920, stating that Istanbul remained under Ottoman control. However, other territories, such as Anatolia, were given to Greece, and some others were handed over to France, Italy, and England. This agreement led to war between Türkiye and Greece from 1920 to 1922 and the victory of Türkiye resulted in an exchange of populations. Turkish Orthodox Christianity was agreed to be transferred to Greece or other European territories. Instead, Muslims living in Greece were moved to Türkiye. Coupled with the thirty-year Christian genocide in 1894-1924³⁰, the forced displacement caused the Christian population in Türkiye to drop dramatically, from 20% before World War I to only 2.6% according to the census in 1927³¹. Currently, the number of Christians dropped to only about 0.2% of the total population³². Ahmad stated that Christians in Türkiye refer to Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrian communities who had no problems with the Ottoman-Turkish state and were considered loyal to the government³³.

²⁶ Hakim, L., "Hubungan Antar Agama Pada Masa Kerajaan Usmani.", *Historia Madania* 3:1 (2019), pp. 93-112.

²⁷ Fletcher, R., "Relasi Damai Islam dan Kristen" (Terjemahan dari *The Cross and the Crescent*). (Tangerang: Pustaka Alvabet, 2009).

²⁸ Nashrullah, N., "Toleransi Era Ottoman Turki Patahkan Tuduhan Negatif Barat." *Islamdigest*, Mei 19, 2020: <https://islamdigest.republika.co.id/berita/qajrjys320/toleransi-era-ottoman-turki-patahkan-tuduhan-negatif-barat>

²⁹ Zurcher, E. J., "Turkey: A Modern History", Fourth Edition. (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2017).

³⁰ Morris, B., and Ze'evi, D., "The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of Its Christian Minorities, 1894-1924.", (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

³¹ Rahman, F., "Sejarah Perkembangan Islam di Turki.", *Tasamuh: Jurnal Studi Islam* 19:2 (2018), pp. 289-308.

³² CNE.News., "For a Christian in Europe, Turkey is the worst country.", *CNE News*, January 18, 2023: <https://cne.news/article/2408-for-a-christian-in-europe-turkey-is-the-worst-country>

³³ Ahmad, F., "Unionist Relations with Greek, Armenian, and Jewish Communities of the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1914." In B. L. (eds.), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society* (New York: Holmes and Meier Pub., 1982), pp. 425-428.

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At the same time, Mustafa Kemal Pasha, later known as Kemal Atatürk, began to build Turkish nationalism. The cultural movements that emerged at the end of Sultan Abdul Hamid's reign were combined with European-pioneered nationalism, Russian influence, and, notably, Islam. This combination spawned two significant changes in the political system of Türkiye. First, the Turkish state was changed from a sultanate to a republic, with Kemal Ataturk as the president, and appointed Sultan Abdul Hamid as Caliph, who became a symbol of unifying religion, not a political ruler. However, the Caliphate system was officially abolished in March 1924. Second, the secularism of Kemal replaced the Caliphate system, delineating a clear separation between religion and state power, with religious affairs coming under governmental control³⁴.

The Turkish nationalism of Kemal was based on the commitment to build Türkiye into a modern country. During the leadership of Kemal from 1924 to 1938, Hagia Sophia Mosque was changed into a museum and abolished the Islamic religious court, which was later replaced with the Swiss-law system. According to Ismail, Kemal instructed the call to prayer in mosques to be practiced in Turkish, not Arabic³⁵. The inclusion of Islamic tradition and values in his government was rejected and built the country with six principles of ideology, namely republicanism, nationalism, populism, statism, secularism, and revolutionism. By these principles, Kemal put religion under the domination of the state. The government exercised stringent control over the country's Muslim majority and their religious practices³⁶. The government also subjected minority groups, such as Christians, Jews, and Kurds, to discriminatory practices, including charging ten times higher taxes and forced migration³⁷.

Nevertheless, the secularism of Kemal has at least two weaknesses. First, the pattern of Ataturk's secularism did not penetrate rural communities. Even urban dwellers want to give more to Islam than Kemal's secularism³⁸. Second, the secularism of Kemal tends to be applied using a militaristic approach³⁹. In 2001, dissatisfaction with secularism implemented in authoritarian ways made some conservative Islamic figures pin their hopes on Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the establishment of a new political party in Türkiye, *Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi* (AKP) or Justice and Development Party. The party is considered democratically conservative, prioritizing Islamic identity and values⁴⁰.

The AKP enjoyed strong support from the conservative Muslims, propelling Erdogan to victory in the 2003 election. Initially, upon assuming the role of Prime Minister, Erdogan adhered to the principle of secularism and had no intention of changing the ideology and constitution of Modern Türkiye. However, an economic crisis occurred after Erdogan was elected President in 2014. This crisis was exacerbated by the emergence of the pandemic in 2020, which made the Turkish people lose trust in Erdogan⁴¹. To gain the trust of the Turkish people, specifically from conservative Islamic groups, Erdogan began to consistently fight for Islamic values and traditions. This included the use of the hijab in government offices and freeing its use in all sectors, which was previously forbidden by Kemal Ataturk. Leveraging human rights considerations, Erdogan achieved a significant breakthrough in 2013 by successfully abolishing the hijab ban for female police officers, military personnel, and government offices⁴².

³⁴ Syhadha, F., "Nasionalisme, Sekularisme di Turki." *Majalah Ilmiah Tabuah: Ta'limat, Budaya, Agama dan Humaniora* 24:1 (2020), pp. 1-14.

³⁵ Ismail, F., "Hijab Dalam Pusaran Politik Turki", *Sindo News*, November 2, 2018.:

<https://nasional.sindonews.com/berita/1351263/18/hijab-dalam-pusaran-politik-turki>

³⁶ Basyar, Hamdan, "Religious Live in Türkiye during Kemal's Secularism." *Interview with Angel Damayanti*, (Depok: University of Indonesia, May 29, 2023).

³⁷ Ozbudun, E., "Turkey-Plural Society and Monolithical State." In A. K. (Eds.), *Democracy, Islam and Secularism in Turkey* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. 219-244.

³⁸ Junaidi, A., "Kebijakan Politik Recep Tayyip Erdogan dan Islamisme Turki Kontemporer." In *Right Jurnal Agama dan Hak Azasi Manusia* 6:1 (2016), pp. 142-200.

³⁹ Misrawi, Z., "Erdoganisme dan Sekularisme yang Rapuh", *Detik News*, Juli 23, 2020: <https://news.detik.com/kolom/d-5105528/erdoganisme-dan-sekularisme-yang-rapuh>

⁴⁰ Rabasa, Angel and Larrabee, F. Stephen., "The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey.", (California: RAND Corporation, 2008).

⁴¹ Misrawi, Z., "Erdoganisme dan Sekularisme yang Rapuh" *Detik News*, Juli 23, 2020: <https://news.detik.com/kolom/d-5105528/erdoganisme-dan-sekularisme-yang-rapuh>

⁴² Ismail, F., "Hijab Dalam Pusaran Politik Turki". *Sindo News*, November 2, 2018.:

<https://nasional.sindonews.com/berita/1351263/18/hijab-dalam-pusaran-politik-turki>

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By promoting Islamic values, President Erdogan was considered to have caused concern to Western countries and international society⁴³. Furthermore, the consolidation of Erdogan's Islamic political agenda has been observed to exhibit authoritarian tendencies⁴⁴. In mid-2020, Erdogan officially turned Hagia Sophia into a mosque and allowed Muslims to worship. Such a policy has provoked Erdogan to be criticized by the international community, including Pope Francis, UNESCO, and Orthodox Christian leaders⁴⁵. Islam was also incorporated into Turkish foreign policy and used as *soft power* for geopolitical strategy, mainly in the Middle East. According to Sarfati, Türkiye, accompanied by Qatar, protects Political Islam and challenges the regional hegemon of Saudi Arabia⁴⁶.

The Impact of *Erdoganism* on Contemporary Christianity

In their study, Ihsan Yilmaz and Galib Bashirov shed light on the political transformation of Türkiye in the last two decades, which they called *Erdoganism*. It has four main dimensions which make the political regime of Erdogan different from the previous secularism of Sultanism and Kemal. They are namely (1) electoral authoritarianism as the electoral system, (2) neopatrimonialism as the economic system, (3) populism as the political strategy, and (4) Islamism as the political ideology. According to Yilmaz and Bashirov, the fourth dimension of *Erdoganism*, the Islamist outlook, predominantly emerged during the second term of President Erdogan in office. After his power was consolidated and the state was captured, the political regime of Erdogan has increasingly become Islamist. It carries some critical Islamic notions to domestic politics and foreign policies⁴⁷.

George Koukoudakis confirms that after Erdogan served as the President in 2014, the AKP enacted a series of Islamization with conservative laws. They also applied authoritarian rules that were perceived negatively by Turkish society and the international community. This is because the rules brought instability in political life and polarization in religious, social, and ethnic aspects⁴⁸. According to Anna Maria Beylunioglu, the Islamic politics of AKP lack to protect the religious freedom of non-Muslim minorities, including Christians. Using Islamic principles, the attitude of AKP to religious freedom remains restrictive, particularly for non-Muslims and their rights to practice their faith. Non-Muslims are waiting for the legal framework to provide constitutional protection for their rights to worship and against discrimination⁴⁹.

The government of Erdogan is also perceived to have discriminated against Christians living in Türkiye as they are considered part of a foreign power to undermine Turkish identity. Erdogan and the ruling party depict Christians as threatening national stability after a failed coup in 2016⁵⁰. For instance, Andrew Brunson, a pastor who has lived and served a Christian ministry in Türkiye for over two decades, was arrested in October 2016 for treason. However, after the intervention of the US government in October 2018, the pastor was released⁵¹. Brunson is not the only Christian religious leader subjected to orchestrated vilification by the Turkish government. The pro-government of Türkiye also resorted to defamatory tactics by baselessly accusing the Greek Orthodox ecumenical party of conspiring with the CIA to orchestrate the coup⁵². Two churches in Malatya and Trabzon, in eastern Türkiye, were vandalized right after

⁴³ Wishon, J., "Erdogan Fans the Flames of Religious Intolerance: Christians Blamed for Bringing COVID-19 to Turke.", *CBN News*, Oktober 12, 2022: <https://www2.cbn.com/news/news/erdogan-fans-flames-religious-intolerance-christians-blamed-bringing-covid-19-turkey>

⁴⁴ Yilmaz, I., "Erdogan's Political Journey: From Victimized Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist.", *ECPS Leader Profile Series #7*, Februari 1, 2021: <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-7-2.pdf>

⁴⁵ CNN, "Kisah Kontroversi Hagia Sophia di Era Ataturk dan Erdogan.", *CNN News*, Oktober 18, 2021: <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/internasional/20211018102231-113-709075/kisah-kontroversi-hagia-sophia-di-era-ataturk-dan-erdogan>

⁴⁶ Sarfati, Y., "The Status Quo, Extremism, and Reform: The Many Faces of Religious Authority in Turkey.", *Baker Institute for Public Policy*, Oktober 05, 2019: https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/59253804/Brief_Sarfati_published_05101920190514-109992-5yybyk-libre.pdf?1557886168=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DThe_Status_Quo_Extremism_and_Reform_The.pdf&Expires=1681056210&Signature=SlbkK06w20

⁴⁷ Yilmaz, I., and Bashirov, G., "The AKP after 15 Years: Emergence of Erdoganism in Turkey.", *Third World Quarterly* 39:9 (2018), pp. 1812-1830.

⁴⁸ Koukoudakis, G., "Authoritarianism in Turkey: From "Kemalism to Erdoganism" via Democratic Reforms and Economic Development.", *Romanian Journal of History and International Studies* 4:1 (2017), pp. 63-101.

⁴⁹ Beylunioglu, A. M., "Freedom of Religion and Non-Muslim Minorities in Turkey.", *Turkish Policy Quarterly* (2015), pp. 139-147.

⁵⁰ Hoff, A.C., "Turkey Turns On Its Christians.", *Middle East Quarterly* 28:3 (2018, Summer).

⁵¹ Kilinc, R., "Christians have lived in Turkey for two millennia – but their future is uncertain.", *The Conversation*, November 21, 2021: <https://theconversation.com/christians-have-lived-in-turkey-for-two-millennia-but-their-future-is-uncertain-127296>

⁵² Maenza, A. E., "Turkey Needs to Change its Policy and Rhetoric Toward Religious Minorities | Opinion.", *Newsweek*, April 29, 2021: <https://www.newsweek.com/turkey-needs-change-its-policy-rhetoric-toward-religious-minorities-opinion-1586803>

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the coup. Other churches faced serious terror threats, with the government doing little to stop such a Christophobic phenomenon. Hoff said anti-Christian hate speech has increased in social and conventional media since 2016⁵³.

Interestingly, during the leadership of Erdogan as Prime Minister from 2003 to 2014, there was an offer for Assyrian Christians to return to Türkiye. These communities refer to those who were displaced to Europe in the 1920s. They were promised to regain their property, which the Turkish government previously confiscated. Despite past fears about genocide during World War I and pressure from Ottoman Empire, some Assyrian Christians living in Türkiye mentioned that their lives have improved since the 1990s and they enjoyed greater freedom of worship under Erdogan. Nevertheless, they remain concerned about their dwindling numbers and fading culture and language⁵⁴. Due to the relatively small population of Christians, the ruling government often ignores their voice and interests.

In 2017, Erdogan held a referendum to amend the Turkish Constitution and succeeded in changing the government system from parliamentary to presidential. Such a presidential system gave greater power to the President as it authorized Erdogan to become the head of government as well as head of state. For some observers, Erdogan is strengthening his power in legal ways⁵⁵. However, this political transformation has raised concerns among Western countries and the international community that Erdogan becomes more authoritarian and encourages human rights violations, including against minority groups⁵⁶.

In the present day, following a formidable challenge in the 2023 election, Erdogan continues to struggle with criticism, mainly due to the economic downturn and a slow response to earthquakes that occurred in February 2023. It is important to note that the current political situation in Türkiye explains how the Turkish leader runs its domestic political system while maintaining good relationships with external parties, specifically the US and EU member-states as its allies and close partners in dealing with economic problems. These countries are likely to persistently demand that Erdogan ensures the protection and respect of minority groups, while also providing assistance, as a crucial step towards accepting Türkiye as a member of the European Union. Therefore, Erdogan needs to be wise in applying his foreign and domestic policies, specifically when dealing with religious intolerance towards minority groups.

CONCLUSION

The political dynamics in Türkiye have demonstrated a pattern wherein minorities, including Christians, have often experienced unpleasant and discriminatory treatment throughout the transition from the Ottoman to the Erdogan era. Such a situation becomes a challenge to the current leader of Türkiye, as they are required to pay attention to the security and freedom of worship for the minorities. Furthermore, the minority communities, including the Christians, deserve such protection for the sake of human rights and gaining international support in solving the economic problems of Türkiye. Preserving the history and identity of Christians, who have long stayed in the territory, benefits Türkiye. In addition, the presence of several sites left by the Roman Empire and the seven early churches in modern Türkiye, coupled with Hagia Sophia, has become the center of religious tourism attractions for the international community.

This study proved that Christians have consistently experienced persecution since the period of the Ottoman Empire to the secularism system and during the Erdogan era. Contrary to Berger's theory which asserts the impact of religious institutionalization with religious violence and intolerance, and Titaley's explanation regarding the state and religion relationship, an interesting result was found. Throughout the history of Türkiye, the changing relationship between religion and the state from Chaliphate to secularism and then Islamism did not change the treatment of minorities, notably Christianity. Furthermore, acts of persecution, injustice, and discriminatory treatment against Christians continue to persist. Such acts of intolerance take the forms of forced migration, paying higher taxes, and political conversions that marginalize the population of Christians and go unnoticed by the government, particularly within legal and political structures.

Nevertheless, the increasing persecution of Christians lately occurred over allegations that they were involved in the failed 2016 coup backed by the US. Such a treatment has become an instrument used by the US and EU member-states to put pressure on the Turkish government to support their international interest in democracy and human rights promotion. In order for Türkiye to maintain its aspirations of becoming an EU member-state and to receive crucial economic assistance from Western nations to bolster its economy, it is apparent for the government to reassess its treatment of minorities, particularly Christians.

⁵³ Hoff, A.C., "Turkey Turns On Its Christians.", *Middle East Quarterly* 28:3 (2018, Summer).

⁵⁴ Subekti, S., "Komunitas Kristen Assyria di Turki Khawatir Masa Depan Mereka.", *Satu Harapan*, Juni 6, 2020: <https://www.satuharapan.com/read-detail/read/komunitas-kristen-assyria-di-turki-khawatir-masa-depan-mereka>

⁵⁵ LAW/MSH/Reuters., "Turkey Transfers Some Powers To President in DW Global Media Forum.", *Deutsche Welle*, April 7, 2018: <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-transfers-some-powers-to-president-erdogan/a-44515791>

⁵⁶ Nurwijoyo, Agung., "Political Dynamic During Erdogan Regime.", *Interview with Angel Damayanti*, (Depok: University of Indonesia, 29 May, 2023).

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