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TURKMENISTAN: "The right to acquire and use religious literature .. of their choice"?

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

The MSS secret police raided homes in at least four towns in Lebap Region on 21 July, the first day of the Muslim festival of Id al-Adha. Officers seized religious books, telling Muslims they can have only the Koran at home. "When they find any religious book, even if it conforms with Turkmenistan's religious literature standards, MSS officers begin to question individuals," one resident told Radio Free Europe. A Lebap Region police officer insisted to Forum 18 that the MSS secret police conducted the raids, not the ordinary police. Russian Orthodox attempts to register six new parishes have seen no progress.

Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police officers raided homes in at least four towns in the eastern Lebap Region and seized religious literature, Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service stated. Officers told Muslims they could have no religious books at home apart from the Koran. The raids came on 21 July, the first day of the Muslim festival of Kurban Bayram (Id al-Adha).

MSS officers are known to have raided homes in the towns of Danew, Darganata, Seydi and Gazojak, Radio Free Europe noted (see below).

The MSS secret police conducted the raids, not the ordinary police, the man who answered the phone of the head of the 6th Department of Lebap Region Police insisted to Forum 18. He refused to discuss anything else, such as why homes in various parts of Lebap Region were raided to hunt for religious literature (see below).

The MSS' actions contradict regime claims. "Turkmen citizens, foreign nationals and stateless persons have the right to acquire and use religious literature and other information materials with religious content in any language of their choice," the regime claimed in a 27 March 2020 report to the UN Human Rights Committee (see below).

Police have turned away Muslims who came to pray at the main mosque in the south-eastern city of Mary on the night of Miraj. Radio Free Europe noted that many Muslims then tried to pray outside in the courtyard of the mosque, but were prevented from doing so without any explanation being given. Some Muslims questioned why mosques and other places of worship were closed when commemorations of President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov's late father took place with thousands of people present (see below).

No official in the regime's Commission for Work with Religious Organisations and Expert Analysis of Resources Containing Religious Information, Published and Printed Production – including chief specialist Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah - answered the phone at any time Forum 18 called it on 3 August in Ashgabat. The Cabinet of Ministers official who chairs the Commission, Yusupgeldi Durdiyev, also did not answer his phone that same day.

Neither Merettagan Taganov (Chair of the Human Rights and Freedoms Committee of parliament's upper chamber), nor Yusupguly Eshshayev (Chair of the Human Rights Committee of parliament's lower chamber) answered their phones each time Forum 18 called on 3 August. No parliamentary deputy has ever faced a free and fair election (https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/8/382915_0.pdf).

The office of the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova did not answer the phone each time Forum 18 called the same day. She was appointed in 2017, and her office does not comply with the United Nations' Paris Principles (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/principles-relating-status-national-institutions-paris>) for national human rights institutions.

Tight state controls on freedom of religion or belief

Turkmenistan imposes severe restrictions on exercising freedom of religion or belief (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244). Only regime-approved activity in regime-approved locations by regime-approved religious communities is allowed. Any exercise of freedom of religion and belief without state permission – for

example sharing any beliefs with others - is banned and punishable.

There has been no progress since 2015 in the Moscow Patriarchate Russian Orthodox Church's attempts to apply for state registration for six new parishes (see below).

Raids, literature seizures

On 21 July, the first day of the Muslim festival of Kurban Bayram (Id al-Adha), Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police officers raided homes in at least four towns in the eastern Lebap Region, Danew, Darganata, Seydi and Gazojak, Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service noted the same day.

The MSS secret police conducted the raids, not the ordinary police, the man who answered the phone of the head of the 6th Department of Lebap Region Police insisted to Forum 18 from Turkmenabat on 3 August. He refused to identify himself or discuss anything else, such as why homes in various parts of Lebap Region were raided to hunt for religious literature. The officer then put the phone down.

The 6th Department ostensibly combats organised crime, but also covers tasks such as restricting freedom of religion and belief.

Officers seized religious literature which they claimed individuals should not have at home. The MSS also demanded that Muslims who regularly go to the mosque should stop reading any religious books apart from the Koran.

There is a de facto ban on most religious publications (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244), and the regime routinely confiscates religious literature from residents and from people entering or leaving Turkmenistan. Very little literature is produced, making it almost impossible for anyone to acquire copies of the Koran, Bible or other religious works in any language.

Local MSS secret police branches inspected the religious books they had seized, to see whether they "conform with Turkmenistan's standards for religious literature", local people told Radio Free Europe.

The MSS' actions contradict regime claims. "Turkmen citizens, foreign nationals and stateless persons have the right to acquire and use religious literature and other information materials with religious content in any language of their choice," the regime claimed in a 27 March 2020 report to the UN Human Rights Committee (CCPR/C/TKM/3 (<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G20/156/96/PDF/G2015696.pdf?OpenElement>)).

One resident of Lebap Region told Radio Free Europe that officials had raided dozens of homes in their District alone. The MSS secret police's main concern was whether residents of the raided homes had religious literature.

The resident added that once news of the raids had spread, residents of other Districts tried to hide any religious books they had.

Older residents said the raids reminded them of the persecution of people exercising freedom of religion or belief in Soviet times. "In the times of the USSR they also raided believers' homes," one elderly resident told Radio Free Europe. "And now, as soon as there's a report of a radical person, the authorities start to suspect the three million-strong population."

"When they find any religious book, even if it conforms with Turkmenistan's religious literature standards, MSS officers begin to question individuals," the resident told Radio Free Europe. "They even go as far as to force believers to drink vodka, crudely violating their rights."

The elderly resident added that many people have a poor understanding of Islam, which they thought was dangerous as it might make it easier for them to begin to follow radical religious movements from outside. The resident thought that MSS secret police pressure on Muslims made the situation worse.

In January, Police in Lebap Region's Farap District detained men on the streets who had beards (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2645). 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," one recounted. Officers shaved off beards and forced the men to drink vodka.

Also in Farap in January, police raided a home where about 10 people had gathered (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2645) to pray the namaz (Muslim daily prayers). They took those present to the police station and held them in the investigation prison.

Worshippers turned away from Mary's main mosque

The regime is most interested in controlling the Islamic community, as it has the largest number of followers (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244).

In the evening of 9 March, police turned away Muslims who came to pray at the main mosque in the south-eastern city of Mary on the night of Miraj. This commemorates the night-time journey of the Muslim prophet Muhammad to Jerusalem. Radio Free Europe noted that many people – old and young, men and women, most wearing facemasks – had gathered in the courtyard of the mosque. Police and plain clothes officials evicted them without listening to pleas to be allowed to remain.

Muslims who came to pray at the main mosque in Mary on the morning of the festival of Id al-Fitr (Oraza Bayram) on 13 May found the mosque closed, Radio Free Europe noted the same day.

Worshippers had come to pray at the mosque because other local mosques had been closed because of the coronavirus pandemic. However, the regime does not admit that it has had any Covid-19 cases (<https://en.turkmen.news/spotlight/turkmenistan-covid-report/>).

Many Muslims then tried to pray outside in the courtyard of the mosque but were prevented from doing so without any explanation being given. "We were chased away with just one word, 'No,'" one local Muslim told Radio Free Europe. "They didn't respect us."

Only later that day did one pro-regime website Turkmen Portal carry an announcement from the state-controlled Muftiate (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244) that Id al-Adha prayers would take place in mosques without worshippers being present. No announcement was made on state-run media before the festival.

"Had the government given the news on TV in advance, we would not have travelled the several kilometres, would not have come to the mosque and been evicted," one local Muslim told Radio Free Europe.

Residents of Ashgabat stated that while cafes, restaurants and parks were open, mosques were closed at Id al-Fitr. One resident regarded this as disrespectful. "People have only religion left and they want to take it away from them," the Ashgabat resident told Radio Free Europe.

Other Muslims questioned why mosques and other places of worship were closed when commemorations of President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov's late father took place with thousands of people present. Other official events have also taken place without masks or social distancing (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2645).

Officials closed all places of worship of communities they allow to exist on 13 July 2020. The restrictions were lifted only on 1 April 2021, though with instructions for all worshippers to wear facemasks and maintain social distancing because of the continuing pandemic.

"Services continue for the moment, with due attention to the hygiene requirements, including masks and social distancing," the leader of a religious community told Forum 18 on 4 August.

No permission for more Orthodox parishes to exist

The regime arbitrarily denies state registration and so permission to exist to any religious community it dislikes. The only mosques allowed to exist are those controlled by the state-controlled Muslim Spiritual Administration (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244) (the Muftiate), led by Chief Mufti Yalkab Hojagulyyev.

Officials have allowed only 23 non-Muslim communities to gain state registration. Officials have rejected registration applications from other communities, particularly from Protestants outside the capital Ashgabat and Jehovah's Witnesses.

In March 2015, the Moscow Patriarchate Russian Orthodox Church's Central Asian Synod, meeting in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent, announced that six new parishes in Turkmenistan were being formed and would apply for state registration.

Twelve parishes already had state registration (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244), and the six new parishes were planned for Kerki (then known as Atamurat), Serhetabad, Serdar, Hazar, Garabogaz and Magtymguly, the Uzbek Russian Orthodox website noted in 2015.

However, officials told the Orthodox verbally that any registration would not be given, someone familiar with the process told Forum 18 in early August 2021.

"The work that has begun to register the parishes in Turkmenistan continues at the present time," the Chancellery of the Patriarchal Parishes in Turkmenistan told Forum 18 from the Russian city of Pyatigorsk on 3 August.

The 12 registered Russian Orthodox parishes in Turkmenistan come under their own separate Deanery, and the regime has blocked a Diocese being set up in the country (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2234). Contact with the parishes from outside the country has been difficult. The Deanery is directly under the Patriarch of Moscow, and has been administered on a "temporary"

basis since 2008 by Archbishop Feofilakt (Kuryanov) of Pyatigorsk.

Moscow Patriarchate Russian Orthodox dioceses exist in all other former Soviet states, apart from in Georgia and Armenia where the Moscow Patriarchate does not want to set up dioceses. (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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