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TURKMENISTAN: President attempts to meddle in Orthodox structures

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

Russian Orthodox Patriarch Aleksii II has politely sidelined Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov's attempt to split the dozen or so Russian Orthodox parishes in Turkmenistan away from the Central Asian diocese, and subordinate them directly to the Patriarch. A Moscow-based priest familiar with the situation, who preferred not to be identified, insisted to Forum 18 News Service that the Church itself has to make such decisions, not the state. The priest told Forum 18 that he believes President Niyazov "wants the Orthodox Church to exist, but a Church that is in his hand, just as he has done with Islam." Stressing that the Moscow Patriarchate is keen to see an end to the tensions between the Church and the Turkmen government, the priest deplored the denial of visas to three or four priests who the diocese wished to send to serve in Turkmenistan, and the refusal of the Turkmen government so far to re-register Russian Orthodox parishes.

Russian Orthodox Patriarch Aleksii II has politely sidelined Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov's attempt to split the dozen or so Russian Orthodox parishes in Turkmenistan away from the Central Asian diocese, based in the Uzbek capital Tashkent, and subordinate them directly to the Patriarch. In an early July letter, Patriarch Aleksii told Niyazov that no changes can be made to the status of dioceses except by a Local Council or Council of Bishops of the Church. "Our attitude to your request is one of understanding," Aleksii told the President diplomatically, "and we will study it when the date is set to call the next council." A Moscow-based priest familiar with the situation, who preferred not to be identified, insisted that the Church itself has to make such decisions, not the state. "In Turkmenistan the church and state are separate, so this interference is serious," he told Forum 18 News Service on 11 July.

The priest said that he personally believes President Niyazov is trying to create "independent Orthodoxy" in Turkmenistan. "He wants the Orthodox Church to exist, but a Church that is in his hand, just as he has done with Islam," the priest told Forum 18. "If the parishes are put under the patriarch first they would have to be autonomous, then would come autocephaly [full independence]. This is unacceptable to us." He pointed out that the Orthodox Church in Turkmenistan is too small to function independently in a country with an Islamic majority.

The priest stressed that the Moscow Patriarchate is keen to see an end to the tensions between the Church and the Turkmen government. He deplored the denial of visas over the past few years to three or four priests who are Russian citizens who the diocese wished to send to serve in Turkmenistan. He also deplored the failure of President Niyazov and successive Muslim Chief Muftis (as leader of the largest faith in the country) to invite Patriarch Aleksii to make a pastoral visit to Turkmenistan. "In principle he wants to go and I know there were concrete plans for a visit about a year and a half ago," the priest told Forum 18. "But no invitations came from the president or the chief mufti." He reported that church delegations to Turkmenistan from both Tashkent and Moscow have in recent years been forced to reduce the numbers of participants.

The priest also regretted that the Turkmen government appears to have so far refused to re-register the dozen or so Russian Orthodox parishes in Turkmenistan required under the 2003 Religion Law, apparently as a bargaining chip. "Some obstruction came from within the state," he told Forum 18. "Re-registration was not granted – and we know this was deliberate." He said successive appeals to the Turkmen authorities from the Church's Holy Synod failed to resolve the problem.

Niyazov made his proposal to Patriarch Aleksii in a letter of 2 May, requesting that Turkmenistan's Orthodox parishes be put directly under the jurisdiction of the Russian patriarch, thereby removing them from the authority of Metropolitan Vladimir (Ikim) of Tashkent, who has jurisdiction over Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Had the Orthodox Church acceded to such a move, Orthodox believers in Turkmenistan would be isolated still further from the rest of their Church.

The Moscow-based priest said this is the first time President Niyazov has raised this issue with the Patriarch, and likened it to what he claimed was the unwritten pressure in the early 1990s from political leaders in the three Baltic states to transfer local Russian Orthodox dioceses to the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople.

In his response to Niyazov, Aleksii was fulsome in praising what he described as the president's "attention to the needs of the

Orthodox parishes located in Turkmenistan" and his "wise far-sighted policy" which he claimed ensured good relations between the Orthodox Church and the Islamic community in Turkmenistan.

Forum 18 has learnt that President Niyazov's intervention has been discussed informally since May by Orthodox clergy in Turkmenistan, who felt that any decision would be taken above their heads. One Turkmen-based priest who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 that "it makes no difference to us" whether the Turkmen parishes are under Tashkent or Moscow. "Moscow is the centre and we have one patriarch," the priest told Forum 18. "I'm just a small guy." The priest declined absolutely to speculate on why President Niyazov has taken it upon himself to intervene in the internal structuring of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Orthodox community in Turkmenistan is already very isolated. Although some contacts remain with the diocese in Tashkent, they are relatively infrequent, though some seminarians from Turkmenistan are reported to be studying at the Orthodox seminary in Tashkent. Metropolitan Vladimir last visited parishes in Turkmenistan for one week in 2003. One Orthodox priest in Turkmenistan contrasted Patriarch Aleksii's failure to be able to visit the country to the fact that he has visited Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in recent years. Asked why he believed the patriarch has not been to Turkmenistan, the priest responded: "This must have been decided at a state level."

Neither Orthodox nor Muslim representatives from Turkmenistan took part in the founding last year of the CIS Inter-religious Council, despite invitations from the Moscow Patriarchate. The Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate – like all Russian publications – can no longer be received on subscription in Turkmenistan. When the relics of two Soviet-era martyrs were taken for veneration to eight of the twelve CIS countries last year and earlier this year (they were barred entry by the Uzbek authorities – see F18News 15 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=510), their visit to Turkmenistan was not even discussed.

Despite Patriarch Aleksii's fulsome praise of President Niyazov's claimed attention to the needs of the Orthodox Church, the Adalat (Fairness or Justice) Ministry's refusal to re-register the dozen or so Orthodox parishes or the convent in Ashgabad has left them waiting without legal status. All registered religious organisations were required to re-register with the Adalat Ministry after the adoption of the highly restrictive 2003 Religion Law, brought in at a time when no non-Orthodox and non-Muslim religious communities were allowed to exist. All unregistered religious activity remains illegal, despite the removal of penalties under heavy international pressure last year (see F18News 10 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=582).

"We haven't been able to re-register in more than a year and a half, but we want our documents to be in order," one Orthodox source told Forum 18. "We still have the old registration documents, but they're no longer valid." The source said that without current, valid registration documents, any applications to build or start new activities (such as Sunday schools in parishes that do not yet have them) are rejected.

The government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs must give specific permission to import any books or church equipment, such as baptismal crosses or incense. "Without re-registration getting such permission is difficult," the Orthodox source told Forum 18.

The Turkmen government already directly controls the Islamic community, the country's biggest religious community. President Niyazov personally removed the last two chief muftis – Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah in 2003 (he has since been imprisoned) and Kakageldy Vepaev in 2004 – while the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs names and removes all imams (see F18News 10 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=408). Other religious communities face strong official pressure and restrictions.

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=296

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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