

# **TURKMENISTAN 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution guarantees the equality of citizens before the law regardless of religious preference, but the law prohibits all unregistered religious activity, including establishing places of worship, gathering for services, disseminating religious materials, and proselytizing. Unregistered religious activities are punishable through administrative fines. There were reports of beatings, imprisonment, arbitrary detention, threats of sexual assault, searches, confiscation of religious materials, and verbal abuse against religious minorities, particularly Jehovah's Witnesses. Religious groups reported continued difficulties working with the Council on Religious Affairs (CRA) to obtain registration with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ). The government also restricts the ability of registered groups to obtain permanent premises for worship, and to print, import, or disseminate religious literature. In October the government granted early release to eight imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses, three of whom were arrested in 2014. One Jehovah's Witness remained in prison at the end of the year. The government also participated in training events on international religious freedom, published information on registration procedures for religious groups, and reportedly continued to allow self-funded pilgrims to participate in the Hajj.

There was societal criticism and harassment of those who deviated from traditional ethno-religious beliefs and practices. There were reports that ethnic Turkmen who converted from Islam received more societal scrutiny than non-ethnic Turkmen converts and were ostracized by their communities.

On July 28, the U.S. Secretary of State designated Turkmenistan as a Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The Secretary issued a waiver of sanctions to further the purposes of the act. In meetings and official correspondence with government officials, U.S. embassy representatives and visiting U.S. government officials, including the Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, raised concerns about the arrests and imprisonment of Jehovah's Witnesses, the lack of civilian service alternatives to military service, the right of religious groups to register, the lack of readily-available information about registration procedures, and restrictions on the importation and distribution of religious literature.

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### Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.2 million (July 2014 estimate). According to U.S. government estimates, the country is 89 percent Muslim, 9 percent Orthodox, and 2 percent other. Most Muslims are Sunni. There are small communities of Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Shia Muslims, and evangelical Christians, including Baptists and Pentecostals.

Most ethnic Russians and Armenians are Christian and generally are members of the Russian Orthodox Church. Some ethnic Russians and Armenians are also members of smaller religious groups.

There are small pockets of Shia Muslims, many of whom are ethnic Iranians, Azeris, or Kurds living along the border with Iran and in the western city of Turkmenbashi.

There are an estimated 300 Jews.

### Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

#### Legal Framework

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion and worship, including the right of individuals to choose their religion, to express and disseminate their religious beliefs, and to participate in religious observances and ceremonies. The constitution guarantees the equality of citizens before the law regardless of religious preference. Other laws and policies restrict religious freedom.

The law requires all religious organizations to register with the MOJ in order to operate legally in the country. In order to obtain registration, organizations must submit their contact information, proof of address, charter, and a registration fee of approximately 400 manat (\$141). The government-controlled CRA and local police enforce government regulations through administrative fines.

The CRA reports to the president and acts as an intermediary between the government bureaucracy and registered religious organizations. The law states the CRA should help registered religious groups to work with government agencies, explain the law to religious representatives, monitor the activities of religious groups to ensure they are in compliance with the law, assist with translating and

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publishing religious literature, and promote understanding and tolerance among different religious groups. The CRA is comprised of Sunni Muslim imams and the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as government representatives, but has no representatives from other religious groups. In practice the CRA acts as an arm of the state, exercising direct control over the hiring, promotion, and removal of Sunni Muslim clergy, as well as playing a role in controlling all religious publications and activities.

A May 3 amendment to the Law on Religion formalized the requirement that members of religious groups register all foreign assistance with the MOJ and provide interim and final reports on the use of the funds. An August 16 amendment to the religion law removed the provision for tax-exempt status for religious groups. The government stated in November, however, that the tax code still stipulates that religious groups are tax-exempt.

The administrative code sets out a detailed schedule of fines for various religious practices, including providing unauthorized religious education to children; producing, importing, and disseminating unauthorized religious literature and other religious materials; accepting funds from foreign sources by unregistered religious groups; and conducting activities that are not in an organization's charter.

The criminal and administrative codes prohibit harassment by private actors towards registered religious groups, but the prohibition is unevenly enforced, and there is no protection extended to unregistered groups. Authorities generally do not enforce the prohibition due to lack of reporting by registered religious groups, who have expressed concerns that authorities would increase harassment or monitoring of their activities. The administrative code stipulates penalties of 200-500 manat (\$70-\$176) for officials who violate an individual's right of freedom to worship or abstain from worship, and fines of up to 10,000 manat (\$3,521) for religious groups receiving unapproved donations from outside the country.

There are two legal categories for registered religious communities: religious groups (consisting of at least five and fewer than 50 members of legal age), and religious organizations (consisting of at least 50 members). Religious groups state that registration procedures are not easy to comply with or understand.

No new religious groups received registration during the year. According to government figures, there are 121 registered religious organizations and seven registered religious groups operating in the country. Of these, 104 are Muslim

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organizations, of which 99 are Sunni and five Shia; 13 are Russian Orthodox; and 11 represent other religious groups, including Roman Catholics, Bahais, Hare Krishnas, and Protestants.

Unregistered religious groups and unregistered branches of religious groups cannot legally conduct religious activities, including establishing places of worship, gathering for services, disseminating religious materials, or proselytizing. Unregistered religious activity is punishable as an administrative offense, with fines ranging from 500 to 1,000 manat (\$176 to \$352), depending on whether the person involved in the activity is a religious leader or is acting on behalf of a religious group. Registered religious groups can also be fined for publishing or disseminating religious material without state approval.

Although no laws expressly prohibit holding religious services on residential property, the housing code states that communal housing should not be used for any activities other than habitation. The religion law states that religious services must be held at the religious group's designated location.

The religion law prohibits foreign missionary activity and foreign religious organizations. The law does not restrict the ability of foreigners to worship with local registered religious groups.

The religion law prohibits the domestic publication of religious literature that will incite "religious, national, ethnic, and/or racial hatred." The CRA must approve imported religious literature, and only registered religious groups can import literature.

The religion law prohibits religious attire in public places, except for clergy of religious organizations.

The constitution states that military service is compulsory for men over the age of 18. The government does not offer civilian service alternatives for conscientious objectors; individuals who refuse military service for religious reasons are offered noncombatant military positions. Refusal to perform compulsory two-year service in the armed forces is punishable by a maximum of two years' imprisonment.

The religion law allows mosques to provide religious education to children after school for four hours per week with the approval of parents. Those who graduate from institutions of higher religious education (the law does not specify domestic

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or international institutions) and who obtain CRA approval may provide religious education. Citizens have the right to receive religious education individually or with other persons; however, the law prohibits providing religious education in private settings such as residences, and those who do so are subject to punitive legal action.

The law prohibits unregistered religious groups or unregistered branches of registered religious groups from providing religious education.

The law prohibits the establishment of political parties on the basis of religion and religious groups' involvement in politics.

### **Government Practices**

There were reports of beatings, imprisonment, arbitrary detention, threats of sexual assault, searches, confiscation of religious materials, and verbal abuse against religious minorities, particularly Jehovah's Witnesses. These acts most commonly occurred when the government suspected individuals of unauthorized or unregistered religious activity. Government authorities at times broke up meetings of registered and unregistered religious groups.

On July 3, law enforcement officials in Dashoguz reportedly beat and threatened a Jehovah's Witness with rape. The officials also reportedly detained the individual in a drug rehabilitation center for two days and subjected the individual to four injections of a substance designed to paralyze the limbs.

Jehovah's Witnesses often refused compulsory military service. There were reports of torture, beatings, imprisonment, and arbitrary detention of Jehovah's Witnesses for refusal to comply with compulsory military service. The government arrested six Jehovah's Witnesses during the year. Since 2010, the government arrested 28 Jehovah's Witnesses for refusing military service, most recently in September. In October the government granted amnesty to eight of nine Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned for conscientious objection and other charges and released them from prison. Courts issued suspended sentences for two Jehovah's Witnesses during the year. Since 2010, 12 Jehovah's Witnesses have been released for serving the bulk of their sentences, nine have been amnestied, seven have received suspended sentences, and one remained in prison at year's end.

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According to the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Forum 18, in May a Jehovah's Witness was sentenced to four years in prison on reportedly fabricated charges for disseminating pornography, but was amnestied in October. According to NGOs, since 2010 three Jehovah's Witnesses have been imprisoned on charges of distributing pornography and subsequently sentenced to four years in prison. Two of these Jehovah's Witnesses were amnestied this year, and one was amnestied in 2012.

According to Forum 18, on July 5, law enforcement authorities detained Jehovah's Witness Bibi Rahmanova, her husband Vepa Tuvakov, and their four-year old son at the Dashoguz train station. The police reportedly used force with Rahmanova, beat Tuvakov, and confiscated their religious literature before releasing them on July 7. On August 7, Rahmanova was reportedly formally detained at the DZD-7 detention facility in Dashoguz. On August 18, she was convicted on charges of hooliganism and violence against a law enforcement officer, and she was sentenced to four years in prison. On September 2, an appeals court overturned the ruling, gave Rahmanova a suspended three-year sentence, and released her from prison.

In January the government informed the U.S. Ambassador that it was willing to engage on religious freedom by discussing civilian service alternatives to military service with a legal expert, meeting with representatives of registered religious groups, publishing information on registration procedures, and participating in training on international religious freedom. Subsequently, the government established a website that includes information on registration procedures, and government officials participated in religious freedom training conducted by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

The government used some aspects of Islamic tradition to define a national identity. Despite its embrace of certain aspects of Islamic culture, the government expressed concern about foreign Islamic influence and the interpretation of Islam by local believers. The government promoted an understanding of Islam based on local religious practices and national traditions. The government reportedly feared that Islam from outside the country was "Wahhabist" or "extremist." The government's stated policy was that it banned only extremist groups that advocated violence. However, it categorized some Muslim groups advocating theologically different but nonviolent interpretations of Islamic religious doctrine as "extremist" and continued to ban such groups.

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Some groups reported difficulties in obtaining permission from local authorities to carry out religious activities such as Bible camps. Some groups stated that by routinely notifying the government of their gatherings and events and inviting government representatives to attend, they generally avoided government harassment. Nevertheless, in June authorities in the city of Mary attempted to close a children's camp organized by a registered Protestant group, even though authorities had been notified in advance of the camp's establishment.

Religious groups reported the government and state-affiliated enterprises hindered or prevented some of them from purchasing or obtaining long-term leases for land or buildings for worship or meetings; however, many segments of society experienced obstacles regarding the purchase and leasing of property. Registered religious groups also reported they had difficulty renting special event space for holiday celebrations from private landlords, possibly due to concern about official disapproval.

Some registered religious groups were denied permission to conduct church meetings such as study groups and seminars, although they were able to hold weekly services.

The government forbade unregistered religious groups or unregistered branches of registered religious groups from gathering publicly or privately and sometimes broke up such gatherings. Some unregistered congregations continued to practice quietly, mostly in private homes, and were able to do so as long as the neighbors did not complain.

There was no official religious instruction in public schools. Authorities actively enforced existing restrictions on private religious education.

Members of the theology faculty in the history department at Turkmen State University in Ashgabat were the only university-level faculty members allowed to provide Islamic higher education. Reports indicated that potential student candidates had to be vetted by the Ministry of National Security before gaining admission to this program. There was no possibility of studying theology subjects other than the state-approved Islamic theology. Women were banned from the program.

Although the government did not officially restrict persons from changing their religious beliefs and affiliation, representatives of religious minorities stated that

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ethnic Turkmen converts from Islam or who were members of unregistered religious groups were subjected to more scrutiny and questioning than non-ethnic Turkmen. Although it remained illegal to proselytize, some registered groups such as the Bahai community were able to speak about their faith in public without harassment.

Officers in the Ministry of National Security and Ministry of Internal Affairs in divisions charged with fighting organized crime and terrorism monitored members of religious minorities, reportedly through telephone and undercover surveillance.

The government denied visas to foreigners suspected of conducting or intending to conduct missionary activity. Some congregations seeking religious visitor visas for foreign religious speakers reported the visas were often short-term and required burdensome paperwork. Others were unable to obtain visas for foreign religious representatives. Some registered religious minority groups, however, obtained assistance from the CRA in obtaining entry visas for foreign members of their churches to give religious lectures to their congregations. In November the government reported that during the year it had approved six visits by foreign members of religious congregations in Turkmenistan, including for Protestants, Hare Krishnas, Sunni Muslims, and members of the Russian Orthodox Church. The government did not report the number of visa applications of foreign members that were denied.

The government approves the appointment of all senior Muslim clerics and requires senior clerics to report regularly to the CRA. Some Muslims expressed concern about the quality of training and changes of appointed Muslim leaders. The Russian Orthodox Church and other religious groups are financed independently, and the government is not involved with the appointment of their leadership.

Religious groups seldom received permission from the CRA to import religious literature. Minority religious groups stated they were disadvantaged in importing religious materials because they had no representation on the CRA. The government reportedly prohibited all religious groups from subscribing to foreign publications. The CRA required that its officials stamp all religious literature, including Bibles and Qurans, to authorize each copy of the text. While the Quran was practically unavailable in state bookstores in Ashgabat, most homes retained one copy in Arabic or a Russian translation from the Soviet-era. Few translations were available in Turkmen. Some citizens reported the seizure of personal Bibles

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at the airport upon arrival from foreign travel, even though the Bibles had been in their possession when they departed the country.

There were no reports of travel restrictions for religious study abroad or to attend religious conferences. In November the government reported that individuals do not need to obtain special permission for religious study abroad. There was one report that education officials threatened university students with expulsion if they attended services at mosques.

Although individuals and religious groups were fined for unauthorized religious practices, there were no reports of officials being fined for abusing religious freedom, and observers noted it was unlikely such fines would be levied against any agents of the state.

Authorities required some registered religious groups to obtain approval to carry out religious activities.

In May government officials approved and participated in a seminar on international religious freedom conducted by the OSCE. In November government officials participated in a study tour to Belgium on religious freedom conducted by the OSCE.

In September the MOJ launched a new website that made information on the Law on Religion more publicly available, including information on registration procedures for religious organizations.

In October the government sponsored 188 pilgrims to travel to Mecca for the Hajj. As was the case in 2013, self-funded pilgrims were reportedly allowed to make their own arrangements to participate in the Hajj. In November the government reported that there were no restrictions on who could participate in the Hajj.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There was some societal criticism and harassment of those who deviated from traditional ethno-religious beliefs and practices.

Societal attitudes generally reflected the belief that an individual is born into an ethno-religious group, and that Islam was an inherent part of the Turkmen national identity. Those who departed from these traditions received little social support or

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were criticized. Representatives of religious minorities stated that ethnic Turkmen who converted from Islam received more societal scrutiny than non-ethnic Turkmen converts and were ostracized at community events, especially in rural areas.

Societal distrust of foreign-based religious groups continued.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

On July 28, the U.S. Secretary of State designated Turkmenistan as a Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The Secretary issued a waiver of sanctions to further the purposes of the act. In meetings and official correspondence with government officials, U.S. embassy representatives and visiting U.S. government officials, including the Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, urged greater efforts in support of religious freedom. They raised concerns about the arrests and imprisonment of Jehovah's Witnesses, the lack of civilian service alternatives for conscientious objectors to military service, the right of religious groups to register, the lack of readily available information about registration procedures, and restrictions on the importation and distribution of religious literature. They urged the government to create a civilian service option that does not fall under the auspices of the Ministry of Defense and to establish regular dialogue between government officials and religious representatives to discuss ongoing concerns.

The embassy requested, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs provided, information about visits by foreign religious speakers, the ability of citizens to participate in the Hajj and pursue religious education abroad, and tax-exempt status for religious organizations.

U.S. embassy officers convened roundtable discussions with representatives of registered and unregistered religious groups throughout the year to monitor their status.