

From VOA Learning English, this is As It Is.

Welcome back. I'm Caty Weaver.

Today on the show we report on political unrest in Turkey. The country has been considered a rising European economic power, and it wants to join the European Union. But the nation's long-time leader -- Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan -- is now battling corruption accusations that could bring down his government. And the government's political opponents say top Turkish business and political officials are corrupt.

Then, we tell about a Christian church in southeastern Turkey that is helping ethnic Armenians rediscover their culture and their faith.

Turkey -- past, present and future -- on As It Is today.

Turkish Leader Battles Corruption Accusations

The Turkish government this week dismissed hundreds of police, government lawyers called prosecutors and judges investigating reports of official corruption. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan defended the dismissals. He has repeatedly said the corruption investigation is an attempt by judges and others in the judiciary division to overthrow his government.

Christopher Cruise reports.

Tens of thousands of Turks in Ankara, the capital, demonstrated against government corruption recently. Parliament has been debating a plan that would give the government more power in naming judges and prosecutors. The opposition says the move is an effort to hide a growing corruption case against the government.

Prime Minister Erdogan denied the accusation. He then accused the judiciary of attempting to overthrow the government. And he says foreign powers are to blame.

Last month, Mr. Erdogan said propaganda had been launched against the government. He said there is a group plotting against the state.

But his opponents disagree.

Gul Berna Ozcan is an expert in Turkish business and politics at the University of London.

“Corruption has actually been increasing as the economy got bigger and more affluent. The most critical part of the current government’s corruption index so to speak has to do with public procurements, municipal services, land planning, urban planning and privatization.”

Some political experts say the judicial dismissals target followers of a powerful conservative movement known as Hizmet. It was founded by Islamic opinion leader Fethulla Gulen, who is based in the United States. Ms. Ozcan says the movement is trying to change the way wealthy people and organizations act in Turkey.

“The Gulen movement has also been part of this economic reallocation -- reallocation through privatization, municipal real estate arrangements. And they perhaps have been increasingly squeezed out of these big fortunes.”

A healthy economy helped Mr. Erdogan win three elections, one after the other. The yearly average economic growth rate in Turkey was about 5.2 percent from 2000 to 2010. But Fadi Hakura, a Turkey expert at the policy research group Chatham House says the following year, growth slowed.

“Now that the pie is shrinking, each side wants to have a bigger slice of a shrinking pie, and that’s generating an enormous amount of feuding and disagreement between conservative forces in Turkey.”

Mr. Hakura says Turkey is in what economists call a middle-income, or earnings, trap.

“What is important is productivity growth, the quality of human capital, robust state institutions, transparency and the rule of law. And on all these criteria, Turkey is seriously lacking.”

Gul Berna Ozcan says the latest corruption accusations could lead to more economic trouble.

“The rule of law is definitely in serious danger. No one would like to invest in a country where the judiciary is controlled by the government.”

I’m Christopher Cruise.

You are listening to As It Is.

Now we take you to the southeastern Turkish city of Diyarbakir. As Katy Weaver reports, a recently-repaired church there has become a center for ethnic Armenians to renew their culture and religious beliefs.

Rebuilt Church Helps Renew Ethnic Armenian Culture

Saint Geragos Armenian Orthodox Church is in Diyarbakir's ancient neighborhood of Sur. The church was unused and in terrible condition for many years. Then, in 2012, the church was repaired and returned to its former beauty.

Hundreds of people attended a celebration of the church and the saint it was named for in September. The church does not yet have a permanent leader, or priest. But, it does have a caretaker -- Armin Demirciyan. He says Saint Geragos is already an important representation of ethnic Armenian identity.

"It means everything to me. It's our history. It's our culture and it's our legacy. It's the gift of our ancestors to us. As an Armenian, I can see myself here. I was raised as a Kurd. I knew nothing of my Armenian identity."

Mr. Demirciyan's family history is not uncommon. His father was an only child. His parents were killed in mass ethnic killings by Turkey's rulers during World War One, when he was just a boy. He was then raised by a local family as a Muslim.

Some ethnic Armenians are now becoming Christians. Melike Gunal goes to Saint Geragos often. She says for years she hid her identity. But, she says the church's reopening helped her publicly admit her identity and faith.

"I come here three or four times a week to light a candle. Even before, when there was no roof I would come here and sit and cry. But now there is a roof and it's restored. It's so special for me."

Ms. Gunal's father was a political activist. He was killed in the Turkish government's war against the Kurdish rebel group PKK. But Melike Gunal says it was the Kurdish fight for greater minority rights that gave ethnic Armenians the right to declare their identity.

Abdullah Demirbas is the mayor of Sur and a member of the pro-Kurdish party, BDP. He gave \$600,000 of public money to help pay for the church's repair. He says the help was linked to a policy that supports the mix of ethnic groups.

“In past years, the state wanted to turn this area into a single Turkish Muslim identity, by not only suppressing Kurds but all these communities, all these religions and languages. We want to show this diversity can live together.”

And that's As It Is for today. I'm Caty Weaver. Thanks for joining us.