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By Mollie Blum, Policy Analyst

Religious Freedom under a Leadership with a Cult of Personality

Introduction

Turkmenistan is widely considered one of the world's most closed-off countries. The Turkmen government restricts virtually all basic freedoms. The government also restricts internet access, which makes it difficult to know the full extent of religious freedom violations. However, available reporting demonstrates that the government maintains strict control over all religious activities and penalizes peaceful religious activities through harassment, administrative fines, torture, and prison sentences. Laws continue to systematically limit religious activity, including the religion law and extremism law. While the government's violations impact virtually all religious groups in the country, they particularly impact Muslims who engage in peaceful religious activities without official authorization. President Serdar Berdimuhamedow and his father, former president Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, are attempting to shift religious devotion in Turkmenistan toward themselves to support their corruption and human rights abuses.

The following publication provides an overview of religious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan. It begins with background on both Berdimuhamedows, lays out the laws restricting religious activity in Turkmenistan, highlights religious freedom violations targeting independent Muslims and minority religious groups, and analyzes the correlation between corruption and freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) violations.

Background

Turkmenistan is a repressive authoritarian regime where almost all fundamental rights and freedoms are denied. The government controls the flow of information and restricts any free, independent expression, especially public criticism of the regime. Relatedly, officials restrict the movement of those considered to be national security risks, which often includes human rights defenders. Officials also limit civil society by outlawing all unregistered activities and imposing an arduous registration process. As such, there are no independent human rights organizations or other civil society groups in the country. The combination of such restrictions makes it difficult to determine the full extent of FoRB and other human rights violations.

Since independence, Turkmen presidents have crafted themselves as "fathers of the nation" with "divine gifts" to maintain influence and justify their suppression of rights, which has led to leadership in Turkmenistan being referred to as "cults of personality." President Serdar Berdimuhamedow has continued this practice, as he governs through



a cult of personality that he shares with his father Gurbanguly, who still maintains power in practice. Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, the former president of Turkmenistan and father of the current president, established a particularly comprehensive cult of personality that continues to influence Turkmen society today. Throughout his tenure as president, Gurbanguly erected a golden statue of himself in Ashgabat, commandeered state media to show videos of him engaging in “macho” activities such as shooting guns and riding horses, and forced his aesthetic preferences on Turkmen. He also gave himself the title of *Arkadag*, or protector, a moniker that Turkmen still use to refer to Gurbanguly today. Serdar has continued his father’s tradition. For example, in September 2024, his regime forced public employees in Balkan Region to pay for and attend performances organized to mark his birthday. Additionally, in January 2025, Serdar forced public employees to buy a book that he published.

As the cult of personality relies on the Berdimuhamedows having divine qualities, it often impacts the religious sphere. Turkmen treat gifts from the Berdimuhamedows as holy. For example, while accepting a book from Gurbanguly, state employees treated the gift with the same gesture of respect typically reserved for the Qur’an in Turkmen culture.

Officials also controlled religious practices, citing Gurbanguly as justification for such actions. In 2024, ahead of Ramadan, officials in Lebap told government employees to honor the *Arkadag* by fasting. Meanwhile, during Ramadan in 2025, imams in Ashgabat increasingly used their pulpits to praise President Serdar

Berdimuhamedow and his policies. Ashgabat imams claimed that opposing the government’s policies is similar to engaging in sedition, going against a ruler chosen by God, and opposing Islam. The cult of personality also impacted religious ceremonies. For example, in the ethnically diverse cities of Balkanabat and Turkmenbashi, authorities interfered in wedding ceremonies by warning couples to adhere to Turkmen tradition and adopt only Turkmen music for entertainment—including songs from Gurbanguly’s personal repertoire.

Legal Framework

The Constitution provides the right to FoRB and declares Turkmenistan a secular state. However, the country’s legal framework, which includes laws on religion and extremism, places particularly severe restrictions on religious activities that violate such constitutional guarantees.

Religion Law

The law [*On Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations*](#), or religion law, describes Turkmenistan as a secular state but recognizes the historical role of Islam. While the religion law guarantees the right to freedom of religion, it places restrictions on nearly all facets of religious practices.

For example, the law requires that religious groups register with the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) in order to operate legally and practice religion. The registration process is arduous, requiring state theological examinations and the submission of founding members’ personal information. Government officials can

arbitrarily reject a registration application and suspend or liquidate a registered religious organization at any time. Religious groups seeking registration must first obtain an endorsement from the State Commission on Religious Organizations and Expert Evaluation of Religious Information Resources (SCROEERIR) before submitting an application to the MoJ. This process is burdensome and designed to allow for significant government interference in the functioning of religious organizations. SCROEERIR additionally has the authority to approve religious leaders according to the law. Under the religion law, religious leaders must be Turkmen citizens with “appropriate religious education.” The state also tightly controls religious education and, through the religion law, bans private religious education. The only exception is for minors who, with SCROEERIR approval, can receive up to four hours of religious instruction a week.

Extremism Law

The law [On Countering Extremism](#), or extremism law, also regulates religious activities in Turkmenistan. According to USCIRF’s 2024 report, [The Abuse of Extremism Laws in Central Asia](#), the law provides authorities with discretion to arbitrarily prosecute individuals for their peaceful activities, including those of a religious nature. For example, the law cites as “extremist” activities such as creating discord based on religious or other grounds and preaching that a person is not special because of their religious beliefs or other social affiliation, among other things.

USCIRF [documents](#) the cases of 10 Muslim men who are in prison on “extremism”-related charges for their peaceful religious activities, though the actual number of such imprisonments is likely higher. The judicial process for each of the imprisoned men seemingly lacked fairness and due process.

The known prisoners include [Bahram Saparov](#), whom authorities arrested and sentenced to 15 years in 2013 for organizing unregistered religious meetings. Prison officials tortured Saparov so severely that his face became unrecognizable. Twenty other Muslims were arrested on the same day as Saparov, but their fates remain unknown.

Additionally, [Annaturad Atdaev](#) is serving 15 years in prison after authorities arrested him in 2016 following his return from Egypt, where he studied Islam. [Myratdurdy Shamyradow](#), [Meret Owezow](#), [Ahmet Mammetdurdyew](#), [Begejik Begejikow](#), and [Jumanazar Hojambetow](#) are serving 12-year sentences for meeting to discuss the writings of Said Nursi and praying. Shamyradow

reportedly suffers health issues and can no longer stand. Also, [Kemal Saparov](#) and [Kakadjan Halbaev](#) are both serving 15-year sentences for holding religious discussions.

In January 2024, human rights activists confirmed that [Ashyrbay Bekiev](#), who was sentenced to 23 years in prison in late 2023 for conducting religious classes, is serving his sentence in the notorious Ovadan-Depe Prison, known for its inhumane conditions, which include torture, medical neglect, and enforced disappearances. A Russian court ordered Bekiev’s deportation to Turkmenistan in May 2023, years after Turkmenistan placed him on its “wanted list.”

Administrative Penalties for Peaceful Religious Activities

Both the [Criminal Code](#) and [Code of Administrative Offenses](#) include penalties for peaceful religious activities. For example, the Criminal Code penalizes the incitement of discord with up to eight years in prison. Additionally, the code imposes a prison sentence of up to 15 years for individuals who establish an “extremist” organization. Under the Administrative Code, individuals who insult “religious feelings” can receive a fine. Additionally, anyone who “uses psychological influence and deception to attract citizens to join a religious organization” can face a fine. Finally, those who violate the religion law by engaging in religious activities, distributing religious content, or teaching religion without authority can face fines or even administrative arrest.

ForB Violations Targeting Muslims

Authorities typically do not permit large meetings outside of those that the government organizes itself, making Ramadan gatherings at mosques a target for official harassment and increased police surveillance. For example, in 2025, as part of a campaign to increasingly interfere with and surveil religious activities, authorities stationed at mosques ordered worshipers to not bring their phones inside under threat of administrative penalty. In Balkanabat city, police and Ministry of National Security (MNS) officials increased their presence around mosques and targeted women and teenagers during Ramadan prayers. For example, police detained women and forcibly removed their headscarves. Additionally, authorities forced women working in the government to resign from their positions, at times even summoning their bosses to the police station late at night to tell them their employee is a member of a “radical

religious group.” Authorities also threatened to send some women to Dashoguz prison. In a separate incident, officials detained teenagers attending mosque during *Taraweeh* prayer, which takes place past the curfew mandated by an official schedule for Turkmen children. While detaining the teenagers, officials called their school principals and parents, threatening parents with fines and more severe punishment in the case of future “violations.”

Turkmen officials often respond to global security threats by cracking down on rights at home, particularly targeting religious activities during major holidays. For example, in Dashoguz during Ramadan in 2025, MNS officials questioned young people who recently studied abroad in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Officials were allegedly concerned with the religiosity of such individuals and their potential connection to Syria, as some Uzbeks and Tajiks hold high-level positions in the interim authorities ruling Syria. While detained for questioning, men reported physical abuse, and authorities also forcibly shaved the beards of young men. In one such case, security officials hit a young man with a copy of the Criminal Code and forced him to shave his beard without any shaving cream, resulting in cuts all over his face. In another instance, officials forced a man to drink vodka and eat pork—two actions typically contrary to Islamic beliefs—while mocking him. According to a report from July 2025, MNS officials and police officers in Ahal Region additionally summoned men with beards to a police station for interrogation. While detained, officials asked the men about their religious activities and forced them to shave their beards. One detainee reported that officers beat him, shaved off half his beard, and forced him to choose between drinking alcohol or eating pork.

In Turkmenistan, SCROEERIR approves all individuals appointed as leaders of religious organizations, including imams. State control over religious leaders seemingly extends beyond the approval process, as officials use imams to further government agendas and propaganda. For example, MNS officials have recruited local Muslim religious leaders to report on those who adhere to religious beliefs outside of the state-sanctioned form of Islam, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, “Krishnas,” and those from “radical Islamic groups.”

ForB Violations Targeting Religious Minorities

Jehovah’s Witnesses

The Turkmen government has not granted Jehovah’s Witnesses legal recognition under the law. In addition, the Turkmen Constitution mandates military service for all men, and laws do not provide an alternative for conscientious objectors. In December 2024, Bayramaly City Court sentenced 21-year-old Arslan Wepayew to two years in prison for conscientious objection, the maximum sentence permitted by law. The Mary Regional Court heard Wepayew’s appeal in January 2025 and changed his sentence to two years of corrective labor, with the government garnishing 20 percent of his wages. Though he was released upon appeal, while detained, Wepayew suffered from seizures, unstable blood pressure, headaches, and chest pains. In January 2025, prosecutors also lodged a criminal case against another conscientious objector, Agabek Rozbayew. The Shabat District Court sentenced Rozbayew to one year and six months of corrective labor, with 20 percent of his wages to be garnished by the state. These two cases were the first criminal prosecutions for conscientious objection since 16 Jehovah’s Witnesses had been granted amnesty and released from prison for conscientious objection in 2021.

Orthodox Christians

In 2025, during Lent, which coincided with Ramadan, authorities obstructed religious services in Dashoguz and ordered worshipers to not practice their faith in public. Police officers threateningly told Orthodox Christians to “remember you live in a Muslim state” and to refrain from drinking alcohol during Ramadan. Police also increased their presence around churches during the holy month.

The Impact of Poverty and Corruption on ForB

Turkmenistan is an impoverished country with one of the most corrupt governments in the world. This corruption has bled into the religious sphere as officials meddled in religious practices that involved money. For example, ahead of Hajj in 2024, the Turkmen government prepaid Saudi Arabia the cost of hosting Turkmen religious pilgrims. However, few Turkmen purchased tickets, unable to afford the cost of the trip. As a result, the government forced local businessmen and state employees to buy the remainder of the tickets to reimburse the state for its prepaid expense. Also in Balkan Region, state-approved imams sold dates donated



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by Saudi Arabia for *Taraweeh* prayer during Ramadan to their acquaintances.

Authorities closely monitored the religious activities of those the state considered “wealthy.” For example, the MNS and other state authorities planned and approved all Eid al-Adha celebrations in the country in 2024, prohibiting and shutting down those that took place independently of the government. In some instances, however, authorities surveilled unauthorized celebrations to collect information on participants and identify “wealthy” households—particularly those that gave charity to the poor during the holiday, as is customary under Islamic tradition. Officials allegedly believe that this custom reflects poorly on the state, given its failure to adequately provide social services. In Balkan Region, authorities interrogated wealthy citizens—including those who recently went on Hajj—whom the government considered as “corrupt.” Police demanded that these

individuals provide a detailed summary of money they spent during Hajj, including on charity.

Conclusion

In Turkmenistan, the government manipulates religious practices and beliefs to increase control over its people, including though the Berdimuhamedows’ cult of personality. Those who disobey the authority of the government and engage in religious activities without authorization face harassment, administrative fines, forced labor, torture, and prison sentences. Since 2000, USCIRF has recommended that the U.S. Department of State designate Turkmenistan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for the government’s ongoing, systematic, and egregious violations of FoRB. The State Department most recently designated Turkmenistan as a CPC in December 2023.

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