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TURKMENISTAN: After Niyazov, what hope for religious freedom?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Following today's (21 December) death of Turkmenistan's dictator, Saparmurat Niyazov, victims of his policies have told Forum 18 News Service that, in the words of an exiled Protestant, "the transition leaders have already praised Niyazov and his policies and vowed to continue them." The country's Foreign Minister and other officials refused to comment to Forum 18. Exiled human rights activist Farid Tukhbatullin, of the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, noted that hostility to religious freedom was a "personal instruction" of Niyazov. But "this does not mean though that his subordinates were merely implementing his will," he said. "Almost all of them shared his views on this entirely." He pointed out that "the overwhelming majority of officials of the police and MSS secret police have a vested interest in preserving the current situation, under which they enjoy unlimited rights." It is unclear whether Niyazov's invented Ruhnama religion will continue to be state-imposed.

In the wake of the death of Turkmenistan's veteran dictator, President Saparmurat Niyazov, this morning (21 December), observers and victims of his anti-religious freedom policy have told Forum 18 News Service that although it was the late president who personally instituted the policy, it has wide support among the country's leaders. Such observers fear this policy could continue. "The transition leaders have already praised Niyazov and his policies and vowed to continue them," one Protestant who had to flee Turkmenistan to escape persecution told Forum 18 on 21 December. "If the government is only going to continue the same policy I don't think there will be many chances, including in the area of democracy and religious freedom."

Most observers are holding off from immediate predictions as to whether Turkmenistan will continue its autocratic, isolationist course. "The whole country is in mourning," one analyst told Forum 18 from the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat] on 21 December. "I believe it is too early to predict what will happen. A junta will come to power, but in a milder form. I don't think believers will face serious pressure – officials will all be engaged in intrigues about power and gas."

Forum 18 reached Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov by telephone on 21 December, but he declined to speak about the country's future course. Officials at the Registration Department of the Justice Ministry also declined to comment, as did the official who answered the phone of Murad Karriyev, deputy head of the government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs.

Although harassment of religious communities has eased in the past year or so, between 1997 and 2003 no religious communities apart from some state-approved Muslim and Russian Orthodox communities were allowed to function. Police raids and harsh punishments on those conducting religious activity without state permission were the norm. But the structure of state control – including complete control of Islam from the inside and control on all other faiths from outside – remains.

The exiled Protestant believes the anti religious policy came from the president. "He instituted this policy because he was afraid of any movement in society."

The Protestant said that religious believers in Turkmenistan want the authorities to provide all the rights to religious freedom set out in the country's Constitution and in international agreements. "We want the government to guarantee that registration will not be used as a restriction on religious freedom," the Protestant insisted, echoing long-standing complaints from religious leaders within Turkmenistan that the government's insistence that religious communities must register and thereby submit themselves to burdensome and intrusive state scrutiny (see a commentary by a Protestant within Turkmenistan at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=728).

"I don't know if any improvement is now likely, though we hope for the good," the Protestant added, saying it was too early to consider returning to Turkmenistan while the threat of being punished for peaceful religious activity remains.

Like the exiled Protestant, exiled human rights activist Farid Tukhbatullin, who heads the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, agrees that the anti-religious policy was instituted on the "personal instruction" of President Niyazov. "This does not mean though that his subordinates were merely implementing his will," Tukhbatullin told Forum 18 on 21 December. "Almost all of them shared his views on this entirely. And if the current authorities continue in the same way, then the anti-religious policy will carry on."

Tukhbatullin saw a small hope in the possibility that the future President – whoever they may be - will have to soften the

government's policies to consolidate power both domestically and internationally. "However, the overwhelming majority of officials of the police and the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police have a vested interest in preserving the current situation, under which they enjoy unlimited rights."

Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 that, throughout 2006, their members across Turkmenistan have been detained for up to 48 hours – especially while talking to others about their faith on the street or at people's doors – and meetings in private homes have been raided.

Following previous long-standing practices against religious minorities, local imam I. Janmedov joined police officers and an official of the local administration during a 15 May raid on a Jehovah's Witness meeting in a private flat in the northern town of Konye-Urgench [Koneürgench]. After being taken to the local police station, all the Jehovah's Witnesses were interrogated, insulted and threatened before being released. Religious literature confiscated from them was not returned. In late June, R. Nasyrov, a Jehovah's Witness from Turkmenabad (formerly Charjou [Charjew]), was forcibly held for five days at a drug-treatment centre in Atamurad (formerly Kerki) in southern Turkmenistan, where he became seriously ill.

In early June, military conscription officers from the northern Lebap region forcibly took Jehovah's Witness Serdar Satlykov to the detention centre for those refusing to perform compulsory military service, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. After refusing pressure from the head of a military unit to accept military service, Satlykov was taken to deputy defence minister, Kurban Muhammednazarov, who then ordered that he be held in a psychiatric unit. Satlykov – who refuses military service on grounds of his faith - was detained there from 6 to 20 June before being freed. He has not been harassed since his release. Fellow Jehovah's Witness Aga Soyegov was held in psychiatric hospital in late 2005 to try to pressure him to accept compulsory military service (see F18News 10 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=725).

Even the Russian Orthodox Church – one of only two legal faiths between 1997 and 2003 – faces restrictions on its activity. The Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) reported in October that final construction work on the women's convent next to St Nicholas' Church in Ashgabad had to come to a halt in late 2005, after President Niyazov warned the Orthodox clergy in a private conversation that if they carried on with the building work he would order the demolition of all the country's Orthodox churches.

Other places of worship – such as those of the majority religious community Islam, the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church have also been demolished (see F18News 23 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=786).

"The walls of the future convent were put up with the funds of parishioners and by their own efforts," TIHR quoted Russian Orthodox parishioner Svetlana M. as declaring. "Unfortunately the powers that be don't understand that the prayers pronounced within the walls of a convent – just as those in mosques – call for peace and harmony."

Unclear at present is whether the new government will continue to impose the cult of personality around Niyazov that was imposed during his lifetime. Niyazov's two-volume Ruhnama (Book of the Soul) has become compulsory reading in schools and other institutions and has been imposed on religious communities. Quotations from it have even – in an action that is for devout Muslims blasphemous - been carved around the interior of the dome of a vast new mosque built in Niyazov's home village of Kipchak near Ashgabad, where he is due to be buried (see F18News 1 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=522).

Turkmenistan's cult of the leader's personality and state-imposition of an invented religion is far closer to North Korea's Juche, or self-reliance, than it is to Stalin's personality cult. North Korea's Juche is – in a similar way to Turkmenistan's Ruhnama - synonymous with the cult of the deceased North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung, or Kimilsungism (see F18News 29 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=752).

"Although religion here is separate from the state, imams and ordinary believers appealed to the government and the local authorities to be allowed to quote from the Ruhnama in mosques," one Ruhnama teacher – who preferred not to be identified – insisted to Forum 18 back in October. "This was the initiative of imams and believers, who wanted to do so out of respect for the President." The teacher alleged that imams only read parts of the work connected with religion. He said mosques hold Ruhnama days each Saturday, but said he did not know if communities of other faiths do the same. "For Christians and others it's their affair – they have their own rituals."

The teacher denied that the presence of copies of the Ruhnama in mosques on a par with the Koran was an insult to Muslims' faith. "If you want to read the Ruhnama you can – you're free to do so or not." He also denied that Muslims are offended by quotations from the Ruhnama at the Kipchak mosque. "People are calm about this," he told Forum 18. "They come to the mosque to worship Allah – it doesn't matter if the quotation is from the Koran or the Ruhnama, as the Ruhnama also speaks of Allah."

The teacher explained that each local administration across the country has an official or officials who "help" local Muslims and other faiths. He was unable to explain to Forum 18 why communities wanted such help. He claimed initially that "ordinary believers" choose their imams, but when pressed explained that the leading imams in each region and district are named by the local authorities in agreement with the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs. He said the government had issued an instruction that the hundred

or so regional and district imams should not ask believers for money as they are already paid by the state, a subsidy no other faith gets.

The teacher made no comment on the cases of mosques destroyed for, apparently in some cases, failure to honour the President Niyazov's books of alleged "spiritual writings" (see F18News 4 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=481 and 19 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=187).

He said he did not know the background to the removal by Niyazov of successive chief muftis, and declined to discuss the case of Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, removed as chief mufti in 2003 and sentenced in 2004 to 22 years' imprisonment on charges the government has persistently refused to make public (see F18News 8 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=271). Despite rumours that he had been freed in the October 2006 prisoner amnesty, it is believed Nasrullah is still being held.

The teacher defended the government's controls on the number of pilgrims going on the haj to Mecca, currently set at 188 annually. He said lists of applicants are held by the religious affairs officials in each local administration, adding that he is 3,000th on the list. Turkmenistan still imposes the strictest controls in Central Asia on haj pilgrims (see F18News 5 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=711).

In early November 2006, the Turkmen government announced that, as in previous years, only 188 pilgrims will be permitted – only enough to fit on one aeroplane of the state-run Turkmenistan Airlines – far below the quota allocated to Turkmenistan by the Saudi authorities.

The teacher claimed that local imams – who are also part of the local administration - play no role in evaluating whether religious minorities are allowed to register religious communities in their area. "In the case of non-Muslim communities, they merely pass on the applications to the local administration before it goes to the justice ministry in Ashgabad. Usually religious people don't say No to others who believe in God," he claimed, but could not then explain why imams have taken part in recent years on raids on religious minority communities and threatened them at interrogations at local administrations.

The teacher also claimed that local authorities cannot refuse to allow a religious community to function, if the Justice Ministry has given it registration.

While many ordinary residents of Turkmenistan fear potential instability in the wake of Niyazov's death, religious believers have told Forum 18 they hope their ability to practice their faith freely will improve. But they remain cautious, as the new leaders have so far indicated they will continue the current course.

Before President Niyazov's death, many within religious communities doubted whether limited access to state registration – trumpeted by the regime as a "liberalisation" - made any real improvement to their situation in practice (see F18News 24 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=787). Unregistered religious activity remains - against international human rights standards – illegal. Despite regime claims of the abolition of exit visas, and exit ban against those the state dislikes is still in place (see F18News 31 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=790).

In June this year, a Baptist, Aleksandr Frolov, was deported solely for his religious activity. This was despite the fact that the deportation separated him from his wife, their three year old son, and their five month old daughter (see F18News 14 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=799).

Turkmenistan has not been able to explain to Forum 18 News Service why requests by Asma Jahangir, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief, to visit the country have gone unmet (see F18News 25 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=718). (END)

For a personal commentary by a Protestant within Turkmenistan, on the fiction - despite government claims - of religious freedom in the country, and how religious communities and the international community should respond to this, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=728

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=672

Reports of the religious freedom situation in Turkmenistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=32>

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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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