

28 February 2005

TURKMENISTAN: "What's the point of registering?"

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

Religious communities with state registration - Seventh-day Adventists, some Baptists, Bahais, Hare Krishna and Muslims - have recently seen some improvement in their freedom to meet for worship, but almost all complain of being unable to worship outside approved places and of the ban on printing or importing religious literature. Russian Orthodox parishes are expecting registration in March. The leader of one religious community, which has decided not to register, complained to Forum 18 News Service that "even if you get registration there are so many things you can't do." Harassment of unregistered religious communities, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, continues. Turkmen President Niyazov has reportedly stated of unregistered religious communities that, if they are good and agree to cooperate with the SSM secret police, there is no reason not to register them. Questioned by Forum 18 about why the government is secretive about its policy, an official insisted that the policy is not secret – but would not give any information.

Although registered religious communities have seen some easing of their freedom to meet for worship, almost all complain that they cannot meet for worship outside approved places of worship and are banned from printing or importing religious literature. "What's the point of registering?" complained the leader of one community which has decided that registration is not worth it. "Even if you get registration there are so many things you can't do." In one serious case of harassment of an unregistered religious community, Forum 18 News Service has learnt that 38-year-old Jehovah's Witness Babakuli Yakubov was detained by police from 20 to 25 January in his home town of Seydi after several weeks of pressure from managers at the oil processing plant where he works who disliked his religious views. President Saparmurat Niyazov has reportedly told officials of the Adalat (Fairness or Justice) Ministry that only religious communities that agree to cooperate with the secret police, the State Security Ministry (SSM), can get registration.

The Russian-language service of Deutsche Welle told Forum 18 that a source in the presidential administration had told them that Niyazov had made the remarks at a cabinet of ministers meeting on 10 or 11 February where the Adalat Minister was heavily criticised. Niyazov had complained that during a 9 February meeting, the visiting US Assistant Secretary of State Laura Kennedy had criticised him for restrictions on religious communities and he angrily blamed the minister for putting him in a position to be criticised. According to Deutsche Welle, Niyazov told the meeting that there are good and bad religious groups and that if they are good and agree to cooperate with the SSM secret police there is no reason not to register them. He said the SSM has already been working with religious communities.

Leaders of registered religious communities complain that in addition to the ban on printing or importing religious literature, even with registration and the right to open a bank account they are banned from getting money from fellow-believers abroad.

Some leaders of unregistered communities also criticise the state's enforcement of the compulsory cult of personality around the president on religious communities, including the imposition of the president's two volume book, the Ruhnama (see F18News 1 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=522).

Forum 18 was unable to find out more about why religious communities need to cooperate with the SSM secret police before being allowed to register. The telephones went unanswered on 25 and 28 February at the department of the Adalat Ministry that registers religious communities. At the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs, an official who would not give his name told Forum 18 on 28 February that deputy chairman Murat Karryev was away on a work trip in the Mary region and that Fr Andrei Sapunov, a Russian Orthodox priest and fellow deputy chairman with responsibility for Christian groups, was also not present. The official said no-one else could answer Forum 18's questions.

Equally uncommunicative was Abram Mogilevsky, scientific secretary at the government's National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights. "We can't discuss anything by phone," he told Forum 18 on 28 February in response to six different questions. Asked why the government's religious policy is a secret if the country proclaims itself as an open democracy Mogilevsky insisted it is not a secret – but would not give any information. Asked about the role of his institute he responded: "We are responsible for human rights in Turkmenistan and we don't give out information on what we do."

The Adventist community in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] - which despite gaining official registration in June 2004 was long

banned from renting anywhere for worship (see F18News 11 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=451) although its Ashgabad church had been bulldozed by the authorities in November 1999 – has finally been allowed to rent a hall for worship. "But worshipping at home is prohibited," Adventists told Forum 18 on 21 February. "Bringing religious literature into the country is prohibited too." Hare Krishna devotees say that despite registration, they too cannot import literature either.

Perhaps more surprisingly, even the Russian Orthodox Church – with thirteen parishes the country's second biggest religious community – cannot import books, journals, icons and other religious items. "We haven't had any new literature for two years," one Orthodox believer told Forum 18. "Of course we don't have enough. The last time any came in was when our bishop, Metropolitan Vladimir of Tashkent, last visited us in May 2003." Even Metropolitan Vladimir had to get special permission through the Foreign Ministry and the cabinet of ministers to bring in the literature with him, which Orthodox sources said at the time was a "long process".

Russian Orthodox priests are reportedly not exempt from the general procedure of seizing all religious literature and religious items at customs and releasing them only after the traveller brings a letter from the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs authorising their entry into the country. Such permission is almost never given. "I know priests who've had literature confiscated on up to five separate occasions," the Orthodox believer told Forum 18. "With no letter the books were confiscated by the state." Other believers told Forum 18 that if there are no more than a few religious books which appear to be for personal use, customs officials sometimes let them through.

Some believers complain that parcels of books sent from abroad are returned by the Turkmen post office. Orthodox believers complain they are no longer allowed to receive the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate – the main official Russian Orthodox publication – by post.

Representatives of several religious faiths that have not been able to revive their activity in recent years because of the strict controls on religious activity say they are hopeful that now the ban on registering minority faiths has been lifted they will at last be able to revive their activity. "We're definitely going to try for this," one representative told Forum 18. The representative was reluctant to identify the faith for fear of jeopardising the possibility of gaining registration.

Formal registration restrictions were eased on paper in spring 2004, under strong international pressure. The Adalat Ministry registered four religious communities (Baptists, Adventists, Bahais and the Hare Krishna community). Changes to the law also required registered Muslim and Russian Orthodox communities (the only legal faiths between 1997 and 2004) to re-register. Muslim communities were re-registered late in 2004. Russian Orthodox parishes lodged re-registration applications in December 2004 and are expecting to receive re-registration certificates in March. Registration conditions imposed on religious communities are highly restrictive (see F18News 13 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=320) and unregistered religious activity remains illegal (see F18News 24 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=326).

In other recent moves against Jehovah's Witnesses, on 29 January the deputy head of the Boyun-Uzyn district of the north-eastern Lebap region Diloram Poladova visited Abdulla Adylov at his family home. She was accompanied by Ballyyev and Nazarov of the State Security Ministry and two police officers. After what Jehovah's Witness sources told Forum 18 was "lengthy threatening and insulting", Adylov, his wife and two grown-up children were taken to the police station. The police officers prepared statements of violation of Article 205 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes unauthorized religious activity. The family's Turkmen-language Bible was confiscated and the family was not allowed home until late in the evening. Their passports were not returned. Two other Jehovah's Witnesses from the area who now live in Ashgabad were detained that same day while on the way to visit the Adylov family and they were also held until late that evening.

The latest moves follow the jailing of two more Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience, for refusing on religious grounds to join the armed forces (see F18News 17 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=514). (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=296

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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