



Turkmenistan

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

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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. Nevertheless, as in the previous reporting period, troubling government practices in the treatment of some registered and unregistered groups continued. During the reporting period, government promotion of the Ruhnama, the former President Niyazov's spiritual-social book, continued to decrease, and the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief carried out a mission. Several religious groups remained unable to register, however, and the Government restricted registered groups' ability to own property, print or import religious materials, host foreign guests, and proselytize. 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; ethnic Turkmen identity is linked to Islam. 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, are viewed with suspicion and sometimes ostracized.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. 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 two roundtables for registered and unregistered minority religious groups during the reporting period. At the request of the Government, the U.S. government funded an independent analysis of the 2003 law on religion.

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 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, 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 restrictive government control, indigenous Islamic culture, and 70 years of Soviet rule, traditional mosque-based Islam does not play a dominant role in society. Local interpretations of Islam place a heavy premium on rituals associated with birth, marriage, and death, featuring music and dancing that more traditional Muslims view as unorthodox. Together with shrine pilgrimage, such rituals play 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 continues 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. In October 2007 the Government began negotiations to have the religious jurisdiction of the ROC in Turkmenistan shifted from the Central Asian ROC Diocese in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and placed under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. In May 2008, subordination to the Moscow Patriarchate became official as a result of a meeting between President Berdimuhamedov and ROC officials. There is one convent in Ashgabat but no Russian Orthodox seminary.

Ethnic Russians and Armenians comprise a significant percentage of members of unregistered religious congregations; ethnic Turkmen are increasingly represented among these groups as well. There are small communities of the following unregistered religious groups: the Roman Catholic Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Shi'a Muslims, and several evangelical Christian groups including Baptists, charismatic groups, Pentecostals, and an unaffiliated nondenominational group.

A small community of ethnic Germans, most of whom live in and around the city of Saragt, reportedly includes practicing Lutherans. Approximately 1,000 ethnic Poles live in the country; they have been largely absorbed into the Russian community and consider themselves Russian Orthodox. The Catholic community in Ashgabat, which includes both citizens and foreigners, meets 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 are some Jewish families living in Turkmenabat, on the border with Uzbekistan, who are known as Bukharan Jews, referring to the Uzbek city of Bukhara. There are no synagogues or rabbis, and Jews continue to emigrate to Israel, Russia, and Germany; however, the Jewish population remains relatively constant. The community gathers for religious observances but does not wish to 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 Criminal Code outlaws violations of religious freedom or persecution by private actors; in practice it is not enforced. Throughout 2004, the Government issued a series of amendments to the 2003 law on religion, which replaced the 1991 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations and its subsequent amendments in

1995 and 1996. The 2003 law on religion required all religious organizations to register, made operation of unregistered religious organizations a criminal offense, restricted religious education, and monitored financial and material assistance to religious groups from foreign sources.

In January 2004, former President Niyazov signed a decree amending the 2003 law on religion by increasing registration fees for religious organizations to approximately \$178 (2.5 million manat). In addition, the decree relieved the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) of the obligation to publish in the local media a list of registered religious organizations. Without a published list, legally registered groups were more isolated, and the public was less able to respond when authorities harassed registered groups. The law also gave the MOJ the right to cancel a group's registration based on vaguely defined charges.

In March 2004, the Government published amendments to the 2003 law on religion that reduced numerical thresholds for registration from 500 members to five and made all minority groups eligible to register. The amendments established two legal categories for religious communities: religious groups (comprising at least five and fewer than 50 members of legal age) and religious organizations (comprising at least 50 members). The amendments leave significant gray areas in the law that permit the Government to delay registration.

Later in March 2004, the Government adopted but did not publish an implementing regulation and recommended standard charter that stipulated harsh requirements for religious groups wishing to register. The decree imposed financial and travel restrictions on registered religious organizations.

In response to international pressure, a May 2004 presidential decree publicly disavowed the unpublished March regulations and lifted criminal penalties for unregistered religious practice. The remaining civil law continues to allow the Government to control religious life and to restrict the activities of all religious groups.

Until June 2004, government entities at all levels, including the courts, had interpreted the laws in such a way as to discriminate against those practicing any faith other than Sunni Islam or Russian Orthodox Christianity, whose congregations represented the only two registered religious groups. In the year following the March 2004 decree reducing the numerical requirement for registration, nine religious groups registered: the Evangelical Christian Baptist Church of Turkmenistan, Seventh-day Adventist Church of Turkmenistan, Baha'i Community of Turkmenistan, Society for Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishnas), Full Gospel Christian Church of Turkmenistan (Pentecostals), Light of the East Church (Dashoguz Pentecostal Church), Greater Grace Church of Turkmenistan, International Church of Christ, and the New Apostolic Church of Turkmenistan. The Ashgabat parish of the Russian Orthodox Church was reregistered in 2005, and the Turkmenabat parish reregistered in January 2006. The Source of Life Church in Turkmenabat and a Muslim group in Ahal were registered in late 2007.

Shi'a Muslim groups have been allowed to register collectively as an organization, according to the CRA. Deputy CRA Chairman Gurbanov stated that the Shi'a are registered as one organization but did not say when the Shi'a were registered.

In October 2005 the Government announced a temporary procedure for the registration of religious groups' regional branches by issuing powers of attorney. MOJ representatives also stated that amendments would be made to the 2003 law on religion that would codify the branch registration issue, but this did not occur during the reporting period.

There were indications the Government planned to modify previous policies regarding religious freedom through the further revision of the 2003 Law on Religion, but the law was not revised during the reporting period. At the request of the Government, an international nongovernmental organization (NGO) funded by the United States Government prepared an analysis of the 2003 Law on Religion, which it delivered in July 2008. This analysis was one element of

an ongoing project involving the Government and the NGO to revise the current religion law.

The government-appointed CRA reports to the president and ostensibly acts as an intermediary between the government bureaucracy and registered religious organizations. It includes Sunni Muslim imams and the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as government representatives, but no representatives of minority 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. Its writ is enforced by security forces, specifically the Sixth Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and it has 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 provided financial and other support to the CRA for construction of new mosques. The Government also pays most Muslim clerics' salaries, approves all senior cleric appointments, and requires senior clerics to report regularly to the CRA.

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 are no laws that expressly prohibit holding religious services in residential property, Article 7 of 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 are permitted to hold services in private homes as long as the neighbors do 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. The 2003 law on religion does not address the legality of holding religious activities in localities other than where a group is registered.

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 are subject to fines and administrative (not criminal) penalties under the administrative code. In practice, if they are 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 prohibits foreign missionary activity and foreign religious organizations. The Government denies visas to foreigners suspected of conducting or intending to conduct missionary activity. The law does not restrict the ability of foreigners to worship with Turkmen religious groups.

By decree, publishing religious literature is prohibited, and the CRA must approve imported religious literature. Only registered religious groups can import literature. 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 are available in the Turkmen 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, 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 is concerned about foreign Islamic influence and the interpretation of Islam by local believers. The Government promotes a moderate understanding of Islam based on Turkmen religious and national traditions.

The role of the Ruhnama, former President Niyazov's spiritual-social book, continued to decline to the point where government policy can no longer be viewed as promoting the book.

Mosques and Muslim clergy are state-sponsored and financed. The Russian Orthodox Church and other religious groups are independently financed. The Government observes the following Sunni Muslim religious holidays as national holidays: Oraza-Bairam (Eid al-Fitr), commemorating the end of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month, and Gurban Bairam (Eid al-Adha), a three-day holiday commemorating the end of the Hajj.

The Government does not offer alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors, although the law allowed it until 1995. The penalty for refusing to serve in the armed forces under Article 219, Part 1, of the Criminal Code is up to two years' imprisonment. Individuals who refuse military service for religious reasons are offered noncombatant roles within the military but are not provided with nonmilitary service alternatives. Until June 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 June 2007, however, 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 November 2008 received suspended sentences. They were again tried in May 2009 and imprisoned for refusal of military service. Following separate trials in April 2009, two other Jehovah's Witnesses remained free with suspended sentences that required weekly reporting to local police.

Although some independent religious education exists, the Government did not promote religious education, and there is no official religious instruction in public schools. The Government requires all public schools and institutes of higher learning to hold regular instruction on the Ruhnama, but teachers reported that such training has decreased substantially. The Ministry of Education requires that each student study the Ruhnama for one hour each week.

Article 6 of the November 2004 law allows mosques to provide religious education to children after school for four hours a week with the approval of parents. Persons who graduate from institutions of higher religious education (the law does not specify domestic 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, and those who do so are subject to punitive legal action. Some Sunni mosques have regularly scheduled classes on the Qur'an.

Unregistered religious groups or unregistered branches of registered religious groups are prohibited from providing religious education. The 2003 law prohibits the Russian Orthodox Church from conducting religious education programs without CRA and presidential approval, and there were no reports that either the CRA or the President approved such programs. Homeschooling usually is allowed only in cases of severe illness or disability and not for religious reasons.

In 2004 the Government formally lifted the exit visa requirement, theoretically permitting travel by all those who wished to participate in the Hajj or other travel for religious purposes.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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. Nevertheless, troubling government practices in the treatment of some registered and unregistered groups continued. The Government officially banned only extremist groups that advocated violence, but it also 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 are 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 four religious groups who applied for registration continued to be denied legal status. The Abadan branch of Light of Life Christian Church initially applied for registration in January 2007, and its application was pending at the end of the reporting period. The Turkmenbashi Word of Life Church's registration application was rejected in October 2007 for improper grammar and insufficient membership, and the group reapplied in September 2008. 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 August 2008; the application was rejected in December, and the group reapplied in March 2009.

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 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.

The Roman Catholic Church remained unregistered because of a conflict with local law requiring that the head of the local Church be a citizen of the country.

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 forbids unregistered religious groups or unregistered branches of registered religious groups from gathering publicly or privately and can punish individuals or groups who violate these prohibitions. Some unregistered congregations continued to practice quietly, 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 controls 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 December 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 ethnic Turkmen members of unregistered religious groups accused of proselytizing and disseminating religious material generally received harsher treatment than nonethnic Turkmen. Nevertheless, two registered groups reported for the first time 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 monitors minority religious groups. The law prohibits foreign missionary activity, although in practice both Christians and Muslims working in other capacities engaged in religious outreach. The 2003 law on religion stipulated that religious groups must report any financial or material assistance received from foreign sources. The Government denies 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 are rarely available for purchase. In practice the CRA must approve imported religious literature. Because all members of the CRA are government officials, Sunni Muslims, or members of the Russian Orthodox Church, minority religious groups said they were disadvantaged regarding importation of religious materials since they have no representation on the CRA. When the CRA approves the importation of a publication, the number of imported copies cannot exceed the number of registered group members. All religious groups also reportedly are prohibited from subscribing to any foreign publications. For instance, the Russian Orthodox Church in Turkmenistan 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. There were reports by some resident Turkish citizens that officials had 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 President Niyazov's books, Ruhnama and Ruhnama II, continued to diminish significantly.

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

The Government financially sponsored 188 pilgrims (one planeload), of the country's quota of 4,600, personally approved by the President to travel to Mecca. The national airline provided transportation free of charge. The Government stated that other pilgrims were allowed to go on the Hajj at their own expense, and there were unconfirmed reports that two planeloads of self-paying pilgrims made the trip.

Some foreign members of registered and unregistered religious groups continued to be denied entry visas. However, in April 2009 a registered minority religious group received permission for the visit of a foreign religious leader to conduct religious services for the group.

Several registered religious minority groups reported that the Government monitored them by attending their gatherings; nonetheless, 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 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. There were, however, detentions and interrogations, a reported beating, imprisonment for conscientious objection, seizure of religious materials, and reports of raids.

The only instance of reported physical abuse happened on May 6, 2009, when Jehovah's Witnesses reported that 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).

Another beating, unreported during the previous reporting period, occurred on June 19, 2008, when Ashgabat authorities detained three Jehovah's Witnesses at the Ashgabat train station while they were waiting for a train to return to Turkmenabat. Police searched them and found their religious literature. Afterward, police took them to another police station and beat one of the members when he resisted pressure to provide a written statement of explanation. Police then videotaped the three members and released them.

Ceper Annaniyazova, a previously imprisoned Hare Krishna follower, remained free after her October 2006 amnesty. Hare Krishnas reported modestly improved relations with authorities.

In the previous reporting period, in addition to the June 19, 2008 beating, Balkanabat police beat four Jehovah's Witnesses, and Turkmenbashy police hit a Word of Life pastor in the head. In 2007 police reportedly sexually molested a female Jehovah's Witness in Turkmenabat.

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. With the exception of the 2007 Kalataevsky and Potolov cases involving alleged illegal entry into the country, there were no reports of prolonged imprisonment. Both Baptist pastors were released from prison in 2007 and subsequently deported.

There were five reported instances of detentions, arrests, interrogations, and seizure of property during the reporting period. On June 19, 2009, police picked up two female Jehovah's Witnesses, Vera Nazarova and Lyubov Khodzhamuralova, walking on a street in Ashgabat. It is unknown if they were proselytizing. Authorities held them for eight days in an overnight detention facility. The mother of one of the detainees asked police about her daughter's whereabouts and was told to ask at the Ministry of National Security, where an official instructed the mother to write what he dictated to her as a condition of the daughter's release. When the mother refused, the official threatened her with arrest, prompting the mother to leave and seek out the local procurator's office, where staff told her they knew nothing about the case and could do nothing. Upon their release, the women were fined but refused to pay.

In late March 2009 police detained two Jehovah's Witnesses in Ashgabat in a public place and brought them to

meet with an imam and a representative of the local CRA. The police seized religious literature. After a one-hour discussion, they were allowed to leave.

On March 24, 2009, police forcibly took a member of Jehovah's Witnesses from his home to the mayor's office for a discussion with a security official, imam, and representative of the local CRA, after which they allowed the member to leave.

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.

On August 30, 2008, police detained Jehovah's Witnesses Aleksandr Zorin and Chari Taganov while they were leaving the apartment building of a fellow believer. Police also detained the householder and believers visiting from Dashoguz and took them to a police station where police interrogated and body-searched them. Officials pressured the Jehovah's Witnesses to admit they had been conducting an illegal meeting. After four hours, police confiscated their Bibles and released the individuals. These incidents were similar to those in the previous reporting period, when in April 2007 Dashoguz and Ashgabat police, in three instances, confiscated Bibles, took members of Jehovah's Witnesses to city halls, questioned them, fined them, and released them. One of the women lost her job, reportedly on the orders of the Ministry of National Security.

Because the country does not offer alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors that would be acceptable to many young Jehovah's Witnesses, they often refuse military service. Nevertheless, they report that courts generally do not imprison them for refusing to serve (see exception below), and sometimes the president pardons them. The courts usually give suspended sentences, referred to as "conditional terms," requiring weekly reporting to authorities.

On May 24, 2009, authorities imprisoned two brothers and members of Jehovah's Witnesses, Sakhmetmurad and Mukhammedmurad Annamamedov, in Turkmenbashi for refusal of military service as conscientious objectors. In November 2008 the Serdar City Court had sentenced them to a two-year suspended sentence (which usually does not involve arrest, but weekly reporting). However, on May 21, 2009, the authorities held a sudden court hearing, finding that because the brothers had not changed their position, they would now serve a two-year prison term. An appellate hearing on June 30 upheld the lower court's decision; they remained in prison at the end of the reporting period.

On April 22 and 20, 2009, two members of Jehovah's Witnesses, Dovran Kushmanov and Zafar Abdullaev, were criminally convicted in the Dashoguz City Court, which sentenced them to two-year conditional terms because they conscientiously objected to compulsory military service. They were obliged to report weekly to the City Police Administration.

By the end of the reporting period, the President had not pardoned Ashirgeldiyev and Shakhmuradov, two of four Jehovah's Witnesses to whom the court gave 18-month suspended sentences in July 2007 for refusing compulsory military service on the grounds of religious conscience. In October 2007 the court pardoned two of the four Jehovah's Witnesses.

In past reporting periods, individuals served time in prison for religious reasons other than conscientious objection.

The widely respected former mufti, Nasrullah Ibn Ibadullah, remained an advisor to the CRA after his pardon in August 2007.

As indicated in the reporting on detentions, arrests, and seizure of property above, raids continued but not in the number reported in previous reporting periods.

On March 29, 2009, local officials raided the home of Shirindzhan Bazarova during a gathering of family and friends. Everyone was taken to the police station and questioned about why they had gathered at Bazarova's home. After three hours, they were allowed to leave.

In a previously unreported raid during the previous reporting period, on June 15, 2008, five local officials, including an imam, a representative of the local CRA, and a police officer, disrupted a gathering of Jehovah's Witnesses in a private home in Turkmenbashy. The officials asked questions, searched the home, and reportedly threatened and verbally abused the householder and guests.

There were no updates on raids that took place during previous reporting periods, including of the Greater Grace Protestant Church in Ashgabat in 2008, the Baptist church in Balkanabat in 2007, the registered Evangelical Baptist Church in Turkmenbashy in 2007, the registered group Svet Vostoka (Light of the East) Pentecostal church in Dashoguz in 2007, and an unregistered religious group in Abadan in 2007.

In contrast with past reporting periods, Jehovah's Witnesses indicated that incidents of persecution and harassment were isolated and usually limited to local officials or police detaining them briefly at a police station or other administrative building, questioning them, and subjecting them to verbal abuse. Jehovah's Witnesses had reported numerous cases of harassment, detention, and abuse in the past two reporting periods; for example, representatives cited seven specific cases of harassment in March and April 2007, including two cases in which members lost their jobs.

During the reporting period, the Government destroyed no religious buildings but made no efforts to compensate communities for buildings destroyed during the Niyazov era.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

Registered minority religious groups generally continued to report lower levels of harassment. 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 UN Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Asma Jahangir, carried out a mission to Turkmenistan from September 4-10, 2008, at the invitation of the Government. The Special Rapporteur reported the Government extended good cooperation during the visit. She was able to collect first-hand information by meeting members of various religious communities, both registered and unregistered.

The Government continued to allow some religious groups to host foreign visitors. In April 2009 the New Apostolic Church received permission for the first time for a visit by a European church leader.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of general societal abuses or violence based on religious affiliation or practice. The government, through the CRA, did little to promote interfaith understanding or dialogue beyond that between Muslims and Russian Orthodox Christians. 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 do not regularly attend mosques; however, the great majority of the population identifies itself as "Muslim," and national identity is linked to Islam. (Turkmen society considers an individual to be born into an ethnoreligious group.) Those who depart from these traditions receive little support or are criticized. Ethnic Turkmen who choose to convert from Islam to other religious groups are viewed with suspicion and sometimes ostracized.

There were no reports of anti-Semitic acts or incidents of harassment of the small Jewish community during the reporting period.

There is a societal distrust of foreign-based religious groups and the belief that Islam from outside the country is "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 raises specific nonregistration cases with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the CRA.

U.S. Embassy officers met regularly with the staff of 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 measures to raise their cases with the Government. These representatives are very willing to meet with embassy officials due to past Embassy advocacy on their behalf, together with the current general improvement of conditions for religious groups in the country.