

30 November 2016

TURKMENISTAN: Who is obstructing Russian Orthodox diocese?

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

"The Orthodox Church wants a diocese and resident bishop in Turkmenistan," an Orthodox told Forum 18. "But it hasn't yet happened." The Deanery Secretary, a Russian priest, was forced to leave. And the Armenian Apostolic Church is still unable to regain a former church.

The Russian Orthodox Church appears no nearer to achieving its goal of a fully-fledged diocese in Turkmenistan, despite an early November visit by two foreign-based hierarchs. "The Orthodox Church wants a diocese and resident bishop in Turkmenistan," a lay Orthodox Christian from the country, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18. "This was raised officially by [Moscow Patriarchate] Metropolitan Kirill when he visited Ashgabad in 2008, before he became Patriarch. But it hasn't yet happened."

Fr Grigory Bocharov, a Russian citizen who has served from 2012 in Turkmenistan as Secretary of the Patriarchal Deanery and senior priest of Ashgabad's St Nikolai Church, was forced to leave by the authorities in spring 2015 (see below).

Turkmenistan, in defiance of its international human rights obligations, has a long-term policy of isolating belief communities from their co-believers outside the country (see below).

And despite repeated attempts, the Armenian Apostolic Church has still not regained its former church in the Caspian port of Turkmenbashi (formerly Krasnovodsk), despite a November 2012 promise by President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov to return it (see below).

Restricted visits

Archbishop Feofilakt (Kuryanov), the Russian-based "temporary" administrator of the Turkmen parishes on behalf of the Moscow Patriarchate, and Metropolitan Vikenty (Morar) of Tashkent, who lives in the Uzbek capital and is head of the Central Asian Metropolitan Area, were allowed a four-day visit to the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] from 3 to 6 November 2016.

Fr Mikhail Stolyarov, spokesperson for the Moscow Patriarchate's Uzbek Diocese, explained that Metropolitan Vikenty had travelled alone to Turkmenistan, as often happens on his pastoral visits. "I wasn't there," he told Forum 18 from the Uzbek capital Tashkent on 29 November. "But as far as I know, no meetings were held with officials during the visit. At least, the Metropolitan didn't mention any. So nothing could have been discussed with them."

Archbishop Feofilakt is allowed to visit Turkmenistan on short visits several times a year, including earlier in 2016. However, this was the first visit Metropolitan Vikenty has been allowed to make to Turkmenistan since 2013 (see F18News 23 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1840). "The Church tried to invite Metropolitan Vikenty once a year, without much success," a lay Orthodox Christian noted (see below).

No serving Russian Orthodox Patriarch has ever visited Turkmenistan.

Isolating belief communities

The Turkmen government's policy of isolating its citizens (including belief communities from their fellow-believers in other countries), together with tight restrictions on which religious communities are allowed legally to exist, means religious communities have only highly limited opportunities to invite foreign religious figures.

Only registered religious communities have the right to apply to invite foreigners for religious purposes, though such applications are rarely successful (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1676).

Any one registered community can generally only invite one foreigner or small group of foreigners (such as a husband and wife) per year, religious community members told Forum 18 from Ashgabad. "In addition, there is always a time limit," one community

member explained. "A guest is usually allowed to stay for three days, maximum five days, never more."

At least two Protestant communities were able to have such brief visits in 2016, Protestants told Forum 18. In the past, other registered Protestant churches, as well as the Baha'i and Hare Krishna communities have been able to have such short, rare visits by foreign citizens.

The state-controlled Sunni Muftiate (Muslim Spiritual Administration) - the only form of the majority religion Islam permitted – appears only to invite foreigners on very rare occasions. Islamic communities outside the framework of the Muftiate are not allowed to exist, and therefore (like Jehovah's Witnesses and many Protestant churches) cannot invite foreign citizens (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1676).

Registered religious communities are generally not able to invite foreign citizens to live and serve in Turkmenistan. The enforced departure from Turkmenistan in spring 2015 of Fr Grigory Bocharov, the Secretary of the Patriarchal Deanery who had arrived from Russia (see below), appears to leave only one Russian Orthodox priest from Russia remaining, Forum 18 notes.

The one exception is for the small Catholic community, which is served by three foreign priests resident in Ashgabad. However, these priests have diplomatic status as staff of the Holy See's Nunciature (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1676).

Religious communities which might want to invite pastoral leaders or qualified religious teachers to live and serve in Turkmenistan are thus unable to do so.

Similarly, the only institution allowed to train clergy of any faith in the country, the small Muslim Theological Section in the History Faculty of Magtymguly Turkmen State University in Ashgabad, is not allowed to have any foreign staff (see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1676).

No Russian Orthodox diocese for Turkmenistan

The dozen or so Russian Orthodox parishes in Turkmenistan were transferred by the Church's Holy Synod in October 2007 from the jurisdiction of the then Central Asian Diocese based in the Uzbek capital Tashkent after heavy pressure from the Turkmen authorities. They were formed into a Deanery directly subject to the Patriarch (see F18News 19 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1037).

When the then head of the Russian Orthodox Church's Department of External Church Relations, Metropolitan Kirill (now the Russian Patriarch) met President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov at his palace in Ashgabad on 27 May 2008, Russian Orthodox sources seemed confident the President would allow the Church to create a diocese.

"During the conversation, issues were discussed related to the organisation in the country of an Orthodox diocese," Church publications noted after the meeting. "The state leadership of Turkmenistan puts great significance on the formation of a diocesan structure on the base of the Orthodox parishes, which would have a status equal to that of all the other dioceses of the Russian Orthodox Church, both in Russia and in other countries."

On behalf of the Patriarch, the Turkmen Deanery has been led since October 2008 by the "temporary administrator", Bishop Feofilakt (Kuryanov). He has retained his responsibility for "temporarily" overseeing the Deanery over more than eight years, despite having episcopal responsibilities in Russia, first as assistant bishop in the Moscow diocese, then bishop of Smolensk and, finally, bishop of Pyatigorsk from March 2011. Feofilakt became an Archbishop in 2014.

The Russian Orthodox Holy Synod established individual dioceses for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – led by their own resident bishops – in July 2011.

While the dozen or so parishes in Turkmenistan would form a small diocese, it would still be bigger than the Tajikistan diocese, which has just six parishes (one of them on a Russian military base). Similarly, the Azerbaijan diocese has fewer parishes than in Turkmenistan.

OSCE obligations

As a participating State of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Turkmenistan has an obligation to respect and facilitate everyone's freedom of religion or belief and linked fundamental freedoms.

The Concluding Document of the Vienna Meeting 1986 of Representatives of the Participating States of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe commits participating states to "respect the right" of religious communities to "organize themselves according to their own hierarchical and institutional structure".

It also commits participating States to respect their right to "select, appoint and replace their personnel in accordance with their respective requirements and standards as well as with any freely accepted arrangement between them and their State" (see Forum 18's compilation of OSCE commitments on freedom of religion or belief http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351).

What or who is delaying establishing Orthodox diocese?

Forum 18 was unable to reach any Turkmen officials to find out whether the state is preventing the Russian Orthodox Church from structuring itself in the country as it chooses and naming a resident leader of its choice.

The telephone of Mekan Akyev, head of the government's Commission for Work with Religious Organisations and Expert Analysis of Resources Containing Religious Information, Published and Printed Production, went unanswered each time Forum 18 called between 28 and 30 November. The telephone of one of the Deputy Chairs, Gurbanberdy Nursakhatov, also went unanswered, though local people told Forum 18 he was out of the country.

Forum 18 asked a spokesperson for the Moscow Patriarchate about what is delaying the establishment of a diocese in Turkmenistan, and whether the Deanery is likely to be turned into a Diocese soon. He chose his words very carefully in his response. "What exists exists," he told Forum 18 from Moscow on 28 November. "If something changes, a new structure might be required."

Asked how much the Moscow Patriarchate is pushing the Turkmen authorities to be allowed a diocese, the official – who did not give his name – responded: "The structure is important for us, but carrying out religious services is the most important thing." Asked about the current state of negotiations, he added: "I'm not saying if there are or aren't discussions in the Moscow Patriarchate on this, but if there were we wouldn't discuss it publicly."

Asked why the Russian-based Archbishop Feofilakt is still the administrator of the Patriarchal Deanery, the Moscow Patriarchate official noted that he had been "temporary" administrator for some years. He did not explain why this provisional status has remained unchanged for more than eight years.

Will synod be able to meet in Ashgabad?

The Turkmen Deanery is part of the Russian Orthodox Central Asian Metropolitan Area, led by Metropolitan Vikenty (Morar), who is based in Tashkent. The Metropolitan Area is made up of the dioceses of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, together with the Patriarchal Deanery in Turkmenistan.

Unlike the Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan dioceses, which he has been able to visit at least once a year, Metropolitan Vikenty has found it more difficult to visit the parishes in Turkmenistan. He first visited the Turkmen parishes in November 2012, then again in April 2013. However, his next visit did not take place until November 2016.

Fr Stolyarov, spokesperson for the Uzbek diocese, insisted that Metropolitan Vikenty faces no obstruction visiting Turkmenistan when required. "If we submit a request for such a visit, that request will be met," he told Forum 18.

The synod of the Central Asian Metropolitan Area – with the bishops of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as well as Archbishop Feofilakt representing the Turkmen Deanery – has met in Tashkent and the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek. Although Archbishop Feofilakt expressed the hope at the March 2015 synod that the next meeting could be held "in sunny Ashgabad", this did not happen.

Deanery Secretary forced out

Fr Grigory Bocharov, a Russian citizen from Pyatigorsk diocese, served from 2012 in Turkmenistan as Secretary of the Patriarchal Deanery and senior priest of Ashgabad's St Nikolai Church. Bishop Feofilakt named him to both posts in September 2012.

In a December 2014 meeting in Ashgabad with Charygeldi Seryaev, head of the government's then Gengesh (Council) for Religious Affairs, Archbishop Feofilakt praised Fr Bocharov's "constructive work" in coordinating the work of the parishes in Turkmenistan. Fr Bocharov was also present at the meeting.

However, in spring 2015 the Turkmen authorities refused to extend Fr Bocharov's permission to remain in Turkmenistan, the lay Orthodox Christian told Forum 18. The priest was forced to leave Turkmenistan and return to Russia, where he resumed duties in the Pyatigorsk diocese. It appears the Church tried to appeal to the Turkmen authorities to overturn the enforced departure, but with no success.

Finally bowing to the inevitable, Archbishop Feofilakt issued a decree on 20 June 2016, removing Fr Bocharov from his post as senior priest at Ashgabad's St Nikolai Church and also from his post as Secretary to the Patriarchal Deanery in Turkmenistan.

"No changes" for Armenian Apostolic Church

Despite repeated attempts, the Armenian Apostolic Church has so far been unable to regain its former church in the Caspian port of Turkmenbashi (formerly Krasnovodsk), confiscated during the Soviet period and partially destroyed in the mid-2000s. President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov's November 2012 promise to return what remains of the church and allow it to be restored and reopened for worship have never been fulfilled (see F18News 23 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1840).

On 12 September 2016, the exiled news website Chrono-tm.org published photographs of the exterior and interior of the half-ruined church in Turkmenbashi. Outside stands a notice "Old Armenian Gregorian church. Historical-Cultural Monument, Registered by the State BN6 10-211".

"No changes have occurred," a spokesperson for the Moscow-based Armenian Apostolic Diocese (which includes Central Asia) lamented to Forum 18 on 29 November. The spokesperson added that Archbishop Yezras Nersisyan is planning to visit Central Asia soon, "we hope in December". Asked if the Archbishop will finally be able to visit Turkmenistan and try to restart the Church's activity there, the spokesperson responded: "We'll see."

The Armenian Apostolic Church has parishes in Samarkand and Tashkent in Uzbekistan and Almaty in Kazakhstan. The church in Turkmenbashi is the only surviving church building in Turkmenistan.

The Armenian ambassador to Turkmenistan tried to arrange an invitation for a priest to visit in 2015, but was unsuccessful, an Ashgabad-based Christian told Forum 18. The last time an Armenian priest is known to have visited was in 1999, when he was only able to hold services and conduct baptisms on Armenian diplomatic territory (see F18News 26 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=439). (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 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.

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>.

For more background information see Forum 18's religious freedom survey of Turkmenistan at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1676.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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