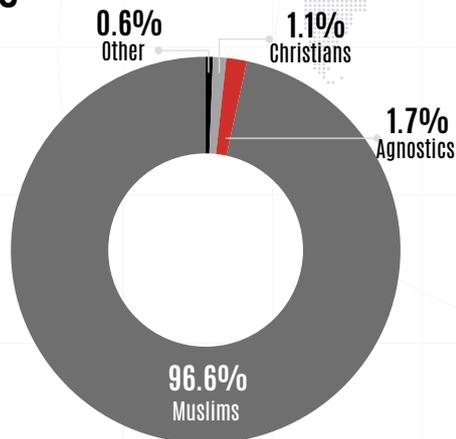




TURKMENISTAN

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

In Turkmenistan, freedom of worship is formally protected by the constitution (Articles 18 and 41).¹ However, the country ranks among the world's worst violators of religious freedom.

The law on religious organisations and religious freedom, which came into effect in 2016, significantly tightens the conditions for free religious practice by: requiring religious groups to register every three years, respecting cumbersome and complex criteria (such as having a minimum of 50 adult resident members), and banning any activity by unregistered groups.² Worshipping in private homes as well as private religious instruction are equally prohibited.

Through the State Commission on Religious Organisations, the government oversees various religious activities, such as approving the appointment of leaders, the construction of places of worship, and the importation, publication and distribution of religious literature. By law, Ministry of Justice officials can attend any event of a registered religious community and question members about the nature of their activities.³

Aside from basic education in some Sunni mosques and Russian Orthodox churches, formal religious instruction is almost entirely banned. The one exception is a small Sunni Muslim theological section in the Faculty of History at Ashgabat State University, which is authorised to train imams.⁴

As of October 2018, 131 religious organisations were registered; of these, 107 are Muslim (102 Sunni and five Shia), 13 are Russian Orthodox, whilst the remaining 11 include Baha'is, Protestants, Roman Catholics and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. No other religious groups appear to have been able to register in the last two years.⁵

Polygamy was banned on 1st September 2018.⁶

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

The lack of an independent press⁷ and the religious believers' fear of government retaliation make it hard to find news about, and hinder the reporting of, abuse. In 2019, there were no signs of improvement for religious freedom in Turkmenistan, which remains one of the worst offenders in the world.

The government continues to be wary of any independent religious activity, which is monitored via an extensive surveillance apparatus. Overt religious practice is viewed with suspicion, and many people have suffered significant repercussions for openly expressing their faith at work in both the public and private sectors.⁸ For some the penalties are harsh; mainly Muslims who were convicted and sent to prison on vague charges of religious extremism because of unconcealed expressions of religiosity.

One of the country's most infamous prisons is Ovadan-Depe, which holds more than a hundred Muslim prisoners of conscience. Little is known about their conditions or even if they are still alive.⁹ Akmyrat Soyunov and Eziz Hudayberdiyev, two of 18 Gülenist¹⁰ prisoners held in the facility, died in custody under unknown circumstances in October 2018 and June 2019 respectively,¹¹ whilst the health of a third prisoner, Alysher Muhametgulyev, is reported as seriously deteriorated.¹²

On a more positive note, relatives of prisoners "missing" in Ovadan-Depe were given for the first time the opportunity to visit their loved ones in June 2018.¹³ Likewise, between September and November 2019, the Ministry of Justice organised meetings with the leaders of registered and non-registered religious organisations, in order to open a channel of communication and answer the questions of certain religious groups. Although viewing such meetings positively, many groups received few or no answers.¹⁴

In the capital Ashgabat, the small Catholic community of about 250 members, mostly expatriates working in the construction or oil industries, can meet discreetly in the Chapel of the Transfiguration of the Lord. As is the case for Orthodox Russians, Mass for Catholics requires a discretionary authorisation from the authorities as do processions and other group liturgical services, as well as charitable activities.¹⁵

Over the past two years, police have repeatedly raided private homes and places of worship where believers gather for services, which tend to end with the seizure of religious literature and the temporary detention of participants.

Christian churches are the main targets of these raids, as they are viewed with suspicion by the population and deemed a potential source of destabilisation by the state. In February 2020, officers broke into two homes in the northern region of Dashoguz during Protestant meetings; one of the owners was fined 200 Manats (US\$ 55), equal to about a week's wages.¹⁶

Police raided a meeting of Protestant women who had gathered in December 2019 to celebrate Christmas in a village in the Lebap Region. The flat was searched, phones seized, and participants questioned and registered at the local police station. The owner was fined 200 Manats (US\$ 55).¹⁷

Since September 2018, Jehovah's Witnesses have also denounced increased government interference in their activities, complaining of harassment and threats as well as the government's denial of their right to own religious material.¹⁸ In most cases, the raids included house searches, seizures of personal effects, intimidation and sometimes physical violence by police.

At least eight Jehovah's Witnesses were fined the equivalent of a week's average salary, whilst one of them was also detained for three days on hooliganism charges. Officials forcibly seized some Jehovah's Witnesses at work and at home to question them and induce them to abandon their faith.¹⁹

After a four-year moratorium, during which conscientious objectors only received suspended sentences or were forced to perform corrective labour (with the state keeping part of their salary), Turkmenistan in 2018 resumed the incarceration of people who refuse to perform military service.

This practice not only continued in 2019 and 2020, but the sentences became more severe, with up to four years in prison. Bahtiyar Atahanov, a 19-year-old Jehovah's Witness, was convicted in July 2019 after he was forcibly enlisted and then not tried as a conscientious objector but as a soldier on active duty. Serdar Dovletov was given a three-year sentence in November 2019 for fraudulently trying to avoid military service.

From early 2018 to September 2020, 24 people were convicted for conscientious objection, most of them sentenced to two years in prison. For three Jehovah's Witnesses, this was a second conviction since they had received a suspended sentence or had been forced to perform corrective labour in 2016 and 2017 for the same crime.²⁰

Although permitted by law, importing religious literature is subject to arcane procedures that govern the process of authorisation. Despite this, some churches have been successful in importing a small number of texts. One Christian church, for example, successfully brought in 50 copies of the Bible, 25 in Russian and 25 in Turkmen.²¹ In December 2018, the authorities detained a Turkmen

woman for 24 hours; she was coming from Turkey (where she lived and worked) carrying copies of the Qur'ān as a gift for relatives. The books were confiscated and she was not allowed to return to Turkey at the end of her holiday in Turkmenistan.²²

The relationship between the state and Islam is characterised by a clear dichotomy. On the one hand, there is a symbiotic relationship with Islam as a pillar around which to build national identity allowing the president to use the clergy as a tool to increase his own influence and gain popular support; on the other hand, strict control is applied to active Islamic religious practice, which is strongly discouraged and constantly monitored.

In Turkmenistan, the only form of Islam allowed must operate under the supervision of the state-controlled Muslim Board (Muftiate). The latter appoints imams and controls the content of sermons and prayers,²³ which must in any case praise the president and wish him health and success. In one case, in May 2020, an imam at an Ashgabat mosque called upon the Almighty to “punish all [the president’s] enemies and foes” so that they may “grovel at his feet”.²⁴

Recently, Turkmen authorities have intensified their efforts to prevent visible expressions of Islamic religious practice. For example, in 2019, unlike previous years, the Muslim Board did not make any official announcement at the start of Ramadan, nor did the country’s mainstream media mention it.²⁵ Fearing the label of “extremist”, many people also choose not to fast during Ramadan or in any case not to talk about it publicly.²⁶ In early 2019, police in Ashgabat and the eastern region of Lebap stepped up their campaign to prevent men under 40 from wearing beards, a practice treated as a sign of excessive devotion. Some of those arrested were forcibly shaved whilst others were also pressured to do the same; in one case, officers forced a young man not only to shave but to drink an alcoholic beverage.²⁷ Also in Lebap, state employees cannot participate in Friday prayers (namaz) in mosques or the workplace, on pain of dismissal. The ban came into effect in February 2020 on the same day that President Berdymukhamedov, attending the inauguration of a new mosque in Turkmenabat, Lebap’s capital, was quoted as saying that, “the government secures all the necessary conditions to protect freedom of conscience”.²⁸ Also in the Mary region, the police intensified a campaign against women wearing the hijab and bearded men.²⁹

Turkmen students abroad are often monitored by Turkmen

diplomatic officials, who regularly summon them to warn them against getting involved in religious communities in host countries, instructing them on the correct behaviour to follow, and sometimes questioning them about the religious practices of fellow Turkmen students. Parents of students studying abroad have also received warnings. During meetings held in Ashgabat in early 2019, government officials instructed them on how they should supervise their children.³⁰

The Turkmen government continues to restrict the movement of its citizens abroad, especially if it suspects that religious activity is the purpose of the trip.³¹ Since 2000, Turkmenistan has limited the number of people allowed to travel to Makkah for the annual pilgrimage (Hajj) to 160 individuals (no more than the number of seats available on its domestic carrier’s largest plane), this despite the fact Saudi Arabia’s quota for Turkmenistan is 5,000 people.³²

PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Turkmenistan is one of the most repressive and authoritarian countries in the world, with negative records in every area of human rights particularly religious freedom.

In the absence of any real opposition or an independent judiciary, President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, in power since 2006, exercises total control. Under the circumstances, significant political change is not anticipated and the country’s extreme isolation vis-à-vis the outside world makes it relatively impervious to international pressures. The various religious communities live, and will likely continue to live in the foreseeable future, under constant surveillance and pressure with little chance to improve their difficult situation.

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