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Turks Protest Against Pope's Visit

Istanbul — A group of Turkish ultra-nationalists protested anew against Pope Benedict XVI's planned visit to the country next week. The group also occupied Hagia Sophia, a major Christian shrine, dated from the times of the Roman Empire. The Saint Sophia Church was built by Roman Emperor Justinian the Great and was converted into a mosque when Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. It was later transformed into a museum by Mustafa Kemal Pasha, Turkey's first dictator.

The group of protestors belonged to the Great Unity Party (BBP), an ultra-nationalist political formation in current Turkey, a mixture of extreme nationalist thought intermingled with Islam. It was led by Kemal Kerincsiz, an ultra-nationalist lawyer who has won notoriety for launching multiple court cases against Turkish intellectuals, contesting the official line on the extermination of Turkey's Christian minorities of Armenians, Greeks and Assyrians under Ottoman rule, which Ankara ostensibly rejects as genocide, or condemning human rights abuses against Kurdish nationals.

This protest is one of the many taking place almost weekly in Turkey since Pope Benedict XVI had announced his intention to visit Turkey in order to meet Ecumenical Patriarchal Bartholomew I, the head of the world's Orthodox Christians. Benedict XVI made unity among divided Christians one of his pontificate's most important goals. Unity among Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians is seen by Rome as very possible given the proximity of these two Christian Churches in all major Christian dogmas. More protests by Turkish nationalists and Islamists are expected next week when the papal visit will be taking place and many fears have been expressed for the Pontiff's security.

Pope Benedict XVI will also meet Turkish President Ahmed Sezer but not Prime Minister Ertogan and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Gul, both of them pious Muslims, who will be absent, a clear sign of discontent for the Pope's latest remarks which were perceived as linking Islam with violence. In the last years, Turkey is rediscovering its Islamic roots, amid fears for an imminent end of its European course which is to be decided in the first half of next December. The European Union accuses Turkey for virtually suspending necessary reforms on human and minority rights and for not taking steps to resolve the pending Cyprus problem.

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