



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Turkmenistan

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and does not establish a state religion; however, in practice the Government continued to monitor all forms of religious expression. All groups must register in order to gain legal status. Until 2004 the only religious groups that were registered successfully were the government-controlled branch of Sunni Islam and Russian Orthodox Christianity; by April 2005 nine additional minority religious groups had registered. The 2004 amendments to the law on religious organizations and subsequent presidential decrees enabled the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) to facilitate registration of some religious congregations and engendered a noticeable reduction in harassment of minority congregations, although some harassment persists. During the reporting period, the Government introduced a temporary procedure for registering branches of registered religious groups located outside of the capital, Ashgabat. However, the procedure was not clear and the implementation by government officials was not consistent. The Government limited the activities of unregistered religious congregations by prohibiting them from gathering publicly, proselytizing, and disseminating religious materials. Government officials outside the capital often interpreted the law more strictly than those in Ashgabat.

The status of government respect for religious freedom improved during the period covered by this report. The Government's Council for Religious Affairs (CRA) was more willing to assist minority religious groups in resolving conflicts with other government agencies. On October 20, 2005, several government agencies hosted a roundtable discussion with leaders of registered religious groups to discuss registration procedures for branch religious groups and other related concerns. In 2004 the president signed a decree pledging to register all religious groups and to adhere to generally accepted international norms and rules concerning treatment of religious minorities; however, the registration process was onerous, and additional requirements for minority congregations to register and operate existed and remained burdensome in practice. The president signed a decree in 2004 disavowing harsh requirements in an unpublished regulation and eliminating criminal penalties for belonging to an unregistered religious group. In 2004 the president granted amnesty to six Jehovah's Witnesses serving prison sentences for conscientious objection to military service and to four more on April 16, 2005.

Although the level of harassment continued to decrease for registered religious groups during the period covered by this report, most unregistered religious groups continued to experience official harassment similar to that in previous reporting periods, including detention, arrest, confiscation of religious literature and materials, pressure to abandon religious beliefs, and threats of eviction and job loss. There were reports of abuse for religious belief or observance, and there were several accounts of persons being detained for questioning in connection with practicing their faith. The Government replaced a number of Sunni Muslim imams with individuals believed to be less independent in their interpretations of Islam, to better facilitate government control of mosques. Many experts agree that official restrictions on religious freedom, a holdover from the Soviet era, reflect the Government's concern that liberal religious policies could lead to political dissent, importing of uncensored "Western" ideas, and the emergence of extreme political interpretations. The Government appears to view active participation in, or sponsorship of, both traditional and nontraditional religious groups as a threat to its own stability.

There is no general societal discrimination or violence based on religion. The overwhelming majority of citizens identify themselves as Sunni Muslim; ethnic Turkmen identity is linked to Islam. Ethnic Turkmen who choose to convert to other faiths, especially the lesser-known Protestant faiths, are viewed with suspicion and sometimes ostracized, but society historically has been tolerant and inclusive of different religious beliefs. The Government's restrictions on nontraditional religious groups do not stem from doctrinal differences or societal friction between the majority Muslim population and non-Muslim communities.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. During the period covered by this report, U.S. embassy representatives and U.S. State Department officials raised specific cases of religious freedom abuses in meetings with government officials and urged greater support for religious freedom. The U.S. ambassador, a Department of State deputy assistant secretary for European and Eurasian affairs, and the U.S. ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) urged senior Government officials to cease minority religious group harassment, assist them with establishing places of worship, stop the demolition of mosques, and simplify the branch registration process for religious groups. An embassy officer attended the Government's October 20, 2005 religious group leaders roundtable discussion. In addition the U.S. ambassador repeatedly urged the Government to make specific improvements with respect to religious freedom. Improving registration for nongovernmental groups, including religious organizations, and permitting them to meet regularly was a top U.S. government priority. Embassy officers met with representatives of unregistered and registered minority religious groups on a continual basis and such groups expressed an increased willingness to meet with the Government.

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 figures from the Government's most recent census (1995), ethnic Turkmen constituted 77 percent of the population. Minority ethnic populations included Uzbeks (9.2 percent), Russians (6.7 percent), and Kazakhs (2 percent). Armenians, Azeris, and other ethnic groups comprised the remaining 5.1 percent. The majority was Sunni Muslim, and the largest religious minority was Russian Orthodox Christian. The level of active religious observance was unknown.

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

While the 1995 census showed that ethnic Russians comprised almost 7 percent of the population, subsequent emigration to Russia and elsewhere has reduced considerably this proportion. The majority of ethnic Russians and Armenians were Christian. Practicing Russian Christians were generally members of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). There were thirteen Russian Orthodox churches, three of which were in Ashgabat. A priest resident in Ashgabat lead the ROC within the country. He served under the religious jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox archbishop in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The president appointed him to represent the Orthodox Church on the Government's CRA. There were no Russian Orthodox seminaries.

Russians and Armenians also comprised a significant percentage of members of unregistered religious congregations, although ethnic Turkmen appeared to be increasingly represented among these groups as well. There were small communities of the following unregistered denominations: the Roman Catholic Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, and several evangelical Christian groups including "Separate" Baptists, charismatic groups, and an unaffiliated, nondenominational group. Small communities of Baha'is, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, and the Society for Krishna Consciousness were registered with the Government. In May 2005 the Greater Grace Church of Turkmenistan, the International Church of Christ, the New Apostolic Church of Turkmenistan, and two groups of Pentecostal Christians were able to register. A very small community of ethnic Germans, most of whom lived in and around the city of Saragt, were reportedly practicing Lutherans. Approximately one thousand ethnic Poles lived in the country, although they had been largely absorbed into the Russian community and considered themselves Russian Orthodox. The Catholic community in Ashgabat, which included both citizens and foreigners, met in the chapel of the Vatican nunciature. Foreign missionaries, typically representing evangelical Protestant denominations, operated, although the extent of their activities was unknown.

An estimated one thousand Jews lived in the country. Most were 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 Bukharin Jews, referring to the Uzbek city of Bukhara. There were no synagogues or rabbis and Jews continued to emigrate to Israel, Russia, and Germany; however, the Jewish population remained relatively constant. The community gathered for religious observances but did not opt to register as a religious group, nor were there reports of harassment.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, in practice the Government placed some restrictions on these rights. The criminal code outlaws violations of religious freedom or persecution by private actors; in practice it is not enforced. In 2004 the Government published amendments to the 2003 law on religion that reduced numerical thresholds for registration from five hundred members to five, and made all minority groups eligible to register. The amendments establish two categories of religious assemblies: religious groups (comprising at least five and fewer than fifty members of legal age) and religious organizations (comprising at least fifty members). The amendments leave significant gray areas in the law.

The 2003 law required all religious organizations to register, made operation of unregistered religious organizations a criminal offense, further restricted religious education, and monitored financial and material assistance to religious groups from foreign sources. Parallel amendments to the criminal code imposed penalties of up to one year's imprisonment for a number of violations for which minority groups traditionally had faced administrative fines. In response to international pressure, criminal penalties were lifted in 2004, but the remaining law continues to allow the Government to control religious life and to restrict the activities of all religious groups. The 2003 law did not codify religious activities in localities other than where a group was 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 happen during the reporting period.

The president signed a decree in 2004 that strengthened the 2003 law on religious practice and religious organizations. A prohibitive requirement introduced in the new registration rules increased registration fees for religious organizations to \$100 (2.5 million manat at the unofficial rate). In addition the MOJ was no longer obliged to publish in the local media a list of registered religious organizations, limiting the transparency of legally registered groups, isolating them from other religious communities, and limiting the ability of the public to respond when authorities harassed them. The law also gave the MOJ the right to cancel a group's registration based on vaguely defined charges.

In March 2004 the Government adopted but did not publish an implementing regulation and recommended standard charter, which stipulated onerous requirements for religious groups wishing to register. The decree imposed financial and travel restrictions on registered religious organizations. Following international pressure, these regulations were rescinded in a May 2004 presidential decree.

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 religious groups to successfully register. However, since the 2004 decree reducing the minimum required number of adherents for registration, nine new religious groups have 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 (Church of Christ); and New Apostolic Church of Turkmenistan. Shi'a Muslims were not registered by the end of the reporting period, and there were no reports that they tried to register since the March 2004 decree, although they remained in contact with the CRA, which reported to President Niyazov and ostensibly acted as an intermediary between the government bureaucracy and registered religious organizations.

In practice, government policies, including those at the city level such as zoning regulations on the use of private residences, have created difficulties for some groups in finding places to hold worship services. According to the national residential code, no religious activity is allowed in private homes or in public halls located in residential areas. However, two registered religious groups, the Baha'i community and the Krishna Consciousness Society, were permitted to conduct worship meetings in homes.

Some groups remained either fearful of registering, citing the amount and type of information the Government required, or refused on principle to do so. During the reporting period, at least two minority religious groups applied for registration, but had not been successful by the end of the reporting period; during previous years, the Government would delay or deny applications citing unsubstantiated technical reasons. Unregistered religious groups and unregistered branches of religious groups are forbidden to conduct religious activities, including gathering, disseminating religious materials, and proselytizing. Government authorities have disrupted meetings of unregistered religious groups. According to the amended law, participants in those groups are subject to fines and administrative (not criminal) arrest under the administrative code. The Government prohibits foreign missionary activity and foreign religious organizations; however, the law does not restrict the worship choices of foreigners.

The Government has incorporated some aspects of Islamic tradition in its effort to redefine a national identity. For example the Government has built large, monumental mosques, such as the ones in Ashgabat, Gokdepe, and Gypjak. 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 moderate Islam, mostly based on religious and national traditions. To further regulate Islamic teaching, in January 2006, the Government published the book *National and Religious Traditions of Turkmen Since Ancient Times*, which contains numerous references to following the president's spiritual guides *Ruhnama* and *Ruhnama II*. The president publicly encouraged all clerics to "read the book in mosques," and declared, "he doesn't want Turkmen religious rituals to create disagreements among believers."

The CRA includes imams, an ROC priest, and government representatives. In practice the CRA acts as an arm of the state, exercising direct control over the hiring, promotion, and firing of both Sunni Muslim and Russian Orthodox clergy, as well as helping to control 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 in promoting interfaith dialogue. Although the Government does not officially favor any religion, it has provided financial and other support to the CRA for the construction of new mosques. The Government pays most Muslim clerics' salaries, approves all senior cleric appointments, and requires the latter to report regularly to the CRA.

Throughout the reporting period the CRA continued to urge imams to accord greater attention to President Niyazov's spiritual-social books on culture and heritage, *Ruhnama* and *Ruhnama II*, by teaching them as religious texts and placing them next to the Qur'an in some mosques. Phrases from the *Ruhnama* were inscribed on the large mosque in President Niyazov's home village of Gypjak. In 2003 the former mufti of the country, Nasrullah Ibn Ibadullah, was replaced, secretly tried, and sentenced in 2004 to twenty-two years in prison. Ibn Ibadullah's replacement, Kakageldi Wepayev, was subsequently placed under house arrest for "misbehavior"—allegedly including drinking and womanizing—and replaced in 2004 by then twenty-seven year-old recent seminary graduate Rowshen Allaberdiyev.

The Government recognizes only Sunni Muslim holy days as national holidays. These include Gurban Bairam (Eid al-Adha), a three-day holiday commemorating the end of the Hajj, and Oraza-Bairam (Eid al-Fitr), commemorating the end of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting.

The Government does not offer alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors; individuals who want to refuse military service for religious reasons are offered noncombatant roles within the military. During the period covered by this report, one member of the Jehovah's Witnesses was placed in a psychiatric hospital for refusing to serve in the military; he was subsequently released.

There is no official religious instruction in public schools; however, the Government requires all public schools and institutes of higher learning to hold regular instruction on the *Ruhnama*. The Ministry of Education requires that each child bring a personal copy of the *Ruhnama* to school.

Article Six 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. Although some independent religious education exists, the Government has done nothing to promote religious education beyond the official version incorporating the *Ruhnama*. Some Sunni mosques have regularly scheduled classes on the Qur'an.

The 2003 law prohibits the ROC 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.

The Government, through the CRA, does little to promote interfaith understanding or dialogue beyond that between Muslims and Russian Orthodox Christians. In 2003 a Ministry of Justice newspaper, *Adalat*, published a vitriolic attack against Hare Krishnas and Jehovah's Witnesses, describing the groups as foreign and implying they were dangerous. There were confirmed reports that several district-level government officials and a local imam attempted to force an ethnic Turkmen Christian convert to renounce his faith.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Almost all registered religious minority groups in the country reported fewer instances of harassment than in the previous reporting period. However, regional affiliates of registered groups experienced harassment by provincial and district law enforcement agencies. The Government officially has banned only extremist groups advocating violence, but it also categorized Islamic groups advocating stricter

interpretation of Islamic religious doctrine as "extremist." The activities of unregistered religious groups remain illegal, with violators subject to fines and administrative arrest under the administrative code.

The Government restricts unregistered religious groups from establishing places of worship, and violations constitute an administrative offense. Registered groups also experienced difficulties establishing and maintaining places of worship. Two registered minority groups renting worship centers were asked by landlords, one public and one private, to vacate their premises after the landlords received visits by security service and municipal officers. Both groups found alternative places of worship. Several minority religious groups said that the largest remaining obstacle was a 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. Five registered minority religious groups have established public places of worship; three are rented and two are private residential homes of group members. The Government did not restrict some worship services in private homes, and the CRA assisted several registered minority groups in locating suitable worship locations. 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 continue to practice quietly, largely in private homes.

During the period covered by this report, the Government replaced a number of experienced imams with younger ones who had attended government-approved training, thus facilitating government control. In October 2005, Ata tribe Muslims, one of the six sacred tribes, reported that government officials required all imams serving at one of the Ata tribe shrines to give all financial donations to the Government.

One mosque in Turkmenbashi City was destroyed during the reporting period. In 2004 at least six mosques were destroyed, some for no stated reason, others ostensibly for Ashgabat city "beautification" plans. In 2004 a Sunni cemetery north of the capital was leveled. Another cemetery in Ashgabat was being encroached upon by a high-rise development. In 2004 Muslims in Bagyr, a suburb of Ashgabat, reported they can no longer bury their family members in traditional cemeteries but instead need to do so at a centralized location. The Government restricts the number of mosques by requiring government permission for construction. Government policy is that every community should have one mosque; however, in 2004 President Niyazov ordered that no more mosques were to be built without CRA approval and stated mosques would henceforth be led by state-appointed imams. Prior to 2003, the Abu Bekir mosque in Ashgabat was closed, and ethnic Uzbek imams from three mosques were ousted for resisting the council's pressure.

There are at least three Shi'a Muslim places of worship, two near Ashgabat and one in Turkmenbashi. Other Shi'a mosques still stand, but the Government does not permit imams to work in them. The Government continued to restrict their construction.

In 2006 the Government continued to limit participation in the annual pilgrimage to Mecca (the Hajj), specifying that only 188 pilgrims (one plane load), personally approved by the president, out of the country's quota of 4,600 would be allowed to journey to Mecca. Transportation was provided free of charge by the national airline.

The Government also controls access to Islamic education. The theology faculty at Turkmen State University in Ashgabat had been the only academic faculty to conduct Islamic education. In July 2005 the president dissolved the theology faculty and incorporated the theology students and curriculum into the university's history department, leaving no official Islamic academic faculty. Also in 2005 the Government replaced the Turkish head of the Turkmen Turkish International University with a Turkmen national, stating the university was conducting unauthorized religious education. In 2004 an Islamic secondary school operating under the auspices of the sole remaining theological faculty was closed, reportedly in part because school administrators and teachers refused to promote the *Ruhnama* as an orthodox Islamic text.

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 receive harsher treatment than non-ethnic Turkmen. In December 2005 the local district supervisor accused an ethnic Turkmen Baptist leader in Galkynysh district of betraying his national culture by not practicing Islam. According to the Norway-based religious news organization Forum 18, in December 2005 a commission of government officials and a local imam pressured an ethnic Turkmen convert to Christianity to renounce his faith, but he refused and was subsequently released.

There were several high-level officials in the Government with Russian Orthodox heritage. No representatives of other minority religious groups were known to be working at 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 peaceful minority religious groups, particularly those perceived to have connections with or support from a supranational hierarchy. The law prohibits foreign missionary activity, although in practice both Christians and Muslims working in the country in other capacities engage in religious outreach. The Government denies visas to foreigners suspected of conducting or intending to conduct missionary activity. Forum 18 reported on June 14, 2006 that Russian citizen Aleksandr Frolov was deported on June 10, 2006 for engaging in illegal religious activity and noncompliance with immigration laws. In May 2006 a foreign citizen worshipping with an unregistered religious group was requested to leave the country. That group is attempting to register. In January 2006 a Ukrainian worshipper at the registered Church of Christ was deported for affiliating with a religious minority group. In 2004 President Niyazov warned the newly appointed mufti (who was subsequently replaced) against accepting money from foreigners seeking to influence mosques to propagate a more fundamentalist message. The 2003 law on religion stipulated that religious groups must report any financial or material assistance received from foreign sources.

In June 2006 the registered Church of Christ pastor was cautioned by the deputy chairman of the CRA against distributing business card invitations for the Church of Christ worship services. The deputy chairman said the practice was not a good idea although he admitted it was not illegal.

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.

The Government enforces the use of President Niyazov's spiritual books, *Ruhnama and Ruhnama II*, in educational institutions, government offices, and mosques. Copies of the book are kept in some mosques, and authorities have pressured religious leaders to place it alongside the Qur'an and to preach *Ruhnama* in their services. In 2003 the Ministry of National Security (MNB) closed down a mosque for failing to place the *Ruhnama* on the same stand with the Qur'an for Friday prayer.

In practice the CRA must approve imported religious literature. Since all members of the CRA are government officials, and either Sunni Muslims or members of the ROC, minority religious groups were disadvantaged regarding importing of religious materials. When the CRA approves the importation of a publication, the number of imported copies cannot exceed the number of registered group members. During the reporting period, one minority religious group had received permission to import thirty Bibles; however, two groups were denied permission to import religious literature. On two occasions the State Customs Service confiscated religious books and disks that unregistered minority group members were carrying for personal use.

In 2005 the MNB and regional government officials harassed some members of minority religious groups for not sending their children to school on Saturdays, their day of worship. The Government reportedly threatened to revoke their registrations if their children did not attend. Public school is held Monday through Saturday and by law children must attend.

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

During 2005 and 2006 the Jehovah's Witnesses, an unregistered group, were harassed repeatedly. The Jehovah's Witnesses reported that members/believers in all five welayats (provinces) were harassed, detained, and interrogated during the reporting period. According to their report, Jehovah's Witnesses were persecuted for proselytizing and having religious literature in their homes. On August 5, 2005 Anew (near Ashgabat) police threatened to fine Tatyana Khodzhamukhamedova if she continued preaching. On September 8, 2005, Oksana Khamrakulyeva and Vadim Ivakhnik were apprehended by police for proselytizing in Ashgabat. On December 7, 2005 police from Garagum Etrap, Mary Welayat threatened Maya Mukhametnizyova and unsuccessfully attempted to force her to renounce her faith. In 2004 officials harassed a member in Ashgabat; throughout the year, authorities confiscated Bibles at the border and from private homes.

Forum 18 reported on November 9, 2005, that two women affiliated with an unregistered religious minority group were denied permission to leave the country in October 2005 to attend a Bible College in Azerbaijan. Immigration officers in Turkmenbashi City prevented their travel although they had the requisite documents certifying they had their parents' consent to travel.

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; however, the Government maintained a "black list" of individuals and continued to limit freedom of movement. Forum 18 reported on May 31, 2006, that unregistered Council of Churches Baptist group member Shageldy Atakov was prohibited from leaving the country on May 25, 2006. In October 2005 three members of two minority religious groups were prevented from traveling outside the country. One of the three was told that he was restricted from leaving because he had previously taken an extended international trip. A Ministry of National Security officer told him he should be eligible to travel abroad again in one year. In January and July 2005 a Pentecostal pastor was restricted from international travel, but not given an explanation. In 2004 two Jehovah's Witnesses were prevented from boarding a flight to Kiev. In 2004 Deutsche Welle Radio reported that five Jehovah's Witnesses were removed from a flight from Ashgabat to Moscow because they were blacklisted and forbidden to leave the country.

Foreign members of registered and unregistered religious groups continued to be denied entry visas. A request for a foreign visitor from the Seventh-day Adventist Church was denied for nine months. The head of the Bible Society from Uzbekistan reportedly was barred from visiting in 2004. According to Forum 18, in 2004 a group of Seventh-day Adventists was denied entry visas, although their sponsors were members of a registered church. In recent years Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishnas have also been denied entry.

Reportedly, the Moscow ROC patriarch denied the Government's request to circumvent the Tashkent patriarch and allow the local church to be directly subordinate to Moscow.

During the reporting period, the Seventh-day Adventist Church was denied compensation pursuant to a court decision for a church building demolished in 1999.

Several registered religious minority groups reported that the Government monitors them by attending their gatherings; nonetheless, communities continue to engage in regular activities. The level of harassment has remained constant over the past year. Officers from the Sixth Department in Ashgabat, the division charged with fighting organized crime and terrorism, still occasionally question members of religious minorities.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The mistreatment of some unregistered religious minority members, which began in 2003, continued and was extended to the Muslim community. In 2004 the country's popular and respected former mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, was secretly tried and sentenced to twenty-two years in prison, reportedly for his alleged role in a failed 2002 coup plot. Ibadullah had been dismissed as mufti in 2003, reportedly in part for his refusal to teach the president's book, *Ruhnama*, as a sacred text. Little is known about the whereabouts or the condition of Ibadullah, despite calls from the international community for access to him and for his release.

Muslim religious leader Hoja Ahmed Orazgylyjov remained isolated in internal exile in Tejen for alleged criminal activity. Some believe his refusal to publicly support the Niyazov regime, and his own strict religious beliefs, contributed to his exile.

The Government threatened members of minority religious groups with fines, loss of employment and housing, rape, and imprisonment because of their beliefs. There were also reports of beatings and raids.

A member of Jehovah's Witnesses in Mary was held for a few weeks in November 2005 because of his conscientious objection to military service. The president announced in June 2004 that all imprisoned conscientious objectors should be released. Subsequently, four Jehovah's Witnesses were sentenced to prison because of their objection to military service but were released in April 2005. In 2004 the Turkmenistan Helsinki Initiative (an opposition group operating out of Vienna) reported that three unnamed Baptists had gone into hiding to avoid arrest for refusing conscription on religious grounds.

On March 2, 2005, Jehovah's Witnesses member Nazikgul Orazova was called to the Internal Affairs Ministry for questioning, and was beaten and threatened with fines. She was detained on four additional occasions in March 2005, and on April 5, 2005 was ordered to pay an approximately fifty-dollar fine (1,250,000 manat) for proselytizing and possessing religious literature. A Forum 18 report indicated that another member of Jehovah's Witnesses was fined a large sum in 2004. In 2004 Jehovah's Witnesses Gulkamar Dzhumayeva and Gulsherin Babkulyeva were arrested for proselytizing. The women were threatened and held overnight. Also in 2004, based on her affiliation with the Jehovah's Witnesses, Bilbil Kulyyeva was forcibly evicted from a hostel by an Ashgabat official of the CRA.

Two raids on meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses occurred in 2004, one, according to a report from Forum 18 News Service, in a private home in Ashgabat the day after the 2004 presidential decree pledging adherence to international standards for respect of religious freedom. In the other raid, a female member was taken to a police station, forced to write a statement dictated by the police, and was sexually harassed by a district police officer.

In 2004 authorities entered the home of a member of Jehovah's Witnesses and demanded he immediately pay a fine from 2001 that allegedly remained unpaid.

The CRA pressured a member of Jehovah's Witnesses in Ashgabat to renounce his faith; he was fired from his job when he refused. In 2003 as many as forty members of the group, male and female, were taken to the Sixth Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The males were beaten, all were required to renounce their faith in writing, and their passports were confiscated until fines were paid.

There were no reports of authorities beating Hare Krishnas; however, in November 2005, Hare Krishna devotee Cheper Annaniyazova was sentenced to seven years in prison for having illegally crossed the border in 2002. In July 2005 she was forcibly detained in a psychiatric hospital until she was tried and sentenced to seven years imprisonment for her 2002 crime. In April 2005 for violating a city ordinance, Ashgabat city officials threatened the Krishna Consciousness Society with the confiscation of their place of worship, a privately owned residence that was used as a temple. In 2003, according to Forum 18, authorities raided a meeting of the Krishna Consciousness Society in Ashgabat and beat one member during an interrogation. Authorities reportedly filmed the occupants of the home, confiscated all religious articles and literature, and fined the group.

Local officials occasionally continued to harass religious minorities, often because these authorities were not aware of the 2004 presidential decree. In 2004, according to the Turkmenistan Helsinki Initiative, secret police officers, representatives of the city administration for religious affairs, and police officers raided a meeting of the Krishna Consciousness Society in a private home in Mary.

In 2003 Geldy Khudaikuliev, a Baptist congregation leader in Gokdepe, was detained without charge for six days, and was released as a result of international pressure. In April 2005, according to Forum 18, five members of a Baptist Church in Turkmenabat were fined approximately sixty dollars (1.5 million manat) for holding a small service.

According to a Forum 18 report, in 2003 a deaf and mute Baptist woman was summoned to court where she was threatened with fines and a fifteen-day imprisonment. Forum 18 also reported that another deaf and mute Baptist woman was summoned to court in 2003. She was also threatened with fifteen days' imprisonment if she failed to pay a fine.

Individuals were also fined in 2003, after authorities raided a Baptist prayer meeting in Turkmenabat. That same year police raided the meeting of an unregistered Christian group, confiscated its Bibles, and fined its leaders twelve dollars (approximately 300,000 manat). Two court decisions supported the actions.

According to Forum 18, in 2004 a Hindu was forced by police officers to sign a statement renouncing his beliefs after being threatened with physical violence and criminal punishment.

Reports of authorities arbitrarily arresting and interrogating members of unregistered minority religious groups who met to worship continued. During such incidents, 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; confiscating religious literature; and detaining members.

In 2004 a small group of Baha'is were detained and questioned for a brief period by local security officials.

Forum 18 reported on May 23, 2006 the demolition of an Armenian Apostolic church (the structure had not been used as a church in recent memory) and of a Sunni mosque in Turkmenbashi.

On July 19, 2005, police interrupted an unregistered Baptist group's worship service in Turkmenabat and hit member Asiya Zasedatelevaya with a Bible. In July 2005, police also raided an unregistered Baptist branch meeting in Mary and questioned members in attendance. On August 14, 2005, police raided an outdoor meeting of an unregistered Baptist branch in Dashoguz.

In August 2005 an estimated thirty suspected "Wahabbis" were reportedly detained in Ashgabat.

On September 10, 2005, a Seventh-day Adventist branch meeting was raided in Turkmenabat and members were threatened with fines, but the CRA intervened to positively resolve the issue for the threatened members.

On October 18, 2005 and January 13, 2006, Jehovah's Witnesses leader Andrey Zhanov was detained by the police to prevent him from attending a U.S. embassy religious group reception and then a meeting with a senior U.S. government official.

On December 17, 2005, a police officer, district government representative, and a local CRA representative raided a meeting of an unregistered branch of Baptists in Galkynysh Etrap of Lebap Welayat. The officials confiscated Bibles, threatened group members, and reportedly forced them to sign letters proclaiming they would not continue to read the Bible, but would only read the *Ruhnama*.

The Jehovah's Witnesses reported numerous cases of harassment, detention, and abuse. They reported that on October 13, 2005, the home of Dzhamilya Kerimov, one of their members in Ashgabat, was searched without a warrant for religious literature. During her subsequent two-day detention she was beaten and fined approximately six dollars (150 thousand manat). In March 2006 Azatlyk Etrap, Ashgabat police hit and forced a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Vladimir Muratov, into a police car and confiscated his Bible and religious literature.

Forced Religious Conversion

In December 2005 an ethnic Turkmen Baptist leader in Galkynysh district was humiliated by the local governor, who accused him of betraying his national culture by not practicing Islam.

In January 2006 there was a report of local government officials and an imam pressuring an ethnic Turkmen convert to Christianity to renounce his faith, but he refused.

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 of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

Since the 2004 presidential decree amending registration requirements, nine religious minorities have registered: the Evangelical Christian Baptist Church of Turkmenistan; the Seventh-day Adventist Church of Turkmenistan; the Baha'i Community of Turkmenistan; the Society for Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishnas); the Full Gospel Christian Church of Turkmenistan (Pentecostals); the Light of the East Church (Dashoguz Pentecostal Church); the Greater Grace Church of Turkmenistan; the International Church of Christ; and the New Apostolic Church of Turkmenistan.

Minority religious groups reported that harassment continued to decrease, and that conditions were much better than in 2003-04. Numerous representatives of registered minority religious groups stated that the MOJ and security services had started to display a more helpful and positive attitude. Some minority religious leaders commented that the attitude of the CRA was more helpful. Several religious groups continued to search for places of worship; some stated financial difficulty rather than government interference was the major obstacle in their search. In September 2004 police returned Bibles that had been confiscated from a Baptist group and apologized for their actions. During the reporting period, the CRA facilitated the return of confiscated Seventh-day Adventists' Bibles; customs officers had interrupted the delivery of the foreign mailed books.

In response to international pressure, President Niyazov pardoned conscientious objectors in 2004 and 2005. Unlike in previous years, incarcerated Jehovah Witnesses were not singled out for abuse in prison and were permitted to pray and to have access to Bibles.

On October 20, 2005, the Government hosted a minority religious group roundtable to discuss pressing concerns. During the meeting the Government announced a temporary procedure to register branches of registered religious groups via powers of attorney.

The Government assisted some minority religious groups in locating appropriate places of worship and refrained from interfering with registered groups that met in private homes. The CRA intervened and resolved a misunderstanding between local law enforcement agents and a minority branch religious group in Turkmenabat.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of general societal discrimination or violence based on religion during the period covered by this report.

Restrictive government control, indigenous Islamic culture, and seventy years of Soviet rule have meant that 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 ("sadakas"), 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.

Many Muslims do not regularly attend mosques; however, the overwhelming majority of the population identify themselves as "Muslim," and national identity is linked to Islam. (Turkmen society considers an individual to be born into an ethno-religious group.) Departures from the pattern are rare and either receive little support or are criticized. Ethnic Turkmen who choose to convert from Islam to other faiths are viewed

with suspicion and sometimes ostracized. Ethnic Turkmen members of unregistered religious groups accused of disseminating religious material receive harsher treatment than members of other ethnic groups, particularly if they received financial support from foreign sources.

Despite strong ties between Islam and national identity, the society historically has been tolerant and inclusive of different religious beliefs. For example, in the early part of the 20th century Ashgabat was a refuge for Baha'is escaping persecution in Iran, and a Baha'i temple was built in the city at that time. Government repression of minority religious groups does not reflect doctrinal or societal friction between the Muslim majority and minority religious groups. Rather, it reportedly reflects 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. There is also a societal distrust of foreign-based religious groups and the belief that Islam from outside the country is "Wahhabist"--extremist.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

During the period covered by this report, U.S. embassy representatives and visiting U.S. Department of State officials raised cases of religious freedom abuse in meetings with government officials and urged greater support for religious freedom. The embassy conveyed to the Government specific steps it should take in order for the country to improve its standing in regards to respect for freedom of religion. Visits in 2004 and October 2005 by staff of the U.S. Department of State's Office of International Religious Freedom, who met with government officials and members of faith groups, underscored the importance of the issue to the U.S. government. U.S. embassy representatives continued to encourage the Government to explain to local authorities--and encourage implementation of--presidential decrees and the laws passed in 2004.

The ambassador and embassy officers raised specific reports of abuse and urged greater respect for religious freedom in meetings with the president, foreign minister, minister of justice, and the CRA. Embassy officials also requested that the Government assist registered religious groups in finding places to hold services.

The embassy encouraged the Government to host the October 20, 2005 roundtable meeting with minority religious groups. A U.S. deputy assistant secretary for European affairs raised the issue of religious freedom during his meeting with President Niyazov in January 2006 and he also held a roundtable discussion with leaders of minority religious groups. In May 2006 the U.S. ambassador to the OSCE raised religious freedom issues during meetings with the minister of foreign affairs, the minister of justice, and the CRA.

In September 2005 embassy officers held meetings with each of the five regional imams, who are also the regional representatives of the CRA, and made visits to many mosques in all five regions of the country.

The ambassador and embassy officers met regularly with the staff of the OSCE center in Ashgabat, the U.K. Embassy, and other diplomatic missions in order to maximize cooperation in monitoring abuses of and promoting greater respect for religious freedom.

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 have been much more willing to meet with embassy officials due to the reduced registration requirements and elimination of criminal penalties for religious activities, another indication that, for some, the religious freedom situation improved.

Released on September 15, 2006

[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)