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TURKMENISTAN: Even harsher controls on religion?

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

Turkmenistan plans to make its harsh state restrictions on religion even harsher, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Under a new draft religion law, which neither the OSCE nor Forum 18 has been able to see, penalties for breaking the law will lead to criminal, not administrative, punishments. The new law also reportedly requires religious groups to "coordinate" contacts with foreigners with the government, and to gain permission before receiving foreign support such as funding and religious literature. Turkmenistan has the harshest state controls on religion in the former Soviet Union, but the Justice Minister claims harsher controls are necessary to address security concerns. Places of worship have already been demolished and police routinely break up religious meetings. Believers have been beaten, threatened, fined, sacked from their jobs, imprisoned, had their homes confiscated, been sent to a remote area of the country, and deported from Turkmenistan.

Turkmenistan, which has the harshest state controls over religious activity of all the former Soviet republics, is set to make these controls even tighter under the proposed new version of the country's religion law, sources in the capital Ashgabad have told Forum 18 News Service. Penalties for breaking the law will lead to criminal, instead of simply administrative punishments, the current draft of the law reportedly declares. The bill amending the 1996 version of the law on freedom of conscience is now in the Mejlis, the parliament, a rubber-stamp body that routinely approves bills prepared by the leadership. No date has yet been set for the law's final adoption.

The new religion law was discussed by the Mejlis on 21 October together with several other bills, the official media reported. Also approved that day were new versions of the Criminal Code and the Code of Administrative Offences. On 22 October, Turkmen television broadcast an interview with the Justice Minister Taganmyrat Gochyev about the draft laws covering religious groups and public organisations. He said tighter control of these groups was needed to address security concerns.

One source in Ashgabad, who preferred not to be identified, reported that under the draft law religious groups must continue to register with the Ministry of Justice but failure to comply would result in criminal prosecution instead of administrative penalties as at present. Religious groups continuing to operate without registration will face administrative fines and members of those groups operating for over one year will be subject to criminal prosecution. The new law reportedly also requires religious minorities to "coordinate" contacts with foreigners through the Foreign Ministry and obtain special permission before receiving overseas support, including funding and religious literature.

Forum 18 has so far been unable to get a copy of the text of the religion bill. As of 31 October the Ashgabad office of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe had also not been able to obtain a copy of the draft law, though an official in Ashgabad said the OSCE would follow the adoption of the new law.

Turkmenistan's government gradually tightened its control over religious activity in the 1990s until, in the 1996 version of the religion law, it set such a high threshold (500 adult Turkmen citizens are required for each local religious community to be eligible to register) that all religious communities except the officially-approved Sunni Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church were stripped of registration. Even religious communities that met these stringent requirements – such as some Shia Muslim and Protestant communities – were denied registration.

The authorities already treat unregistered religious activity as illegal and routinely break up worship services and other religious meetings. Believers have been beaten, threatened, fined, sacked from their jobs, sent to a remote area of the country, imprisoned, or deported from the country. Places of worship have been demolished and also believers' private homes confiscated in retaliation for hosting religious meetings. Presently, most fines are levied under Article 205 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes unregistered religious activity.

Turkmenistan's current restrictions on religious activity have recently come under fire from the European Parliament, members of the US Congress, and the US Helsinki Commission.

(For more background see F18News 2 October 2003, Turkmenistan Religious Freedom Survey

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If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY