

2006 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Countries Recommended for CPC Designation by the Commission

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan is among the most repressive states in the world today and engages in systematic and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief. The all-pervasive authoritarian rule and escalating “personality cult” of President Saparmurat Niyazov effectively prevent any opposition or independent religious activity within the country. The country’s poor human rights situation further deteriorated after November 2002, when, in response to a reported assassination attempt, Niyazov ordered the arrest of hundreds allegedly linked to that attempt, sentencing many to long prison terms and sending others to psychiatric hospitals. In the past two years, the government has made small, purportedly positive legal adjustments to the laws that restrict religious practice; however, these changes have done little or nothing to alter the overall repressive situation. The Commission continues to recommend that the Secretary of State designate Turkmenistan a “country of particular concern,” or CPC. Although religious freedom continues to be severely proscribed in Turkmenistan and there is scant evidence that the situation has improved in the past year, the Secretary of State has not named Turkmenistan a CPC.

President Niyazov’s personality cult is increasingly becoming comparable to a state-imposed religion. This aspect of his rule is bolstered by the forceful official promotion of a book containing the president’s own “spiritual thoughts,” known as *Rukhnama*. Students are reportedly required to study the *Rukhnama* at all public schools and institutes of higher learning. Moreover, according to the State Department, observers have stated that the president uses his teachings “in part to supersede other established religious codes, as well as historical and cultural texts, and thereby influence citizens’ religious and cultural behavior.”

A July 2002 law enjoins parents and guardians “to bring [children] up in spirit of ...the unshakeable spiritual values embodied in the holy *Rukhnama*.” Credible reports indicate that mullahs in Turkmenistan were told in late 2005 to stop reading the Quran in mosques and restrict themselves to the *Rukhnama*. In March 2006, Niyazov announced on Turkmen state television that anyone reading *Rukhnama* three times “would be assured a place in heaven.” According to reports, the study of the *Rukhnama* has even replaced some subjects in the school curricula. The president’s books must be displayed in mosques and churches alongside the Quran and the Bible. *Rukhnama* quotations have also been carved alongside Quran citations in the country’s largest mosque. Turkmenistan’s former chief mufti, Nazrullah ibn Ibadullah, who opposed this requirement, was sentenced in a closed trial in March 2004 to 22 years in prison, reportedly for treason due to his alleged link to the alleged assassination attempt. The former chief mufti remains in prison, where, reports indicate, he is maltreated by prison guards. During a December 2005 police raid of a registered Baptist church in the town

of Deynau, ethnic Turkmen congregants were released from detention only after they signed a statement promising to read the *Rukhnama* rather than the New Testament.

Since independence in 1991, religious groups have been required to register with the government in order to engage in religious activities. The 1997 version of the country's religion law effectively banned all religious groups except the state-controlled Sunni Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church, though religious instruction even for these two communities is severely limited. Niyazov enforces his own interpretation of Islam as part of his version of Turkmen identity. Imams have been instructed by the government to repeat an oath of loyalty to the "fatherland" and to the President after each daily prayer. In March 2004, Niyazov proclaimed that no new mosques should be built and some seven mosques are reported to have been destroyed in that year. In July 2005, Niyazov reportedly told his cabinet that Turkmen Muslims had their own way of praying and ordered the publication of a list of religious rituals common to all Turkmens. Reportedly, secret police attend mosques to identify Muslims who perform religious rites in a way that differs from this officially prescribed Turkmen practice. Since August 2005, according to the exiled Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation, the secret police have increased the monitoring of young men who regularly visit mosques in the country's Ahal region by ordering imams to hang a list of mosque attendees above the doors to their mosques; now, only those whose names are on the lists are allowed to visit those mosques. The Turkmen authorities continue to limit the numbers of Muslims permitted to perform the *haj*; in 2006, only 188 of the country's official quota of 4,500 were allowed to go to Mecca. In the past year, the Turkmen State University Theological Faculty was dissolved and absorbed into another department, leaving only one institution of Islamic education open, with the government controlling the curriculum of that institution. As far back 2000, Niyazov reportedly ordered Muslims to renounce the hadiths, sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad that do not appear in the Quran.

The Russian Orthodox community has also been affected by the repressive policies of Niyazov, who has banned residents of Turkmenistan from receiving Russian publications by mail, including the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*. All Russian Orthodox parishes were re-registered by November 2005. However, Turkmen authorities refuse to allow the Russian Orthodox community to build a new cathedral in the capital of Ashgabat, though Niyazov allocated land for that purpose ten years ago. In addition, the Turkmen government continues to attempt to isolate local parishes from the wider Russian Orthodox Church, in part by pressuring the local Church to take the Turkmen parishes from the jurisdiction of the Central Asian diocese in Uzbekistan and put them directly under the Patriarch of Moscow, who in July 2005 rejected this proposal.

A new law on religion in 2003 resulted in a further decline in religious freedom conditions. The new law codified the Turkmen government's already highly repressive policies even further, effectively banning most religious activity, and established criminal penalties for those found guilty of participating in "illegal" religious activity. The law also requires religious groups to coordinate with the Turkmen government any contacts with co-religionists abroad. In response to international pressure, Niyazov issued a decree

in March 2004 stating that religious communities may register “in the prescribed manner,” and will no longer have to meet the requirement of 500 members in order to do so. However, the decree only amended the numerical requirements for registration and not the penalties for violating it. In May 2004, President Niyazov issued several decrees decriminalizing unregistered religious activities and easing other requirements for registration, resulting in the registration of nine small groups, in addition to the majority Sunni Muslims and the Russian Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, Turkmen officials have stated that “eased” registration requirements do not mean that religious communities may gather in private homes or that religious adherents will no longer be required to request official permission before holding worship services. In fact, some reports indicate that registration is actually being used as a method of more effective state control over religious communities, as it affords officials the right to know what occurs at every meeting of a religious group. Church members who refuse to provide details about religious gatherings risk having their communities charged with being in violation of registration requirements.

In addition, police continued to interfere in the activities of registered and unregistered religious communities in the past year. Security officials regularly break up religious meetings in private homes, search homes without warrants, confiscate religious literature, and detain and threaten congregants with criminal prosecution and deportation. Family members of detained religious leaders have been subjected to harassment and internal exile. In March 2005, Baptist communities were raided in the towns of Turkmenabad and Mary and Pentecostals in Turkmenbashi. In August, “anti-terrorist” police raided a Baptist worship service in Dashoguz, questioning church members, confiscating Turkmen-language Bibles, and claiming that the church’s national registration in Ashgabat was not valid in other towns. In the past year, Baptists, Hare Krishnas, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Seventh-day Adventists reported disrupted meetings, detainments (including of children), and administrative fines. Jehovah’s Witnesses reportedly experienced eight incidents of harassment or short-term detention during a three-month period in the last year. One Jehovah’s Witness was confined to a psychiatric hospital for refusing military conscription in November 2005. He was released in February 2006. In July 2005, police raided a home in Turkmenabad where a group of unregistered Baptists had gathered; police reportedly beat the host with her own Bible and threatened to hang her. An adherent of Hare Krishna received a seven-year jail sentence on unknown charges; in February 2006 her appeal to overturn that sentence was denied. In addition, members of some religious minority groups, particularly Protestants, Hare Krishnas and Jehovah’s Witnesses, continue to face official pressure to renounce their faith publicly, and are forced to swear an oath on the *Rukhnama*.

No religious literature is printed in Turkmenistan and the import of religious materials is essentially impossible. In addition, known religious adherents are sometimes banned from travel. In 2005, two Protestants were denied permission to leave Turkmenistan after they told border guards they wanted to study the Bible, and a Hare Krishna follower who had planned to visit a temple in Russia was also prevented from traveling. In recent years, the Turkmen government has refused entry visas to three or four priests who are Russian citizens, while church delegations to Turkmenistan

from Tashkent and Moscow have been forced by Turkmen officials to reduce their numbers. Muslims are not allowed to travel abroad for religious education; however, Russian Orthodox men from Turkmenistan are allowed to study for the priesthood at the Tashkent seminary.

For several years, the Commission has raised public concerns about the status of religious freedom in Turkmenistan at meetings of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. The Commission has met with the U.S. Ambassador to Turkmenistan to discuss bilateral relations, the status of religious freedom and other human rights, and steps the United States might take to ameliorate the situation. As recommended by the Commission, the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) passed resolutions condemning Turkmenistan for repression of religious and political rights in 2004. In March 2005, the Commission met with delegation heads from the United States and European Union (EU) countries at the 61st session of the UNCHR session and presented information about violations of religious freedom in Turkmenistan, questioning the decision of the United States and the EU not to introduce a resolution on Turkmenistan at the 2005 UNCHR.

In May 2004, the Commission organized two public briefings on “Religious Freedom in Turkmenistan: the U.S. Response to One of the World’s Worst Religious Freedom Violators,” with the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. The Commission also released a public statement in response to the Turkmen Ministry of Justice’s declaration that unregistered religious activity continues to be illegal, noting that “CPC designation would likely lead to significant improvements for the religious communities in Turkmenistan who have been ignored by the outside world for too long.” In July 2005, the Commission held a public briefing with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, on “U.S. Strategic Dilemmas in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.” The briefing discussed the human rights situation in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the nature of local extremist and terrorist threats, and U.S. and other strategic interests in the region.

In addition to continuing to recommend that Turkmenistan be designated a CPC, the Commission has further recommended that the U.S. government should:

- suspend all non-humanitarian assistance to the government of Turkmenistan, with the exception of programs that serve identifiable U.S. national security interests in connection with the current campaign against terrorism. This recommendation does not apply to U.S. assistance to appropriate non-governmental organizations, private persons, or cultural or educational exchanges;
- scrutinize all aspects of any assistance programs in Turkmenistan to ensure that these programs do not facilitate Turkmen government policies or practices that result in religious freedom violations. The United States should also examine its programs in Turkmenistan to determine if opportunities exist within those programs to promote the development of genuine respect for human rights, including religious freedom, in that country;

- support efforts to facilitate Turkmenistan's sale of natural gas on world markets, including support for the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline, only if the Turkmen government takes definitive steps to improve substantially conditions for religious freedom in Turkmenistan;
- identify specific steps that the government of Turkmenistan could take in order to have its currently suspended assistance reinstated and to avoid triggering further restrictions on assistance programs, steps which should include, but not be limited to (1) the lifting of oppressive legal requirements on religious groups and allowing all such groups to organize and operate freely; (2) the end to harassment and deportation of religious leaders; and (3) the halting of unjust arrest, detention, imprisonment, torture, and residential and workplace intimidation of religious leaders and their adherents, including releasing those currently in detention or imprisoned;
- press the government of Turkmenistan: (a) to release immediately and unconditionally any persons who have been detained solely because of their religious beliefs, practices, or choice of religious association; (b) to ensure that all people in Turkmenistan are able to exercise their right to religious freedom without threat of harassment, detention, imprisonment, or torture; and (c) to permit all religious groups to organize and worship freely;
- continue to support discussions in Turkmenistan among representatives of Turkmenistan's religious communities, religious affairs officials, and experts on international norms on religious freedom, possibly in conjunction with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE);
- support efforts to counteract the Turkmen government's blockade on information into the country and its rollback of general education by increasing radio, Internet, and other broadcasting of objective news and information on issues relevant to Turkmenistan, including educational topics, human rights, freedom of religion, and religious tolerance;
- increase exchange programs for Turkmen citizens, including civil society leaders, students, and others concerned with human rights;
- suspend state visits between the United States and Turkmenistan until such time as religious freedom conditions in the country have improved significantly; and
- encourage scrutiny of religious freedom violations in Turkmenistan in appropriate international fora such as the OSCE and other multilateral venues and also raise the issue of religious freedom violations in Turkmenistan at those UN bodies that consider human rights questions.