

12 March 2004

TURKMENISTAN: Scepticism and optimism greet surprise presidential decree

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18, and Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Despite a surprise 11 March decree from President Saparmurat Niyazov lifting the requirement that a religious community must have 500 adult citizen members before it can register, officials have insisted that unregistered religious activity remains illegal. Bibi Tagieva of the Adalat (Justice) Ministry told Forum 18 that the decree does not mean that unregistered religious communities can start to meet freely in private homes. Some believers are optimistic that the decree might be a signal of a relaxation of Turkmenistan's harsh restrictions on religious communities – which have seen all Protestant, Armenian Apostolic, Shia Muslim, Jewish, Hare Krishna, Baha'i and Jehovah's Witness communities banned. "The authorities have tried up till now to use repressive measures and have understood this is unsuccessful," one Protestant told Forum 18. "They seem now to be trying to bring religious communities under state control – perhaps a cleverer policy."

Religious believers of the many illegal faiths – including all Protestant, Armenian Apostolic, Shia Muslim, Jewish, Hare Krishna, Baha'i and Jehovah's Witness communities - have been taken by surprise by an 11 March decree from Turkmenistan's authoritarian president Saparmurat Niyazov allowing religious communities to gain official registration regardless of how many members they have or what faith they belong to. Some have told Forum 18 News Service they are optimistic that conditions will improve, though others – especially from groups that have regularly suffered fines, beatings and threats - are sceptical.

Under the country's harsh religion law, communities have previously needed five hundred adult citizen members (a requirement almost impossible for religious minorities to achieve), while since last November unregistered religious activity has been a crime. The new decree makes no mention of decriminalising unregistered religious activity.

Bibi Tagieva, an official of the department that registers social organisations at the Adalat (Justice) Ministry, told Forum 18 that the decree does not mean that unregistered religious communities can start to meet freely in private homes. "As before, religious communities can only function after they get registration," she told Forum 18 from Ashgabad on 12 March. "The decree simply gives religious communities like the Baptists and others the possibility to work legally."

Officials at the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs were, as usual, reluctant to talk, putting down the phone when Forum 18 telephoned. Eventually Forum 18 managed to speak to Mukhamed (who refused to give his last name), an aide to the deputy chairman Murad Karriyev, who said the same as Tagieva that the decree does not entitle unregistered religious communities to begin to function. "They still need registration," he insisted to Forum 18.

Radik Zakirov, a Protestant from Ashgabad, said his community is not preparing to register under the new decree. But he believed it might mark a change of policy. "The authorities have tried up till now to use repressive measures and have understood this is unsuccessful," he told Forum 18 on 12 March. "They seem now to be trying to bring religious communities under state control – perhaps a cleverer policy."

One immediate welcome for the decree came from Armenia's Ambassador to Turkmenistan, Aram Grigorian, who has been seeking the return to the local Armenian community of their church in the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi (formerly Krasnovodsk), which was confiscated during the Soviet period. "This is a very progressive decree," he told Forum 18 from Ashgabad on 12 March. "We will try to make use of it."

The government has not allowed any Armenian Apostolic churches to reopen or open in Turkmenistan and, if they wish to attend services, Armenian Apostolic believers are forced to go to the only legal Christian denomination, the Russian Orthodox Church, although the Armenian Church is of the Oriental family of Christian Churches, not the Orthodox.

Vasili Kalin, chairman of the ruling council of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, who maintains close ties with fellow believers in Turkmenistan, was cautiously optimistic over what he regarded as perhaps the start of a process of improvement. "We welcome the guarantees of freedom of religion and registration in the decree," he told Forum 18 from St Petersburg on 12 March, "but experience teaches us to look at what happens in practice." Anatoly Melnik, a Jehovah's Witness leader from Kazakhstan with contacts in

Turkmenistan, was more pessimistic over whether the decree will improve life for their communities, believing the decree might be simply a "propaganda measure".

Kalin said their communities in Turkmenistan are ready to register, but pointed out that several Jehovah's Witnesses remain in prison for their faith. "It would be a good gesture that Turkmenistan is ready to abide by its international human rights commitments if these innocent people would be freed. We hope to see that soon." He said the new decree might be a signal that Turkmenistan is changing "just as in the Soviet Union when the situation changed". He pointed out that moving from illegality in the Soviet Union to a position where Jehovah's Witnesses could register their communities took time.

One Protestant, whose church has had numerous problems from the authorities and has to meet in secret to try to evade state control, was sceptical about whether the decree would make a lot of difference. "We know about the decree," the Protestant – who preferred not to be identified - told Forum 18. "But are we optimistic? Not so much."

A Christian representative outside Turkmenistan with close links in the country told Forum 18 that "if the decree becomes a reality, it will be good". The representative noted that without registration the church has faced a number of problems, including the impossibility of acquiring property for services.

Most sceptical were leaders of unregistered Protestant churches. Viktor Makrousov of the Pentecostal church (who had not yet seen the decree) and Vladimir Tolmachev of Greater Grace both separately believed the situation is unlikely to improve on the ground. "Our main problem has not been the 500 signatures required for registration – we could achieve that," Tolmachev told Forum 18 from Ashgabad on 12 March. "The problem is that people signing the registration application would get problems – they would be sacked from their work, especially those who are ethnic Turkmens. It is a problem of people's safety."

Niyazov's decree, reported on state television on 11 March and published in Russian on the pro-government website turkmenistan.ru, claims that the country "carries out fully" its commitments under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief "while securing the harmony of the religious confessions functioning in Turkmenistan". In reality, the government has flagrantly violated these international commitments amid the heaviest controls on religious life of all the former Soviet republics.

The decree – which comes into force today (12 March) – sets out three provisions:

"1. To secure the registration on the territory of Turkmenistan of religious organisations and groups in accordance with generally-accepted international norms and procedures.

"2. To register on the territory of Turkmenistan according to established procedure religious groups of citizens independently of their number, faith and religion.

"3. The Adalat Ministry of Turkmenistan is to put into effect the current decree from the day of its publication."

The decree was published at the same time as a decree ordering the lifting of exit controls on Turkmenistan's citizens. Both this and the denial of religious freedom have been heavily criticised by foreign governments and human rights activists. Religious believers within the country are generally too frightened to speak out openly against the restrictions on their religious activity.

For more background see Forum 18's report on the new religion law at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=180

and Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=151

A printer-friendly map of Turkmenistan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=turkme>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY