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Norwegian Helsinki Committee

REPORT 2023

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF IN TURKEY

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The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Turkey
Monitoring Report

Norwegian Helsinki Committee's Freedom of Belief Initiative

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Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC) is an Oslo based human rights organisation established in 1977 and works internationally to strengthen the protection of human rights in practice. To this end the NHC's activities include monitoring, reporting, human rights training and supporting democratic structures. NHC's work is based on the human rights instruments adopted in the context of the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Freedom of Belief Initiative has promoted freedom of thought, religion, or belief as a human right as outlined by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee since 2011. The project is supported by the Norwegian Foreign Ministry of Foreign Affairs since 2013. The Initiative's activities, which are carried out to effectively protect the right of freedom of religion or belief for everyone in Turkey, include monitoring, documentation, reporting, solution development, proposals and advocacy.

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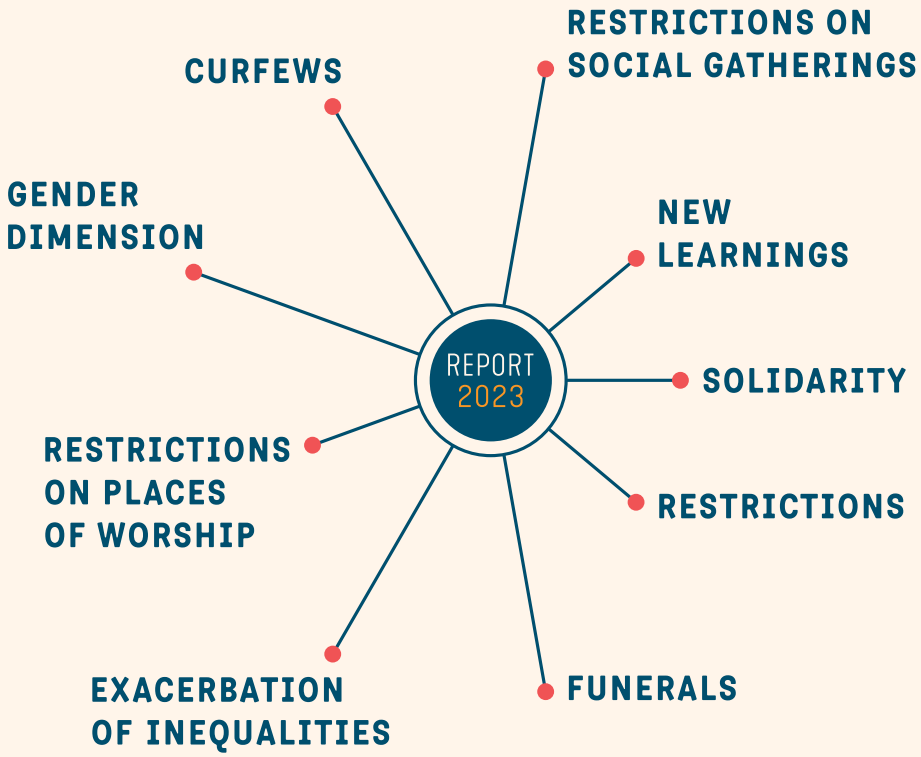
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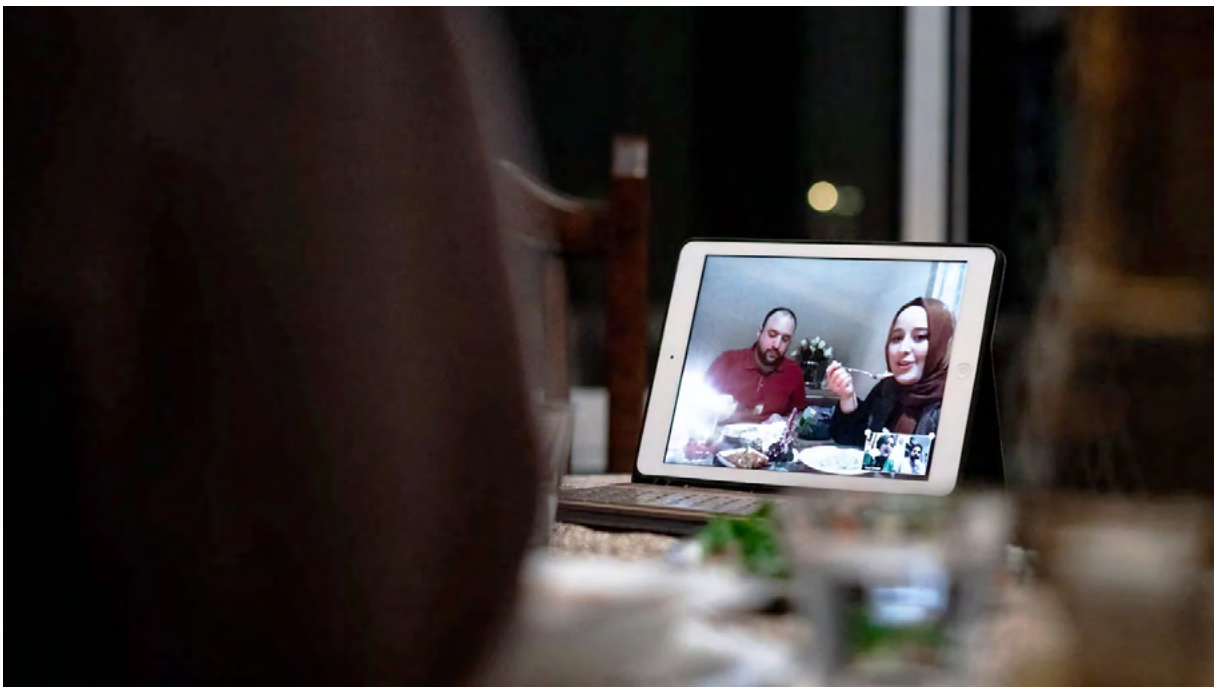

Credit: Fabian Strauch/dpa

Ramadan during the Pandemic. During the Covid-19 Pandemic, many religious rituals in the world and in Turkey were performed online.

1. Introduction

Restrictions imposed by governments in response to the Covid-19 Pandemic have presented human rights challenges around the world. Public health interests had to be assessed as grounds for limitations in relation to several human rights including the right to freedom of religion or belief with significant consequences. Curfews, temporary closures, and measures limiting attendance in places of worship constituted some of the critical measures that amounted to restrictions on freedom of religion or belief.

The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Turkey report presents a brief examination of the nature of restrictions and their impact on the right to freedom of religion or belief in Turkey. The report describes,

- the nature of restrictions,
- curfews,
- measures such as closures of places of worship,
- limitations on the attendance of assemblies,
- and their implications for accessing places of worship, funerals, the collective activities of non-governmental organizations, including with religious intent,
- the exacerbation of inequalities,
- the gendered impact of restrictions as well as the solidarity and new learning that took place within religious or belief communities.

The report finds that differentiated measures, including age related measures, impacted religious or belief communities differently. Deep systemic inequalities stemming from the public resources made available to mosques and their communities and not to other religious or belief communities, became even more apparent during the Pandemic. Women and girls had to stay at home and often lost the freedoms they had found outside the home in practising their religion or belief as well as other rights.

Furthermore, the report includes several good practices and concludes with concrete recommendations to public authorities, among others:

- When limitations are imposed on the right to manifest freedom of religion or belief and freedom of association, public authorities must ensure that these are prescribed by law, necessary in a democratic society for the legitimate aim of protecting public health, are proportionate, non-discriminatory and gender sensitive.
- When establishing differentiated restrictions and exemptions, public authorities must ensure that the practice of all religious or belief communities are considered in a gender and age sensitive manner.
- The impact of limitations on minority religious or belief communities must also be assessed.
- Measures should be taken after broad consultation with all religious or belief communities in a gender sensitive manner.
- The authorities should take steps to tackle inequality by reforming the present system by which public funds and accommodation is provided only to Sunni Muslim religious services.

This study comprised of monitoring of the relevant legal and administrative measures over the course of March 2020 until June 2021. To understand the experiences of religious or belief communities in the face of the Pandemic and the governmental measures we conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 members of various religious or belief communities and non-governmental organizations through online meetings and email communication. These included among others but not limited to the Alevi, various denominations of Christian communities and the Jewish community. In order to identify the impact of the measures taken in response to the Pandemic on women's right to freedom of religion or belief women members of religious or belief communities were interviewed.

Credit: Sat 7 Türk Haber

In Antakya Greek Orthodox Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, due to the Covid-19 measures, the Feast of Baptism was celebrated by the clergy without the participation of the community in 2021.

2. Measures taken in the face of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Governmental measures taken in the face of the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic have posed challenges to freedom of religion or belief globally, and the consequences have been substantial. Places of worship were closed and collective worship was restricted for extended periods of time.[1] Some vulnerable religious or belief communities were subjected to "'hate speech' and associated disinformation and misinformation that scapegoat and stigmatise ethnic and religious minorities" due to the Pandemic.[2] In a few cases, severe restrictions were imposed on burial rituals such as the forced cremations of Muslims in Sri Lanka.[3] The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has reported that, in its region, in response to the virus, certain states imposed very high-level restrictions.[4] They effectively banned private prayers in public places of worship, and public religious gatherings. Some states,[5] imposed highly restrictive measures by banning public gatherings but allowing for private prayer to be accommodated in public places of worship. Others,[6] adopted a moderate approach, allowing public gatherings to take place, so long as they did not exceed a maximum number of participants. Still others,[7] chose to adopt lower-level restrictions, allowing public religious celebrations with physical distancing or without any limitations.

At the early stages of the Pandemic the World Health Organization (WHO) issued guidance to "faith-based organizations" in the context of Covid-19, asking them to avoid large

1 BBC, *Covid in Scotland: Places of worship can open now after court win*, 24 March 2021.

2 Just Security, *A conversation with UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief: Covid-19 and Freedom of Belief*, 18 June 2020.

3 United Nations Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights Special Procedures' Statement, *Sri Lanka: Compulsory cremation of COVID-19 bodies cannot continue*, 25 January 2021.

4 OSCE/ODIHR, *OSCE Human Dimension Commitments and State Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic*, 2020.

5 *Ibid.*, for example, Cyprus, Denmark, Germany, Romania, Tajikistan, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

6 *Supra* 4 OSCE/ODIHR, for example, Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden.

7 For example, Bulgaria, Hungary, Spain and Turkmenistan.

group gatherings and to conduct "rituals and faith-related activities virtually" whenever possible.[8] Where people assembled for worship or other collective religious activities, physical distance was advised. The WHO also called for a hiatus in rituals such as touching and kissing of devotional and other objects that the community is accustomed to handling communally, Holy Communion, fonts of holy water, washing for ritual cleansing, and weddings and funerals (of large gatherings and/or without social distancing).[9]

The Turkish public authorities began taking measures to control the Covid-19 Pandemic in March 2020. **These measures had human rights implications, most notably, limitations on freedom of movement, closure of schools and transitioning to online teaching at schools and universities, restrictions on business opening hours, cessation of prison and detention visits, closure of places of worship, and the introduction of strict curfews.** Under the Turkish Constitution, limitations to constitutional rights must be enacted directly through an act of the Parliament in the form of a legislation or based on the explicit authorization of such legislation. Turkey did not declare a state of emergency.[10] Instead, the authorities based the executive measures, including presidential circulars, ministerial circulars and public announcements in conjunction with the decisions of provincial public health boards and provincial pandemic boards, on the Law on Public Health,[11] and the Law on Provincial Administration.[12] The government's direct and indirect reliance on already existing laws, therefore, raised questions on the legal basis of sweeping restrictions of fundamental rights under the Constitution.

Differentiated legal and practical measures resulted in various restrictions on human rights.[13] Differentiated regulations, applied to individuals based on their age, restricted the movement of individuals above the age of 65 and under the age of 20.[14] Measures were also applied differently, whilst some public gatherings in closed and open spaces were banned, others were permitted.

Religious activities typically involve the gathering of groups of individuals. Since public gatherings are hot spots for the spread of viral infections, including Covid-19, preventive measures related to Covid-19 were imposed on religious gatherings. These measures impacted the ability of individuals and communities to manifest their religion or belief across Turkey.

The measures taken in relation to the Covid-19 Pandemic impacted believers and religious or belief communities in different ways. Restrictions were impose on:

- accessing places of worship,
- the right to manifest religion or belief in worship,
- observance of religious holidays
- participation in rituals associated with certain stages of life, including *bar mitzvahs*, funerals,
- gathering in homes for worship,

8 World Health Organization, *Practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19*, Interim Guidance, 7 April 2020.

9 *Ibid.*

10 As provided for under Article 119 of the Constitution.

11 *Umumi Hıfzıssıhha Kanunu*, No. 1593 24 April 1930, Official Gazette No. 1489, 6 May 1930.

12 *İl İdaresi Kanunu*, No. 5442 10 June 1949, Official Gazette No. 7236, 18 June 1949.

13 Çalı, B. and Turkut, E., *Year one: Reflections on Turkey's legal responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic, Verfassungs Blog*, 16 March 2021.

14 *Ibid.*

- organising community activities and
- teaching religion or belief.

Furthermore, the glaring inequality between the communities benefiting from religious services funded with public funding through the Presidency of Religious Affairs and others became even more apparent during this time. The reason for this was that the restrictions on access to places of worship and collective activities meant that donations could not be collected. Hence religious or belief communities were deprived of important source of income to cover costs, among others, rent and salaries.

> *The public authorities' approach to lockdown measures once again made us think that non-Muslim communities are forgotten, as if such citizens don't exist. We had to take account of the guidance given to mosques and have not received guidance for churches. The frequent Sunday curfews meant that Christians could not gather in churches. It would have been good if there had been an exception for Christians. They considered how to accommodate Friday prayers at mosques, however, did not think about others.* ***– Kayra Akpınar, co-leader of the Pera Diriliş Kilisesi (Pera Resurrection Church, Istanbul)***

2.1 Curfews and access to places of worship

Since the beginning of the Pandemic, curfews were imposed. These affected access to places of worship of different religious or belief communities differently.

On 16 March 2020 the Ministry of Interior, in compliance with measures taken by the Presidency of Religious Affairs to prevent the increase in the infection rate of the Covid-19 Pandemic, sent a circular to the 81 provincial governors informing them that, as of 16 March 2020, noon, afternoon and Friday prayers were suspended in all mosques and *masjids* across the country until the epidemic was brought under control.[15]

During the period when mosques were closed, communities that worship in other places of worship also closed their places of worship. Some started gathering for collective worship in virtual and hybrid forms. For example, the Yeniköy Tiferet Israel Sinagog met every morning to perform *Shahrit tefila* prayers and in the evenings *Minha* and *Arvit* prayers were broadcasted live on Zoom.[16] The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate provided virtual prayer services during Advent and Christmas in 2020. The following Easter 2021, an in-person worship service was held with a limited number of participants under the "new normal" conditions.[17] Baptism and other special rituals were performed with a small group of members and then broadcasted live *via* online applications.

For communities where Eucharist - the consumption of bread and wine as a sacrament - is an essential part of their worship, such as the Latin Catholic Church, the virtual gatherings were not suitable.[18] Therefore, when in person gatherings became possible the sacrament was distributed using tongs and observing physical distance.[19] The Istanbul Syriac Kadim Church clergy, reportedly, was given permission to travel to their church and provide Sunday service while broadcasting it live on their social media accounts in December 2020.[20]

15 Ministry of Interior, Circular on Coronovirus Measures, 16 March 2020.

16 Şalom, *Yeniköy Sinagogu COVID-19 günlerinde de yahidlerini yalnız bırakmadı*, 27 May 2020.

17 Interview with Laki Vingas, the Chair of the Yeniköy Panayia Rum Ortodoks Kilisesi Vakfı, 9 December 2020.

18 Interview with Claudio Monge and Luca Refatti, priests at Saint Peter and Saint Paul Church, Istanbul, 18 December 2020.

19 *Ibid.*

20 CNNTurk, *Ana Haber*, 6 December 2020.

Credit: Osmangazi Municipality

Osmangazi Municipality in Bursa staff disinfecting the Geruş Synagogue.

The practice in Protestant churches varied; some moved their weekly Sunday church services to week-day evenings, some continued solely with online gatherings.[21] A common challenge, expressed by a number of interviewees, was that the virtual assemblies were usually open only to members of the congregations and visitor attendance was thus very limited during this time.

The *cemevi* assemblies were also impacted by these measures. *Cemevis* are connected to associations and each *cemevi* made their own decision on whether to close or not.[22] **Generally, the *cemevis* were first opened for funerals and then gradually for *cem* as well. The differentiated restrictions negatively impacted *cem* attendance.** The *cem* worship takes place in the evenings and since the curfew often started at 21:00, this time was not convenient for believers to join the *cem* after work and return home by 21:00. The rules for 65+ allowed them to be outside between only 10:00-13:00 therefore, they could not join the *cem* even when it was performed. Therefore, individuals who were 65+ Alevis were disproportionately impacted by the restrictions imposed on them.

The Ministry of Interior did not publish a general guidance for worship places. However, a circular prepared together with the Presidency of Religious Affairs was issued by the Ministry of Interior on 23 May 2020 on collective worship in mosques and *mesjid*.[23] Accordingly, noon, afternoon and Friday prayers were allowed as of 29 May 2020. Friday prayers were only allowed in certain mosques. The Governorships then determined the specific mosques and *masjids* where Friday prayers were allowed in their respective provinces and published lists which included the number of people who would be allowed to worship.[24]

Other religious communities did not receive specific guidance from public authorities for their places of worship. This resulted in uncertainty which impacted religious communities differently and disproportionately.

21 Interviews with the General Secretary of the Association of Protestant Churches, Pera Diriliş Kilisesi, Bursa Protestan Kilisesi, 19 July 2021.

22 Interview with Doğan Bermek from Alevi Düşünce Ocağı, 14 December 2020.

23 *Cami ve Mescitlerde Cemaatle İbadet Edilmesi Genelgesi*, 22 May 2020.

24 BBC in Turkish, *Camiler açılıyor: Hangi önlemler alındı, uyulacak kurallar neler?*, 28 May 2020.

For the Protestant Churches, a guide was prepared by the Protestant Churches Association and sent to the church leaders to help guide them in adapting to the post-lockdown period and to prevent the spread of the disease among church members.[25] The guide explained the hygiene rules to be followed in churches to help eliminate the risk of infection.

When we asked, the authorities told us that we could go to church despite the curfew, but they did not provide this response in writing. Requests for information were not answered and were instead addressed superficially with general statements. There was a lot of uncertainty and many gaps in guidance for churches. ***– Umut Şahin, General Secretary of the Association of Protestant Churches***

Şişli, Ortaköy and Caddebostan synagogues were opened in Istanbul on 13 June 2020. According to the rules that the Turkish Jewish Community described as the "new normal", only those with reservations could enter the synagogues, and a maximum of 15 male and 5 female Yahids were allowed in each prayer service.[26] Moreover, they imposed their own additional restrictions announcing that people over the age of 65 would not be able to enter synagogues for a while, even if the national Scientific Committee granted permission.

In 2021, many churches were able to celebrate Easter under the "new normal" with adaptations. Some of these adaptations involved limiting the number of participants and using outside spaces, including for the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Istanbul.[27]

The public authorities have shown great understanding and have been helpful with our churches throughout the Pandemic. ***– A representative of the Syriac Christian community***

The Baha'i community has not been withdrawn during the pandemic. Cooperation and solidarity continued within the framework of the rules issued by public authorities. On the other hand, meeting online has been good, but it is not a substitute for face-to-face meeting. ***– Bahai Community spokesperson Suzan Karaman***

Good practice

Despite limited specific guidance by public authorities for places of worship other than mosques and *masjid*, several religious communities developed their own guidelines to safeguard believers and prevent the infection.

The Bet Din of the Rabbinate of the Turkish Jews published guidance for the believers on safer access to religious services in the synagogues.

The Armenian Patriarch issued a circular for the Armenian Apostolic churches on worship in churches.[28]

The Association of Protestant Churches published guidance for their member churches to help ensure safer conduct of services in churches.[29]

25 Interview with Umut Şahin General Secretary of the Association of Protestant churches, 10 December 2021.

26 Hyetert, *Sinagogların Yeniden Açılışıyla İlgili Yahid Duyurusu*, 10 June 2020.

27 Greek Orthodox churches in Mersin and Hatay celebrated Easter in May 2021.

28 Armenian Patriarchate, *Patriarch's Circular on worship in our churches*, 2 June 2021.

29 Interview with the General Secretary Umut Şahin, 10 December 2020.

Credit: İlk Haber

Ashura distribution in the Muharram month in Kartal Cemevi with social distancing and mask rule in place in 2020.

In the autumn of 2020, the Ministry of Interior's circular of 18 November 2020 set in place weekend curfews and provided for exemptions only for funerals with limited attendance.[30] The weekend curfews resulted in a disproportionately higher restriction on religious communities that gather for worship at the weekends, such as the Jewish and Christian communities.

As demonstrated above the government guidance for religious activity centred on mosques and *masjid*, accommodation of Islamic prayers and holidays. Others developed their own guidance, taking cues from the guidance given by the authorities to the general public and mosques and *masjid*. Gradually, however, as questions were asked and guidance requested, references to *cemevi* and *dedes* were added to guiding documents. For example, The Ministry of Interior's Frequently Asked Questions document, when describing the exemptions on the curfew imposed on those over the age of 65, indicated that persons aged 65 and over who carry out religious activities in *cemevis* (*dedes*, association/foundation managers, etc.) were exempt from the restrictions imposed on these age groups without obtaining any permission to go to and from *cemevis* during the periods and days when curfews are imposed on weekdays and weekends.[31]

A notable exception in the application of the restrictions was the opening of the Hagia Sophia as a mosque on 24 July 2020. Around 350,000 people gathered and reportedly many in attendance ignored regulations regarding social distancing and masking.[32] Furthermore, thousands attended indoor and outdoor Ramadan prayers at Istanbul's Hagia Sophia despite a Covid-19 full lockdown on 13 May 2021.[33]

During a three-day lockdown on 23-25 April 2021, an exception was made for the Friday prayers, and these were allowed in mosques nearest to one's residence.[34] This could not be

30 Ministry of Interior Circular No 20077, 18.11.2020.

31 https://www.icisleri.gov.tr/kurumlar/icisleri.gov.tr/IcSite/illeridaresi/Haberler/Covid-19/SIKCA-SORULAN-SORULAR-07122020.pdf

32 Arab News, *Hagia Sophia prayers 'sparked Turkey's new COVID-19 cases'*, 12 August 2020.

33 Daily Sabah, *Muslims welcome Eid at Istanbul's Hagia Sophia in 1st prayer in decades*, 13 May 2021.

34 BBC in Turkish, *23 Nisan ve hafta sonu sokağa çıkma yasağı başladı: Cuma namazı 'en yakın camide' serbest*, 22 April 2021.

easily applied to other places of worship since their relative sparsity means they are often not within walking distance.

An interesting "implied recognition" of cemevi as a place of worship occurred on 26 April 2021 when the Ministry of Interior published a circular on the lockdown which stated that the dede and other staff of cemevi would be exempt from the curfew, provided they document that they are within the scope of the exemption.[35]

Some expressed that children's participation in community life was weakened during this time and this had a negative impact on faith and community formation. For religious communities where music, chanting or collective singing constitute part of the worship service this aspect remained absent.

2.2 Restriction of the collective activities of non-governmental organisations

Throughout the Pandemic, general assembly meetings of non-governmental organisations, including association and foundations, were postponed for an extended period until the end of February 2021.[36] Holding online general assembly meetings was not possible during this time due to general assembly meeting requirements set forth in legislation. Finally, an announcement was made that general assemblies should be held within 30 days, after 28 February 2021.[37]

Many religious or belief communities or their places of worship attempted to carry on with the activities they had been running under associations or foundations. Therefore, the extended postponement of general assemblies impacted the freedom of association of non-governmental organisations having religious intent. Three key difficulties were the uncertainties, prevention of activities, and the vulnerabilities of worship places linked to associations.

Firstly, the scope of the postponement was unclear. Many questions were unanswered as to whether the postponement decision was an opportunity for the postponement for associations whose general assembly could not convene, or whether it meant a categorical ban on the general assembly of all associations. Some associations held their general assemblies while many decided to postpone them. While the boards of non-governmental organisations could regularly convene, decisions that required general assembly decisions of associations, such as changes in the statute or opening branches, had to be postponed. Similarly, foundations had to postpone the board of trustees meetings. Some foundations' statutes explicitly refer to specific dates for when the board of trustees meetings must be held. There were questions and lack of guidance on if and how these meetings could be postponed.

As stated above, many places of worship are linked to associations and some to foundations. Collective activities of non-governmental organisations were postponed but places of worship were allowed to remain open yet subject to certain rules. This resulted in uncertainty and vulnerability particularly for places of worship that do not have the status of place of worship such as *cemevis*, most Protestant churches and JW kingdom halls. Following a request for information, on whether these venues which lack the place of worship status could be used for worship as "associations", we received the response below from the Ministry of Interior:

35 Ministry of Interior, *81 İl Valiliğine Tam Kapanma Tedbirleri Genelgesi Gönderildi*, 26 April 2021.

36 Sivil Toplumla İlişkiler Genel Müdürlüğü, *Dernek Genel Kurul Toplantıları, Bildirim ve Beyannameleri*, 24 July 2020. Then again, this was followed pursuant to the amendment made with Law No. 7256, published in the Official Gazette dated 17.11.2020 and numbered 31307, the period for the submission of the declarations and notifications of the associations and the postponement of the general assembly meetings was extended until 28.02.

37 Sivil Toplumla İlişkiler Genel Müdürlüğü, *Dernek Genel Kurul Toplantıları, Bildirim ve Beyannameleri*, 27 November 2020.

> within the scope of the circulars of our Ministry of Interior, curfews and other restrictions are applied at certain times of the day. In line with these restrictions, the meetings, seminars or worship meetings held by the members of the associations that are particularly relevant to our Directorate are also included under these restrictions. In particular, the security forces and other institution officials continue their inspections on the subject. **Gathering of people within the scope of social distance rules is prohibited according to both the circulars and the law numbered 7244.**[38]

As clearly indicated in the above response, the exemptions available to officially recognised places of worship were not extended to venues used for worship linked to associations but lacked place of worship status. While this rule was not consistently applied to worship gatherings in association venues - where the venues have not been recognized as places of worship - it led to uncertainty and uneasiness on the part of religious or belief communities and individual believers.

For example, three Christian churches in Esenyurt, Istanbul, which were used by believers of African and South Korean origin, were closed by a decision of the Esenyurt District Governorship.[39] The notification said that they would implement the "closure [of the church] in line with the restrictions brought in to combat the pandemic".[40] The Association of Protestant Churches reported that the police gave verbal assurances that permission would be given for activities once the pandemic restrictions had been lifted.[41] Judicial remedies were not pursued by the affected communities assuming that such remedies would not be effective.[42]

2.3 Inequalities exacerbated

The impact of the Pandemic exacerbated the inequalities between the communities that are served by the publicly funded religious services under the Presidency of Religious Affairs and others. Public religious services are funded from the budget allocated to the Diyanet from the general tax income. Alevis, Christians, Jews, JWs and others do not receive any public funding despite their contribution to the state budget through their taxes. These communities rely on the donations of their members. Restrictions on assemblies during the Pandemic meant that members could not make their donations or collections through community dinners or other community activities. As a result, these groups' income decreased while expenses did not. They continued to pay rent, utilities, and staff salaries.This brought renewed attention to the demands made by some from the Alevi community for the salaries of the Alevi religious officials, the *dede* and others, to be paid from public funds.[43] A Protestant church leader said that though donations had decreased, they were able to manage.[44] She remarked that many people in the society had become unemployed during the Pandemic, and were in need of public funding before it came to the funding of the church. She also underlined that **as a matter of principle it is unfair that only mosques receive funding.**[45]

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38 Information request no 2005645501 of 17 December 2020, answer General Directorate for Relations with Civil Society under the Ministry of Interior received on 24 December 2020. Emphasis our own.

39 Esenyurt District Governorship, E-60931568-450-5962, 16 November 2020.

40 *Ibid.*

41 Association of Protestant Churches, *Rights Violations Report 2020*.

42 *Ibid.*

43 Interviews with Doğan Bermek from the Alevi Düşünce Ocağı, 14 December 2020 and Müslüm Metin, Alevi Bektaşi Federation, 15 December 2020.

44 Interview with Kayra Akpınar from Pera Resurrection Church, 15 December 2020.

45 *Ibid.*

2.4 Gendered impact

The strict curfews had a varied impact on women's rights to freedom of religion or belief. Reportedly, in many cases the curfews restricted the freedom women had found outside of their home in the context of religious practice as they felt compelled to comply with the religious practice in their family homes. For other women, when virtual religious gatherings began, worship became more accessible. This was the case particularly for women whose faith or religious practises are different from that of their family.

The measures taken to control the Pandemic impacted the use of mosques. For over two and a half months in 2020 mosques were closed. Both men and women did not have access to mosques, and this created a certain equality. Men voiced complaints saying that they would like to perform *namaz* as *cemaat* and therefore demanded the opening of mosques. The Women in Mosques campaigners expressed hope that the Pandemic related restrictions on accessing mosques for men would lead to an understanding of the deprivation that women feel when they are prohibited from mosque access.[46]

When mosques were reopened for prayer, a new challenge faced women. The smaller worship spaces allocated to women in mosques often lack air circulation. As a result, social distancing rules and infection concerns were bigger issues for women. To address this restrictive situation, measures should have been taken by the Presidency of Religious Affairs and mosque administrators. However, no statement or explanation was provided on this by relevant public authorities.

Good practice

The Havle Women's Association organised virtual meetings to discuss the impact of the Pandemic on women's rights including freedom of religion or belief.[47]

The Women in Mosques Campaign representatives drew attention to women's specific challenges of the re-opening of mosques under the "new normal" and the needed measures.

2.5 Solidarity and new learning

It was frequently reported that the Pandemic had been a time of adjustment and solidarity within religious or belief communities. Older congregation members had to learn to use online tools to be able to join virtual assemblies. Religious communities had to increase and strengthen their digital communication capacities. At the Yeniköy Panayia Rum Ortodoks Church a 65+ Volunteer Solidarity Group was formed to assist the elderly members of the community. For Christmas 2020 the church made extra efforts to decorate the church and its garden even if they could not assemble at the church for Christmas worship service.[48]

At Christmas 2020 we made an extra effort to decorate our church and its garden with lots of light to help instil hope at the height of the Pandemic. ***– Laki Vingas, Yeniköy Panayia Rum Ortodoks Kilisesi Vakfı***

46 Interview with the Women in Mosques Campaign representatives in Gazete Duvar, *Kadınlar Camilerde Platformu: Pandemide camiye erişim hakkımız korunsun*, 30 May 2020.

47 Telephone interview with Rumeysa Çamdereli from Havle Association, October 2020.

48 Interview with Laki Vingas, Chair of the Yeniköy Panayia Rum Ortodoks Kilisesi Vakfı, 9 December 2020.

3. Concluding remarks and recommendations

In conclusion, the differentiated measures taken to address the impact of the Pandemic impacted religious or belief communities differently. While more guidance and accommodation were provided for mosques, other religious or belief communities were not given specific guidance. Accommodation fell behind and was not on par. The deep systemic inequalities stemming from the public resources made available to mosques and their communities and not to other religious or belief communities, became even more apparent during the Pandemic. Communities who could not gather in person could not collect donations. As a result, their income was diminished. Women and girls had to stay at home and often lost the freedoms they had found outside the home in practising their religion or belief as well as other rights. Solidarity and learning surged in religious or belief communities as communities sought to adjust to the new circumstances and support each other at the face of new challenges.

- When limitations are imposed on the right to manifest freedom of religion or belief and freedom of association, public authorities must ensure that these are prescribed by law, necessary in a democratic society for the legitimate aim of protecting public health, are proportionate, non-discriminatory and gender sensitive.
- When establishing differentiated restrictions and exemptions, public authorities must ensure that the practice of all religious or belief communities are considered in a gender and age sensitive manner. They must also assess the impact of limitations on minority religious or belief communities.
- Measures should be taken after broad consultation with all religious or belief communities in a gender sensitive manner. They should be periodically reviewed, monitored and adjusted.
- The authorities should take steps to tackle inequality by reforming the present system by which public funds and accommodation is provided only to Sunni Muslim religious services.
- Public authorities must ensure clear and sufficient guidance is provided to authorities who implement measures and those affected by such measures. Relevant central and local government authorities should establish communication channels at national and local levels to share information with representatives of different religious or belief communities.
- Steps should be taken to ensure that believers are able to fulfil requirements to observe days of special importance, including reasonable accommodation in school and workplace schedules, during exceptional circumstances like those of the Pandemic.

Norwegian
Helsinki Committee

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