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COMMENTARY: Why can't all religious communities have places of worship?

By a Turkmen Protestant

One of the biggest problems faced by religious believers in Turkmenistan is not being able to freely maintain public places of worship, a Turkmen Protestant from a region far from the capital argues in a personal commentary for Forum 18 News Service <http://www.forum18.org>. "You cannot build, buy, or securely rent such property, let alone put up a notice outside saying "This is a place of worship," the Protestant comments. "All kinds of obstructions are imposed, whether through rules or just in practice," the commentary continues, noting that "whenever officials raid our meetings the first thing they ask is: 'Where's your registration certificate?' The government likes to be able to say to outsiders 'We have registration' and show them communities in Ashgabad. But people don't look at what we experience in places away from the capital, where we have no hope of registration." The Turkmen concludes that "without freedom to meet for worship it is impossible to claim that we have freedom of religion or belief."

Religious believers in Turkmenistan don't have freedom. We can be raided as we meet for worship, and be stopped and searched anywhere. But one of the biggest problems we face is not being able to freely maintain public places of worship. You cannot build, buy, or securely rent such property, let alone put up a notice outside saying "This is a place of worship". Officials won't give a place of worship legal status as such – I don't know why. All kinds of obstructions are imposed, whether through rules or just in practice.

Some places of worship do exist. Mosques and Russian Orthodox churches are usually reasonably visible and known as such. Within the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat] the handful of registered non-Muslim and non-Orthodox religious communities are able to meet quietly for worship, however insecure their arrangements, though not in a formal place of worship. Other faiths – and those of us outside the capital - have it more difficult.

If the community has existed for some time, it might have a place of worship which people know about, but which usually has no legal status. But for those that had their places of worship bulldozed or confiscated in the last decade – as has happened to Muslim, Protestant, and Hare Krishna places of worship – there is no chance of getting them back or of compensation.

Even registered religious communities (apart from most Muslim and Russian Orthodox communities) find it hard to get a place of worship.

The many communities which exist without state registration (a process which has now all but come to a halt) face the biggest difficulties. They cannot officially get a place of worship and if they try unofficially they always fear they will be discovered and punished for even trying.

I don't know why the authorities restrict places of worship – you will have to ask them. Perhaps they are afraid.

Although a dedicated place of worship is not essential for a religious community, in today's Turkmenistan it makes it difficult for a community to operate without one. People interested in learning more about your community and its beliefs cannot come to attend services – even if they know you exist they don't know how to find you. We don't have telephone directories (the last ones were issued in the Soviet period) but if we could have an open place of worship people could find the phone number from directory enquiries or from the local hyakimlik (administration).

If you meet in a private flat – and try to escape police or secret police surveillance – this might be on the third or fourth floor of a block of flats. Climbing stairs with no lift is difficult for some.

If it is difficult to meet unobtrusively in towns, it is almost impossible in villages and small settlements. Aksakals (community elders), the police and Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police often ban minority faiths from meeting in villagers' homes. They deploy a whole range of threats – from intimidation and public humiliation to social ostracism or denial of work.

In other ways too having a recognised place of worship is vital. It would provide a safe place where a religious community could hold not just open, public worship, but educational work with children or adults, something that remains highly risky today. Maybe

I'm being too ambitious here, but our communities could try to hold larger events or conferences – this is of course impossible today.

Most importantly, people would be assured that coming to worship is safe. They could come knowing that – at least in theory – the place of worship would not be raided and they would not have to give their name, address and place of work. They would not be harassed and face questions such as: "Why do you come here?"

The changes to the Religion Law in 2004 did help a little, especially the reduction in the number of adult citizen members required to found a religious organisation from 500 to just a handful. Finding 500 people was impossible and without registration we were completely banned from meeting. But since the changes very few non-Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox communities have been able to get such registration, especially away from Ashgabad. However, being able to meet for worship has become easier, even if intermittent raids and check-ups continue.

It is important now for religious communities in the regions – such as my own Protestant church - to be able to get registration. Of course, we shouldn't be required to have registration before we can meet, but that's how it is. Whenever officials raid our meetings the first thing they ask is: "Where's your registration certificate?" The government likes to be able to say to outsiders "We have registration" and show them communities in Ashgabad. But people don't look at what we experience in places away from the capital, where we have no hope of registration.

Officials are cunning in the way they obstruct registration. They never give their refusals on paper. Anyway, local officials don't decide anything – they just get their orders from above. They are afraid to take any steps without such direction from on high, for fear of losing their comfortable seats. Any official who approved a religious community's registration application would be sacked.

The government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs in Ashgabad is not interested in the problems religious communities face. Its officials can't decide anything anyway – they need to seek advice from on high. The aim is a system of control. Everything is still as it was in the Soviet period.

Many activities are banned for us. We can't spread our faith, meet in public buildings like cinemas, show films, work in hospitals or children's homes, distribute humanitarian aid or invite fellow-believers from abroad.

I know people from neighbouring countries who wanted to visit us who have been refused visas five times. They are our brothers and sisters. We pray together. This is – or should be – a normal part of our religious life. We suffer because of this – it leaves us without teaching, encouragement, friendship and exchanges of information.

Religious literature is especially difficult. We can't print such literature at all – how can we when the state runs all printing houses and you need official permission for anything that is printed? Nor can we import it into the country – if you have more than one religious book when you come back through customs they will be confiscated. I have had my personal Bible confiscated from me at customs. It would be excellent if we could print our own literature.

But I come back to places of worship. It is our desire to have a freely-open place of worship in every place where we have a community. This is vital – but at present impossible. Without freedom to meet for worship it is impossible to claim that we have freedom of religion or belief. (END)

- a Turkmen Protestant contributed this commentary to Forum 18 News Service <http://www.forum18.org>. Commentaries are personal views and do not necessarily represent the views of F18News or Forum 18.

For a personal commentary by another Protestant within Turkmenistan, on the fiction - despite government claims - of religious freedom in the country, and how religious communities and the international community should respond to this, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=728.

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1167.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Turkmenistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=32>.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

A printer-friendly map of Turkmenistan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=turkme>.

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