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TURKMENISTAN: President's personality cult imposed on religious communities

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

Amongst pressures on religious communities is a government-enforced cult of President Niyazov's personality. Forum 18 News Service has learnt that Muslims face mounting pressure to venerate the president's two volume ideological book, the Ruhnama (Book of the Soul), while Russian Orthodox churches must have a minimum of two copies of the Ruhnama. One government minister claimed that the Ruhnama would make up for shortcomings in both the Bible and the Koran, neither of which were, he claimed, fully adequate for the spiritual needs of Turkmen. The personality cult includes a massive mosque decorated with quotations from the Ruhnama, a gold statue in Ashgabat that revolves to follow the sun and a monument to the Ruhnama. Also important in the President's cult are his books of poetry, and Muslim clerics were last month told that "it was a priority task for clergymen to disseminate the lofty ideas in our great leader's sacred books on the duties of parents and children."

Registered religious minorities need to defer to the state and are often pressured into hanging the country's flag and state emblem and portraits of Turkmenistan's President Saparmurat Niyazov at their places of worship (if they have places of worship), and other restrictions are also imposed (see F18News 28 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=521). As part of the grotesque government-enforced cult of President Niyazov's personality, Forum 18 News Service has learnt that the Muslim community faces mounting pressure to venerate the president's two volume ideological book, the Ruhnama (Book of the Soul), while Russian Orthodox churches must have a minimum of two copies of the Ruhnama in parish libraries.

The massive mosque built at taxpayers' expense in the president's home village of Kipchak in central Turkmenistan has been decorated with quotations from the work and up to a quarter of the book stands for copies of the Koran are taken up with the Ruhnama and other presidential publications. An apparently full-time official at the massive Saparmurat Haji mosque in the village of Geok-tepe near the capital Ashgabat is present to "remind" the imam which pages of the work he is to read from at prayer times.

Although the president's cult of personality – which includes a gold statue in Ashgabat that revolves to follow the sun and a monument to the Ruhnama – began in the mid-1990s, the cult was stepped up after the publication of the first volume of the Ruhnama in 2001, which Niyazov described at the launch ceremony as a "holy book". Officials later likened it to the Koran. The second Ruhnama volume was ceremonially launched in September 2004. In 2000, one government minister claimed that the Ruhnama would make up for shortcomings in both the Bible and the Koran, neither of which were, he claimed, fully adequate for the spiritual needs of Turkmen.

Controversy was stirred among Muslims when news spread last year that the Kipchak mosque – named after the president - was decorated with quotations from the Ruhnama. Indeed, to enter the main entrance of the mosque, visitors have to walk through a gateway over which is written in Turkmen: "Ruhnama is a holy book; The Koran is Allah's book". On one side of the gateway is the text of the oath of allegiance to the president carved in stone and on the other the text of the national anthem.

On 11 February Muslim leaders from across the country attended a meeting in Ashgabat at the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs jointly hosted by the office of the Mufti (in effect part of the Gengeshi with no separate existence), under the slogan "Our esteemed leader [President] Saparmurat Haji is a true protector of clergymen". There imams were enjoined to preach from the Ruhnama. "Speakers at the meeting emphasised the need for unity and accord in order to reach great heights," state television reported the same day. "It was mentioned that it was a priority task for clergymen to disseminate the lofty ideas in our great leader's sacred books on the duties of parents and children."

Those present, who had earlier visited the grave of Niyazov's parents in Kipchak and attended Friday prayers in the mosque for the president's "sound health, long life and successes in his efforts for the good of our country", also thanked Niyazov for his new volume of poetry. State television said speakers described the volume as "an indispensable help in giving honest and pure education to the young generation of Turkmenistan's golden age".

Given the large proportion of school children's time that is taken up studying the president's works and learning them (even the English translation of the Ruhnama is used to teach English), the endorsement by imams can only be helpful for the president. All

imams in state-approved mosques are appointed by the Gengeshi.

One registered Sunni mosque in Ashgabad, like most government offices, schools, factories and some places of worship, has a "Ruhnama room" honouring the president's book, just as in the Soviet period space was set aside to honour Lenin and the communist movement.

Unlike the new Kipchak mosque, which was inaugurated amid great fanfare in October 2004, the mosque in Geok-tepe – completed in 1996 – is not carved with inscriptions by Niyazov. However, the layman based at the mosque responsible for overseeing the teaching of the Ruhnama told recent visitors it is "quite normal" to teach from the book. Neither the Kipchak nor the Geok-tepe mosques have visible portraits of Niyazov.

Some other registered religious communities have bowed to pressure to display the president's portrait at their places of worship, even if they find this unnecessary or offensive. In some ways the Russian Orthodox Church has been able to escape the worst aspects of the cult of the president. "If we have a parish library the Ruhnama must be there in at least two copies," one Orthodox believer told Forum 18. "Whoever wants to read it can do so – no-one is forced to." The believer said the local Gengeshi official enforces this unwritten rule.

Other Orthodox sources insist that their priests are not required to quote from the Ruhnama or even mention it in sermons. "Most parishioners work for the state and get the Ruhnama there," one told Forum 18 in explanation.

Pressure from officials on Muslims and the Orthodox to accept the cult of personality is reportedly especially strong in the north-eastern Dashoguz region, where ethnic Uzbeks make up about half the population. The authorities have forced imams to place the Turkmen flag above mosque entrances and every sermon delivered by imams has to begin with a eulogy to "Turkmenbashi" ("Father of the Turkmen", as Niyazov insists on being called). A copy of the Ruhnama is placed prominently at the entrance to every mosque and believers have to touch it as if it were a sacred object (see F18News 4 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=268). Similar instructions have been given to Sunni Muslim mosques elsewhere and to Russian Orthodox churches.

In other places too, including the southern town of Tedjen, local officials have pressured the Orthodox to put up the national flag on church land on state holidays, though this is not reported to happen at Ashgabad's three Orthodox churches. "This is not a violation of Orthodox Church law and our spiritual rights are not harmed by it," one Orthodox source told Forum 18. "But we would not accept national symbols inside the church itself – we have no right to put up the flag and the national coat of arms in the church." The source added that nowhere have officials pressured the Church to put up presidential portraits

Orthodox believers insisted there are no written rules on what national symbols must be displayed in places of worship and how the Ruhnama must be used. However, some told Forum 18 that local officials – especially in towns away from Ashgabad – like to show "excessive zeal" in promoting the president's cult of personality.

Part of the official process of deciding whether a religious community can register or not appears to centre around how far such a community will accept the cult of personality and other restrictions on their practice of their faith (see F18News 28 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=521).

Those denied registration or deciding not to apply because of what they regard as the unacceptable conditions attached to registration, scorn the cult of personality they believe other faiths have wrongly accepted as a condition of registration. One Jehovah's Witness elder who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 from Ashgabad last September that although his community was planning to lodge a registration application, it would not accept official demands made of other faiths to hang the country's flag and a portrait of the president in places of worship. "These are unacceptable demands," the elder told Forum 18. "The constitution is clear: religion and the state are separate. Plus as Jehovah's Witnesses we do not get involved in politics." (see F18News 10 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=408).

Forum 18 was unable to find out why religious communities are being forced to accept national symbols, presidential portraits and treat the president's writings almost as sacred texts given that the constitution declares the separation of religion from the state. The telephones went unanswered on 25 and 28 February at the department of the Adalat Ministry that registers religious communities. At the Gengeshi, 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

Intermittent protests took place in summer 2004 against the enforced imposition of the Ruhnama on mosques. Anonymous anti-government leaflets circulating in Ashgabad in early July contained calls for Muslims not to go to mosques where the Ruhnama is cited together with the Koran (see F18News 9 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=390).

Sunni Muslim mosques are reported to have seen attendance slump as, in response to government orders, imams placed copies of the Ruhnama in mosques with equal prominence as copies of the Koran. Imams are, at least in theory, required to recite the oath of loyalty to the president and country at the end of the namaz (daily prayers). President Niyazov told Muslims in 2000 that they were to renounce the hadiths, sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad which do not appear in the Koran but are valued by devout Muslims.

One mosque was closed down by the State Security Ministry secret police for not putting the Ruhnama on the same reading stand as the Koran (see F18News 19 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=187). One local Muslim suggested that four of the Ashgabad mosques demolished in the autumn 2004 campaign of mosque destruction were targeted because their imams refused to read the Ruhnama in their mosques (see F18News 4 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=481).

One theory as to why in January 2003 Niyazov ousted the Chief Mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, an ethnic Uzbek who had led Turkmenistan's Muslims for the previous ten years, and had him sentenced to 22 years' imprisonment in March 2004 was his lack of enthusiasm for the campaign to promote the Ruhnama in mosques.

However, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah had gone along with earlier official moves related to the cult of personality, removing several imams from mosques in the late 1990s - including a leading imam in Dashoguz - for refusing to recite the special verses (suras) in praise of the president that imams are supposed to recite during Friday prayers.

Religious minority prisoners – including Jehovah's Witnesses and Baptists - have not benefited under successive presidential prisoner amnesties, as they refused to confess their guilt and swear the national oath of allegiance to the president and country on a copy of the Koran in the local mosque. The oath is considered by many to be blasphemous and reads: "Turkmenistan, beloved homeland, my native land, both in my thoughts and in my heart I am eternally with you. For the slightest evil caused to you, let my hand be cut off. For the slightest calumny against you, may my tongue lose its strength. In the moment of treachery to the fatherland, to the president, to your holy banner, let my breathing cease."

The latest religious prisoners of conscience jailed are two Jehovah's Witnesses (see F18News 17 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=514).

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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