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TURKMENISTAN: Muslims barred from opening new mosques

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Turkmenistan's largest religious community, the Muslims, appear to have been barred from benefiting from the promised easing of the harsh registration restrictions that have prevented most of the country's religious communities from registering since 1997. "Do not build any more mosques," President Saparmurat Niyazov told officials of the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs on 29 March, insisting that its officials must continue to appoint all mullahs and control mosque funds. More than half the 250 registered mosques were stripped of their legal status in 1997, and only 140 have registration today. Shia mosques appear likely to remain banned. Forum 18 News Service has learnt that the only other current legal faith, the Russian Orthodox Church, is planning to try to register new parishes in the wake of this month's presidential decree and amendments to the religion law easing the restrictions.

Despite a new presidential decree and amendments to the religion law this month lifting the tight restrictions on registering religious organisations, the country's president Saparmurat Niyazov has apparently barred Muslim communities from benefiting from the new procedures. "Religion is free," he claimed to officials of the Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs on 29 March, saying he was handing over to it three mosques, before adding: "Do not build any more mosques." A range of previously "illegal" religious communities – including the Catholics, various Protestant communities and the Baha'is – are planning to lodge registration applications, while Forum 18 News Service has learnt that one of the two current permitted faiths – the Russian Orthodox Church – is also planning to take advantage of the simplified procedures to register new communities. It remains unclear why Turkmenistan's majority faith – Islam – will be unable to benefit from the new law.

Niyazov made the remarks the same day that Shirin Akhmedova, the head of the department that registers religious communities at the Adalat (Justice) Ministry, assured Forum 18 that both the Muslim community and the Russian Orthodox could avail themselves of the new registration procedures along with other religious communities. She said 140 Muslim communities and 12 Russian Orthodox parishes currently have registration. Before the harsh registration restrictions were introduced in 1996, the Muslims had 250 registered communities.

Forum 18 was unable immediately to reach anyone at the Gengeshi or among the Muslim leadership in the capital Ashgabad.

In his remarks to the Gengeshi staff, broadcast by state television on 30 March, Niyazov also insisted that the Gengeshi – a governmental body that reports to the Cabinet of Ministers - must retain control over all aspects of Islamic life, although under Article 11 of the country's constitution religion is supposed to be separate from the state. "They [mosques] should not choose the mullahs themselves. Since you work here, you should appoint mullahs from among those who have graduated from the department of religion and have them approved by the court," he ordered. "Otherwise, they select anyone they want in the localities." He also instructed that Gengeshi officials should maintain "proper order" over donations to mosques. "We will not take it from you. You just need to maintain order in it and look at their expenditures."

Although Sunni Islam has been one of only two faiths permitted to function in Turkmenistan since 1997, it remains under tight state control. President Niyazov ousted the chief mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, in January 2003 and appointed Kakageldy Vepaev to replace him. The state authorities have removed all ethnic Uzbek imams in the northern Dashgovuz region and replaced them with ethnic Turkmens (see F18News 4 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=268). Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah was arrested in Dashgovuz in mid-January of this year, according to the Moscow-based researcher Vitali Ponomarev, and was sentenced to 22 years' imprisonment on 2 March (see F18News 8 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=271).

President Niyazov's dislike of Shia Islam has prevented Shia mosques from registering and it now appears that the ban might continue. In a bizarre case, the writer Rahim Esenov is facing criminal charges partly as a result of defying the president's criticism that in his novel about the sixteenth-century regent of the Moghul empire, Bayram Khan, the hero was correctly presented as a Shia, not a Sunni Muslim (see F18News 23 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=285). Forum 18 is still unable to reach Esenov by telephone in Ashgabad as his line continues to be blocked.

President Niyazov issued his decree on religion on 11 March removing the requirement that religious organisations must have 500 adult citizen members before they can apply for registration, a provision introduced in 1996 which left all but the Sunni Muslims and

Russian Orthodox stripped of their registration. The religion law, revised only in October 2003 to increase control over religious groups, was again revised this month to reflect the simpler registration requirements. The new amendments, published on 24 March in the government press in Turkmen and in Russian and available on the government website (<http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/countri/zakon/zakon-31.html>), requires that "religious groups" must have between five and fifty adult citizen members to register, while "religious organisations" must have at least fifty. In theory at least, this removes the obstacle to registering non-Sunni Muslim and non-Orthodox communities.

Akhmedova of the Adalat Ministry told Forum 18 on 29 March that various communities have come to her office to seek information on how to register. "They come constantly to seek information," she declared. She said she had given communities a model statute that they could adapt for use. She added that no community has yet lodged a registration application under the new procedure.

Among the Protestant churches preparing to lodge an application is Greater Grace church in Ashgabad, as its pastor Vladimir Tolmachev reported. "We are collecting signatures and we expect to lodge the application within the next week," he told Forum 18 on 29 March. Describing the current situation as "strange", Tolmachev was optimistic that his church would get registration, having read the text of the amendments to the religion law.

Aleksandr Yukharin, vice-president of the New Apostolic Church in Russia, who maintains links with its community in Ashgabad, said his church is pleased that it now has the opportunity to register. "We have been trying to do so for a long time," he told Forum 18 from Moscow on 30 March. "We were warned last year not to meet, so we had to halt all our religious activity. All over the world we abide by the laws of the state, which is why our Ashgabad community stopped its activity." He stressed that his Church wants to resume its activity, but would do so only once it has registration and can do so legally. "We do not conduct religious activity illegally."

Despite the denial of the possibility of registering new Muslim communities, the Russian Orthodox Church is planning to try to register new parishes to add to its current 12 registered communities. "Registration is now a lot simpler," Fr Ioann Kopach, the dean of Ashgabad, told Forum 18 on 30 March. He said the first two parishes likely to seek registration are in the town of Khazar (formerly Cheleken) on the Caspian Sea and in the northern Caspian Sea port of Bekdash. "We will seek the blessing of our bishop, Metropolitan Vladimir of Tashkent, and then lodge the applications and see what happens."

He said the Church might also found parishes in other towns, though he said most of the parishes that need registration already have it. He said the Orthodox have already built a new church in the town of Tedjen and have nearly completed a new church in Dashoguz to replace churches destroyed during the Soviet period.

Both Fr Ioann and Fr Andrei Kiryakov, the priest of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjou), admitted to Forum 18 that many of their parishioners are Armenian Apostolic Christians, although the Armenian Church and the Orthodox Church are of differing families of Churches. The Armenians have so far been prevented from reopening churches in Turkmenistan, but Fr Ioann told Forum 18 that "it is a question for the Council for Religious Affairs why there are no Armenian churches in Turkmenistan".

Fr Ioann said that after the religion law was amended last October, Orthodox parishes had expected to have to re-register with the Adalat Ministry. However, given the latest religion law amendments he said it was unclear whether this was still the case and if and when any re-registration of existing registered communities might take place.

One draconian provision of the religion law that the new amendments have not lifted is the ban on unregistered religious activity and the criminal penalties imposed on those taking part in it. "I believe that they will allow all the churches to register, then they will conduct checks and those that continue to function without registration will be fined," Pastor Tolmachev of the Greater Grace church told Forum 18. If this does indeed happen, one group that has already suffered numerous raids and punishments on its communities - the Baptists of the Council of Churches who refuse to register on principle in any of the post-Soviet republics where they operate - is likely to be penalised once again.

For more background see Forum 18's report on the October 2003 religion law at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=180

and Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=151

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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