

"To injure no man,
but to bless all mankind"

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New hope in Turkey?

By Joanne Leedom-Ackerman

HOPE springs from stony soil in Turkey. It does not bloom easily among the hundreds of writers and human rights advocates who have been sent to prison for their words over the last two decades. However, at the moment – perhaps for the next few months – some people are daring to hope.

"I believe that one wing wants Turkey to enter the millennium more democratized and with human rights and with membership in the European Union, though another wing wants to leave Turkey out of the system and in an authoritarian system," says Akin Birdal, former chairman of the Human Rights Association of Turkey, on temporary medical leave from prison. "I believe there is a significant opportunity for peace, and this is an important time."

The time is shaped by several factors. First, Turkey's bid to join the European Union is requiring the government to improve its human rights record and legal systems. In the past, the EU denied Turkey membership in part because of its human rights history. As Turkey hosts the 54-member Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) summit today and tomorrow, it will also host working meetings of various organs of the EU considering its candidacy status in Helsinki in December.

Another factor favoring this moment is the easing of tensions in southeast Turkey. Abdullah Ocalan, head of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), has urged his followers to lay down their arms. From prison, Mr. Ocalan has called the uprising "a mistake" and renounced his demand for Kurdish independence. The prospect of peace hovers for the first time in 15 years. And following the recent earthquakes, an outpouring of aid came from many countries including Greece, where relations have been improving since.

This confluence of events may allow political space to accomplish reform, according to Mr. Birdal and others, who emphasize that the window is small and the consequences of failure are large. Steps that could capitalize on this moment include cessation of hostilities in the southeast, reform of the penal code, and a broad and unconditional amnesty for nonviolent political dissidents.

Some in government want these reforms, but not everyone. The reforms could end up being cosmetic rather than systemic, with only technical adjustments in the law, restricted amnesties, and punishment by the army of former insurgents rather than clemency from the courts. Turkey must now undertake bold legal and peace initiatives, or it could lose not only its coveted place in Europe, but also the chance for peace within its borders.

At a recent press conference in Istanbul, Turkey's renowned novelist Yasar Kemal and four other noted Turkish writers declared, "At present, Turkey is seen as betraying the vital injunctions of human rights and democracy. Even Turkish government officials admit to this fact." The writers called on the government to end the bloodshed in the southeast and to embrace "her Kurdish citizens" and allow

them "to preserve their language, their cultural identity and to live within the unity of the Turkish Republic as free citizens."

The justice minister is revising the penal code. The majority of writers imprisoned in Turkey fell foul of the hundreds of laws that effectively prohibit discussion of the Kurdish situation as "disseminating separatist propaganda" and "inciting racial hatred."

Until a recent amnesty that conditionally released many journalists and writers from prison for their writing, Turkey had more than 100 writers entangled in the judicial processes – more than any other country, reports International PEN.

One of the indexes as to whether Turkey makes real progress and turns this moment into a future of fuller democracy and human rights will be the fate of its writers. One in particular casts a shadow over Turkey's claims of reform. The blind poet Esber Yagmurdereli remains in jail because his most recent offense was spoken, not written. Originally imprisoned in 1978, he remained there for 13 years before being conditionally released in 1991. Upon his release, he spoke out at a meeting in defense of Kurdish rights. This speech eventually sent him back to prison, where he is serving a 10-month sentence and the remainder of his original term. Because his case did not fall under the amnesty, he is not scheduled for release until around 2015.

His son Ugur, now 21, has seen his father only six years out of prison. "I try to

As Turkey vies for entry into the EU, as tensions with Kurds ease, and post-quake goodwill grows with other countries, this moment is rich with possibilities.

visit him now on Sundays, but the prison is far away from Istanbul. He has a typewriter and can write, but he isn't doing that well," his son told me recently.

When Yagmurdereli had to return to prison in 1997, he declared, "There is nothing further I can do. I am ready to go to jail and wait for a political decision, for political change, for constitutional change, that will allow me to be freed."

As long as Yagmurdereli remains in prison, as long as Nadire Mater, a Turkish journalist facing charges for her book of interviews with soldiers serving in the southeast, faces the prospect of prison, as long as Akin Birdal, released for only six months, faces the prospect of returning to prison, Turkey remains doggedly on this side of a new age. As we reach the end of this century, there are some people in Turkey who are hoping.

■ *Joanne Leedom-Ackerman, a vice president of International PEN and a board member of Human Rights Watch, recently returned from Turkey, where she met with government officials and writers on behalf of International PEN.*