

Matters of protection

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In the year since Turkish-Armenian editor Hrant Dink's murder stained this country's fabric, my husband and I welcomed our fair-skinned son, a Turkish citizen, into the world.

Living in Turkey, I cannot deny that I am scared for his safety and his future. Since his birth, three Protestants were strangled after extensive torture in Malatya because of their faith and attempts were made on the lives of clergymen in several cities. So far authorities have shown nothing but disregard for the recent escalation in violent hatred here along ethnic, religious and nationalist lines. Soli Özel, an international relations professor at Bilgi University, wrote in daily Sabah last week, "The political authority hasn't clamped down on the matter determinedly in any of these cases and hasn't openly declared that what was done was evil." Nor have they done anything to scrap Article 301 even as it continues to hinder free speech and condemn people like Dink to petty convictions that only serve to fuel nationalist hatred.

Two days before the anniversary of a murder born of growing intolerance for minorities and free speech, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan set the public discourse over the flames of a different freedom : the right of women to wear Islamic head cover in school. He announced that his government would change the constitution to lift the ban on religious headscarves in public universities.

Flawed mission

The prime minister extols the virtues of one freedom of religion and not others, revealing a flaw in the government's mission. They want to sell the West on the idea that American-style freedom to worship (secularism) suits their own cause of upending one of the country's founding principles that limited the influence of religion on the state (laicism). If they were smart salesmen - or virtuous in their ideology - they would not choose one religion's exemption from the law over another's. By ignoring the trampled freedoms of religious and ethnic minorities to worship and express themselves, the government sets itself up to lose in the secular arena as well.

But the real losers are members of the next generation who saw images of an ethnic Armenian Turkish journalist lying face down shot after being convicted of insulting Turkishness. Leaders must take measures to reassure kids that the same won't happen to them if they speak or write freely. In what might turn out to be a bold step in the right direction, Turkish authorities arrested 30 people on Tuesday suspected of a series of politically inspired killings and attacks. Among them is a well-known lawyer involved in court cases against Dink and Turkish Nobel prize winning author Orhan Pamuk, whose case is ongoing.

Maureen Freely, a writer, journalist and translator of Pamuk's books who grew up in Istanbul, told me during an interview on Monday that the nationalist perspective could evolve into something more benign through conversation and inclusion.

"For Turkey to truly prosper, people have to have room to maneuver," said Freely, who was in town to remember Dink. Meanwhile over the weekend a Turkish court blocked access to popular video sharing Web site YouTube for the second time this year. At fault was a video insulting Atatürk, founder of the republic. But nationalists posting death threats on Web sites are protected. I stood holding my baby son on Saturday as nationalists chanted insults when Dink's wife Rakel addressed the crowd where her husband was shot. Do they enjoy more freedoms than our children will ?

Sources

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