

25 February 2013

TURKMENISTAN: Government changes Islamic leadership again

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Turkmenistan's government has changed the entire leadership of the country's officially permitted Muslim administration, Forum 18 News Service notes. Turkmenistan has not announced whether the new Chief Mufti and regional imams also have the usual second role as officials of the Gengesh (Council) for Religious Affairs, whose task is to restrict freedom of religion and belief. However, a regional Gengesh official confirmed to Forum 18 that this was happening in their region. The latest appointments came as the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, complained of the difficulties of recovering Soviet-confiscated Orthodox churches. The Armenian Apostolic Church is hoping promises of being allowed to resume its activity among Turkmenistan's ethnic Armenian minority will eventually be fulfilled. And Turkmen students studying in Ukraine have been pressured not to attend non-Muslim religious communities. "The idea that we had instructions from our Foreign Ministry is stupidity," an official of Turkmenistan's Embassy in Ukraine told Forum 18.

Turkmenistan's government has changed the entire leadership of the country's officially permitted Muslim administration, by replacing some and moving other leaders in mid-January. Forum 18 News Service notes that such sudden, unannounced changes of senior Muslim leaders – as in the latest case apparently without any consultation with the country's Muslim community - continues the system of regular state rotation of officials introduced under now-deceased President Saparmurat Niyazov in the 1990s.

The latest change of Muslim leaders came as the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, complained of the difficulties of recovering Orthodox churches in Turkmenistan confiscated during the Soviet period. Also, the Armenian Apostolic Church has been promised the return of its one surviving Soviet-confiscated church and is hoping to fulfil its long-standing aim of being allowed to resume its activity among Turkmenistan's ethnic Armenian minority.

Muslim leadership reshuffle

The state's change of Islamic leaders came at a previously-unannounced 13 January meeting at the Ertogrul gazy (Turkish) Mosque in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat]. Turkmenistan's State News Agency said that the meeting was convened by the government's Gengesh (Council) for Religious Affairs, whose offices are located in the grounds of the Mosque. It said the meeting was attended by "honoured elders" from around the country.

Mekan Akyev was appointed as new Chief Mufti, with the State News Agency claiming that the appointment was by the "leadership of the Muftiate of Turkmenistan". The state-run media gave no information about where he was educated, where he served before being given this role or whether he said anything at the meeting at which his appointment was announced. The media's coverage of the meeting mainly focused on unnamed speakers' praise for President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov.

Akyev is the fifth Chief Mufti since 2003. No reason has ever been given for why Chief Muftis are removed. Muslims inside Turkmenistan have in recent years expressed concern at the repeated changes, not least because they believe the state-appointed Chief Muftis lack adequate Islamic theological education (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1676).

As has become routine, the entire regional Muslim leadership was also changed at the January 2013 meeting. The new imam of Ashgabad was named as Yalkab Hojagulyev (who had served as Chief Mufti only since about June 2011). Named as imam of Ahal Region was Bazar Hojaev (formerly imam of Mary Region); of Balkan Region Hazrat Annaorazov; of Dashoguz Region Annaoraz Repov (formerly imam of Lebap Region); of Lebap Region Yusup Durdyev; of Mary Region A. Amanlyev.

The State News Agency claimed that the new regional imams had, like the new Chief Mufti, also been appointed by the "leadership of the Muftiate of Turkmenistan". Muslim sources have categorically told Forum 18 that it is inconceivable that such changes were made without the involvement of President Berdymukhamedov (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1676).

Gengesh dual roles

The State News Agency did not reveal whether the new Chief Mufti and regional imams had also acquired a second role as officials of the government Gengesh, whose task is to restrict freedom of religion or belief for all. Normal practice is for the Chief Mufti to be one of three Deputy Chairs of the Gengesh, while the regional imams head the Gengesh in their regions. On 20 February a regional Gengesh official confirmed to Forum 18 that the regional imam has also become Gengesh head in their region, but no official announcement of the Chief Mufti's usual extra role has been made.

The latest appointments continue long-standing state practice, under which leaders appointed to restrict the freedom of religion and belief of the Islamic community also have a state-appointed role to restrict the freedom of religion and belief of non-Muslim religious communities (see F18News 13 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1361).

Who chose new Muslim leaders?

Neither Gurbanberdy Nursakhatov, a Deputy Chair of the Gengesh, nor any other Gengesh officials in Ashgabat were prepared to discuss with Forum 18 why the senior Muslim clerics had been replaced or reshuffled, and whether this had been the initiative of the Muslim community or state officials. On 13 February Nursakhatov put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 identified itself. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

Similarly, regional Gengesh officials were equally uncommunicative. For example, the official who answered the phone on 20 February at Lebap Regional Gengesh – who would not give his name – told Forum 18 that the new regional imam Durdyev was away on a work trip. He declined to answer any questions as to why the regional imam had been replaced and who had taken the decision.

An official of the Hyakimlik (administration) of Turkmenbashi [Turkmenbasy, formerly Krasnovodsk], a Caspian Sea port in Balkan Region, told Forum 18 on 20 February that the city's imam, Chary-hajy Mommalyev, had left office in late 2012. He said the city's deputy imam, Dovlet Atayev, is currently temporary imam. He declined to discuss whether the removal of imam Mommalyev was related to the January 2013 Muslim leadership changes. The official declined to discuss who had decided on his removal and why.

"The appointment procedure for senior Muslim clerics is completely opaque," an Ashgabat-based commentator told Forum 18 on 18 February. "In his time [then-President] Niyazov planned to form a kind of Council of Muftis of Turkmenistan, but I have never been able to find out if such a Council was ever formed. Appointments up to now have been made by the Gengesh for Religious Affairs."

The 1996 presidential decree establishing the Gengesh made no mention of naming leaders of the Islamic or any other religious community.

Gengesh structure

The Gengesh is one of the primary state agencies tasked with suppressing freedom of religion and belief (see F18News 13 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1361). Its Chair has always been an imam, though never the Chief Mufti. Since 2006 the Chair has been imam Charygeldi Seryaev. One long-standing Deputy Chair of the Gengesh is Fr Andrei Sapunov, a Russian Orthodox priest, but he is not one of the country's three Orthodox deans who lead the Church in the country (see F18News 19 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1037). Between 1997 and 2004, the only permitted faiths were the state-backed Sunni Muslim community and the Russian Orthodox Church.

Members of religious communities who have dealt with the Gengesh have told Forum 18 that the official who controls all its activity is the third Deputy Chair, Nursakhatov. He does not hold any post within a religious community.

The 1996 decree establishing the Gengesh also established the posts of regional Gengesh officials, to be paid out of regional budgets, with the possibility of naming officials at district level if required. A January 2000 presidential decree set out 51 appointments of Gengesh officials at a district level throughout Turkmenistan, to be paid out of district budgets.

Forum 18 can find no published law, decree or regulation which gives imams or Russian Orthodox priests ex officio roles in the Gengesh.

Difficulties over church buildings, visas

Meanwhile, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, has complained of difficulties over the return of Orthodox churches in Turkmenistan confiscated in the Soviet period, getting permission to build new churches and the provision of visas to priests. Controls on priests importing Orthodox religious material only for use in their parishes were lifted in 2011 (see F18News 11 March 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1551).

Speaking at the Church's Bishops' Council in Moscow on 2 February 2013, Patriarch Kirill noted that "the question has not been resolved of the return to Orthodox communities of a range of churches, used since the Soviet period as warehouses, museums and the like," according to the text of the address, posted on the Moscow Patriarchate website.

"Similarly it is not always possible to reach agreement over the assigning of plots for building new churches," he added. "Sometimes difficulties arise over receiving visas for priests who do not have Turkmen citizenship."

One Orthodox source in Russia familiar with the situation in Turkmenistan notes that while most of the Orthodox priests in Turkmenistan are local citizens or have lived there for many years, some have arrived more recently. "These are given short-term visas – lasting perhaps two or three months," the source told Forum 18 on 20 February. "They have to keep extending them." The source said this is not a "problem of life or death", but an inconvenience. "Formalities take time."

One frequent visitor to Turkmenistan is Bishop Feofilakt (Kuryanov) of Pyatigorsk, who has pastoral care of the Orthodox parishes in Turkmenistan on behalf of Patriarch Kirill. His most recent visit was in January. Unlike previous visits, this time he travelled unaccompanied by other priests from Russia. The bishop – and others in his party visiting the country with him – require visas which they must obtain at the Turkmen Embassy in Moscow.

The Orthodox source noted that the return of churches in Turkmenistan confiscated during the Soviet period is slow. "Many of them are occupied by other institutions, and time is needed to find alternative accommodation for them."

Will Armenian Apostolic Church be allowed to resume activity?

The Armenian Apostolic Church has struggled to be allowed to resume its activity, among Turkmenistan's ethnic Armenians, since Turkmenistan's 1991 independence from the Soviet Union. On 30 November 2012, during an official visit to Armenia, President Berdymukhamedov visited the Church's headquarters at Echmiadzin, near Armenia's capital Yerevan. There he "warmly greeted" Church leader Catholicos Karekin II, the Turkmen government website noted the same day.

The Church's website also noted that President Berdymukhamedov invited Catholicos Karekin to visit Turkmenistan.

The last known visit by an Armenian priest to Turkmenistan was in the late 1990s, when the priest from neighbouring Uzbekistan was granted a visa. However, as the Armenian Apostolic Church was then illegal he had to conduct baptisms and hold services on diplomatic territory in the Armenian Embassy in Ashgabad (see F18News 2 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=151).

However, Armenian officials are hopeful the Armenian Apostolic Church in Turkmenbashi will soon be allowed to be rebuilt and re-opened for worship. The church was confiscated during the Soviet period and despite efforts by the Church and previous Armenian ambassadors to Turkmenistan the last surviving pre-revolutionary Armenian church in Turkmenistan has never been handed back. The Turkmenbashi authorities partially demolished the church in 2005.

The Armenian Apostolic Church website noted on 30 November that: "Answering the appeal of His Holiness [Catholicos Karekin II], President Berdymukhamedov directed his representatives of the Turkmenistan Government, who were among his delegation, to discuss this issue and provide a positive resolution to the issue of the Armenian Church."

"The President of Turkmenistan gave a clear order during his meeting with the Catholicos to the Governor of Balkan Region [Satlyk Satlykov], where the Armenian Church is located, to renew the church's activity," Armenia's ambassador to Turkmenistan Vladimir Badalyan told Forum 18 on 25 February, via the Diaspora Department of Armenia's Foreign Ministry. (Satlykov was transferred from Balkan Region to become Public Utilities Minister in January 2013.)

The Ambassador noted that the Church is in the yard of the Turkmenbashi city administration, for which a new building is due to be constructed on another site. "Once the city administration has moved to its new building and its old building is demolished, renovation and new building will take place for the Armenian Church. All this will take time."

Nelli Matevosyan, the head of the Foreign Ministry Diaspora Department, insisted to Forum 18 the same day that "the entire Armenian government – at a senior level - is very interested" in the revival of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Turkmenistan. She speculated that the issue of sending a priest to serve the Armenian Apostolic community in Turkmenistan is likely to be resolved, once the Turkmenbashi church is rebuilt and re-opened for worship.

Fr Vahram Melikyan of the Armenian Apostolic Church headquarters at Echmiadzin told Forum 18 on 22 February that Turkmenistan falls within the jurisdiction of the Moscow-based Armenian Diocese and referred all enquiries to them. The Russian Diocese has not yet responded to Forum 18's questions.

Pressure on students abroad

Turkmen students studying in Ukraine have been pressured not to attend non-Muslim religious communities, the exiled Alternative Turkmenistan News noted on 11 February, citing sources in Ukraine. An attache of the Turkmen Embassy in Ukraine's capital Kiev, Charymurad Atahanov, told Turkmen students studying in Kharkiv in north eastern Ukraine in early February that many complaints

had reached the Embassy about their conduct, including drinking alcohol, fighting and harassing women.

Atahanov added that "there are concrete facts as well as photographs of the participation of Turkmen students in various religious sects 'of another faith'," Alternative Turkmenistan News declared. "But you are Muslims – think about your future, we are obliged to send all these complaints to Ashgabad and discussions are underway with directors of higher educational establishments about expelling such students," it quoted him as telling them.

Alternative Turkmenistan News said the pressure came in response to an order from Turkmenistan's Foreign Ministry in January to embassies in Ukraine and Belarus to hold "prophylactic discussions" with Turkmen students in the two countries. The websites of a number of Ukrainian higher educational establishments regularly note visits by Turkmen diplomats to Turkmen students.

"Atahanov didn't go into details, speaking only generally about students' participation in 'sects'," Alternative Turkmenistan News told Forum 18. "Of course he had in mind Jehovah's Witnesses. As for the photos, certainly this was meant to intimidate, but it's not impossible that they do have some photos."

"No restrictions on freedom of conscience"?

Despite repeated calls, Forum 18 was unable to reach Atahanov at the Turkmen Embassy in Kiev. Officials said on 12 February he was on a work trip until 18 February. On 20 February officials said he was again on a work trip.

However, Embassy First Secretary Serdar Berdiev vigorously refuted reports that embassy officials tell Turkmen students what they should or should not do. "I don't know where you get this information," he told Forum 18 from Kiev on 12 February. "The idea that we had instructions from our Foreign Ministry is stupidity."

Berdiev ridiculed suggestions that Embassy officials are concerned over which religious communities students might or might not attend during their studies abroad. "Why would any official be interested in students' faith? How can anyone have the right to interfere in people's faith? It is not a fact that such a conversation took place." He claimed that there are "no restrictions on freedom of conscience" in Turkmenistan, adding that the same held for Turkmen students in Ukraine.

Control on students

Government scrutiny of students within Turkmenistan and students from Turkmenistan studying abroad was stepped up following the Arab Spring uprisings for freedom and democracy in 2011. The authorities increased their information-gathering on such students, including on their religious affiliation and practice. Parents of children studying abroad were questioned – some by the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police - about how often their children attended mosques or other places of worship (see F18News 29 April 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1566).

In February 2011, two students were reportedly expelled from their institute in Ashgabad after Education Ministry inspectors discovered audio recordings of suras (verses) of the Koran on their computers during "unexpected inspections" of student accommodation (see F18News 11 March 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1551).

Women are banned from studying theology within Turkmenistan - including Islamic theology, the only permitted religious university subject. 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 (see F18News 24 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1492). (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=1676.

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.

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