



Forum 18 www.forum18.org Twitter @Forum_18 Telegram @Forum18NewsService

Forum 18 provides truthful, original, detailed, and accurate monitoring and analysis of violations of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Central Asia, Russia, Russian-occupied Ukraine, government-held Ukraine, Belarus, and the South Caucasus particularly Azerbaijan.

1. Freedom of religion and belief is, along with other intrinsically linked rights such as the freedoms of expression, association, and assembly, seriously restricted in Turkmenistan. The regime has an intentional systemic policy to control every aspect of society. All exercise of freedom of religion or belief with others without state permission is illegal, with compulsory registration of all religious or belief groups and severe restrictions on their activity.
2. An unknown number of long-term Muslim prisoners of conscience are jailed for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. The nature of Turkmenistan's "justice system," in which the planting of evidence and torture by the regime is often credibly claimed, makes it unlikely that the regime – or anyone else - knows what exactly these prisoners did, or how many may simply be "guilty" of being devout Muslims who exercised their right to freedom of religion and belief.
3. Typical examples include prisoner of conscience Bahram Saparov, who from 2013 organised meetings in homes to study the five pillars of Islam and the attitude of Islam to the family and neighbours. From March 2013 the regime arrested more than 100 Muslims in and around the eastern city of Turkmenabat who had participated in the meetings Saparov led. He and more than 60 others were sentenced to long prison terms in May 2013.
4. In another example, five Muslims (Myratdurdy Shamyradow, Meret Owezow, Ahmet Mammeddurdyew, Begejik Begejikow and Jumanazar Hojambetow) met with others to pray and study their faith, using the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. They were arrested for this in May and June 2017 and on 15 August 2017 sentenced to 12-year jail terms in strict regime labour camps. Balkan Regional Court also ordered that religious literature, mobile phones, and cash be confiscated from the five men. On 11 July 2018 the Supreme Court upheld the sentences. In mid-2022 four of the five were moved to the strict-regime labour camp at Bayramali in Mary Region. The fifth is being held at the labour camp in Balkan Region for former police officers. A sixth Muslim who met others to read Nursi's works – 47-year-old Begench Dadebayew – is also in the Bayramali labour camp, but it is not known when or where he was sentenced.
5. At least three of the more than 60 Sunni Muslims from in and around the city of Turkmenabat in the eastern Lebap Region imprisoned in 2013 and after to punish them for their involvement in a Muslim study group have been freed. They had completed not only their original five-year jail terms but extra sentences of five years added to their terms.
6. Prisoners' freedom of religion and belief is severely restricted, in violation of the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the Mandela Rules). For example the general regime Seydi Labour Camp has its own prison mosque, but prisoners are afraid to attend. "The mosque is open to any prisoner, but Muslim prisoners won't go for fear of being branded a 'Wahhabi'," a former prisoner told Forum 18 in 2016. "At Friday prayers there are usually only about 4 or 5 people." The prison library has no religious literature. Non-Muslim prisoners also

*More background is in Forum 18's country survey https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244
Details of specific violations are at <https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=32>*

Turkmenistan UPR submission on freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18, April 2023

appear not to be able to meet for worship.

7. In January 2018 Turkmenistan restarted jailing conscientious objectors to military service, having not jailed any since 2014. However, on 8 May 2021 all 16 known conscientious objector prisoners – all Jehovah's Witnesses - were freed in a prisoner amnesty. They were serving jail terms of between one and four years, and are among the very few prisoners of conscience - including political prisoners - ever to be freed in the regular prisoner amnesties. No Muslims jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief are known to have been amnestied. The regime has made no move to offer a civilian alternative to those unable to perform compulsory military service on grounds of conscience, and the new Criminal Code which took effect from 1 January 2023 retains the same punishment of up to two years' imprisonment for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience.

8. Neither the Justice Minister Merettagan Taganow, nor the Chair of the Human Rights Committee of the unelected parliament's then lower chamber Yusupguly Eshshayew, nor the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarowa answered their phones when Forum 18 called to question them in October 2022. The woman who answered the phone at the Ombudsperson's office put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 began to introduce itself. Subsequent calls were not answered.

9. Torture is often used by the regime. Former prisoners of conscience – who all served their sentences at the Seydi Labour Camp - state that solitary confinement and violent torture by guards is routine. No official is known to have ever been arrested or tried for torture.

10. Muslim prisoner of conscience Saparov was last seen alive in the top-security Ovadan-Depe Prison in late 2014. "Bahram's face – and the faces of the other prisoners in the block – were unrecognisable because of the beatings," one source told Forum 18. "Officers in uniform came weekly from Ashgabat in helmets and riot gear and beat the prisoners." In the second half of 2016 at least two other Muslim prisoners of conscience from Saparov's Islamic discussion groups, Lukman Yaylanov and Narkuly Baltayev, died in Ovadan-Depe Prison. Yaylanov was possibly tortured to death. The two men's bodies were handed over to their families for burial, but relatives had to sign a document banning them from revealing what they saw.

11. In June 2017, a fourth member of Saparov's Islamic discussion groups died in Ovadan-Depe Prison. Aziz Gafurov's body, returned to relatives, was "incredibly thin" and "blue from beatings". Officials forced Gafurov's relatives to sign statements not to reveal anything about the condition of the body, Alternative Turkmenistan News noted. Forum 18 has been unable to establish whether Gafurov died of illness, starvation, neglect or torture. An official of the Penal Correction Department at the Interior Ministry in Ashgabat – who would not give his name – initially claimed to Forum 18 in September 2017 that Gafurov had died "a normal death". He then insisted that the Department had no information.

12. In December 2016, the regime disappeared another Muslim prisoner of conscience, Annamurad Atdaev, possibly into Ovadan-Depe Prison. He was jailed for 15 years after refusing to be an informer on his fellow-Muslims for the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police. His wife Daria (a Russian convert to Islam) and their two young children have since late January 2017 received no information on whether Annamurad is alive or dead. Many who know him are afraid to discuss the case.

13. Islam, because it has the largest number of followers, is the community the regime is most interested in controlling. The Sunni Muftiate - the only form of Islam permitted - is under tight regime control. The Justice Ministry names the Chief Mufti and the Muftiate appoints imams down to the district level. But the MSS secret police has the decisive input, based on MSS information on

*More background is in Forum 18's country survey https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244
Details of specific violations are at <https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=32>*

Turkmenistan UPR submission on freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18, April 2023

a candidate's ancestry (they must be at least mostly ethnic Turkmen), relatives, political views and activity. Mullahs - who perform rituals related to births, circumcisions, marriages and deaths in a small district of perhaps 100 families - are appointed by district imams, after MSS checks. The regime “recommends” to imams Friday prayer sermon topics they should and should not cover. Prayers conclude with a short prayer for the President.

14. The state bars Muslim young men under 40 in some regions from wearing beards, and bans women from wearing a hijab. One Dashoguz Muslim told Forum 18 that local police summon bearded young men for “preventative talks,” which include instructions to shave off their beards. Police appear to think that young men who wear beards encourage Muslims to become “extreme”. Sometimes the forcible detention of young men with beards and forcible shaving is accompanied by forcing them to drink alcohol and eat pork, both unacceptable to devout Muslims.

15. In January 2021, police in the eastern Lebap Region again targeted Muslims who they thought were following their faith too closely, such as by praying every day. Police in Farap detained about 10 men and at the police station “used swear words and behaved crudely towards those they detained”. Police forcibly shaved at least one man, made him drink alcohol, and fined him with no explanation. Also in Farap, police raided a home the same month where about 10 men were praying the namaz. The men were taken to a police station, and it remains unknown what then happened to them. Police claimed they had violated lockdown regulations, though these remain unclear.

16. MSS secret police officers – not ordinary police - raided homes in at least four towns in Lebap Region and seized religious literature, the man who answered the phone of the head of the 6th Department of Lebap Region Police insisted to Forum 18. He refused to discuss anything else, such as why homes in various parts of Lebap Region were raided to hunt for religious literature. Officers told Muslims they could have no religious books at home apart from the Koran, Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service stated. The raids came on 21 July 2021, the first day of the Muslim festival of Kurban Bayram (Id al-Adha).

17. Neither the office of the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova, nor any official in the regime's Commission for Work with Religious Organisations and Expert Analysis of Resources Containing Religious Information, Published and Printed Production – including chief specialist Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah – nor the Cabinet of Ministers official who chairs the Commission Yusupgeldi Durdiyev, nor Merettagan Taganov (Chair of the Human Rights and Freedoms Committee of the unelected parliament's then upper chamber), nor Yusupguly Eshshayev (Chair of the Human Rights Committee of the unelected parliament's then lower chamber) answered their phones when Forum 18 tried to question them in August 2021.

18. Officials at all levels continue to try to find out who is religious and threaten such individuals with harmful consequences if they are. Such enquiries – whether by police or diplomats at Turkmenistan's consulates abroad – often include questions as to whether an individual drinks alcohol or not. Individuals often feel forced to lie about their beliefs to try to avoid punishment.

19. Muslims feel forced not to mark the Muslim holy month of Ramadan visibly, as they fear being branded “extremists”. The country's poor economic state also forces those who need strength to work not to fast during Ramadan. Many lack the money to host the traditional meal with relatives and neighbours to break the fast after sunset. Earlier in 2019, a Muslim in the western city of Balkanabat stopped going to mosque after being summoned to the police. “Who is more important, Allah or the President?” officers asked. Similarly, in February 2020 in Lebap Region state employees – including those working in education, culture, health, the military and the police – were banned from attending Friday prayers in mosques. They were warned that if they were seen in mosques they would be sacked from their jobs. Officials also banned them from praying the namaz

*More background is in Forum 18's country survey https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244
Details of specific violations are at <https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=32>*

Turkmenistan UPR submission on freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18, April 2023

(Muslim daily prayers) at their place of work.

20. The haj pilgrimage to Mecca quota granted by Saudi Arabia is reported to be 5,000, but the regime only allows much lower numbers of pilgrims. The normally low numbers also include MSS secret police and other officials. Going on the haj appears to entail obligations including supporting regime policy at public meetings.

21. Freedom of movement restrictions are also applied to non-haj travellers. Many active religious believers are among those on an exit ban list maintained by the Migration Service, on behalf of the Interior Ministry and the MSS secret police. Turkmen citizens returning to the country are often stopped at the airport for questioning and searched, being detained for longer if they are thought to pray the namaz (Muslim daily prayers) or carrying a Koran or other Islamic literature. One test used by officials is to force the detainee to read from the Koran, to find out whether they can read and correctly pronounce Arabic. Such searching and questioning can lead to an exit ban being imposed on the traveller.

22. Control of followers of non-Muslim beliefs is mainly formally imposed via the Commission for Work with Religious Organisations and Expert Analysis of Resources Containing Religious Information, Published and Printed Production. Also, permission from the Justice Ministry is required to acquire a place of worship, publish or acquire religious literature, or to invite foreign guests. Such permission is rarely granted and, if it is, is frequently accompanied by unwritten demands, such as cooperation with the MSS secret police.

23. The exercise of freedom of religion of belief without state permission is banned. Whether or not a community is registered, raids on their meetings and members frequently happen. For example, police in February 2020 raided two homes in the northern Dashoguz Region where Protestants were meeting. After the first raid a court fined the home owner nearly a week's average wage. Participants in the second meeting were expecting to be summoned to court to be fined. During the first Dashoguz Region raid, officials threatened that they would take away the home owner's grandchildren, Protestants told Forum 18. They also threatened others, including about possible sackings from work. A homeowner in Lebap Region who hosted a Christmas celebration in December 2019 was fined nearly a week's average wage in January 2020. During the raid, officers searched the home, seized telephones and then questioned the participants at the police station. Officers later summoned participants one by one, forced them to write statements, and took their photos and fingerprints. "They're used to this," one local Protestant told Forum 18. "They periodically get such visits or phone calls."

24. School children continue to face pressure from education officials and police if they are known to be members of religious communities the regime does not like. Police and education officials have brought in state-appointed Muslim clerics to intimidate children from non-Muslim faiths. In December 2020, just before the beginning of the winter school holidays, officials instructed school children in at least one Ashgabat secondary school to sign a pledge that they would observe various restrictions during the holidays. As well as observing health restrictions in light of the pandemic, school children had to pledge not to attend sermons by "incorrect religious movements". "I have been warned that if my participation in any of the above mentioned events becomes known, I will bear responsibility up to being expelled," concludes the document the children had to sign.

25. Even registered communities often cannot freely maintain public places of worship. As one Turkmen Protestant from a region far from the capital put it to Forum 18, "You cannot build, buy, or securely rent such property, let alone put up a notice outside saying 'This is a place of worship'." The Protestant added that "the government likes to be able to say to outsiders 'We have registration' and show them communities in Ashgabat. But people don't look at what we experience in places away from the capital, where we have no hope of registration. Without freedom to meet for

*More background is in Forum 18's country survey https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244
Details of specific violations are at <https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=32>*

Turkmenistan UPR submission on freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18, April 2023

worship, it is impossible to claim that we have freedom of religion and belief.”

26. Many communities cannot gather all their members together, or only meet in small groups for fear of police and MSS secret police raids. Owners of venues who agree to rent to a religious organisation soon cancel this, apparently after receiving telephone warnings from officials. Some registered communities have had to move their place of worship more than 12 times a year. Meeting for worship outside state-approved venues - such as in homes - is dangerous and can lead to raids and fines, especially in locations close to Turkmenistan's borders with Uzbekistan and Iran.

27. Building or regaining places of worship is almost impossible. Belief communities without an existing place of worship find it almost impossible to build or acquire a place of worship. This can make it impossible for meetings for worship or other purposes to be held. For example, the registered Light of the East Church in Dashoguz has not met since early 2015.

28. There is a de facto ban on most religious publications, and the regime routinely confiscates religious literature from residents and from people entering or leaving Turkmenistan. No religious literature may be published or imported without permission from the Commission for Work with Religious Organisations. It is almost impossible to acquire copies of the Koran, Bible, or other religious works, with very few sales outlets permitted. The regime's censorship of the internet and surveillance of communications – including emails, calls and mobile phone text messages – makes users wary of being open about any exercise of freedom of religion and belief. (END)