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Turkmenistan

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and does not establish a state religion; however, in practice the government continued to restrict the free practice of religion. All groups must register in order to gain legal status; unregistered religious activity is illegal and may be punished by administrative fines.

The government generally enforced existing legal restrictions on religious freedom, but there were small improvements in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. Troubling government practices in the treatment of some registered and unregistered groups continued. During the reporting period, the Catholic Church in Ashgabat and two Muslim religious organizations were registered, and a few foreign religious leaders were allowed to visit their coreligionists. Several religious groups remained unable to register, and the government restricted registered groups' ability to own property and print or import religious materials. There were reports of raids and arbitrary detentions involving Jehovah's Witnesses. The government also continued to arrest, charge, and imprison Jehovah's Witnesses who conscientiously objected to military service.

There were no reports of societal abuses or violence based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. The government, through its Council on Religious Affairs (CRA), did little to promote interfaith understanding or dialogue beyond that between Muslims and Russian Orthodox Christians. The majority of citizens identify themselves as Sunni Muslim. Turkmen society historically has been tolerant and inclusive of different religious beliefs, but ethnic Turkmen who choose to convert to other religious groups, especially lesser-known Protestant groups, were viewed with suspicion and sometimes ostracized.

During the reporting period, U.S. embassy representatives and visiting U.S. Department of State officials raised religious freedom concerns in meetings with government officials and urged greater support for religious freedom. The embassy hosted a roundtable for unregistered minority religious groups during the reporting period, and U.S. delegates raised the issues at the June 2010 Annual Bilateral Consultations in Ashgabat.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 188,457 square miles and a population of five million. Statistics regarding religious affiliation were not available. According to the government's most recent census (1995), ethnic Turkmen constitute 77 percent of the population. Minority ethnic populations include Uzbeks (9.2 percent), Russians (6.7 percent), and Kazakhs (2 percent).

Armenians, Azeris, and other ethnic groups constitute the remaining 5.1 percent. The majority religion is Sunni Islam, and Russian Orthodox Christians constitute the largest religious minority. The level of active religious observance is unknown.

Since independence in 1991, there has been a tightly controlled revival of Islam. During the Soviet era, there were only four mosques operating; at the end of the reporting period, there were 398 mosques, according to the CRA. Ethnic Turkmen, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, and Baloch living in Mary Province are predominantly Sunni Muslim. There are small pockets of Shi'a Muslims, many of whom are ethnic Iranians, Azeris, or Kurds living along the border with Iran and in Turkmenbashi.

As a result of government restrictions, 70 years of Soviet rule, and indigenous Islamic culture, traditional mosque-based Islam did not play a dominant role in society. Local interpretations of Islam placed a heavy premium on rituals associated with birth, marriage, and death, featuring music and dancing that was viewed by some parts of the Muslim world as unorthodox. Together with shrine pilgrimage, such rituals played a greater role in local Muslims' expression of Islam than regular prayer at mosques.

The 1995 census indicated that ethnic Russians made up almost 7 percent of the population; however, subsequent emigration to Russia and elsewhere continued to reduce this proportion. Most ethnic Russians and Armenians are Christian. Russian practicing Christians are generally members of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). There are 13 Russian Orthodox churches, three of which are in Ashgabat. A priest resident in Ashgabat leads the ROC within the country. As of 2008 the ROC was under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. There was one convent in Ashgabat but no Russian Orthodox seminary.

Ethnic Russians and Armenians composed a significant percentage of members of unregistered religious congregations; ethnic Turkmen were increasingly represented among these groups as well. There were small communities of the following unregistered religious groups: Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Shi'a Muslims, and several evangelical Christian groups, including Baptists and Pentecostals.

A small community of ethnic Germans, most of whom lived in and around the city of Saragt, reportedly included practicing Lutherans. Approximately 1,000 ethnic Poles lived in the country; they have been largely absorbed into the Russian community and considered themselves Russian Orthodox. The Catholic community in Ashgabat, which includes both citizens and foreigners, met in the chapel of the Vatican Nunciature.

An estimated 1,000 Jews live in the country. Most are members of families who came from Ukraine during World War II. There were some Jewish families living in Turkmenabat, on the border with Uzbekistan, who were known as Bukharan Jews, referring to the city of Bukhara in Uzbekistan. There are no synagogues or rabbis, and Jews continued to emigrate to Israel, Russia, and Germany; however, the Jewish population remained relatively constant. The community gathers for religious observances but did not register as a religious group.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and does not establish a state religion; however, in practice the government continued to restrict the free practice of religion. All groups must register to gain legal status; unregistered religious activity is illegal and may be punished by administrative fines.

The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations requires all religious organizations to register; restricts religious education, literature, and training of clergy; and monitors financial and material assistance to religious groups from foreign sources. The numerical threshold for registration is five members, and all minority groups are eligible to

register. There are two legal categories for 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). The law provides that leaders of religious organizations should have higher theological training.

The criminal code outlaws violations of religious freedom or persecution by private actors; in practice it is not enforced.

According to Deputy CRA Chairman Gurbanov, the Shi'a were registered as one organization.

The government-appointed CRA reported to the president and ostensibly acted as an intermediary between the government bureaucracy and registered religious organizations. It included Sunni Muslim imams and the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as government representatives, but no representatives of other registered religious groups. In practice the CRA acts as an arm of the state, exercising direct control over the hiring, promotion, and firing of Sunni Muslim and Russian Orthodox clergy, as well as playing a role in controlling all religious publications and activities. Security forces enforced its writ, specifically the Sixth Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the CRA had no role promoting interfaith dialogue beyond that between Sunni Muslims and Russian Orthodox Christians.

Although the government does not officially favor any religion, it has funded the construction of new high-profile monumental mosques. The government also approved all senior Islamic cleric appointments, and required senior clerics to report regularly to the CRA. The Russian Orthodox Church and other religious groups were independently financed and the government did not approve the appointment of their religious leadership.

Registered as well as unregistered minority religious communities had trouble obtaining facilities to use for worship. Legal and governmental obstacles hindered or prevented some religious groups from purchasing or obtaining long-term leases for land or buildings for worship or meetings. Some groups reported they were able to rent space for meetings only from private landlords because government-owned buildings were not available. Registered and unregistered groups also experienced difficulty in using residential property for worship or study. Although there were no laws that expressly prohibited holding religious services in residential property, the housing code states communal housing should not be used for any activities other than living. The code does not address the issue of using residential property for religious gatherings. Government officials stated that groups were permitted to hold services in private homes as long as the neighbors did not complain. Government policies, however, including those at the city level, such as zoning regulations on the use of private residences, have created difficulties for some groups seeking places to hold worship services. Three registered religious groups--the Baha'i community, the Society for Krishna Consciousness, and the Evangelical Christian Baptist Church--were permitted to conduct worship meetings in residential buildings, but local authorities told other groups, such as the unregistered Word of Life Church in Turkmenbashi, that they were breaking the law.

Unregistered religious groups and unregistered branches of religious groups are forbidden to conduct religious activities, including gathering, disseminating religious materials, and proselytizing. Government authorities at times disrupted meetings of unregistered religious groups. Participants in those groups were subjected to fines and administrative (not criminal) penalties under the administrative code. In practice if they were suspected of unauthorized unregistered activity, they may also be subjected to search, detention, confiscation of religious materials, verbal abuse, pressure to confess to holding an illegal meeting, and beating.

The law prohibited foreign missionary activity and foreign religious organizations. The government denied visas to foreigners suspected of conducting or intending to conduct missionary activity. The law does not restrict the ability of foreigners to worship with local religious groups.

By decree publishing religious literature is prohibited, and the CRA must approve imported religious literature. Only registered religious groups can import literature. In practice these groups have seldom obtained permission to import

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religious publications. When the CRA approves the importation of a publication, the number of imported copies cannot exceed the number of registered group members. A survey of state bookstores in Ashgabat revealed that the Qur'an was practically unavailable, except rare second-hand copies. Nevertheless, most homes have one copy in Arabic. Few were available in the country's language. Only religious leaders may wear religious garb publicly.

The government has incorporated some aspects of Islamic tradition in its effort to redefine a national identity. For example, after independence and as recently as 2009, the government built large, monumental mosques in Ashgabat, Gokdepe, Gypjak, and Mary, and planned to build another at Konye-Urgench. Despite its embrace of certain aspects of Islamic culture, the government was concerned about foreign Islamic influence and the interpretation of Islam by local believers. The government promoted a moderate understanding of Islam based on local religious practices and national traditions.

According to the CRA, only large mosques were registered as religious organizations. Smaller mosques, or houses of prayer, were not considered groups or organizations and were not registered. These smaller mosques may or may not have a resident cleric, depending on the number of worshippers. Most houses of prayer were located in rural areas, staffed by elderly volunteer clerics who survived on their pensions and material support from their families. At larger mosques that were registered as religious organizations, clerics are paid by their respective religious organizations and the building belonged to the organization.

The role of the Ruhnama, former President Niyazov's spiritual-social book, continued to decline.

The government observes the following Sunni Muslim religious holidays as national holidays: Oaza-Bairam (Eid al-Fitr) and Gurban Bairam (Eid al-Adha).

The government does not offer alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors. The penalty for refusing to serve in the armed forces under the criminal code is up to two years' imprisonment. Individuals who refuse military service for religious reasons were offered noncombatant roles within the military but were not provided with nonmilitary service alternatives. Until 2007 conscripted members of the Jehovah's Witnesses were returned home unharmed several days after being called up, although they were not given papers excusing them from military service, which are needed for employment. This policy changed in 2007 when three Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested and charged with avoiding military service. They were subsequently pardoned or given suspended sentences. Two Jehovah's Witnesses tried in 2008 received suspended sentences. They were again tried in May 2009 and imprisoned for refusing military service. Two more Jehovah's Witnesses were sentenced in July 2009 for refusing military service. A fifth Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector was sentenced in December 2009. All five are currently incarcerated in a prison at Seydi. Although one of these conscientious objectors was reportedly included on the list of prisoners amnestied as part of the May 9 Victory Day observances, he was not released, and his family members have not received an official explanation.

On April 5 a Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector was tried in Ashgabat. He received a two-year suspended sentence.

Although some independent religious education existed, the government did not promote religious education, and there was no official religious instruction in public schools. The Ruhnama was taught in schools and institutes from between one to a few hours per week. Ruhnama exams were no longer given, although a Ruhnama exam was required to receive a degree from the Academy of Sciences.

The amended law on religion allows mosques to provide religious education to children after school for four hours a week with the approval of parents. Persons who graduated from institutions of higher religious education (the law does not specify domestic or international institutions) and who obtained CRA approval may provide religious education. Citizens have the right to receive religious education individually or with other persons; however, the law prohibited providing

religious education in private, and those who do so were subject to punitive legal action. Some Sunni mosques regularly scheduled classes on the Qur'an.

Unregistered religious groups or unregistered branches of registered religious groups were prohibited from providing religious education. Homeschooling usually was allowed only in cases of severe illness or disability and not for religious reasons.

Unlike in past years, the government did not financially sponsor any pilgrims to travel to Mecca. Due to alleged concerns about the spread of H1N1 virus, the government sent no pilgrims to the Hajj for the first time since 1993. Instead, the government organized an 18-day internal pilgrimage for a group of believers to visit 38 Turkmen shrines in the country. The government did not provide aircraft for charter flights for self-paying pilgrims as it had in the past. There were no reports that self-paying pilgrims made the trip to Mecca.

The country used internal passports that include ethnicity but not religion explicitly.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally enforced existing legal restrictions on religious freedom, but there were some improvements in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. Troubling government practices in the treatment of some registered and unregistered groups continued. The government officially banned only extremist groups that advocated violence. It categorized Islamic groups advocating stricter interpretation of Islamic religious doctrine as "extremist." The activities of unregistered religious groups remained illegal, with violators subject to fines under the administrative code. If individuals were suspected of unauthorized religious activity, they may be subjected to search, detention, confiscation of religious materials, verbal abuse, and pressure to confess to holding an illegal meeting.

During the reporting period, at least three religious groups that applied for registration continued to be denied legal status. The Abadan branch of Light of Life Christian Church initially applied for registration in 2007, and its application was pending at the end of the reporting period. The Turkmen Baptist Church in Dashoguz applied in 2006, and its application was pending at the end of the reporting period. The Jehovah's Witnesses applied in 2008; the application was rejected in December but the group was provided with a list of remediable deficiencies. The group reapplied in March 2009 and the application was pending at the end of the reporting period.

Following registration with national authorities, religious groups must also obtain approval from local authorities to carry out religious activities. Some groups reported difficulties in obtaining such permission. Local authorities in Mary told the Society for Krishna Consciousness that they could not register its local branch, although the Ministry of Justice had confirmed that the group's registration was valid nationally. The group continued to discuss the matter with Mary officials but had not obtained permission by the end of the reporting period.

Registered religious minority groups reported sporadic instances of harassment. Regional affiliates of registered groups experienced harassment by provincial and district law enforcement agencies. As in the previous reporting period, some of these groups found that by routinely notifying the government of their gatherings and events and inviting government representatives to attend, they experienced decreased government harassment.

The government restricted unregistered religious groups from establishing places of worship, and violations constituted an administrative offense. Registered groups also experienced difficulties establishing and maintaining places of worship; several groups stated that their largest obstacles were administrative hurdles or the lack of funds to rent a public hall. Several groups said they would prefer to buy a worship center or land to establish a permanent one, but municipal authorities raised insurmountable bureaucratic hurdles. Ten registered minority religious groups have established public places of worship, of which five were rented, two were residential buildings used exclusively as church facilities, and three

were private residential homes of group members. The government restricted some worship services in private homes. The government forbade unregistered religious groups or unregistered branches of registered religious groups from gathering publicly or privately and can punish individuals or groups who violated these prohibitions. Some unregistered congregations continued to practice quietly, and largely in private homes.

Some religious groups were denied permission to conduct church meetings such as study groups and seminars apart from a weekly worship service.

The government also controlled access to Islamic education. The theology faculty in the history department at Turkmen State University in Ashgabat is the only academic faculty allowed to conduct Islamic education. In 2007 the CRA told U.S. officials it planned to reestablish a separate theology faculty, reversing former president Niyazov's decision to merge the faculty with the history department in 2005. There was no evidence that the faculty had been put in place by the end of the reporting period.

The government does not officially restrict persons from changing their religious beliefs and affiliation, but treated ethnic Turkmen members of unregistered religious groups accused of proselytizing and disseminating religious material more harshly than nonethnic Turkmen. Nevertheless, two registered groups reported being able to proselytize in public without harassment. Some leaders of minority religious groups noted that random proselytizing in public was not considered culturally appropriate activity.

There were three high-level officials in the government of Russian Jewish heritage and at least one deputy minister who was Russian Orthodox. No representatives of other minority religious groups were known to be working in senior or mid-level government positions during the reporting period. Some minority religious group adherents remained members of the only political party but feared openly acknowledging their faith out of concern for political reprisal.

The government monitored minority religious groups and the law prohibited foreign missionary activity. The law on religion stipulated that religious groups must report any financial or material assistance received from foreign sources. The government denied visas to foreigners suspected of conducting or intending to conduct missionary activity.

By decree publishing religious literature is prohibited, limiting the availability of Qur'ans, Bibles, and other religious literature. Sacred religious books were rarely available for purchase. In practice the CRA must approve imported religious literature and religious groups seldom received permission. Because all members of the CRA are government officials, Sunni Muslims, or members of the Russian Orthodox Church, minority religious groups claimed that they were disadvantaged regarding importation of religious materials since they had no representation on the CRA. When the CRA approved the importation of a publication, the number of imported copies cannot exceed the number of registered group members. All religious groups also reportedly were prohibited from subscribing to any foreign publications. For instance, the Russian Orthodox Church cannot receive the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate or other ROC publications. The Dashoguz office of the CRA required that its officers stamp religious literature, including Bibles and Qur'ans, to authorize them. However, in 2009 for the first time, at least one registered group reported no trouble in obtaining permission to import enough literature for its use. Some groups noted the availability of printable materials on the Internet. Registered and unregistered groups reported they were able to import ample literature clandestinely for their needs; however, they noted that there were risks to such activity. Some resident Turkish reported citizens that officials seized their personal copies of the Qur'an upon arrival at the airport.

As in the previous reporting period, the government's emphasis on studying former president Niyazov's books, Ruhnama and Ruhnama II, continued to diminish significantly.

Contrary to reports from the previous period, there were no reports of travel restrictions for religious study or to attend religious conferences.

Some foreign members of registered and unregistered religious groups continued to be denied entry visas; however, in December and in February, two registered minority religious groups received permission for foreign religious leaders to visit and conduct religious services for the group.

Several registered religious minority groups reported that the government attended and monitored their gatherings; however, the groups continued to engage in regular activities. Officers from the Sixth Department in Ashgabat, the division charged with fighting organized crime and terrorism, monitored members of religious minorities.

The government continued to discriminate against members of some religious groups with respect to employment.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Mistreatment of some registered and unregistered religious minority group members diminished considerably during the reporting period; however, harassment of Jehovah's Witnesses increased. There were detentions and interrogations, a reported beating, imprisonment for conscientious objection, seizure of religious materials, and reports of raids.

The number of cases of reported physical abuse decreased during the reporting period. The only instance of reported physical abuse happened on March 18, 2010, in Turkmenbashi, when Police detained Jehovah's Witness member Khushnud Dzhabbergenov and seized his religious literature. He was taken to an unknown location in the trunk of a car, after which he was reportedly stripped and beaten in an effort to force him to write and sign a statement. Held overnight at a police station, the following day Dzhabbergenov was again beaten and forced to write a statement that was dictated to him, after which he was released.

In May 2009 a Turkmenabad police officer seriously beat and abused Kasym Joraev, a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Subsequently, Joraev's mother complained about the incident to the local public prosecutor. The prosecutor summoned the police officer and ordered him to pay damages to Joraev of approximately \$540 (8 million manat).

In the previous reporting period, a Jehovah's Witness member was beaten at an Ashgabat police station when he resisted pressure to provide a written statement. In addition Balkanabat police beat four Jehovah's Witnesses, and Turkmenbashi police hit a Word of Life pastor on the head.

During incidents that involved police detention and interrogations of members of unregistered minority religious groups, authorities took a range of actions, including: filming those present; recording the names, addresses, and places of work of the congregants; threatening fines and imprisonment; and confiscating religious literature. There were no reports of prolonged imprisonment.

There were six reported instances of detentions, arrests, interrogations, and seizure of property involving religious organizations during the reporting period.

On March 30, 2010, police detained five Jehovah's Witnesses in Ashgabat following a small gathering in a private apartment. Their personal belongings, including Bibles, were taken from them, and they were brought to a police station. At the station police questioned and verbally abused them before release.

On March 26, 2010, police detained a high school-age Jehovah's Witness, Dovlet Annamuradov, when he was conducting door-to-door proselytizing in Ashgabat. Although he was released on the same day, on subsequent days the director of his school repeatedly summoned him to his office and pressured him to write an explanatory statement, which he refused to

do. After the boy's parents lodged a complaint about this treatment, the school director became unavailable, allegedly on vacation.

On February 9, 2010, after Jehovah's Witness Ilmira Razmetova left a worship service in Dashoguz, two men forcibly brought her to the municipal building. They pressured and threatened to cut her utilities before releasing her.

On October 5, 2009, police detained two female Jehovah's Witnesses, Emma Nazarova and Olga Ukhobotova, as they were leaving their apartment. At the police station, they were threatened that their utilities would be cut off if they did not stop proselytizing. An official of the CRA arrived at the police station and demanded that the women sign a statement of unknown purpose which they refused to do. Police released them after two hours of detention; however, they also seized religious literature from the two.

On September 16, 2009, when Jehovah's Witness Evgeniy Kalinin arrived at Ashgabat airport, customs officials confiscated CDs with religious content, a flash drive, books, magazines, and a Bible and sent the items to the CRA. The CRA reportedly refused to discuss the return of the religious materials.

On September 6, 2009, in Dashoguz, two police arrived at the home of Jehovah's Witness Davran Kushmanov, asked him questions that he refused to answer, and took him by force to a police station. At the police station, the police presented him with documents to sign, but he refused. They subsequently released him.

On March 9, 2009, local officials entered the home of Davran Kushmanov, a member of Jehovah's Witnesses, and removed his computer and religious publications. The officials brought him to the provincial government headquarters for a discussion, after which they allowed him to leave. Following that incident on April 22, a court gave Kushmanov a two-year suspended sentence for refusing to enlist in the military.

Because the country does not offer alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors that would be acceptable to many Jehovah's Witnesses, they often refused military service. They reported that courts generally did not imprison them for refusing to serve, and sometimes the president pardoned them. The courts usually gave suspended sentences, referred to as "conditional terms," requiring weekly reporting to authorities. However, a number of Jehovah's Witnesses were imprisoned.

On April 6, 2010, an Ashgabat court gave Jehovah's Witness Denis Petrenko a two-year suspended sentence for refusing to serve in the army.

On December 7, 2009, the City Court of Dashoguz sentenced Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Navruz Nasyrbaev to two years' imprisonment in a general regime labor camp. Nasyrbaev appealed against his sentence, but on January 3, 2010, the Dashoguz Regional Court left the original sentence unchanged.

On July 13, 2009, the City Court of Dashoguz heard the case of Jehovah's Witness Shadurdy Uchetov because of his refusal to serve in the army. The judge sentenced him to two years' imprisonment. Uchetov appealed, and the District Appeals Court of Dashoguz heard the appeal without him being present in court. The panel of four judges decided to keep the decision unchanged. Uchetov was moved to the Seydi labor colony three days after the first-instance decision.

On July 29, 2009, the Dashoguz Court sentenced Jehovah's Witness Akmurat Egendurdyev to a one-and-a-half year prison term for his conscientious objection to military service. The courts heard Egendurdyev's appeal in his absence and left the decision unchanged. Egendurdyev filed an appeal with the Supreme Court that has not yet reviewed the case. In the meantime authorities moved Egendurdyev to the Seydi labor colony.

On May 24, 2009, authorities imprisoned two brothers and members of Jehovah's Witnesses, Sakhetmurad and Mukhammedmurad Annamamedov, in Turkmenbashi for refusal of military service as conscientious objectors. An

appellate hearing on June 30, 2009, upheld the lower court's decision; they remained in prison at the end of the reporting period.

Two Jehovah's Witnesses, Dovran Kushmanov and Zafar Abdullaev, were criminally convicted in the Dashoguz City Court in April 2009 and sentenced to two-year conditional terms because they conscientiously objected to compulsory military service. They were obliged to report weekly to the City Police Administration.

Raids continued, but not as many as in previous reporting periods.

In December 2009 police and members of the local CRA escorted members of the unregistered Iman Yoly (Path of Faith) Baptist Church in Dashoguz from their place of worship to local government offices. Authorities questioned the members for several hours and held the group's pastor separately from the other church members. During the raid they also seized the group's religious materials, including Bibles, and released the church members and pastor after several hours, but without returning the materials. While the pastor was being questioned, police searched his home, also seizing his religious materials.

During the reporting period, the government did not destroy religious buildings but made no efforts to compensate communities for buildings destroyed during the Niyazov era (1990-2006).

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In March the government registered the Roman Catholic Church, 13 years after its initial application. The church had remained unregistered because of a conflict with local law requiring that the head of the local church be a citizen of the country. On June 25 the government registered two Sunni Muslim religious organizations located in Ahal Province, one in Baharden District and the other near Anau.

Registered minority religious groups generally continued to report less harassment than in the previous reporting period. One unregistered group's leader reported that the group's adherents gathered in small groups in private apartments and were no longer raided by police or fined as occurred in the past.

As in the previous reporting period, the government did not destroy any mosques during the reporting period. The government began construction of large mosques in each of the provincial capitals, as well as smaller mosques in a number of villages and towns.

The government continued to allow some religious groups to host foreign visitors. In December 2009 and February 2010 two minority religious groups received permission for the first time for visits by foreign religious leaders.

Two minority religious groups indicated that their members were able to proselytize in the form of "street evangelism" without interference from authorities.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Government repression of minority religious groups did not reflect doctrinal or societal friction between the Muslim majority and minority religious groups. Rather, it reportedly reflected the government's concern that the proliferation of nontraditional religious groups could undermine state control, promote civil unrest, facilitate undue influence by foreign interests, and destabilize the government.

Many Muslims did not regularly attend mosques; however, the great majority of the population identified itself as "Muslim," and national identity was linked to Islam. (Turkmen society considered an individual to be born into an ethno-religious group.) Those who departed from these traditions received little support or were criticized. Ethnic Turkmen who chose to convert from Islam to other religious groups were viewed with suspicion and sometimes ostracized.

There was societal distrust of foreign-based religious groups and the belief that Islam from outside the country was "Wahhabist" or "extremist."

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights and raised specific nonregistration cases with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the CRA.

In the June 2010 Annual Bilateral Consultations held in Ashgabat, the U.S. government addressed its concern about the need to improve religious freedom conditions in the context of the broader discussion of human rights.

U.S. embassy officers met regularly with staff from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Center in Ashgabat, UN representatives, and other diplomatic missions to maximize cooperation in monitoring abuses of and promoting greater respect for religious freedom.

U.S. embassy officers regularly met with representatives of registered and unregistered religious groups to monitor their status, receive reports of abuse, and discuss ways to raise their cases with the government.

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