

# TURKMENISTAN

## U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom: 2013 Annual Report

**Bottom Line:** The religious freedom environment remains extremely poor, as the Turkmen religion law makes it difficult for religious groups to function. Police raids and other harassment of registered and unregistered religious groups continue, and Jehovah's Witnesses are imprisoned for conscientious objection.

Severe religious freedom violations persist in Turkmenistan. Despite a few limited reforms undertaken by President Berdimuhamedov, the country's laws, policies, and practices violate international human rights norms, including those on freedom of religion or belief. Police raids and other harassment of registered and unregistered religious groups continue. The repressive 2003 religion law remains in force, causing major difficulties for religious groups. Turkmen law does not allow a civilian alternative to military service and eight Jehovah's Witnesses are imprisoned for conscientious objection.

In light of these severe violations, USCIRF continues to recommend in 2013 that the U.S. government designate Turkmenistan as a "country of particular concern," (CPC). The Commission has recommended CPC designation for Turkmenistan since 2000, but the State Department has never followed this recommendation.

### **Background**

Turkmenistan is the most closed country in the former Soviet Union. Since 2007, it has been led by President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov. The country's first president, Saparmurat Niyazov, who died in late 2006, oversaw one of the world's most repressive and isolated states. Virtually no independent public activity was allowed, and the 2003 religion law banned most religious activity. Turkmenistan's public life was dominated by Niyazov's quasi-religious personality cult set out in his book, the *Ruhnama*, which was imposed on the country's religious and educational systems.

Upon assuming the presidency in early 2007, Berdimuhamedov undertook limited educational reforms and improved the country's international image. In 2007, he ordered the release of 11 political prisoners, including the former chief mufti; placed certain limits on Niyazov's personality cult; set up two new official human rights commissions; and registered 13 minority religious groups. He eased police controls on internal travel and allowed Turkmenistan to become slightly more open to the outside world. Yet, he has not reformed the country's oppressive laws and maintains a state structure of repressive control that violates human rights including freedom of religion or belief. A system of denials of international travel for many citizens remains in place, and as of July 2013, the Turkmen government will no longer recognize dual citizenship.

Turkmenistan's constitution purports to guarantee religious freedom, the separation of religion from the state, and equality regardless of religion or belief. The 2003 religion law, however, contradicts these provisions and violates international standards on freedom of religion or belief. This law sets intrusive registration criteria and bans any activity by unregistered religious organizations; requires that the government be informed of all foreign financial support; forbids worship in private homes, only allows clerics to wear religious garb in public; and places severe and discriminatory restrictions on religious education. The government-appointed Council on Religious Affairs (CRA) supervises religious matters. The CRA controls the hiring, promoting, and firing of Sunni Muslim and Russian Orthodox clergy; censors religious publications; and oversees the activities of all registered groups. While its membership includes government officials and Sunni Muslim and Russian Orthodox Church representatives, no other religious groups are represented.

USCIRF visited Turkmenistan in August 2007, meeting with President Berdimuhamedov and other senior government officials, religious leaders, and the former chief mufti. During the visit, the President announced a new government commission to examine how Turkmen laws conform to international human rights commitments, telling USCIRF that his country "may have some shortcomings on religion and other issues." In

2008, USAID funded, at the request of the Turkmen government, a critique of Turkmen laws affecting religious freedom, but the Turkmen government has ignored the report's numerous recommendations.

### **Religious Freedom Conditions**

**Registration of Religious Groups:** Since 2005, a number of small religious groups were registered, including the Baha'i, several Pentecostal communities, the Seventh-Day Adventists, several Evangelical churches, and the Society for Krishna Consciousness. In its January 2010 report to the UN Human Rights Committee, the government claimed 123 registered religious communities; including 100 Sunni and Shi'a Muslim, and 13 Russian Orthodox. Some communities decided not to register due to the onerous and opaque process, while certain Shi'a Muslim groups, the Armenian Apostolic Church, some Protestant groups, and the Jehovah's Witnesses have had their registration applications rejected many times.

**Government Interference in Internal Religious Affairs:** The Turkmen government continues to interfere in the internal leadership and organizational arrangements of religious communities. The President selected the current Chief Mufti. Turkmen Muslims have expressed concern that the state has replaced imams who have formal Islamic theological training with those who lack such education. Turkmen officials have stated that imams cannot be appointed if they have received foreign theological training.

**Punishment for Religious and Human Rights Activities:** The government imposes harsh penalties, such as imprisonment, forcible drug treatment, and fines, for religious and human rights activities. In recent years, members of religious communities, including Muslims, Protestants, and Jehovah's Witnesses have been detained, fined, imprisoned or internally exiled due to their religious convictions. More than 20 Protestants reportedly have been fined for unregistered religious activity in 2012, some the equivalent of about two months' average local wage. Registered religious communities are subject to police raids. Local secret police officers reportedly require Muslim and Orthodox clerics to report regularly on activities.

**Government Control over Religious Activities:** The secret police, anti-terrorist police units, local government, and local CRA officials continue to raid religious communities. It is illegal for unregistered groups to rent, purchase, or construct places of worship, and even registered groups must obtain scarce government permission. A decree banned the publication of religious texts inside Turkmenistan. By law, only registered communities can import such texts. The religion law also bans private religious education. Muslims are not allowed to travel abroad for religious education and there is an extensive black list of Turkmen citizens who are banned from international travel. The country's largest religious minority, the Russian Orthodox Church, lacks an institution within Turkmenistan to train clergy, but Russian Orthodox men are allowed to leave the country for clerical training.

**Conscientious Objectors:** Turkmen law has no civilian alternative to military service for conscientious objectors, and an individual who refuses to serve can face up to two years of imprisonment. Until 2009, the Turkmen government had given suspended sentences to Jehovah's Witnesses who refused military service. Currently eight Jehovah's Witnesses are in prison for refusing military service, while four more were given suspended sentences.

### **Recommendations for U.S. Policy**

In addition to designating Turkmenistan as a CPC, the United States should:

- Raise human rights and religious freedom in all bilateral meetings with the Turkmen government, urge it to adopt new laws and practices that comply with international human rights standards, and establish a regular reporting mechanism on these issues.
- If the Turkmen government continues to violate human rights obligations, including on freedom of religion or belief, and threaten Turkmen human rights defenders both inside and outside of the country, the United

States should express its concern publicly at international fora, including the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

- The United States also should increase educational and exchange programs and broadcasts to Turkmenistan to help overcome decades of isolation that created a dangerous cultural and educational vacuum.

**Please see USCIRF's 2013 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Turkmenistan.**