

Murders & Islamist candidate worry Turkish Christians

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ISTANBUL (ABP)—As Turkish Christians reel from the recent brutal murders of three of their own—allegedly by radical Islamists—many Turks worry the possible election of Turkey's first devoutly Muslim president could mean more trouble.

As many as a million secularist Turks protested in Istanbul April 29 against the potential election of Abdullah Gul, according to multiple news reports. The protests follow similar ones in Ankara, the nation's capital, two weeks ago.

They also came less than two weeks after the murders of a German missionary and two Turkish converts to Christianity in a conservative city in eastern Turkey, allegedly at the hands of young Islamists. The victims were reportedly bound and had their throats slit.

Gul received the largest number of votes—but short of the required two-thirds majority—when the Turkish Parliament held its first round of voting in the presidential election April 27.

However, members of the main Turkish opposition party boycotted that poll and have asked the nation's highest court to declare the election void. The second round of voting is scheduled for May 2.

Gul, who currently is Turkey's foreign minister, and the nation's prime minister, Tayyip Erdogan, belong to the AK Party. It was formed from a moderate Islamist party that the government had previously banned. AK enjoys strong support among religious Turks, who tend to be poorer and more rural than the secularist elites centered in Istanbul and other large Turkish cities.

However, the party's economic reforms have earned the support of many Turkish moderates and business leaders. Gul has spearheaded Turkey's bid to join the European Union.

AK politicians control the parliament, but Turkish military leaders have threatened to unseat the government if Gul wins. The military has unseated three other governments in the last half-century, including another moderate Islamist government elected in 1997.

Turkey's population is, according to most estimates, 99 percent Muslim. However, unlike most other majority-Muslim nations, the government has been staunchly secularist since the Turkish Republic's 1923 founding. Many Turks have criticized Gul and Erdogan, for instance, because their wives wear Islamic headscarves. Under current law, such scarves are banned in Turkish government buildings.

AK Party leaders have condemned the murders of the three Christians, which took place April 18 in the city of Malatya. According to Compass Direct, a news service that tracks persecution of Christians, two victims—Necati Aydin, 36, and Ugur Yuksel, 32, were Turks who converted from Islam to Christianity. The third man, Tillman Geske, 46, was a German citizen.

All three reportedly worked for a small Protestant publishing house that was translating a study Bible into Turkish and were members of the city's tiny Kurtulus Protestant Church, where Aydin was the pastor. The attacks took place in an office that served both the church and Zirve Publishing.

The Middle East Times, an English-language daily, reported local authorities arrested 10 men in connection with the attack, including the five killers.

In an April 19 press conference televised live on CNN's Turkish station, the head of the Alliance of Protestant Churches in Turkey said the attacks were "not a surprise" and linked them to anti-Christian propaganda in conservative parts of Turkey.

"Turkey was buried in the darkness of the Middle Ages" by the attacks, said Ihsan Ozbek, who also is pastor of an Ankara church. He compared opposition to Christian missionaries and rumors spread among non-Christian Turks about Christian proselytism to the witch hunts of the last millennium.

A letter about the details of the murders, purportedly from Protestants in the hometown of one of the victims, has spread to Christians around the world via e-mail. It said the perpetrators had done surveillance prior to the murders by posing as potential converts and attending an evangelistic meeting that the Malatya church hosted.

The letter, from "The Protestant Church of Smyrna," also includes details about gruesome torture that the victims allegedly underwent prior to their deaths. It accused political leaders of fostering suspicion of Christians that led to the murders and linked them with other recent attacks against Turkey's tiny Christian minority.

Smyrna is the Greek name for Izmir, a large, ancient city on Turkey's Aegean coast. Aydin's funeral was held there. According to Compass Direct

news service, the funeral had been scheduled for an Anglican church in Izmir, but the letter said it was at Buca Baptist Church in Izmir.

It is unclear if the Baptist congregation was the same as the one in which the letter originated. It was dated April 24 and contained the tagline “reported by Darlene Bocek.”

Jeff Sellers, Compass Direct’s managing editor, said April 30 that his reporters in the region had not been able to confirm the letter’s accuracy or authenticity.

Ancient Smyrna was home to one of the earliest Christian churches.

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