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TURKMENISTAN: Police detain, threaten, swear at Muslims

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Police detained about ten Muslim men in Farap in January who they believed were following their faith too closely, such as by praying every day. Officers "used swear words and behaved crudely towards those they detained." Police forcibly shaved one man, made him drink alcohol, and fined him with no explanation. About ten more were held for praying in a home. Officials warned school children not to take part in (unspecified) "illegal" religious groups and residents received a similar warning.

Government officials repeatedly warn individuals not to participate in religious communities that the regime has not allowed to exist. In December 2020, officials in the capital Ashgabat warned school children not to take part in (unspecified) "illegal" religious groups. In February 2021, officials warned residents in the northern Dashoguz Region not to follow religious groups that do not have state approval.

In January, police in the eastern Lebap Region again targeted Muslims who they believed were following their faith too closely, such as by praying every day. Police in Farap detained about 10 men and at the police station "used swear words and behaved crudely towards those they detained." Police forcibly shaved at least one man, made him drink alcohol, and fined him with no explanation (see below).

Also in Farap, police raided a home in January where about 10 men were praying the namaz. The men were taken to a police station, and it remains unknown what then happened to them. Police claimed they had violated lockdown regulations, though these remain unclear. The regime does not give clear public health instructions, as - despite numerous deaths with coronavirus-type symptoms - it does not admit that the country has any such cases (see below).

Officials at all levels continue to try to find out who is religious and threaten such individuals with harmful consequences if they are. Such enquiries - whether by police or diplomats at Turkmenistan's consulates abroad - often include questions as to whether an individual drinks alcohol or not. Individuals often feel forced to lie about their beliefs to try to avoid punishment (see below).

In countries with many students from Turkmenistan - such as Belarus, Ukraine, and Turkey - the regime's diplomats often summon students to warn them about their behaviour. This includes warning them not to attending mosques or other religious communities or, for men, not having beards (see below).

Turkmenistan imposes severe restrictions on exercising freedom of religion or belief and interlinked rights (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244). Only state-approved activities in state-approved locations by state-approved religious communities are allowed. All exercise of freedom of religion and belief without state permission is banned and subject to a variety of punishments.

Seven Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors to military service have been jailed in 2021 so far, and there are currently 15 jailed conscientious objector prisoners of conscience (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2636). (Nine are serving second sentences for the same "crime".) "We deeply regret the criminalization of conscientious objection," four UN human rights Special Procedures wrote to the regime in December 2020, adding that Turkmenistan "must provide meaningful alternative service". The regime has not responded to the UN.

Violating international human rights commitments

Turkmenistan ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx>) (ICCPR) in 1994. General Comment 22 (<https://www.refworld.org/docid/453883fb22.html>) on ICCPR Article 18 ("Freedom of thought, conscience and religion") states, among other things: "no one can be compelled to reveal his [sic] thoughts or adherence to a religion or belief", and that "the freedom to manifest religion or belief may be exercised 'either individually or in community with others and in public or private'."

No official was prepared to explain to Forum 18 why the regime breaks its legally-binding international human rights obligations by: pressuring individuals to reveal their beliefs; warns and threatens individuals not to exercise their freedom of religion or belief in

non-regime approved communities; and why the regime tries to force individuals to act against their beliefs by drinking alcohol, or by doing compulsory military service.

The telephone of Yusupguly Eshshayev, the regime-appointed Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Human Rights Committee, went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 16 March. The woman who answered the phone at the office in Ashgabat of the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 asked to speak to her.

The telephones of the Deputy Foreign Minister's Office and of the Foreign Ministry Press Office were not answered each time Forum 18 called on 16 March.

The official who answered the phone on 16 March at the regime's Commission for Work with Religious Organisations and Expert Analysis of Resources Containing Religious Information, Published and Printed Production (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244) claimed that neither Commission Chair Yusupgeldi Durdiyev nor chief specialist and former Chief Mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah were available.

Police detain, threaten, swear at Muslims

From about 20 January, police and other officials in the eastern Lebap Region increased pressure on Muslims who followed their faith. Pressure was particularly intense in Farap and Charjou Districts, Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service noted on 22 January.

Officials often summon and threaten people known to exercise their freedom of religion and belief (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2534), including men who attend mosques, women who wear headscarves, Protestants meeting for worship, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

"From the middle of this week, they have been conducting explanatory work on people up to the age of 55 who observe Islamic customs and pray every day," a 30-year-old resident of Farap told Radio Free Europe. "They invite them to the local administration and the housing management office. Ministry of State Security [secret police] officials also use the services of their informers among the population to reveal who are the believers."

The Farap resident was among many men detained by police in mid-January on the street because they had beards. "Because I was busy I hadn't shaved for about a week," the Farap resident noted. Officers took the men to the police station, suspecting them of being "religious extremists" or "Wahhabis". Officers "wanted to know if I followed religious traditions or not, and if I drink alcohol or not. They questioned me for about two hours."

The resident was one of about 10 men detained at the police station that day for the same reason. He told Radio Free Europe that officers "used swear words and behaved crudely towards those they detained."

However, the police were not just interested in the individuals they had detained, asking if they also knew people who "followed religious traditions". The Farap resident told officers he did not. Officers then shaved off his light beard, claiming that he did not resemble the photo in his identity document.

"Then they forced me to drink vodka, telling me 'Drink if you're not a Wahhabi'," the Farap resident told Radio Free Europe. "Without explaining the reason, they also insisted that I pay a fine of 50 Manats, but wouldn't give me a receipt." The fine represents about two days' average local wage for those in formal work.

Muslims increasingly fear being branded "extremists" if they visibly fast or mark Ramadan. Turkmenistan has jailed numerous Muslims on vague "extremism" accusations, including to punish them for meetings to study their faith. One Muslim stopped going to mosque in 2019 after police summoned him (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2481). "Who is more important, Allah or the President?" an officer asked him.

The telephones at Farap District Police went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 16 March. An officer from Lebap Regional Police in Turkmenabat refused to answer any questions the same day.

In September 2019, Mary Region secret police officers summoned a 50-year-old man (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2534) "because he was religious and prays the namaz". "I told them I pray the namaz. They said they know about that," the man told Radio Free Europe. Officers were also interested to know if Muslims drink alcohol or soft drinks. In December 2019, particularly in Mary Region east of Ashgabat, the regime stepped up its campaign against women wearing the hijab headscarf.

In January 2019, Police in Ashgabat and Lebap Region stepped up their campaign to stop men under the age of 40 from wearing beards (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2449). They forcibly shaved some and pressured others to shave. Police appear to believe that young men who wear beards encourage Muslims to become extreme. In one case in Lebap Region, officers

forced a young man they had detained not only to shave but to drink alcohol.

Police raid Muslim prayers – coronavirus an excuse?

Also in Farap on 15 January, police raided a home where about 10 people had gathered to pray the namaz (Muslim Friday prayers), Radio Free Europe also noted on 22 January. Officers arrested all those present, holding them in the investigation prison for alleged violation of lockdown regulations, a local resident told Radio Free Europe. It remains unclear what then happened to those detained.

Radio Free Europe was unable to get comment on these arrests and detentions from the police, Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police, or local authorities in Lebap Region.

Although many people in Turkmenistan have died from the coronavirus infection, the regime does not admit that any cases have occurred in the country (<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/turkmenistan>). The regime has banned some activities, including travel inside the country without special permission and going to restaurants, and extended the New Year school holidays. However, they say such measures are only to counter "seasonal respiratory infections".

In the week of 10 to 15 January, the main regime newspapers – such as "Turkmenistan" (in Turkmen) and "Neutral Turkmenistan" (in Russian) – carried instructions on how people could protect themselves from such infections, such as by washing hands, increasing indoor ventilation and exercising. Such announcements instructed people only to wear masks and "go more rarely to populated places". They made no mention of not visiting other people in their homes.

Mosques and other places of worship of communities which the regime allows to exist were mostly ordered closed from July 2020 because of the coronavirus pandemic, along with shops, restaurants and many places of work. However, official events occur frequently with no facemasks and no social distancing.

At two official events in Lebap Region on 15 January – publicised with photographs in the newspaper "Turkmenistan" the following day – attendees do not appear to be wearing masks. One photo shows people listening as President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov opened a gas compressor station. The event was attended by regime ministers and Chinese officials. The other shows dancers outside the new Fire Safety Department of Lebap Regional Police.

Raids on people meeting for worship have reduced since early 2020 during the pandemic. Police raided a Christmas gathering of Protestant women (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2534) in a village in Lebap Region in December 2019. Throughout 2019 police also raided Jehovah's Witness meetings, interrogated and threatened individuals and brought cases to court (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2534). Incidents included police physical violence, intimidation, house searches (often without a warrant) and seizures of personal belongings.

Dashoguz residents instructed not to follow unapproved religious communities

In February, the Interior Ministry began handing out instructions to residents in the northern Dashoguz Region, either in person or posting them in mail boxes, Turkmen.news noted on 9 March. The two-page instructions – reproduced on Turkmen.news - claimed to tell residents how to protect their homes, for example by not using too many electrical appliances in one socket or to take care when smoking. However, the instructions also spoke about behaviour outside the home, telling residents to cross roads carefully.

The list of banned activities includes Point 20: "Believing in religious currents that have not been registered in our country." It gives no explanation of why following such religious communities is banned, or why the ban was included in a list of instructions about how residents should protect the safety of their homes.

The regime is interested in closely monitoring religious communities which do not have state permission to exist. Statistical forms prison administrations have to submit regularly to higher authorities, such as the Prosecutor's Office and the Interior Ministry, ask for numbers of various categories of prisoners, including jailed "adherents of banned religious organisations" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2476). Another form asks for the number of jailed alleged "Wahhabis", "Jehovists", and "Suleimanists" (an apparent reference to followers of Turkish-influenced Islam).

The February 2021 instructions also warned Dashoguz Region residents to use the internet only in accordance with the law. (The internet is slow and expensive, and access to foreign-based news and opposition websites is blocked.)

School instructions not to attend "incorrect religious movements"

In mid-December 2020, just before the beginning of the winter school holidays, officials instructed school children in at least one Ashgabat secondary school to sign a pledge that they would observe various restrictions during the holidays, Turkmen.news noted on 24 December 2020. As well as observing health restrictions in light of the pandemic, school children had to pledge not to attend sermons by "incorrect religious movements".

"I have been warned that if my participation in any of the above mentioned events becomes known, I will bear responsibility up to being expelled," concludes the document the children had to sign.

The document – reproduced by Turkmen.news – does not explain what an "incorrect" religious movement is.

Officials have targeted non-Muslim schoolchildren and their parents and guardians (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244) with threats of school expulsion.

Intrusive questions at Istanbul consulate

Turkmenistan's diplomats regularly try to monitor and threaten citizens working or studying abroad (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2481) who exercise their freedom of religion and belief.

In about November 2020, the Turkmen consulate in the Turkish city of Istanbul started issuing "certificates for return to Turkmenistan" for Turkmen citizens whose passports had expired but who were unable to return to Turkmenistan to renew them, Turkmen.news noted on 25 February 2021. An individual had to apply for and pay for these certificates, which are valid for six months, but not everyone who applied was able to get one.

Everyone who applied was investigated thoroughly. "First of all, the special services [MSS secret police] find out how religious the person is, whether they drink alcohol, whether they go to mosque and whether they have links to extremist organisations," Turkmen.news said. Officials also wanted to know if individuals had taken part in demonstrations against the regime's policies, which have become more frequent in foreign cities.

"If a migrant is 'excessively' religious or showed disloyalty to the authorities of Turkmenistan, they have no chance of legalising themselves," Turkmen.news added.

Telephones at the Turkmen consulate in Istanbul went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 16 March. The telephones at the Foreign Ministry press office and at the office of the deputy minister Vepa Hajiyev went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 16 March.

Turkmen diplomats in countries with many Turkmen students – such as Belarus, Ukraine and Turkey – often summon students to warn them about their behaviour (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2481), including not attending mosques or other religious communities or, for men, not having beards. (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Turkmenistan (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=32>)

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion and belief commitments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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