

Advancing Turkey’s democracy through strategic human rights litigation

Why Turkey’s democracy needs support

In the last two decades, Turkey’s democracy has deteriorated sharply, and the country’s political system is moving towards a closed autocracy. The government increasingly deploys the state apparatus and the judiciary to suppress dissent. Journalists, activists, and opposition figures face politically motivated prosecutions, arbitrary arrests, and judicial restrictions. Yet, even within this constrained environment, elements of democratic resilience persist – civil society remains active and the opposition has secured meaningful legal and electoral gains, notably at the local level.

What to support

Turkey’s authoritarian consolidation has in large part been driven by the strategic deployment of the legal system. Broadly framed counter-terrorism laws have been used to prosecute opposition politicians, journalists, human rights defenders (HRDs), and lawyers, while judicial independence has been systematically dismantled, removing an essential check on executive power.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has repeatedly found Turkey in violation of fundamental rights – including in the landmark cases of Osman Kavala and Selahattin Demirtaş – yet the government has refused to comply with binding rulings ordering their release.

The arrest in March 2025 of Istanbul’s Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, the government’s January 2026 plan to strip parliamentary immunity from ten opposition politicians, and the May 2026 Ankara appeals court ruling annulling the CHP’s 2023 congress and removing its elected leader Özgür Özel – which the party denounced as an attempted coup carried out through the judiciary – mark a further intensification of a crackdown on opposition actors.

Against this backdrop, strategic human rights litigation before international mechanisms – notably the ECtHR, the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers, and UN treaty bodies – remains one of the few effective levers for holding the government accountable, setting legal precedents that reinforce fundamental human rights, and sustaining the legal and political pressure needed to keep civic space open. Without sustained external legal challenges, there is little to constrain the government’s consolidation of control over the judiciary and its suppression of dissent.

Who to support

The Turkey Human Rights Litigation Support Project (TLSP) is a human rights litigation, research, and advocacy centre established in 2018 within the School of Law at Middlesex University. It was founded by a group of international human rights lawyers in direct response to the normalisation of exceptional measures after the 2016 coup attempt. TLSP is recognised by domestic, European Union (EU), and United Nations (UN) bodies as a leading civil society organisation engaged in Turkey-related judgment supervision.

The ECtHR has explicitly cited TLSP’s third-party interventions in landmark rulings including Kavala, Demirtaş, and Taner Kiliç. Its Rule 9.2 submissions contributed to infringement proceedings in the Kavala case, and its sustained advocacy and capacity-building contributed to the January 2026 acquittal of the Istanbul Bar Association’s president and board members on terrorist propaganda charges.

Between June 2023 and May 2025, TLSP supported at least 35 individuals and 15 lawyers, contributed to 14 strategic litigation actions and 6 third-party interventions, and submitted 10 UN urgent action letters and 14 Committee of Ministers submissions – consistently exceeding its committed outputs.

For the period June 2025 to May 2027, TLSP seeks €66,515 to close the funding gap on its €306,515 initiative. By financing the project, donors will support an organisation that has the credibility, institutional access, and legal expertise to sustain international pressure on the Turkish government through strategic litigation, implementation advocacy, and capacity-building for lawyers and civil society in Turkey. In doing so, donors will help preserve the rule of law, protect civic space, and keep open the path to democratic recovery in Turkey.