

## THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN TURKEY

### ISSUE

The human rights situation in Turkey is paradoxical. Although Turkey is a relatively open society and a secular multiparty democracy, serious and widespread violations of human rights nevertheless occur. The number and severity of these abuses appear to be increasing; they take place mainly, but not exclusively, in the Kurdish-inhabited region of southeastern Anatolia.

### BACKGROUND

Since the return to civilian rule in 1983, Turkey has been a parliamentary democracy in which several parties compete freely for power. There was a peaceful transition in government after the ruling Motherland Party was defeated by the True Path Party (DYP) in general elections held in October 1991. The DYP and the smaller Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP), with which it formed a governing coalition, both campaigned on platforms that included promises to improve respect for human rights. The Government has promised to introduce legislation establishing several official human rights bodies, including a human rights council with wide powers of investigation, but has thus far implemented few of these promises. The parliamentary Human Rights Commission established in 1991 remains ineffective. Turkey has an independent judiciary that often dismisses prosecution cases; the rule of law generally prevails. Although Turkey has cooperated with UN and Council of Europe inspections, it recently refused to admit an international NGO researcher. Turkey has ratified many international human rights instruments but remains a non-signatory to the UN Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

As a truly secular state, Turkey is nearly unique in the Moslem world. Outside the major cities, however, it remains a traditional society. The status of women in Turkey lags well behind western European countries, but is nonetheless far ahead of most middle eastern countries. The election of Turkey's first woman Prime Minister, Tansu Çiller, at a DYP party congress in June 1993, is a sign of the improved status of women in Turkey. Turkish law enshrines the equality of the sexes in most but not all instances.

Within a broad consensus that includes support for the unity of the Turkish state, public dissent is tolerated. The mainstream press is openly critical of the government, and sometimes reports human rights violations. Individuals and organisations that challenge the integrity of the Turkish republic, however, are subject to severe repression. Anti-terrorism legislation permits security forces sweeping powers, which are often used to suppress legitimate dissent. Pro-Kurdish newspapers and organisations have been subject to quasi-legal harassment, and in some cases shut down altogether. Many journalists, human rights advocates, and supporters of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Party (DEP) and its successor, the People's Democratic Party (HADEP) have been arrested. Eight Members of Parliament,