



The Freedom House concludes Turkey is no more a free country. What is next?

A new report released by the independent, non-profit and non-partisan watchdog organization Freedom House concluded that democratic principles such as election integrity and freedom of the press, political and civil rights have severely downgraded in Turkey that is no longer ‘a free country.’ The study added that Turkey’s status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to a deeply flawed constitutional referendum that centralized power in the presidency, the mass replacement of elected mayors with government appointees, arbitrary prosecutions of rights activists and other perceived enemies of the state, and continued purges of state employees, all of which have left citizens hesitant to express their views on sensitive topics.

The Freedom House has been publishing annual reports since 1973 for assessing the condition of political rights and civil liberties around the world.

It has been a great source for scholars and academics since then. Their methodology is very strong and reliable. Their ranking provides a snapshot of the world and political circumstances in each states. It has always been interpreted seriously by international organizations and financial institutions as well.

The report noted that Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan broadened and intensified the crackdown on his perceived opponents that began after a failed 2016 coup attempt. In addition to its dire consequences for detained Turkish citizens, shuttered media outlets, and seized businesses, the chaotic purge has become intertwined with an offensive against the Kurdish minority, which in turn has fueled Turkey’s diplomatic and military interventions in neighboring Syria and Iraq.

According to Freedom House, which analyzed data from 195 countries over the 2017 calendar year, Turkey’s passage over the threshold from Partly Free to Not Free is the culmination of a long and accelerating slide in Freedom in the World.

‘The country’s score has been in free fall since 2014 due to an escalating series of assaults on the press, social media users, protesters, political parties, the judiciary, and the electoral system, as President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan fights to impose personalized control over the state and society in a deteriorating domestic and regional security environment. Erdoğan has pushed out his rivals and former allies within the ruling party, reshaped media ownership to fit his needs, and rammed through an unpopular constitutional referendum to create a “super-presidential” system without meaningful checks and balances.’

The study also noted that President Erdogan's response to the July 2016 coup attempt has become a sprawling witch hunt, resulting in the arrest of some 60,000 people, the closure of over 160 media outlets, and the imprisonment of over 150 journalists. The leaders of the third-largest party in the parliament are in prison, and nearly 100 mayors across the country have been replaced through emergency measures or political pressure from the president. The government has even pressed its crackdown beyond Turkey's borders, triggering a flood of Interpol "red notice" requests to detain critics abroad, among other effects.

How will the report affect the Asylum seekers?

Since the controversial coup attempt, thousands of military officials, government officials, academics, and civilians have been detained, arrested or fired from their positions. The purge has led to a large number of these individuals to flee Turkey and seek asylum elsewhere.

It is safe to analyze that The Freedom House report will have major consequences on several issues especially asylum applications of thousands people since the report extensively provided all the necessary data about the failure of democracy in Turkey. The report which confirmed Turkey's passage over the threshold from 'Partly Free to Not Free' is considered both essential and useful for the court processes of the Asylum applications.

How should NATO respond?

A core principle of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is that member states adhere to democratic values. Here is how NATO defines its core principle and the purpose of its very existence:

'NATO's purpose is to guarantee the freedom and security of its **members** through political and military means. **POLITICAL - NATO** promotes **democratic** values and enables **members** to consult and cooperate on defense and security-related issues to solve problems, build trust and, in the long run, prevent conflict.'

As a democratic security organization, NATO should clarify its stance and policies towards Turkey, which is openly defined as a non-democracy and not-free? Can NATO promote democratic values while one of its biggest member is already defined a dictatorship by non-partisan international organizations?

The recent study by the Freedom House which reports the decline in Turkey's human rights record may cause some U.S. lawmakers and decision makers to question the country's NATO membership.

ECtHR appears as a new venue

The shocking lower court rulings of the last several days rejecting the authority of Turkey's Constitutional Court to hear individual applications has also been considered as the end of the rule of law in Turkey. This new episode in Turkish judiciary will lead the Turkish citizens who seek legal recourse to violations of their rights at European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) which still remains a proper venue that they should pursue. The recent study by The Freedom House can definitely be used as a source by the Turkish citizens to strengthen their cases at the ECtHR despite the fact that the ruling processes of the Court may take so long.