



Orhan Kemal Cengiz

Orhan Kemal Cengiz (born in 1968) is a human rights lawyer, columnist and president of the [Human Rights Agenda Association](#), a respected Turkish NGO that works on human rights issues ranging from the prevention of torture to the rights of the mentally disabled.

Cengiz is also known for representing the families of the victims in the Malatya murder case in which three Christians were killed by a group of young men with links to ultranationalist organisations (read ESI's report "[Murder in Malatya](#)"). After the trial started in November 2007, Cengiz received multiple threats. He asked the government for protection. Following an [international campaign by Amnesty International](#), the state provided him with a bodyguard in early 2008.

Throughout his professional life, Cengiz has tried to improve the human rights situation in Turkey and to uphold the rule of law. After obtaining a law degree from Ankara University in 1993, he attended post-graduate courses in public law, criminal law and the European Convention on Human Rights at the 9th September University in Izmir.

Since 2002, Cengiz has been the lawyer of the Alliance of Turkish Protestant Churches. In the interview with ESI, he talks about the difficult legal situation for Christian communities in Turkey. In 2003, he published the report "[Minority Foundations in Turkey: An Evaluation of Their Legal Problems](#)", which attracted the attention of the government and the European Union. "We were not only talking about the legal gap," he tells ESI, "we were also talking about this huge mentality which criminalised the very existence of Christians in Turkey."

Cengiz is also an active columnist, writing for the liberal daily Radikal and the English-language daily [Today's Zaman](#). He has written extensively on the problems of Christians and other human rights matters, but also high-profile court cases like Ergenekon and the murder of Hrant Dink and issues of transitional justice. In a December 2011 column for Today's Zaman, "[Religious minorities and new constitution](#)", Cengiz called on the leaders of religious

minorities to provide input into the new constitution that is being developed. In a November 2011 article, "[Alevis' consciousness: false or pretence?](#)," he talked about the attitude of contemporary Alevis to the massacres of their kinsmen in 1937 and 1938. In 2008, he published "[Turkey and the World Around It: From Democracy and Human Rights Perspective](#)", a compilation of his columns in the Turkish Daily News in 2007 and 2008.

Cengiz founded and co-founded various civil society organisations concerned with human rights, such as the [Human Rights Agenda Association](#) (2003), which he still chairs, the [Civil Society Development Centre](#) (2004), which provides capacity-building support for Turkish NGOs, and new sections of the [Izmir Bar Association](#). (These include a section dealing with torture, which initiated 2,000 legal cases, another section dealing with human rights, and an international committee.) Between 1999 and 2002, Cengiz worked as a legal adviser to the [Kurdish Human Rights Project](#) in London.

The human rights lawyer also gives lectures in Turkey and abroad, provides training to Turkish lawyers and human rights activists, and has published or translated various handbooks (for example on the prosecution of torture) and legal studies. In 2010, he prepared an evaluation of the Law of Associations ([executive summary](#)) for the Third Sector Foundation in Turkey ([TUSEV](#)).

In his interview with ESI, Cengiz talks about the situation of Christians in Turkey, the Ergenekon, Malatya and Hrant Dink cases, the Turkish judiciary, and ways of dealing with the crimes of the past. Although much remains to be done in his opinion, he is optimistic. "When I look at the current situation," he says, "there are so many things happening. For example, we are talking about the Armenian taboo, we are talking about every single aspect of the Kurdish question. ... This is a huge transition. Nothing in Turkey is comparable with the situation of, let's say, ten years ago."