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TURKMENISTAN: In Ramadan, Muslims fear "extremism" accusations

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Muslims increasingly fear being branded "extremists" if they visibly fast or mark Ramadan. Turkmenistan has jailed numerous Muslims on vague "extremism" accusations, including to punish them for meetings to study their faith. One Muslim stopped going to mosque after police summoned him. "Who is more important, Allah or the President?" an officer asked him.

An increasing number of Muslims feel forced not to mark the Muslim holy month of Ramadan visibly, as they fear being branded "extremists", local people told Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service. Some therefore choose not to fast, while those that do often try to keep it secret.

Turkmenistan has jailed numerous Muslims on vague accusations that they are "extremists", including to punish them for meeting with others to study their faith. Trials often take place in secret and, once jailed, many prisoners have no contact with relatives. Many such prisoners are tortured (see below).

The economic crisis is also forcing those who need strength to work not to fast during Ramadan. Many lack the money to host the traditional meal with relatives and neighbours to break the fast after sunset (see below).

Ramadan, which this year runs until early June, began on the evening of 5 May. However, the state-controlled Muslim Board (Muftiate) – the only form of Islam the government allows - made no public announcement. The state-controlled media made no mention of it (see below).

Earlier in 2019, a Muslim in the western city of Balkanabat stopped going to mosque after being summoned to the police. "Who is more important, Allah or the President?" officers asked (see below).

Turkmen diplomats in countries with many Turkmen students – such as Belarus, Ukraine and Turkey – often summon students to warn them about their behaviour, including not attending mosques or, for men, not having beards (see below).

Parents are also warned about the behaviour of their children studying abroad (see below).

Only one form of Islam is allowed in Turkmenistan: that under the supervision of the state-controlled Muslim Board (Muftiate). Muslims dissatisfied with the way it organises public Islam have no alternative. Those who try to organise other forms of exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief have been jailed (see below).

Neither the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova, nor the regime-appointed Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Human Rights Committee Yusupguly Eshshayev, answered Forum 18's phone calls (see below).

State-controlled Islam, with no alternative

All exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief is under tight government control. Unlike with other faiths, the government directly controls Islam, including by naming the chief mufti and other imams. No mosques are allowed to exist unless they are subject to the state-controlled Muslim Board (Muftiate). (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244)

Imams have long been required to praise the President during Friday prayers, call for Muslims to support him and to pray for his well-being. However, after Friday prayers at an Ashgabat mosque on 17 May, the imam went further in what appears to be a new development.

"The Imam prayed to God that he would give President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov strong health and a long life, that Allah would protect him from all troubles and misfortunes, and also that he would punish all his enemies and foes," noted a Radio Free Europe Turkmen Service correspondent, present at the prayers.

The correspondent added that the mosque was full, and many of those present expressed dissatisfaction at the Imam's words, whispering among themselves "Off he goes again."

Muslims who dislike political statements in mosques or the requirements of the Muslim Board over how they practice their faith have no alternative to the state-controlled mosques because of the state-imposed monopoly over all public Islam handed to the Muslim Board.

No Ramadan announcement

The state-controlled Muslim Board (Muftiate) – the only form of Islam the government allows - made no public announcement of the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan on the evening of 5 May. The state-controlled media – the only form of media allowed in the country – similarly made no mention of it.

During Ramadan in 2017, the Muftiate set the donation individuals should make at 2 Manats. In Ramadan in 2018, Chief Mufti Charygeldy Seryayev set the donation at 5 Manats. No figure has been announced for 2019.

Afraid to fast in Ramadan?

Few people in Turkmenistan are observing the fast during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service noted on 10 May. Some Muslims point to the fear that the police or secret police will brand them as "extremists" if they are widely known to be observing the Ramadan fast.

"In comparison with Turkey, in Turkmenistan you are not conscious that the holy month of Ramadan has begun," one resident told Radio Free Europe on 9 May, without giving their name.

"Those maintaining the fast are afraid that they could be accused of extremism. For this reason, people do not observe the fast during the month of Ramadan or do not speak about it publicly."

Those fasting traditionally break the fast after sunset each evening with an iftar meal, to which they invite their family and neighbours.

"Those maintaining the fast gather each day with about 10 to 15 people at one of their homes to break the fast," the resident added. "After that they go to prayers at the mosque."

Forum 18 is not aware of anyone punished for gathering for iftar meals, but such gatherings could risk attention from the authorities.

Others who have jobs have been forced not to fast during Ramadan to have enough strength to work, as the economic crisis makes it difficult to earn money to support a family. "If during the fast you don't eat as much as you should, you won't have enough strength to work," one resident of the capital Ashgabat told Radio Free Europe.

The Ashgabat resident also noted that others do not fast because they cannot afford to host the traditional iftar with relatives and neighbours as guests.

Forum 18 tried to ask Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova, who was named by the regime-appointed Parliament which has never faced free and fair elections, why individuals cannot exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief without having to fear state reprisals. Her phone was not answered on 28 May.

Forum 18 also tried to call Yusupguly Eshshayev, Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Human Rights Committee. However, his phone also was not answered on 28 May.

Consequences of "extremism" accusations

Muslims who exercise the right to freedom of religion or belief – whether by too public devotion to their faith or by meeting with others without state permission – are often jailed as "extremists".

Among jailed Muslims the authorities consider as alleged "Wahhabis" are a large group of Hanafi Sunni Muslims who met in Turkmenabat in 2013 to study Islam and were subsequently arrested and jailed. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244) It is unknown whether their leader Bahram Saparov and others from this group of prisoners of conscience are still alive. Three of the group are already known to have died in prison of torture or neglect. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2318)

Among jailed Muslims the authorities consider to follow Turkish-influenced Islam are five Muslim prisoners of conscience who in

2017 met in Balkan Region with others to pray and study their faith, using the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2399)

An imam, freed in 2018, had been jailed for the growing following he had begun to attract for his explanations of the Koran. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2476)

Fear of attending mosque, having beard

Many Muslims have long been afraid to attend mosque, given the state surveillance of them and the threat of being branded "extremist", local people told Forum 18.

Earlier in 2019, a Muslim in the western city of Balkanabat stopped going to mosque after being summoned to the police, a resident told Forum 18. "Who is more important, Allah or the President?" officers asked the Muslim. Few people now attend the city's mosques.

Many Muslim men – particularly young men - are afraid to grow beards as police often target bearded men.

In early 2019, police in Ashgabat and the eastern Lebap Region stepped up their campaign to stop men under the age of 40 from wearing beards. They forcibly shaved some and pressured others to shave. One man in Ashgabat, who was detained for two days, noted that the police headquarters was "packed with bearded men". Police appear to believe that young men who wear beards encourage Muslims to become extreme. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2449)

Students abroad warned not to attend mosque

Turkmen diplomats in countries with large numbers of Turkmen students – including Belarus, Ukraine and Turkey – often summon the students to instruct them on their behaviour.

In February, the Turkmen Ambassador to Belarus, Nazarkuly Shagulyev, summoned students in Minsk, warning women not to wear jeans or skirts and men not to have beards or attend mosque, Radio Free Europe on 11 April cited students as saying. "He said that lads with beards are similar to terrorists," one student noted.

The student said that Ambassador Shagulyev added that in Belarus, KGB secret police officers "closely watch" mosques. "They watch to see which students attend mosques," the ambassador claimed. It remains unclear if the Ambassador was hinting that the Belarusian authorities might inform the Turkmen authorities if Turkmen students were attending mosques.

An official of the Turkmen Embassy in Minsk would not answer any of Forum 18's questions on 21 May.

For many years, Turkmen diplomats have summoned or visited students to warn them not to get involved in religious communities in the countries where they are studying. A Turkmen diplomat in Ukraine warned students in 2013 not to attend local non-Muslim religious communities, which he called "religious sects 'of another faith'". (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1805)

Students – particularly those studying in Turkey – are often questioned on their return to Turkmenistan as to whether they or any of their fellow Turkmen students attend mosque or belong to any Islamic movements.

Parents warned

Parents are also warned about the behaviour of their children studying abroad, including that they should not get too involved in exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief.

Officials summoned parents to meetings in schools in the capital Ashgabat in early 2019. Officials from the Migration Service, Ashgabat city administration and Conscription Office, as well as the state-controlled Muslim clergy, issued instructions on how parents should control their children studying abroad.

At one meeting, the imam warned parents that their children should only attend mosque and "keep their distance from other religious movements", Alternative Turkmenistan News (now Turkmen.News) on 5 February cited a parent who had been present at one such meeting. (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Turkmenistan (<http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=32>).

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244).

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion and belief commitments (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351).

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