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HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN TURKEY

ISSUE

The human rights situation in Turkey is paradoxical. Although Turkey is an open society and a secular multiparty democracy, serious and widespread violations of human rights nevertheless occur. These abuses 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 has formed a governing coalition, both campaigned on platforms that included promises to improve respect for human rights. Turkey passed legislation in October 1993 establishing several official human rights bodies, including a human rights council with wide powers of investigation. Turkey has an independent judiciary that often dismisses prosecution cases; the rule of law generally prevails. Over the years, Turkey has ratified most major international human rights instruments.

As a truly secular state, Turkey is nearly unique in the Moslem world. Outside the major cities, however, it remains a traditional, and in some respects backwards, 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 Ciller, 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, lively debate flourishes. The mainstream press is openly critical of the government, and reports human rights violations. Individuals and organisations that challenge the integrity of the Turkish republic, however, are subject to severe repression. After months of quasi-legal harassment, the pro-Kurdish newspaper *Ozgur Gundem*, was raided and effectively shut down in December 1993; many of its journalists have been arrested, and in some cases murdered under unexplained circumstances. Similarly, numerous supporters of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Party (DEP) have "disappeared", while Mehmet Sincar, a DEP Member of Parliament, was assassinated in September 1993. Satisfactory explanations for most of these crimes have not been provided. The United Nations Committee against Torture report of November 1993 found evidence of the systematic torture of people in custody.