

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HJM 4003

As Reported by House Committee On:
State Government & Tribal Affairs

Brief Description: Petitioning the government of Turkey to respect the property rights and human rights of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. .

Sponsors: Representatives Wallace and Hinkle.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

State Government & Tribal Affairs: 2/13/09 [DP].

Brief Summary of Bill

- Prays to the President of the United States, the U.S. Secretary of State and the Washington Congressional Delegation that the Government of Turkey grant the Ecumenical Patriarchate (Patriarchate) the appropriate international recognition, uphold and safeguard religious and human rights, and respect the property rights of the Patriarchate.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON STATE GOVERNMENT & TRIBAL AFFAIRS

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 7 members: Representatives Hunt, Chair; Appleton, Vice Chair; Armstrong, Ranking Minority Member; Alexander, Flannigan, Hurst and Miloscia.

Staff: Tracey O'Brien (786-7196)

Background:

The Turkish Constitution provides for freedom of religion and, according to the U.S. Department of State 2008 International Religious Freedom Report, the Government of Turkey (Turkey) generally respects this right in practice. Turkey does place some restrictions on Muslims and other groups and on Muslim religious express in government offices, state-run institutions, and universities, usually with the state purpose of preserving the secular state. With a population of 72.6 million, Turkey estimates that 99 percent of the population is Muslim, the majority of which is Sunni. Turkey officially recognizes three

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minority religious communities: Greek Orthodox Christians, Armenian Orthodox Christians, and Jews.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate (Patriarchate) is the highest-ranking Orthodox Church. It is the spiritual center for over 300 million Orthodox Christians worldwide. In 1923 the primacy of the Ecumenical Patriarch was recognized in the Lausanne Treaty as the spiritual leader of Orthodox Christians around the world. Turkey does not recognize the ecumenical nature of the Patriarchate. It regards the Patriarchate as an institution whose leader is only the spiritual leader of Orthodox believers in Turkey. In addition, the Turkish authorities do not allow the use of the term "Ecumenical" for any religious activity. Turkey also does not recognize that the Patriarchate has a legal personality, resulting in the failure to recognize its ownership rights.

Legislation urging Turkey to grant the Patriarchate the appropriate international recognition has been introduced in seven states and the U.S. Congress. In 2006 New Jersey was the first state to pass such a resolution.

Summary of Bill:

The Legislature prays to President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and to the Washington Congressional Delegation that the Government of Turkey:

- upholds and safeguards religious and human rights without compromise;
- ceases its discrimination of the Patriarchate;
- grants the Patriarchate the appropriate international recognition, ecclesiastic succession, and the right to train clergy of all nationalities; and
- respects the property rights and human rights of the Patriarchate.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) The issue is the religious freedom of the Orthodox Christian faith. This is the faith of many of Washington's citizens. This is a human rights issue, a freedom of religion issue and it impacts our friends and family. By failing to recognize the Patriarchate, Turkey essentially prohibits it from owning property and imposes a 42 percent tax on the Patriarchate's charitable institutions. Seventy-five percent of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's properties have already been confiscated by Turkey, including many churches. Turkey has closed the Theological School of Halki making it impossible to train new Orthodox Christian clergy. Turkey policies render the dissolution of the Patriarchate inevitable.

It is a crime in Turkey for an Orthodox Christian priest to wear his robes in public. This is just one example of how Turkey violates the principles of religious freedom. As citizens of

democracy, we should be concerned about such limitations to religious freedom occurring anywhere in the world. Many other states have passed similar memorials. Let us join our voices in supporting religious freedom and our actions could have far reaching results. In spite of their policies, Turkey will likely listen if we will witness to them the importance of a commitment to religious freedom on behalf of their own people and all people. That commitment is fundamental for the nations of the world to cooperate in solving the joint problems that face use all on this shrinking planet, and to build a lasting peace.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying: Representative Wallace, prime sponsor; Representative Hinkle; Clifford Argue, St. Demetrius Church; Stefanos Vertopoulos, Archons; Father Tom Tsagalakis, Holy Apostles Greek Orthodox Church; Reverend Michael Bruce Johnson, Greek Orthodox Church; Jerry Costacos; Paul Lotakis, Greek Orthodox Church of the Assumption; and Kim Sheley, Washington State Catholic Conference.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.