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COMMENTARY: Turkmenistan's fictitious religious freedom

By a Turkmen Protestant

"Outsiders sometimes think that freedom of conscience exists in our country," writes a Turkmen Protestant, anonymous to avoid state persecution, in this personal commentary for Forum 18 News Service <http://www.forum18.org>. But the writer sees "constant specific violations of religious freedom" and "cannot see any improvement" in Turkmenistan's human rights. When religious believers "demand that officials follow the laws and the Constitution, these officials are in shock." "We have yet to meet an official who refused to act against religious believers, and chose instead to follow the laws and the Constitution." The writer pleads for the international community to act and "publicly and clearly tell our government to do what the Constitution proclaims and respect human rights," as this "would help it keep its promises." The writer states that "religious communities are not calling for any special privileges. We simply want the Constitution to be obeyed. Let us have the rights we are promised - we are going to use them anyway."

Outsiders sometimes look at Turkmenistan's Constitution and government statements and think that freedom of conscience exists in our country. But the reality is very different. Not only are published legal restrictions – which break international human rights standards - tight, but secret unwritten laws operate as well as the published laws.

For example, we Protestants cannot build places of worship. Services in private homes have been banned, any religious community must have its own special building designated for worship or rented for the purpose. Renting a flat is impossible. What is more, officials have to be shown the building and give their approval.

Officials have told some religious communities that if they want to buy or build a building it must be outside a residential area, hidden from view just like mosques or Russian Orthodox churches were in the Soviet period. But it is almost impossible to find such buildings. When urban districts are being planned, no such buildings are included.

We have no possibility to print or import religious literature. This has been banned since the mid-1990s. Officials of the government's Religious Affairs Committee have to look at each individual book and give specific permission - which they almost never do. Even if any permission is given, officials will link it to the number of recorded members a religious community already has - if the community is officially allowed to exist - even though they almost never give such permission for any copies.

Evangelism includes giving out literature to anyone who wants to read it - as many people do. We want to spread our faith. Most of all we need Bibles, both in Turkmen and in Russian, a book available throughout the world. But our government regards this issue as very sensitive and I do not know when printing and importing religious literature will be possible. Sharing our faith is totally banned.

Christian congregations in Turkmenistan - even those that are registered as part of an international religious community - find it difficult to maintain contact with the wider Church they are part of. Our country's leaders say there are no restrictions on foreign travel, but travel for religious purposes is restricted. When people submit invitations to the Migration Service, officials often come back with a refusal. They never admit that refusals are for religious reasons. If people are allowed to travel, they face constant questions on leaving and on returning.

Even registered religious communities can only function openly outside the capital Ashgabat if local authorities allow them to do so - and often they claim that registration in the capital does not cover operating elsewhere, even if the religious community's statutes allow this. In one example, for nearly a year the authorities kept dragging out discussions. Recently, they have started saying that a church can give a local branch official status after it holds a meeting where the leader of the branch is designated, with confirmation that he or she has appropriate religious education. The leader must then go to the local hyakimlik (administration) and its Religious Affairs Department for their approval. Only then will this designated leader (and no-one else) be allowed to lead services locally.

Legally communities are given the hope of functioning, but there are always excuses used for someone to stop our communities from functioning. Officials can raid a service, take down the names of all participants and ban them from meeting, as happened to the Baptist and Seventh-day Adventist communities in Turkmenabad (formerly Charjew), who were told they had no registration in the region.

Registration represents total state control over each religious community. We believers want a different sort of relationship with the state. Registration would be fine if it were just technical, without any intrusive conditions and regulations decided at the whim of officials. Information on the name of the community, its denominational affiliation, its legal address and the name of the leader should be enough. No more should be demanded. And communities should not be forced to register.

But even for registered churches, officials demand to know what happens at every meeting - believers do not like this. For example, if a church has an internal meeting, does the church want officials to be reading everything that was discussed? If the church refuses to hand over the minutes of its meetings, Justice Ministry officials say it is violating its registration by not passing these on and strip it of legal status. We oppose total state control of church life - internal church life should remain internal. In just the same way, no family wants everyone to know everything they say to each other. Why does our Justice Ministry need to know everything? Who wishes to register under these conditions?

The registered religious communities also face strong control over their use of money. They face pressure to put all the money from collections into their official bank account on Monday morning after weekend services. Officials argue this is needed for the tax authorities. But what if the community wants to help someone in urgent need, someone who needs money for medicine? This is a very common situation. Why can't the community help immediately out of the collection?

If officials want to attend a service and hear the sermon, communities are happy for this to happen. But a religious community should not have to reveal its private internal documents. That is interference and a violation of their rights.

The authorities already have full information on every religious community. They know how many there are, who leads each one, how often it meets and how many members it has. It is possible the government wants to have security against groups using religion as a cover. The President fears this. But attacking believers is not the right way to deal with this fear.

All religious minority communities - including we Protestants, Hare Krishna devotees and peaceful minority Muslims - have the experience of being banned. Pressure on banned communities is not only on a material level, with the confiscation of property, but on a moral level. All minorities were in the recent past banned from meeting for worship. This ban was imposed even though our country's constitution guarantees us the right to worship individually, or together with others, or not at all.

This ban is still imposed today on religious communities who choose not to register – even though this choice is their right under the international agreements the government has signed - and on those the government finds obstacles and excuses not to register.

But banned churches continue to exist, meet and hold services, despite the internal situation of the country and the hostility of the government. Even non-believers recognise that the state has taken the wrong route. The state cannot ban faith, something that is inside a person. The state has no legal right to interfere.

I cannot see any improvement as a result of the changes the government claimed it made in 2004. Even after getting registration, Protestant and other communities still face pressure from the authorities. Officials still visit believers in their flats, take the names of those attending services, issue warnings and ignore our registration documents.

An especially painful issue for religious communities is the presence of Muslim imams within the state Religious Affairs Committee. This particularly affects ethnic Turkmens who adopt Christianity: they face constant humiliation and psychological pressure from Muslim officials. Every velayat (region) has an official from the Religious Affairs Committee. Such officials should be neutral and objective as they represent the state, not a religious community. They should not humiliate and intimidate Christians. Even if they are not imams, they still hold intolerant views. Ethnic Turkmens, or others considered traditionally Muslim, who change their faith are always regarded as traitors.

The initiative for this system of control over and persecution of religious communities comes from above. Great influence in the state is wielded by the President's book, the Ruhnama, which in practice occupies pride of place in the state (see F18News 1 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=522). I have read parts of it myself. If you freely choose to read it, that is of course acceptable. But if - as happens many times - you are forced to read and memorise it, that is unacceptable.

Believers must be firm in their faith and demonstrate this to officials. When services and religious meetings are raided or believers summoned, we want officials to see our deep faith. We want them to see they cannot do anything in the face of such faith. Otherwise, these officials will be encouraged to even more actively intimidate believers, sack them from their jobs, seize their flats and pressure them to abandon their faith. They will increase pressure on believers to sign a statement that they will no longer read the Injil (New Testament) and read the Ruhnama instead. Even for nominally Muslim officials, the Koran is far less important than the Ruhnama. They tell us that if we want to be Christians, we should go to the Russian Orthodox Church.

It is difficult for individual believers when officials intimidate them, especially when they are punished for offences they never committed. It is hard when they are told they are traitors to their nation and cursed. Believers must respond briefly and succinctly: they will continue to follow their Saviour. The weaker individuals are in their faith, the greater the pressure officials apply.

Believers must also know the laws and the Constitution. When they demand that officials follow the laws and the Constitution, these officials are in shock. Article 11 of the Constitution says in part that "everyone has the right independently to determine her or his own religious preference, to practice any religion alone or in association with others, to practice no religion, to express and disseminate beliefs related to religious preference, and to participate in the performance of religious cults, rituals, and ceremonies."

We have to educate officials that our country is a secular state - so I myself am the only one who can decide which faith to choose. As article 11 of the Constitution says: "The government guarantees freedom of religion and faith and the equality of religions and faiths before the law. Religious organisations are separate from the government, and may not perform governmental functions. The governmental system of education is separate from religious organisations and is secular in nature."

How can a secular state impose the Ruhnama or any other faith? Officials have no response to this. There is nothing they can say and they stop arguing. This argument works better than anything.

On our side are the laws and the Constitution. But officials do what they are told to from higher up. They know they are acting wrongfully when, for example, they take the names of all those participating in a service. But we have yet to meet an official who refused to act against religious believers, and chose instead to follow the laws and the Constitution.

The police never want to put anything in writing when they persecute us - they want to hide their anti-religious activity. Our government wants to hide what is going on in our country - not only from the outside world but from its own people also. Internal pressure will by itself bring no significant change in the overall situation. Pressure has to come from outside.

The roundtable in 2005 - where Justice Ministry officials were forced to explain themselves to religious community leaders while diplomats observed - was a start. Officials were dragged into the open to make their promises - even if they have not kept these wonderful promises. One face was seen by those at the meeting, but a very different face is seen in the reality of everyday life.

The whole world should tell our government that its words on religious freedom must be turned into reality. The Constitution respects religious freedom - so the reality should be what the Constitution says. The international community must publicly and clearly tell our government to do what the Constitution proclaims and respect human rights.

Pressure must be maintained on our government, which tries to give a false picture of the situation. Other countries must make it publicly clear that they know what the reality is of life in Turkmenistan, including the constant specific violations of religious freedom. This would be very painful for our government, and would help it keep its promises.

So many pieces of paper are required just to be able to meet for worship. Why don't officials just leave religious communities alone to practice their faith calmly and without interruption? Christian faith is not just closing the doors and windows of my home and reading the Bible. We want to practise our faith in freedom as is our right under article 11 of the Constitution, which says: "everyone has the right .. to express and disseminate beliefs related to religious preference, and to participate in the performance of religious cults, rituals, and ceremonies."

We Protestants and other religious communities are not calling for any special privileges. We simply want the Constitution to be obeyed. Let us have the rights we are promised - we are going to use them anyway. (END)

- a Turkmen Protestant contributed this commentary to Forum 18 News Service. Commentaries are personal views and do not necessarily represent the views of F18News or Forum 18.

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.

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1167.

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>.

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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