Human rights suffer as Erdogan tightens grip on Turkey

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11:00PM MARCH 31, 2019 • 10 COMMENTS

After the Christchurch massacre, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan accused Australia of anti-Islamic motives at Gallipoli and threatened to send anti-Muslim visitors back home “in coffins, like their grandfathers”.

Such hubris and moral indignation are unwarranted, considering Turkey’s poor record on freedom of speech and human rights, particularly regarding women. More generally, the issues exemplify the impasse between politicised Islam and secular government.

To some extent, Erdogan’s statements were mitigated by political posturing before yesterday’s local government elections, and his claim that the statements were taken out of context. However, replaying footage of the terrorist’s grisly video during rallies was a cynical ploy to ramp up outrage, and reminiscent of techniques used by ISIS recruiters.

Within Turkey, few journalists would challenge Erdogan for fear of being charged with punishable “insult”. Since Erdogan was installed as President in 2014, more than 66,000 “insult investigations” have been initiated. MPs, singers, writers, students and businessmen were among those indicted. Human Rights Watch says prosecutions for the offence are increasing. The relevant law, Article 299 of Turkey’s penal code, dates from 1926 and was rarely used before 2014. A conviction for “insulting the president” carries jail of up to four years.

The Council of Europe and the European Court of Human Rights have found Turkey in repeated violation of rights to freedom of expression.

Last year the chairman of the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) and 72 other members of the CHP were accused of insult after they tweeted a cartoon of animals plastered with the face of the President. MP Ahmet Yildirim gave a speech in which he referred to “that
would-be sultan in the palace”. He lost his parliamentary immunity and was convicted of insulting the President. Singer Zuhal Olcay inserted Erdogan’s name in her song, *I have given up on this world*. She was handed a suspended sentence of 11 months and 20 days.

Turkey has more journalists in prison, including females, than any other country. Hundreds have been arrested since the abortive coup in 2016. The crackdown on dissent is at unprecedented levels and extends to websites and social media. Last year courts in Turkey blocked about 3000 online articles.

Women’s rights are subject to violations by the government and family members. A proposed bill would decriminalise the sexual abuse of children, notably within marriage, by lowering the age of consent from 15 to 12. This would grant automatic amnesty to about 10,000 men in jail. Most were married in legally unrecognised religious ceremonies.

International Women’s Day on March 8 was a sombre evening for Turkey’s feminists. Government attempts to ban the Feminist Night March failed, and thousands of women gathered in central Istanbul. When they spilt over the barricades, police turned teargas on them.

During a rally, Erdogan showed a video of the women chanting and whistling during the Islamic call to prayer, and accused them of “disrespecting Islam”. In the past he has scorned women’s independence as “feminist propaganda”, and confined women to motherhood according to Islam. A report of the We Will Stop Femicide Platform revealed 440 women were murdered and 317 sexually assaulted last year. A significant number were killed because they demanded more agency in their lives. The majority of perpetrators were male kin or former boyfriends. In the same year, the media recorded 1217 cases of child abuse and 26 cases of child murder.

In response to a 14-fold surge in “honour” killings between 2002, when his Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power, and 2009, Erdogan said it only reflected an increase in reporting of murders. Of 187 countries analysed in a 2019 World Bank report, “Women, Business and the Law 2019: A Decade of Reform”, Turkey ranks 85th regarding economic equality, and according to the “Women’s Labor Report”, under 30 per cent of women are employed.

Turkey is considered an important and compatible partner for democracies such as Australia, but Erdogan’s increasingly autocratic leadership and Islamist drive have raised concerns. The nation is poised between secular followers of founder Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, and those faithful to Erdogan’s brand of Islamism.
Politicising the tragic Christchurch terrorist attack loads the latter and also exposes the moral chasm between two opposing views within Turkey and in the wider world.

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