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The right to change one's belief or religion
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TURKMENISTAN: "Women can't study there"

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Women are banned from studying theology in Turkmenistan - including Islamic theology, the only permitted religious university subject – an official has told Forum 18 News Service. "Only men are accepted for this course," the State University official – who did not give her name or role – told Forum 18. "Women can't study there." She declined to say why this discrimination against women has been imposed. This is the only university-level institution in Turkmenistan where the government allows any religious faith to be studied, and only Islam is permitted to be studied. It is also the only institution where the government allows young men who want to become imams to be trained. Potential imams are not allowed to study abroad, and only a small number of men (some of whom do not wish to become imams) are allowed to academically study any religious topic. Only the Russian Orthodox Church is permitted to send male and female students abroad for their studies, and the possibilities for all other formal and informal (such as Sunday School) religious education and instruction are extremely severely restricted.

Women are banned from studying theology in Turkmenistan - including Islamic theology, the only permitted religious university subject - an official of Magtymguly Turkmen State University has told Forum 18 News Service. The University, in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat], is the only university-level institution in Turkmenistan where the government allows any religious faith to be studied, and the government only allows Islam to be studied. It is also the only institution where the government allows young men who want to become imams in Turkmenistan to be trained.

This means both that potential imams are not allowed to study abroad, and that only a small number of men (some of whom do not wish to become imams) are allowed to academically study any religious topic - and these men are only allowed to study Islamic theology.

"Only men are accepted for this course," the official – who did not give her name or role – told Forum 18 from Ashgabad on 22 September. "Women can't study there." She declined to say why this discrimination against women has been imposed.

Nurmukhamed Gurbanov, Deputy Chair of the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs, put the phone down on 21 September before Forum 18 was able to ask him why women cannot study Islamic theology at the University, why only a limited number of men can do so, why the academic study of non-Islamic religions is banned, why the Turkmen Government ended participation in a Turkish-funded Islamic education programme in 2008, why religious colleges cannot be set up, and why individuals have been punished for teaching religion.

Ten students per year

The University official confirmed to Forum 18 that, since the Theology Faculty was abolished by presidential decree in 2005, the subject has been taught within the History Faculty. "There's no separate department – it's a specialism within the Faculty."

The official said that 50 men are studying theology, ten in each year of the five-year course. She said the latest 10 men began the first year of the course at the beginning of the new academic year on 1 September. She added that some of those who graduate from the course become imams, but not all.

Are numbers studying theology falling?

The numbers of students who study Islamic theology at the University is controlled by the government, as is their selection, sources in Turkmenistan have told Forum 18. The University official declined to explain to Forum 18 how the students are chosen and who by.

If the official's claim of 50 current students is correct, this appears to represent the same number as were studying in the 2009-10 academic year, but a fall compared to earlier years. In the 2008-9 academic year 60 students were taking its five-year course of study, sources have told Forum 18.

Islamic education under tightening controls

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The closure of a madrassah (Islamic college) in the northern city of Dashoguz [Dashowuz] in 2001 left Turkmen State University as the only place in Turkmenistan where the government would allow imams to be trained (see F18News 22 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=614).

Gurbanov of the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs and Himra Shamkuliev, the University's Vice Rector for Educational Issues, confirmed to Forum 18 in October 2009 that no Islamic university or Islamic institute exists in Turkmenistan. They also confirmed that the State University is the only place that Islam can be studied (see F18News 13 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1361).

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 22 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=614). Some local Muslims have complained to Forum 18 that graduates of the Department show often a weak grasp of Islam and knowledge of Arabic.

In 2007, Gengeshi officials claimed to foreign visitors that plans were underway to upgrade the Department to a separate Faculty once again. But it appears that this has not happened.

Although officials denied it to Forum 18, its building – constructed in the 1990s - was demolished in the summer of 2009 without prior warning. Theological studies are said to continue to function in the university's main building (see F18News 13 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1361).

Formal and informal religious education almost completely banned

The Muslim theology course at Turkmen State University, as well as small scale basic education in some mosques and Russian Orthodox churches, are the only exceptions to the government's de facto ban on formal religious education within Turkmenistan. Religious communities are banned from organising lectures, courses or extended study and training programmes, such as setting up degree or diploma courses, inviting teachers to lead them, or advertising them to would-be students.

This policy was reconfirmed in January 2010. Paragraph 573 of the Turkmen government's report (CCPR/C/TKM1) to the United Nations Human Rights Committee under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) states that: "Teaching of religion privately is banned and is subject to responsibility in accordance with the procedure established by the Law of Turkmenistan."

Other religious communities have been harassed for trying to give their members less formal religious education. Some 10 officials from the Religious Affairs Department of Ashgabad's Kopetdag district, the Justice Ministry, the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police, local police and the Tax Ministry raided a Bible class at a Protestant church in April 2008. They threatened that any further religious teaching without specific permission from the Committee for Religious Affairs could lead to the church being closed down, for teaching religion "without approval" (see F18News 18 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1116).

After the arrest of Protestant pastor Ilmurad Nurliev in Mary on 27 August, police confiscated the certificate he obtained for completing a preachers' course in a Ukrainian Christian college in 2006. He remains in detention awaiting trial on criminal charges his community insists are fabricated (see F18News 10 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1487).

Foreign Muslim education programme halted

Muslims are not allowed to travel abroad for religious education. In 2008 the Turkmen government cancelled without explanation a Turkish-funded programme allowing men from the country to study in the Islamic Theology Faculty of Uludag University in Bursa, Turkey, according to Asim Yediyildiz, Assistant to the Faculty's Dean, who oversees foreign students. "Only male students were sent, and there were around 20 students from Turkmenistan in recent years that attended Uludag University," he told Forum 18 from Bursa on 24 May. "The Turkish State paid for their education." Yediyildiz said he did not know why Turkmenistan cancelled the agreement.

However, Russian Orthodox men from Turkmenistan are allowed to study for the priesthood outside the country, as are male and female choir-leaders. Several young men have studied in recent years at the seminary in the Uzbek capital Tashkent, when the Orthodox parishes in Turkmenistan were under the jurisdiction of the Tashkent diocese. In the wake of their transfer to the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Smolensk, students are now being sent to study there.

The academic Pro-Rector of Smolensk Orthodox Theological Seminary, Oleg Rebizov, was allowed to travel from Russia to Turkmenistan to oversee the entry exams for the Seminary and for the icon-painting course at the Seminary. Two young men and two young women took the entry exams at St Nicholas' Church in Ashgabad on 21 and 22 August, the website of the Smolensk

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Diocese noted, the first time such exams have been held in Turkmenistan.

Apart from these Russian Orthodox students who have approval from the state to travel abroad for studies, no other religious believers can get the state permission they are required to obtain to study religion abroad. Those who do study abroad have to conceal this from the state, otherwise they risk being denied the possibility of leaving the country. On return, their foreign religious qualifications are not recognised by the state.

It is unclear why the state restricts the right to travel freely and to gain religious education, or why - uniquely - it largely exempts the Russian Orthodox church from the educational restrictions that affect every other faith.

Exit bans and censorship are part of the state's efforts to isolate believers from their co-believers, as well as to control all their activities (see F18News 3 August 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1474). The censorship includes a ban on the import into Turkmenistan of the official Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate (see F18News 13 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1361).

Will "all who want to go" be able to go on haj?

The haj pilgrimage is compulsory at least once in their lifetime for Muslims, who are not prevented by factors such as cost and ill health, within Dhu al-Hijja (the twelfth and final month in the Islamic calendar).

But in each year between 2005 and 2008 only 188 people, the capacity of one aircraft of the national airline Turkmenistan Airlines, were permitted to go on the haj. This figure included the MSS secret police who monitor the pilgrims. People have not been permitted to travel independently, and in 2009 the government banned the 188 pilgrims from going at all (see F18News 2 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1403).

Gengeshi Deputy Chair Gurbanov insisted to Forum 18 that pilgrims will be able to travel on the haj this year. "There is no ban – preparations are underway. All who want to go will be able to go." He said the government will as usual organise one planeload of 188 pilgrims, who will be transported on Turkmenistan Airlines at state expense.

Gurbanov also claimed that other pilgrims will be able to travel by "different channels". "These are private arrangements that the Gengeshi has no involvement in." Asked how these pilgrims will be able to make independent arrangements, he responded: "I don't know." (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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