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TURKMENISTAN: Religious freedom survey, October 2003

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In its survey analysis of the religious freedom situation in Turkmenistan, Forum 18 News Service reports on the complete lack of freedom to practice any faith except for Sunni Islam and Russian Orthodox Christianity in a limited number of registered places of worship. All other communities - Baptist, Pentecostal, Adventist, Lutheran and other Protestants, as well as Shia Muslim, Armenian Apostolic, Jewish, Baha'i, Jehovah's Witness and Hare Krishna – are de facto banned and their activity punishable under the administrative or criminal law. Religious meetings have been broken up (with a spate of raids on Protestants and Hare Krishnas since May), believers have been threatened, detained, beaten, fined and sacked from their jobs, while homes used for worship and religious literature have been confiscated. Religious activity is overseen by the secret police's department for work with social organisations and religious groups, which recruits spies in religious communities.

Turkmenistan has enacted one of the harshest systems of state control over religious life of any of the former Soviet republics which makes barely any pretence of its rejection of religious freedom. Under the highly restrictive 1996 religion law, only two religious faiths have been able to gain registration: communities of the state-approved Sunni Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church. The government treats all other religious activity as illegal. Baptist, Pentecostal, Adventist, Lutheran and other Protestant churches, as well as Shia Muslim, Armenian Apostolic, Jewish, Baha'i, Jehovah's Witness and Hare Krishna communities are among those whose activity is de facto banned and punishable under the administrative or criminal law.

Religious meetings have been raided (with a spate of raids against Protestant and Hare Krishna communities since May), places used for worship have been confiscated or demolished and believers have been beaten, fined, detained, deported and sacked from their jobs in punishment for religious activity the government does not like. Some believers have been given long prison sentences in recent years for their religious activity (all the current known prisoners are Jehovah's Witnesses) or have been sent into internal exile to remote parts of the country.

Jehovah's Witness sources have told Forum 18 that three of their young men were sentenced in August to one and a half years' imprisonment for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience (Turkmenistan has no provision for alternative service). The three new prisoners, who were from towns around the country and at least one of whom has served an earlier sentence on the same charges, bring to five the number of Jehovah's Witnesses now in prison.

Jehovah's Witnesses are worried about the health of another of their imprisoned conscientious objectors, Nikolai Shelekhov, who is nearing the end of his second sentence. "He has problems with his kidneys and is suffering from arthritis in his legs," one source told Forum 18. "But his spirit is good." Sentenced in July 2002 to one and a half years in prison, Shelekhov is currently being held in a labour camp in the eastern city of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjou).

The restrictions on religious activity come despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion and Turkmenistan's obligations to maintain such freedom of religion as a member of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and a signatory to international human rights conventions.

With an authoritarian ruler, President-for-life Saparmurat Niyazov (who likes to call himself "Turkmenbashi" or Father of the Turkmen), Turkmenistan already suffers from an absence of political and social freedom. State control was tightened even more in the wake of a failed assassination attempt on the president last November. Niyazov's rule is characterised by a grotesque cult of personality, with ever-present statues and portraits. Works he allegedly wrote – especially the Ruhnama (Book of the Soul), which officials have likened to the Koran or the Bible – are compulsorily imposed on schools and the wider public.

Turkmenistan's deliberate isolation from the outside world and the punitive measures taken against those engaged in unauthorised religious activity make religious freedom reporting very difficult. Believers fear retribution for reporting their difficulties, and so Forum 18 is unable to give the names or identifying features of sources within the country.

Religious activity is overseen by the secret police's department for work with social organisations and religious groups. This department, formerly the sixth department of the National Security Committee (KNB), is one of the six or seven main departments of the State Security Ministry (MSS) and was created when the KNB was restructured late last year. The social and religious affairs

department is believed to have 45 officers at the headquarters in the capital Ashgabad, with a handful of officers in each local branch.

Local MSS officers regularly summon Muslim and Orthodox clerics to report on activity within their communities. Some believers have told Forum 18 that the MSS also runs "spies" in each Muslim and Orthodox community, sometimes as many as half a dozen. In addition to their spies – who attend the religious community solely at MSS behest to gain information – there might be another ten or fifteen believers who are regularly interviewed by MSS officers and forced to reveal details of the community's religious life.

The MSS and the police also try to recruit spies in unregistered religious groups, such as with the attempted recruitment of a member of a Baptist church they had detained in June in Turkmenabad. "They tried to talk Yeldash [Roziyev] into co-operating with them, hoping for information about the internal life of the church," the Baptists complained (see F18News 18 June 2003).

The government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs – which is headed by Yagshimurat Atamuradov – has nominal responsibility for religious affairs, and has a headquarters in Ashgabad and branch offices in each of Turkmenistan's five velayats (regions). The Gengeshi's main job appears to be approving clerical appointments in the Sunni Muslim and Orthodox communities. "Imams are chosen by the Gengeshi and are then approved by the president," one source told Forum 18.

The Ministry of Justice officially registers religious organisations, although has little work to do on this as so few applications are approved anyway.

Unregistered religious communities face regular raids by MSS officers, backed up by police officers, officials of the local administration and local religious affairs officials, who work closely together in suppressing and punishing unregistered religious activity.

Even the two officially-recognised faiths – the Sunni Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church – face government meddling and require government approval for the nomination of all officials. In January President Niyazov ousted the Chief Mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, an ethnic Uzbek who had led Turkmenistan's Muslims for the previous ten years, and replaced him with the 35-year-old Kakageldy Vepaev, someone widely believed to be more pliant (see F18News 17 March 2003).

Vepaev's dual role – as a Muslim leader and a state official (he is also one of the deputy chairmen of the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs) – became all too apparent during the crackdown on Protestant and Hare Krishna communities this spring: he personally took part in raids on Protestant churches in Ashgabad and in follow-up meetings at hyakimliks (local administrations) when church members were questioned and threatened. In a similar move, local mullahs have frequently been involved in raids on local religious minorities elsewhere in the country, threatening them and calling them to renounce their faith and, if they are ethnic Turkmens, to "return" to their ancestral faith.

Sunni Muslim mosques are reported to have seen attendance slump as, in response to government orders, imams placed copies of the Ruhnama in mosques with equal prominence as copies of the Koran. The grand mosques constructed on the president's orders – and with state funds – are likewise reported to be largely empty, as Muslims decline to regard them as places of worship. Imams are, at least in theory, required to recite the oath of loyalty to the president and country at the end of the namaz (daily prayers). President Niyazov told Muslims in 2000 that they were to renounce the hadiths, sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad which do not appear in the Koran.

Devout Muslims have expressed concern about the government-sponsored ousting of imams who have theological education in favour of those who have never been formally educated in Islam. In the past, imams were educated in neighbouring Uzbekistan, but that appears to have come to a halt. One source told Forum 18 that the decline in the level of education among practising imams has led to a growth in respect for the artsakal, a traditional religious leader. "They have preserved their authority and people go to them for weddings and funerals," the source reported. "The authorities don't attack them."

Government tolerance of Sunni Islam has not extended to Shia Islam, which is mainly professed by the ethnic Azeri and Iranian minorities in the west of the country who are traditionally more devout than ethnic Turkmens. Shia mosques failed to gain re-registration during the compulsory round of re-registration in 1997 after the adoption of the much harsher law on religion.

The Russian Orthodox Church, which is nominally under the control of the Church's Central Asian diocese led from the Uzbek capital Tashkent by Metropolitan Vladimir (Ikim), is in fact under the direct control of the Ashgabad-based priest Fr Andrei Sapunov, widely regarded with suspicion by members of the Orthodox Church and other Christian faiths who have suffered from his actions.

"Formally Fr Andrei is not the 'senior priest' in Turkmenistan," the Moscow-based researcher on Central Asia, Nikolai Mitrokhin, told Forum 18. He said the secretary of the Central Asian diocese for Turkmenistan and dean of the country is Fr Georgy Pobylovsky, priest of Sts Peter and Paul church in Turkmenabad. "Fr Andrei is just an ordinary priest, whose influence is based on his personal contacts with President Niyazov."

Some Orthodox question his background. A famous cyclist during the Soviet period, Fr Sapunov was not then known for any religious adherence. It is only since the Soviet period he has become a priest. "No-one recalls him praying before," one Orthodox believer told Forum 18. While sources in Ashgabad close to Sapunov claimed to Forum 18 that he had studied at the Orthodox seminary in Tashkent, Mitrokhin maintains that he has no theological education. Relations between Fr Sapunov and the Tashkent diocese are reported to be bad, and Fr Sapunov is known to want Turkmenistan to form an autocephalous (independent) Orthodox jurisdiction.

In an echo of the practice in Sunni Muslim mosques, Orthodox priests reportedly received instructions from the end of 2000 to quote from the Ruhnama in sermons and to "preach to us about the virtues of living in Turkmenistan and of the policies of Turkmenbashi," one parishioner complained.

Close to President Niyazov, Fr Sapunov frequently deploys the extravagant personal praise of the president required of all officials. Many Orthodox regard such statements as close to blasphemy. Some Orthodox told Forum 18 they have evidence he passes information received in the confessional to the secret police.

In addition to his duties in the Church, Fr Sapunov is also one of the deputy chairmen of the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs, with particular responsibility for Christian affairs. This gives him an official power of veto over the affairs of other Christian denominations. He is also well-known in the secret police, even to local officers outside Ashgabad. During numerous raids on Protestant churches in different regions, secret police officers have told the Protestants that they must gain permission from Fr Sapunov before they can operate.

The 1996 religion law specified that an individual religious community needs 500 signatures of adult citizen members before it can apply for registration. Officials have repeatedly declared (although it is not specified in the law) that these 500 must live in one city district or one rural district. This makes it all but impossible for any new religious community to register, even if the government wished to allow it to. Most religious communities – including many mosques – lost their registration and had to close down in the wake of the new law. Most Islamic schools were also closed.

Article 205 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which dates back to the Soviet period, specifies fines for those refusing to register their religious communities, with typical fines of 250,000 manats (363 Norwegian kroner, 44 Euros or 48 US dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). Fines can be doubled for repeat offenders. Many believers of a variety of faiths have been fined under this article, including a series of Baptists and Hare Krishna devotees this spring and summer after the series of raids on unregistered religious meetings (see F18News 1 September 2003).

One of the biggest religious communities that has been denied registration is the Armenian Apostolic Church. An estimated fifteen per cent of those who attend Russian Orthodox churches are said by local people to be Armenians, although the Armenian Church is of the Oriental family of Christian Churches, not of the Orthodox family. "Sapunov told parish priests to accept Armenian believers," one local Orthodox told Forum 18. However, the Orthodox Church would stand to lose a sizeable proportion of its flock were the government to allow the Armenian Church to revive its activity.

The one surviving pre-revolutionary Armenian church – in the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi – is said to be in a "sorry state of repair". The Armenian ambassador to Turkmenistan has repeatedly sought permission for it to be restored and reopened as a place of worship but in vain. When the Armenian priest last visited from neighbouring Uzbekistan he had to conduct baptisms and hold services in the Armenian embassy in Ashgabad.

Religious parents – Muslim, Christian and members of other faiths - face a dilemma over whether to send their children to state-run schools. With the Ruhnama playing a major role in the school curriculum from the very first year, together with recitation of the oath of loyalty to the country and president, many religious parents do not wish to subject their children to what many believe are blasphemous practices.

After the adoption in July 2002 of the law on guarantees of the rights of the child, the unregistered Baptist Church complained bitterly about Article 24 part 2 which declared: "Parents or the legal representatives of the child are obliged to bring him up in a spirit of humanism and the unshakeable spiritual values embodied in the holy Ruhnama." Pointing out that officials are promoting the Ruhnama as "the last word of God to the Turkmen people", the Baptists declared: "In practice this law is a direct infringement on the freedom of conscience of citizens professing faith in Jesus Christ or another faith not recognised by the state."

Orthodox Christians echo the Baptists' concerns, telling Forum 18 that the issue has put Russian Orthodox priests in a difficult position. "Worried parents have come to their priests," one Orthodox Christian reported. "The priest can't tell his parishioners not to send their children to school. All he can do is tell them to do as their conscience dictates." Some parents have begun to teach their children privately at home.

Believers who want to receive information from fellow-believers abroad face virtually insurmountable obstacles. Access to the Internet is possible only via state providers that exert strict control over what information can be accessed. The majority of international religious websites are simply not accessible by an Internet user in Turkmenistan. Moreover, a special computer

program searches emails for coded words that could be used to send "unreliable information", while "a suspicious message" will simply not reach the addressee.

Religious literature is no longer published in Turkmenistan. Mosques and Russian Orthodox churches often have small kiosks where a limited quantity of literature is available. A typical Orthodox church bookstall might have a few prayer books, small icons and calendars, with the Bible available only erratically – and often, at about 12 US dollars, too expensive for the badly-paid local people. Supplies of religious literature and articles to Orthodox churches are equally erratic, with no official distribution of books, icons, candles and baptismal crosses.

Orthodox believers trying to receive alternative information are in a more difficult situation than Sunni Muslims. Under a September 2002 presidential decree, direct subscription to Russian newspapers and magazines, including religious publications such as the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate, is banned in Turkmenistan. Even Orthodox priests do not receive the Journal regularly, being forced to rely on old copies they pick up when they are visiting Moscow or Tashkent.

Of the Russian television channels, only a few hours a day of the ORT channel are broadcast, and then only with a day's delay after programmes have been approved by a censor. Currently there are a number of broadcasts on Russian television covering Orthodox issues. The broadcast of Russian cable programmes is forbidden in Turkmenistan, so that unlike in other Central Asian states, local Orthodox believers cannot use this as an alternative source of religious news.

Officials have not simply restricted themselves to banning the receipt of political information from the former metropolis. Purely religious communications between local Orthodox believers and Russia have inevitably also been obstructed. As Turkmenistan has become even more isolated from Russia, individual Orthodox believers have become more isolated from the Moscow Patriarchate.

Religious literature is routinely confiscated from members of unregistered religious minorities during police raids on their homes or as they return to the country from foreign travels.

With sweeping measures against religious groups in the wake of the harsher religion law in 1996, the denial of registration to most religious communities in the 1997 re-registration drive, the expulsion of hundreds of foreigners engaged in religious activity (including Muslims, Baptists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees), the confiscation or demolition of unauthorised places of worship, the sacking of believers from their work (especially Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestants) and a growing climate of fear, the Turkmen authorities have succeeded in all but wiping out public religious activity except in a small number of registered Sunni Muslim and Russian Orthodox places of worship.

All other religious activity must of necessity be shrouded in secrecy, with believers having to hide their faith and worship from intrusive officials. In response to the pressure, all unregistered communities have seen the numbers of their active members fall. Yet despite the severe controls and the threat of punishment, the remaining believers continue to insist on practising their various faiths as best they can while waiting for better times.

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