

30 July 2024

TURKMENISTAN: Protestant pastor faces arrest threats

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

In early July, a mosque official in Dogryyol, Juman Illiyev, told worshippers that local Protestant Pastor Rahymjan Borjakov "will sooner or later be locked up", with work "already underway". In mid-July, officials visited the family home seeking relatives' car numbers and places of work or study. Relatives (many of them not Christians) received "threatening and insulting" phone calls from a number assigned to a man named Ylham from the Police 7th Department which controls religion. The man who answered that phone refused to answer any questions. Muslims too face pressure.

In early July, an official of the mosque in the village of Dogryyol in Charjew District of the eastern Lebap Region told mosque attendees that Protestant Pastor Rahymjan Borjakov "will sooner or later be locked up". The mosque official, Juman Illiyev, added that "work is already underway" on this.

About two weeks after the mosque official had made his public remarks, an officer of the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police and a regional religious affairs official visited Pastor Borjakov's family home in Dogryyol. "They sought information about his brother and cousins, taking car numbers and details of their places of work or study," a Christian who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 (see below).

Relatives – who are not Christians – soon began receiving "threatening and insulting" phone calls from a number assigned to a man named Ylham. He is an officer of the Police's 7th Department, which controls religious activity. The man who answered the phone when Forum 18 called would not say if he was Ylham or not. Nor would he answer any questions then or on subsequent calls (see below).

The telephone at Lebap Region's Religious Affairs Department in Turkmenabat went unanswered each time Forum 18 called (see below).

The 44-year-old Pastor Borjakov leads a Protestant Church which is not able to gain state registration under the country's tight restrictions on the exercise of freedom of religion or belief. His church is not formally allowed to meet for worship. Any meetings risk punishment (see below).

The man who answered the phone at the Cabinet of Ministers Religious Affairs Department in Ashgabat said its head, Yusupgeldi Durdyev was away on a worktrip. He said the Department's chief specialist Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah was not in the office. The official – who did not give his name – denied that any Protestant pastor is facing arrest or that his relatives have been threatened. "This didn't happen," he told Forum 18 (see below).

Yusupguly Eshshayev, Chair of the Human Rights Committee of the non-freely elected parliament, each time put the phone down after Forum 18 introduced itself (see below).

Police and MSS secret police officers, as well as local administration officials, pressure ethnic Turkmen, Tatars, Uzbeks and Tajiks and their families not to attend Orthodox churches and to convert to Islam, a resident of the eastern Lebap Region told Radio Liberty's Turkmen Service in May. An official of the Russian-based diocese that administers the parishes said he had not heard that pressure was being put on Orthodox believers who are not of a Slavic background. (see below).

During the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which ran from mid-March to mid-April, officials tried to prevent devout Muslims exercising their freedom of religion or belief. The MSS secret police stepped up surveillance of those attending mosques. "Devotees who fast during the day gather in the mosques in the evening and perform the Tarawih prayer. Security officers are watching them and looking for 'extreme believers' among them," an Ashgabat resident told Radio Liberty (see below).

Those considered "too religious" are summoned for questioning to the district police station or to the Communal Housing Department. Officials record their personal details and ask them how long they have been praying, and the name of anyone who encouraged them to do so (see below).

Following a terrorist attack on a concert hall in Moscow on 22 March, Turkmen officials launched a further crackdown on Muslims attending mosques. In Turkmenbashi, Balkanabat and Cheleken, the police and MSS secret police interrogated young people going to prayer. Officials particularly targeted bearded men and hijab-wearing women (see below).

In at least one Region, officials tried to prevent students in secondary schools and higher educational institutions from fasting during Ramadan (see below).

The official at the regime's Religious Affairs Department in Ashgabat denied that the state imposes restrictions on or pressures Muslims who wish to pray in mosques. "No one puts pressure on Muslims," he told Forum 18 (see below).

MSS secret police officers have threatened state employees, including teachers, who have been on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca or who reveal their faith at work. They tell men not to grow beards, and women not to wear white headscarves. Those who refuse to heed the secret police warnings are forced to sign a "voluntary" resignation letter (see below).

Tight state controls on freedom of religion or belief

Turkmenistan imposes severe restrictions on exercising freedom of religion or belief (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244). Only regime-approved activity in regime-approved locations by regime-approved religious communities is allowed. Any exercise of freedom of religion and belief without state permission – for example sharing any beliefs with others - is banned and punishable.

The regime particularly controls the Muslim community, allowing only communities of the state-controlled Muslim Board to exist. The small number of permitted Shia mosques come under the control of the Sunni Muslim Board. The regime names the Chief Mufti (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244) (currently Yalkap Hojagulyev) and lower level imams.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Nazila Ghanea requested a visit to Turkmenistan on 25 April to review the country's record, according to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights website. The regime has not yet approved the visit.

Pastor "will sooner or later be locked up"

In early July, an official of the mosque in the village of Dogryyol in Charjew District of the eastern Lebap Region told mosque attendees that Protestant Pastor Rahymjan Borjakov "will sooner or later be locked up". The mosque official, Juman Illiyev, added that "work is already underway" on this.

Illiyev made the comments publicly, local Christians who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18.

The 44-year-old Pastor Borjakov lives in the village of Dogryyol, which is located 25 kms (15 miles) north-west of the regional capital Turkmenabat, close to the border with Uzbekistan. He is often under surveillance.

Pastor Borjakov leads a Protestant Church which is not able to gain state registration under the country's tight restrictions on the exercise of freedom of religion or belief (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244). His church is not formally allowed to meet for worship. Any meetings risk punishment.

"Threatening and insulting" phone calls

In mid-July, about two weeks after the mosque official had made his public remarks, an officer of the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police and a regional religious affairs official visited Pastor Borjakov's family home in Dogryyol. "They sought information about his brother and cousins, taking car numbers and details of their places of work or study," a Christian who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. It appears that Pastor Borjakov was not present at the time.

Many of Pastor Borjakov's relatives are not Christians. "That's why they're afraid," the Christian told Forum 18. "They fear problems at their places of work or study because of him." The Christian believes the MSS secret police are trying to use his relatives to pressure him to stop his exercise of freedom of religion or belief.

Relatives soon began receiving "threatening and insulting" phone calls from a number assigned to a man named Ylham. He is an officer of the Police's 7th Department, which controls religious activity.

The man who answered the phone when Forum 18 called on 24 July would not say if he was Ylham or not. Nor would he answer any questions then or on subsequent calls.

The telephone at Lebap Region's Religious Affairs Department in Turkmenabat went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 30 July.

Yusupgeldi Durdyev, the Cabinet of Ministers official who heads the Religious Affairs Department in Ashgabat, did not answer his phone on 29 or 30 July. The man who answered the phone at the Department on 30 July said Durdyev was away on a worktrip. He said the Department's chief specialist Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah was not in the office.

The official who answered the phone at the regime's Religious Affairs Department in Ashgabat – who did not give his name – denied that any Protestant pastor is facing arrest or that his relatives have been threatened. "This didn't happen," he told Forum 18 on 30 July.

Yusupguly Eshshayev, Chair of the Human Rights Committee of the non-freely elected parliament, each time put the phone down after Forum 18 introduced itself on 29 and 30 July. No election in Turkmenistan has ever been found to be free and fair (<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/turkmenistan>) by Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) election observers.

Blocked from leaving country

In early 2024, the Migration Service stopped Pastor Borjakov from leaving Turkmenistan as he was preparing to board a flight at Ashgabat Airport. He had a valid passport and ticket. "Officials refused to give him an explanation," a Christian told Forum 18.

Pastor Borjakov then wrote to President Serdar Berdimuhamedov to complain about the arbitrary denial of the right to leave the country. Forum 18 has been unable to find out if Pastor Borjakov received a response, but the ban on leaving was then lifted.

The Migration Service often prevents individuals from leaving Turkmenistan despite having valid passports and tickets, exile Turkmen.news notes (<https://turkmen.news/doch-turkmenskoj-aktivistki-ne-vypustili-iz-strany/>). Officials almost never explain why they are doing so. Individuals generally do not get back the money they have paid for their ticket.

Pressure on non-Slavic Orthodox?

As many people of Slavic (and Armenian) background, including Russians and Ukrainians, have left Turkmenistan in recent years, the number of people attending the dozen state-permitted Russian Orthodox churches has declined. Among those attending are Orthodox of Turkmen, Tatar, Uzbek and Tajik background.

Police and MSS secret police officers, as well as local administration officials, pressure ethnic Turkmen, Tatars, Uzbeks and Tajiks and their families not to attend Orthodox churches and to convert to Islam, a resident of the eastern Lebap Region told Radio Liberty's Turkmen Service for a 6 May article (<https://www.azathabar.com/a/asgabat-basga-dine-uyyan-adamlary-gysmagyny-guyclendiryar-/32935000.html>).

This pressure is said to have increased since Serdar Berdimuhamedov took over from his father as President in March 2022. That June, the new President made the umra pilgrimage to Mecca.

Lebap Region authorities point to what they see as the example of former president Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, who went on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca in June 2023 and often attends the official opening of newly-built state-controlled mosques.

Radio Liberty notes that as a result of this policy, pig farms were destroyed in Charjew, Danew and Farap Districts, and two enterprises producing pork sausages were closed in Turkmenabat. The authorities prevent pork from being sold at markets. (Islam prohibits Muslims from consuming pork products.)

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Archbishop Feofilakt (Kuryanov) of Pyatigorsk is the Russian-based "temporary" administrator of Turkmenistan's dozen Orthodox parishes on behalf of the Moscow Patriarchate. He has held the "temporary" post since 2008.

An official in the Pyatigorsk Russian Orthodox Diocese (who said he had never visited Turkmenistan but was familiar with the life of the Church there) told Forum 18 on 29 July that he had not heard that pressure was being put on Orthodox believers who are not of a Slavic background.

Ramadan crackdown on Muslims

The state-controlled Muslim Board declared the Muslim holy month of Ramadan began at dawn on 11 March and concluded with the festival of Id al-Fitr (Oraza Bayrami) on 10 April. During Ramadan, officials tried to prevent devout Muslims exercising their freedom of religion or belief. The MSS secret police stepped up surveillance of those attending mosques.

"These days, there are hundreds of secret police officers in civilian and police uniforms in the capital's mosques," a resident of Ashgabat told Radio Liberty's Turkmen Service on 18 March (<https://www.azathabar.com/a/asgabatda-metjiltire-gozegcilik-guyclendirilip-asa-dindarlar-gozlenyar/32866487.html>). "For them, these days are a good time to target the 'extremists' in the country. Devotees who fast during the day gather in the mosques in the evening and perform the Tarawih prayer. Security officers are watching them and looking for 'extreme believers' among them."

Those considered "too religious" receive a call the next day and are summoned for questioning to the district police station or to the Communal Housing Department. Officials record their personal details and ask them how long they have been praying, and the name of anyone who encouraged them to do so.

Secret police officials also ask them whether or not they mark the death of an individual after three, seven and forty days. If they answer that "There is nothing in the Koran that says that these should be marked", officers accuse them of being "Wahhabis". This is a term widely used in Central Asia for Muslims officials regard as extreme.

"These citizens are blacklisted. If they have a beard, they are forced to shave it," the Ashgabat resident told Radio Liberty.

Security guards at mosques publicly abuse attendees who have been released from prison and are now religious, praying and fasting, Radio Liberty added.

"Police officers shout to everyone that they have committed a crime, been in prison, and now grow a beard and become a believer."

The official who answered the phone at the regime's Religious Affairs Department in Ashgabat – who did not give his name – denied that the state imposes restrictions on or pressures Muslims who wish to pray in mosques. "No one puts pressure on Muslims," he told Forum 18 on 30 July.

Ramadan fasting crackdown in schools

In at least one Region, officials tried to prevent students in secondary schools and higher educational institutions from fasting during Ramadan, Radio Liberty's Turkmen Service noted on 19 March (<https://www.azathabar.com/a/turkmenistanda-okuwcylyara-we-talyplara-agyz-beklemek-gadagan-edilyar/32868685.html>). Educational officials imposed the measures as Ramadan began. Radio Liberty chose not to identify the Region for fear that individuals might face state reprisals.

"These days, special guards have been placed in front of the doors of secondary and vocational schools and higher education institutions of the province. These guards have water in their hands, they make every student drink water before entering the educational building," a local resident told Radio Liberty.

"The leaders of schools and universities tell the young people that fasting is forbidden, saying that they suffer heatstroke and faint," the local resident said.

The man who answered the phone at the Religious Affairs Department in Ashgabat on 30 July said its head, Yusupgeldi Durdyev was away on a worktrip. He said the Department's chief specialist Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah was not in the office.

Yusupguly Eshshayev, Chair of the Human Rights Committee of the non-freely elected parliament, each time put the phone down after Forum 18 introduced itself on 29 and 30 July.

Secret police threaten state employees

Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police officers have threatened state employees, including teachers, who have been on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca or who reveal their faith at work. They tell men not to grow beards, and women not to wear white headscarves.

Those who refuse to heed the secret police warnings are forced to sign a "voluntary" resignation letter.

"Ministry of State Security officers are looking for and warning those in state institutions, including teachers of educational institutions, who have undertaken the haj pilgrimage and follow the principles of Islam," Radio Liberty's correspondent noted on 18 April (<https://www.azathabar.com/a/turkmenistanda-asa-dinci-gorunyan-isgarler-isden-cykarylyar-/32912250.html>).

A Muslim, speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of state reprisals, told Radio Liberty that the government's crackdown on devout Muslims flows from the regime's fears that religion could become a "force against the government". He noted that while the government organises the haj pilgrimage to Mecca each year, "the increase in the number of those undertaking the haj and the growth in the number of believers seem to worry the authoritarian regime".

The Muslim added that state pressure on Muslims exercising freedom of religion or belief "contradicts the principles of Sharia [Islamic law]".

The man who answered the phone at the Religious Affairs Department in Ashgabat on 30 July said its head, Yusupgeldi Durdyev was away on a worktrip. He said the Department's chief specialist Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah was not in the office.

Yusupguly Eshshayev, Chair of the Human Rights Committee of the non-freely elected parliament, each time put the phone down after Forum 18 introduced itself on 29 and 30 July.

Crackdown on Muslims follows Moscow terror attack

Following a terrorist attack on a concert hall in Moscow on 22 March, Turkmen officials launched a further crackdown on Muslims attending mosques.

In Turkmenbashi, Balkanabat and Cheleken, the police and MSS secret police stopped and interrogated young people going to prayer. Officials particularly targeted bearded men and hijab-wearing women, Radio Liberty's correspondent in the western Balkan Region noted on 25 March

(<https://www.azathabar.com/a/orsyetdaki-pajygaly-hujumden-son-turkmen-polisiyasy-dincileri-gysyar/32876308.html>). Local officials directly linked the increased scrutiny of Muslims to the Moscow attack.

Secret police officers told Radio Liberty that the government's latest crackdown on devout Muslims, which it described as "domestic security concerns", also involved shaving men's beards and asking them not to pray in mosques.

"People under the age of 50 are ordered not to come to mosques and to pray at home if they are sick," a Muslim from Balkan Region told Radio Liberty. "They also ask religious people whether it is necessary to fast at this time. If young men have a beard, they will shave it off. If you don't give up, they threaten to send you to Ovadan-Depe prison for five years as a 'Wahhabi'."

Ovadan-Depe is a harsh, isolated top-security prison (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2786) located in the Karakum Desert 70 kms (45 miles) north of Ashgabat. Prisoners in Ovadan-Depe are known to have been tortured, and some have died from maltreatment or neglect (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2318). Relatives of prisoners held there often have no information as to whether or not they are still alive.

The man who answered the phone of Balkan Region's Religious Affairs Department in Balkanabat on 30 July told Forum 18 that its head, Rahim (last name unknown) was not available. The official refused to answer any questions and put the phone down.

Police detained three young men with beards in the mosque in the village of Shatlyk in Mary Region, the exile Turkmen.news noted on 26 March (<https://turkmen.news/v-maryjskom-velayate-proshli-oblavny-na-molodyh-lyudej-s-borodami/>). The criminal investigation department checked their phones, but found nothing suspicious. Police stopped other men with beards on the street near the mosque and checked their phones. The detentions were linked to the aftermath of the Moscow attack.

A Mary Region police officer told Turkmen.news that officers would soon begin inspections of homes where Muslims "teach Islam". Police claimed that young people attend such meetings, listen, and then "get involved in all sorts of things".

On 29 March, the number of attendees at Friday prayers at the main mosque in Turkmenabat, Lebap Region, was far fewer than usual. "Most of those who attended the prayer were elders. Only some of them had children under the age of a teenager. As in previous weeks, there are no middle-aged men or young men. In general, the number of participants in the Friday prayer was very low," a Muslim told Radio Liberty. Muslims linked the low attendance to the Turkmen authorities' response to the Moscow attack.

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Raids on, enforced closures of religious clothes shops

In the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi in Balkan Region, secret police officers raided shops selling religious items – such as tasbih (Islamic beads) - and clothes - such as hijab headscarves. They ordered them to close and confiscated all their goods. These were the first such raids on shops selling religious goods in 30 years, one local shopkeeper told Radio Liberty in late March (<https://www.azathabar.com/a/orsytdaki-pajygaly-hujumden-son-turkmen-polisiyasy-dincileri-gysyar/32876308.html>).

The man who answered the phone of Balkan Region's Religious Affairs Department in Balkanabat on 30 July told Forum 18 that its head, Rahim (last name unknown) was not available. The official refused to answer any questions and put the phone down.

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Yusupguly Eshshayev, Chair of the Human Rights Committee of the non-freely elected parliament, each time put the phone down after Forum 18 introduced itself on 29 and 30 July. (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Turkmenistan (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=32>)

For background information, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey (https://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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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