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DEMOCRACY

U.S. Senate Human Rights Caucus

Discussion

on

The Human Rights Situation in Turkey

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Thank you, co-chairman Coons and co-chairman Tillis, for holding this panel and for inviting me to speak.

Turkey's human rights crisis is today at a level unprecedented in the 19 years that President Erdoğan has ruled the country. I would like to focus my remarks on what this means for Turkey's trajectory and why the United States must prioritize democratic values in its policy towards Turkey.

Erdoğan's blatant disregard for basic human rights is an alarming threat to Turkey's social and political stability. Under his rule, the Turkish government is leveling an abhorrent crackdown on Turkey's political opposition, independent media, and civil society—dismantling the fundamental building blocks of a stable democracy. Turkey's top opposition leaders, who together represent more than half of the electorate, face constant harassment from a politicized judiciary. Erdoğan's near-total control of the media and periodic bans on protests leave disgruntled citizens with very few outlets to express their frustration democratically. In a country as polarized along ethnic, religious, and political lines as Turkey, this is a recipe for social upheaval and civil strife.

The most urgent issue that could trigger such unrest is the government's effort to shut down the HDP, Turkey's second largest opposition party. For years now, authorities have been jailing the party's duly elected lawmakers and mayors without just cause or due process—in effect, disenfranchising millions of voters. Critically, a majority of the HDP's voters are Kurds,

Turkey's largest ethnic minority. And for the last 40 years, Turkey has been engaged in a deadly war with Kurdish militants—a war that bitterly divides Turkish and Kurdish citizens. Erdoğan's assaults on the HDP only fuel this polarization and severely damage prospects for peace.

Another top concern for Washington is Turkey's disregard for the rule of law, at home and abroad. Erdoğan's control of the judiciary not only makes everyone in Turkey, including American citizens, vulnerable to arbitrary prosecutions; it also makes Turkey an irresponsible international actor. Today, Erdoğan's Turkey is second only to Putin's Russia in the number of cases it faces before the European Court of Human Rights. Despite Turkey's legal obligation to follow the court's decisions, it has been refusing to implement them—most prominently, by failing to release a high-profile political detainee, civil society leader Osman Kavala, for nearly two years. This is by no means the only example. Erdoğan is leading Turkey to undermine key multilateral institutions that are designed to uphold a rules-based international order. It is no coincidence that Turkey recently forced its NATO allies to water down a crucial joint statement condemning Belarusian dictator Lukashenko after he brazenly kidnapped a 26-year-old dissident from a Ryanair flight.

Erdoğan's authoritarianism is not just a domestic issue: It is also fundamentally changing Turkey's global orientation. The Turkish republic has never been a full-fledged democracy, but for decades, it saw itself as part of a Western club of democracies, and strived to be a responsible member of the international community. These features played a central role in turning Turkey into a U.S. ally, and remain the top reasons why NATO still has a vested interest in keeping Turkey in its orbit. But the more Erdoğan moves Turkey away from democratic values, the more Turkey undermines the alliance's core objectives. For all of these reasons, it is vital for Washington to make the promotion of human rights and democracy in Turkey a top priority.

I look forward to your questions.