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TURKMENISTAN: State officials' dual role as clergy to suppress freedom of religion or belief

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Some state officials in Turkmenistan's Gengesh (Council) for Religious Affairs, which restricts freedom of religion or belief for all, have a dual role as clergy within religious communities. This was most recently demonstrated in late September 2009, Forum 18 News Service notes. Most if not all the senior Muslim clergy given new appointments then were also officials in the Gengesh. The new Chief Mufti, Gurban Haitliev, has a staff position at the central Gengesh, and was previously head of the Lebap regional Gengesh as well as the region's Chief Imam. Four of the officials appointed to head regional branches of the Gengesh were also appointed as new regional Chief Imams, officials have told Forum 18. In their dual role as Gengesh officials and religious community leaders they work with other state agencies such as the MSS secret police. Meanwhile, residents of the capital Ashgabat have told Forum 18 that the University's [Islamic] Theology Department building has been demolished without warning. Gengesh Deputy Chair Nurmukhamed Gurbanov told Forum 18 that "there are no problems in Turkmenistan."

Some state officials in the state agency which restricts freedom of religion or belief for all have a dual role, as clergy within Muslim and Christian religious communities. This was most recently demonstrated in late September, Forum 18 News Service notes, when most if not all the senior Muslim clergy given new appointments then were also officials in the Gengesh (Council) for Religious Affairs. The new Chief Mufti, Gurban Haitliev, ostensibly appointed to the post by the leadership of Turkmenistan's Muftiate (Sunni Muslim Spiritual Administration), simultaneously has a staff position at the government's central Gengesh, as did his predecessors. Four of the officials appointed to head regional branches of the Gengesh were also appointed as new regional Chief Imams, officials have told Forum 18. In their dual role as Gengesh officials and religious community leaders they play a key part in suppressing freedom of religion or belief.

Muslims have complained to Forum 18, anonymously for fear of state reprisals, about state interference in Islamic religious life. These include restrictions on who can lead their communities, and the state appointment without consultation of imams who, they argue, do not have adequate experience or Muslim education.

Meanwhile, officials have denied to Forum 18 that the building of the [Islamic] Theology Department of Turkmen State University in the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat] was demolished in July 2009, as city residents have told Forum 18. However, a University official confirmed that its students are instead studying in the University's main building.

The Gengesh's role

Gengesh officials both nationally and locally – including imams – take part in raids on non-Muslim religious meetings and intimidation of those present often in conjunction with the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police. The use of beatings, torture and threats of torture during such raids appears to be common, but victims are normally reluctant to speak publicly of this for fear of state reprisals (see eg. F18News 25 November 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1221). Officials have claimed that such raids are their "duty" (see F18News 18 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1116). Among the Gengesh's other activities are helping restrict the numbers of people allowed to travel out of and into the country including on the Muslim haj pilgrimage (see F18News 19 November 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1219), and helping impose strict censorship of religious literature (see F18News 12 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1294).

The Gengesh's permission at national or local level is also required for any other activity, including state registration (the only means of gaining the legal right to exist) with the Justice (Adalat) Ministry, acquiring a place for religious meetings, acquiring religious literature or inviting foreign guests. Such requests are almost always denied and state officials often also impose illegal requirements, representatives of many religious communities have told Forum 18 (see the Forum 18 religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1167). These illegal requirements include collaboration with the MSS secret police (see personal commentary on the near impossibility of acquiring a place of worship at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1128).

The central Gengesh for Religious Affairs reports to President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, while local Gengeshs report both to local Hyakims (administration chiefs) and the central Gengesh.

Nurmukhamed Gurbanov, Deputy Chair of the central Gengesh, put the phone down on 12 October before Forum 18 was able to ask him: how clerics of one faith can also oversee the religious life of other faiths neutrally on behalf of the state; who had chosen the new Chief Mufti and made the other senior appointments on behalf of the Muslim community; and why the Gengesh names all senior imams in the country. Subsequent calls were answered but immediately terminated.

How are Gengesh decisions taken?

At the national level, decisions at the Gengesh are reportedly taken mainly by the one Deputy Chair who is not a cleric (currently Gurbanov). The Gengesh Chair has usually been an imam, while the other two Deputy Chairs are the country's Chief Mufti and a Russian Orthodox priest, Fr Andrei Sapunov. While the Gengesh as a whole makes Muslim appointments, Fr Sapunov deals with non-Muslim faiths, though without apparently appointing their leaders. He is distrusted by many in the Orthodox Church and other religious communities, and supported a 2002 Gengesh decision to ban the import into Turkmenistan of the official Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Pressure that appears to have come from the government via the Gengesh may have been responsible for the Russian Orthodox Church placing its Deanery in Turkmenistan directly under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarch (see F18News 19 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1037).

Reinforcing the fusion of the Gengesh and the Muslim leadership, in Ashgabad itself, the city Chief Imam and the office of the Muftiate are in one building, officials told Forum 18. In regional centres, Chief Imams tend to have an office both at the main mosque and at the city Hyakimlik.

Forum 18 notes that Turkmenistan is a highly centralised country, with all senior decisions and appointments being made by President Berdymukhamedov. Commentators in the country pointed out to Forum 18 that the dual appointment of senior Muslim clerics to a state position overseeing religious affairs, as well as to a religious role, indicates that the decision is taken by the state, not by the Muslim community. They find it hard to believe that the appointment of the Chief Mufti could be taken by anyone apart from the President.

The September 2009 Gengesh and Muslim appointments

Haitliev's appointment as Chief Mufti was announced on state television on 25 September, which attributed the appointment to the Muftiate leadership. It also announced that he would be Chief Imam of the mosque built by the late President Niyazov in the village of Kipchak near Ashgabad. The announcement did not reveal that Haitliev would also gain an official position with the government's Gengesh for Religious Affairs, though this has been confirmed to Forum 18 by officials.

The television announcement said Haitliev had previously been both Chief Imam and head of the Gengesh at the Hyakimlik in Lebap Region of eastern Turkmenistan. Several Hyakimlik officials confirmed to Forum 18 on 8 October his previous dual role, but refused to comment on how he could have acted simultaneously as both head of the Gengesh and Chief Imam of the Region. They also refused to say exactly when and how the appointment as Turkmenistan's Chief Mufti was made.

Forum 18 has learnt that Yalkab Hojagulyyev - former Chief Imam of Balkan Region - has been appointed in Haitliev's place as Chief Imam and head of the Gengesh for Lebap Region.

State television also reported that the previous Deputy Chair of the Gengesh and Chief Mufti, Allaberdiyev, had been appointed as both Chief Imam and head of the Religious Affairs Department at the Hyakimlik (administration) in Dashoguz Region. Reached on 8 October in Dashoguz, Allaberdiyev refused absolutely to discuss who had appointed him to his new post and how he could hold both a religious and a government job at the same time while acting neutrally towards other faiths. "We cannot answer any questions," he told Forum 18. "You should call the Foreign Ministry."

Transferred from Dashoguz Region to make way for Allaberdiyev was former Chief Imam Mekan Akyev, who now becomes Chief Imam (and presumably also head of the Religious Affairs Department) of Balkan Region of western Turkmenistan. He thus takes the place of Hojagulyyev.

Among other new Muslim appointments made at the same time in late September was the transfer of Bazar Hojaev from Mary Region to Ashgabad city as Chief Imam, an official of the Mary Hyakimlik told Forum 18 on 12 October. He refused to identify Hojaev's replacement in both roles, but stated that he is still under 30 years old.

Hojaev's new colleague in Ashgabad City Hyakimlik, who would not give his name, refused to tell Forum 18 on 12 October who had named Hojaev to the post and how he could fulfil both roles while remaining neutral. He declined to say whether Hojaev's predecessor had been transferred to another job.

Asked what duties Hojaev and the Gengesh have, the official was vague. "We deal with religious organisations when they come to us with questions," he told Forum 18. Asked whether they handle registration applications, he responded: "No. These go to the Justice Ministry. We handle only non-legal questions." He declined to answer any more questions, referring Forum 18 to the Foreign Ministry, and put the phone down.

Forum 18 was unable to find out whether the Chief Imam and Religious Affairs head of Ahal Region around Ashgabad has also been replaced.

However, an official of the city Hyakimlik in Turkmenbashi confirmed to Forum 18 on 12 October that Momaliev – who has been in office for several years – remains the Chief Imam of the city. However, she said that although he "indirectly" works in the city's Gengesh, he is not in charge of it. She said overseeing religious affairs is the Deputy Hyakim, Guzel Orazurbieva.

Gengesh chooses Chief Muftis and regional Chief Imams

The Sunni Muslim community, Turkmenistan's largest religious group, is the most tightly-controlled religious community in Turkmenistan. No leaders or imams can be appointed without government approval, granted through the Gengesh. Muslims have expressed concern at the youth, inexperience and what they say is the poor knowledge of Islam among appointments in recent years. Non-Sunni Muslims, especially among the Shia Muslim minority which is mainly located in western Turkmenistan, complain that their rights are restricted and maintaining Shia mosques is difficult.

When Haitliev's predecessor, Rovshen Allaberdiev, was appointed Deputy Chair of the Gengesh and Chief Mufti in August 2004, the state-run media insisted that the decision to remove from office the previous Chief Mufti, Kakageldi Vepaev, came from the Muftiate. Vepaev was sacked for "serious shortcomings in his work", according to the state-run media, as well as for deficiencies in his private life (see F18News 10 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=408).

Allaberdiev graduated in 1999 from the then [Islamic] Theology Faculty of Turkmen State University in Ashgabad. He was just 25 when appointed as head of the Lebap regional Gengesh and Chief Imam of the Lebap Region. At the age of 27 he was appointed Turkmenistan's Chief Mufti. Some questioned his qualifications in Islam when he was appointed to these posts. Those who have met Allaberdiev say his knowledge of at least spoken Arabic is poor.

Vepaev, appointed Deputy Chair of the Gengesh and Chief Mufti by the then President Saparmurat Niyazov in January 2003, had been since 1998 both Chief Imam and head of the Gengesh of Mary Region. He had earlier studied Arabic at Turkmen State University in Ashgabad.

Vepaev's predecessor, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, was sacked by Niyazov both as Chief Mufti and as a Deputy Chair of the Gengesh in January 2003, and later imprisoned. After his release in August 2007 he was given a new post as a consultant at the Gengesh in Ashgabad (see F18News 15 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1008).

The 61-year-old Nasrullah – who was said by some Muslims to be the last Chief Mufti to have had a solid grounding in Islam – is an ethnic Uzbek who gained his Islamic education during the Soviet period in the Uzbek city of Bukhara, as well as in Syria and Egypt.

In 2003-4, the authorities removed all ethnic Uzbek imams in Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] Region of northern Turkmenistan, which has a large ethnic Uzbek population, and replaced them with ethnic Turkmen. Some local Uzbek objected not only to the ethnic bias but also that the new imams did not have what they regarded as a sufficiently deep knowledge of Islam (see F18News 4 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=268).

Theology Department's role

The Theology Department of Magtymguly Turkmen State University in Ashgabad, part of the History Faculty, is the only place where future imams can study. Its building was demolished, apparently without notice, in summer 2009 (see below). Non-Muslim communities are not allowed to conduct religious education within the country.

Not only is the University Department the only place in Turkmenistan where the government will allow imams to be trained, but receiving Islamic training abroad is also banned. Sources in Ashgabad say the Theology Department has some 50 students taking a four-year course. "The aim is to prepare imams under government control," one resident who asked not to be identified told Forum 18. "Young men are officially banned from travelling abroad for Islamic study, though many still do so unofficially." However, the Gengesh for Religious Affairs will not appoint those who have gained their Islamic education abroad as imams.

Islamic education in the University has faced ever-tighter controls. In 2002 the late President Saparmurat Niyazov set limits on the number of students who could train at the then Theology Faculty. In 2005 he ordered all the Faculty's Turkish teachers to leave and downgraded the institution to a Department of the History Faculty (see F18News 22 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=614).

In 2007, Gengesh officials indicated to foreign visitors that plans were underway to upgrade the Department to a separate Faculty once again, though it appears this was never acted on.

The Russian Orthodox Church is permitted to send students to study at the Orthodox seminary in the Uzbek capital Tashkent. The Uzbek diocese told Forum 18 on 12 October that the two students from Turkmenistan – one man and one woman, both second-year students of theology - have faced no problem this year leaving their homeland. Since summer 2009 the Turkmen authorities have prevented many students studying at various foreign universities from leaving the country.

Theology Department building demolished

During summer 2009 the authorities demolished the building of the Theology Department, residents of the capital told Forum 18. They say the academic year finished with exams in May, then in mid-July demolition began. By the beginning of August, the building – and several other University buildings nearby - had been demolished. The building was only built in the 1990s. Forum 18 notes that even prominent, recently-built structures are often bulldozed at short notice with no consultation, often to build new roads or prestige buildings.

However, Himra Shamkuliev, the University's Vice Rector for educational issues, denied to Forum 18 on 9 October that any university buildings had been destroyed. He said all theology students are studying in the University's main building, where they used to study earlier.

Shamkuliev said theology students study all religions, though Islam in particular. He confirmed that all men appointed as imams in Turkmenistan must have a certificate from his University. He added that no separate Islamic University or Institute exists outside the University, which was also confirmed by Gurbanov of the Gengesh.

Forum 18 was unable to reach Murad Hojaguliev, head of the History Faculty, on 12 October. The Faculty telephone went unanswered each time Forum 18 called.

"There are no problems in Turkmenistan"

Deputy Chair Gurbanov of the Gengesh for Religious Affairs refused to say whether the Theology Department had been demolished or not. "Religious education is going on – Islam is being studied in the University," he told Forum 18. "There are no problems in Turkmenistan. Thank you for your interest in our country." He then put the phone down. Subsequent calls were answered but immediately terminated.

Among violations of freedom of religion or belief currently happening in Turkmenistan is a crackdown on conscientious objection to the country's compulsory military service. Four Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience are currently incarcerated in a labour camp, which is described by a former Baptist prisoner of conscience as being "like something from the Middle Ages" (see F18News 30 September 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1356). (END)

For a personal commentary by a 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 a personal commentary by another Turkmen Protestant, arguing that "without freedom to meet for worship it is impossible to claim that we have freedom of religion or belief," see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1128.

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>.

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

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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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