



Alliance *for*
Shared Values

July 15, 2025

AfSV's 9th Anniversary Message on July 15

The Night of July 15 and the Beginning of a Coup against the Civil Society

Today marks the ninth anniversary of the so-called coup attempt in Türkiye on the night of July 15, 2016. In the wake of that dark night—particularly starting the morning of July 16—a systematic campaign of repression and persecution was launched against hundreds of thousands of innocent citizens. This process turned into an unprecedented witch hunt, condemning nearly a million people to a form of "social death."

That night, without any investigation, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan directly accused Fethullah Gülen of being responsible. Yet Mr. Gülen categorically condemned the violence as it unfolded, rejected Erdoğan's baseless allegations, and called for the establishment of an international investigative commission. He even publicly declared his willingness to return to Turkey and face trial if found guilty, even based on false testimony. Despite the historical opportunity this invitation represented for exposing the real perpetrators, Erdoğan never responded. Instead, he launched a sweeping political purge and revenge campaign.

The report of the investigative commission established by the Turkish Parliament to examine the attempt was never released to the public¹, likely out of fear that it would reveal the government's official narrative to be baseless. The court testimonies of some accused officers and witness accounts that emerged since the incident pointed to possible collusion behind the scenes among some high-level commanders, officials from the National Intelligence Agency (MIT), and members of the political leadership. Junior officers acting under chain-of-command were abandoned by their superiors and labeled as "coup plotters," while none of the top commanders were held accountable in court—many were, in fact, promoted. (For details, see AfSV's report)²

The Scope of the Witch Hunt: Systematic Repression and Violations

The witch hunt launched by Erdoğan as of July 16, 2016, was not limited to military actors. It expanded to target virtually all segments of society, including journalists, academics, lawyers, human rights defenders, and even ethnic and religious minorities. Participants of the peaceful Hizmet Movement were disproportionately and systematically targeted in this campaign. Tens

of thousands of innocent people were labeled as "terrorists," losing their jobs, freedoms, and even their homeland simply because they were affiliated with a civil society initiative.

Official statistics reveal the scale of this civilian coup: As of 2024, more than 705,000 civilian citizens have been investigated for alleged involvement in the July 15 events.³ This figure is more than ten times the number of military personnel accused of involvement. During the same period, over 125,000 civilians were convicted—twenty times the number of convicted soldiers.⁴

As of today, approximately 13,000 innocent people are still being held in prison.⁵ In other words, the judicial processes pursued under the pretext of July 15 have disproportionately targeted civilians rather than the actual perpetrators. Moreover, over 1,500 schools, 15 universities, and more than 500 civil society organizations were shut down through emergency decrees issued during the state of emergency, depriving thousands of students, and their families of their right to education.⁶ These mass dismissals and closures became instruments of collective punishment aimed at erasing millions of people from economic and social life. Despite being subjected to all forms of deprivation, injustice, and even torture, participants in the Hizmet Movement have remained committed to peace and have limited their response to lawful and non-violent means, both inside and outside of Turkey.

From Democracy to One-Man Rule

The Erdoğan government continues to portray the night of July 15 as a "victory of democracy over military tutelage" in its official propaganda. However, for independent observers around the world, the meaning of July 15 is quite the opposite: it marked the collapse of Türkiye's remaining democratic pillars and the transformation of the country into a one-man regime. As Human Rights Watch has stated, "President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's authoritarian and highly centralized rule has set back Turkey's human rights record by decades; it has targeted critics and political opponents, profoundly undermined judicial independence, and hollowed out democratic institutions."⁷ This observation clearly shows how seriously the rule of law was damaged in Turkey after July 15.

International Findings

Over the past nine years, the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and international human rights organizations have consistently highlighted Türkiye's severe rights violations.⁸ Annual UN reports document that thousands of individuals in Türkiye are arbitrarily detained each year, that allegations of torture and ill-treatment go unpunished, and that the rule of law is being systematically eroded. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has ruled in hundreds of cases that Türkiye has violated the European Convention on Human Rights. Notably, imprisoned journalists and politicians (such as Selahattin Demirtas and Osman Kavala) have not been released despite ECHR rulings, and the Turkish government has openly

defied its international obligations. The European Parliament responded to this democratic backsliding by suspending accession negotiations with Türkiye in 2019.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has described post-July 15 practices as "alarming," specifically denouncing the arrest of pregnant women and mothers with infants as "utterly cruel, completely outrageous, and having nothing to do with making the country safer."⁹ More than 100 pregnant women were detained solely because their spouses were allegedly affiliated with the Hizmet Movement. Many were sent to prison straight from the hospital after giving birth, often handcuffed. The imprisonment of innocent babies with their mothers shows the inhumane extent of this persecution.

Decline in International Rankings

Türkiye's sharp decline in human rights is clearly reflected in international indices. In Freedom House's 2023 report, Türkiye scored 32 out of 100 and was categorized as "Not Free."¹⁰ Türkiye is the only NATO member classified in the "Not Free" category.¹¹ In press freedom, Türkiye ranks 158 out of 180 and has for years been known as one of the world's worst jailers of journalists.¹² The country ranks 117 out of 142 in the Rule of Law Index and 115 out of 180 in the Corruption Perceptions Index.^{13 14} These indicators reveal how Türkiye's global reputation is rapidly deteriorating in an environment where the rule of law has been suspended and arbitrary rule prevails.

Repression Without Limits

Erdoğan's regime has extended its oppression far beyond Türkiye's borders. According to a comprehensive 2021 report by Freedom House, Türkiye is one of the world's worst offenders in cross-border repression.¹⁵ The Turkish government has hunted down dissidents worldwide, orchestrating abductions via intelligence operations or abusing international mechanisms to force returns to Türkiye. U.S. State Department data reveals that since 2016, Turkish authorities have orchestrated the forced return of over 100 individuals from more than 20 countries.¹⁶ These included educators, businesspeople, journalists, and even ordinary asylum seekers. Examples include the abduction of six educators from Kosovo in 2018 by Turkish intelligence and similar incidents in countries like Malaysia and Pakistan, all of which drew global condemnation. According to Freedom House, Türkiye has conducted operations in at least 30 countries since 2014 to target dissidents.¹⁷ The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances has repeatedly ruled that such abductions violate international law.

The regime still imposes travel bans, revokes passports, and refuses to issue new ones to those trying to escape persecution. Some citizens have drowned in the Evros River with their children or risked their lives in refugee boats in the Aegean Sea. Tens of thousands of Turkish

citizens who managed to leave the country have ended up as refugees. All of this shows that Türkiye's domestic repression has become a global human rights crisis.

Instrumentalization of Justice: Current Examples

July 15 effectively turned Türkiye into a party state and the judiciary into an instrument of punishment in the hands of the Erdoğan government. Basic legal principles have been ignored, and courts have become tools for silencing dissent. A recent example is the political sentencing of Istanbul's elected mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, one of Erdoğan's strongest potential rivals in the next elections, according to polls. This politically motivated case demonstrated to the world the extent of the politicization of the Turkish judiciary. Over 1,400 citizens were arrested for peacefully protesting his sentencing¹⁸, providing a current example of how the judicial system is abused to intimidate civil society.

Today, people from all walks of life—from university students to housewives—can suddenly find themselves facing charges of "membership in an armed terrorist organization" simply for criticizing government policies or associating with the "wrong" people. In such an environment where the sense of justice is deeply eroded, public trust in the state is severely shaken.

A Call to the International Community

On this tragic anniversary, we call on the international community not to remain silent in the face of the ongoing crimes against humanity in Türkiye. The Turkish government must be clearly and firmly urged to fulfill its legal and human rights obligations under international treaties to which it is a signatory.

Concrete steps that must be taken include: The immediate release of female prisoners (including pregnant women and mothers), prisoners of conscience, journalists, and all political detainees; an end to the persecution and prosecution of lawyers for doing their jobs; and the removal of obstacles preventing citizens from leaving the country, including the return of confiscated passports.

Finally, any diplomatic, economic, or military support to Türkiye must be made conditional upon concrete and measurable improvements in its human rights record. A clear and principled stance from the international community is essential to protecting democratic values and human dignity. Every institution and country that raises its voice against injustice will serve as a beacon of hope for the countless people in Türkiye who have suffered persecution.

On this anniversary of July 15, we once again renew our call for justice, freedom, and human rights for the people of Türkiye. We offer our prayers for the innocent people who lost their lives in this tragic event.

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- ² AfSV July 15 Report
<https://afsv.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/July-15-A-Genuine-Attempt-for-a-Synthetic-Coup.pdf>
- ³ U.S. Congress Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing (Presentation by Alp Aslandoğan)
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- ⁴ <https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/events/hearings/human-rights-turkey-today-0>
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- ⁶ <https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/events/hearings/human-rights-turkey-today-0>
- ⁷ Human Rights Watch Turkey Country Profile
<https://www.hrw.org/europe/central-asia/turkey>
- ⁸ New Indian Express, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Statement (March 20, 2018)
<https://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2018/Mar/20/un-slams-rights-abuses-against-hundreds-of-thousands-in-turkey-1789915.html>
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<https://www.turkishminute.com/2023/10/26/turkey-rank-117-among-142-countries-global-rule-of-law-index/>
- ¹⁵ Turkish Minute, Dr. Edward Lemon Interview
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- ¹⁶ 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Turkey
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- ¹⁷ Turkish Minute, “Turkey’s Transnational Repression: 2021 in Review”
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<https://www.cnn.com/2025/04/18/europe/turkey-begins-mass-trials-protests-istanbul-mayor-detention-intl>