

17 March 2003

TURKMENISTAN: Orthodox to be main victims of clampdown?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

The clampdown launched in the wake of the apparent assassination attempt on President Saparmurad Niyazov last November will make life more difficult still for Turkmenistan's religious believers. As religious minorities – especially Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses – had already suffered the brunt of government pressure, it is difficult for their position to get any worse. Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishna devotees, Baha'is, Jews and even the Armenian Apostolic Church had already been denied any public religious activity. With the Sunni Muslim community and the Russian Orthodox under tight state control, it seems that ordinary Orthodox believers are likely to suffer most from the latest crackdown.

Even before the apparent assassination attempt on Turkmenistan's President Saparmurad Niyazov on 25 November 2002 in the capital Ashgabad, believers faced tighter restrictions on their rights in Turkmenistan than in any other Central Asian republic, although in many of these states the observance of religious freedoms is far from meeting international standards.

President Niyazov (who likes to call himself "Turkmenbashi" or Father of the Turkmen) immediately identified the organisers of the attack as the former minister of foreign affairs Boris Shikhmuradov, former deputy minister of the rural economy Sapar Yklymov, former Central Bank governor Khudaiberdy Orazov and ex-ambassador to Turkey Nurmukhammed Khanamov. Yet the speed with which he named the alleged perpetrators has given rise to speculation that the assassination attempt was staged. Whether that was indeed the case or whether it was a real act of terrorism, it has provided a powerful stimulus for the authorities to increase repression and human rights violations. Amnesty International reports that many men, women and children have been arrested, subjected to persecution and turned out of their apartments, with their possessions confiscated. Many have become targets of persecution simply because their relatives were members of the opposition. There are reliable reports that those arrested were treated harshly – many were reportedly beaten - and that dozens of people have been sentenced to lengthy terms in prison after legal investigations that were not impartial.

The clampdown is certain to affect religious believers. Members of religious minorities - as opposed to Sunni Muslims and the Russian Orthodox, whose religions are officially tolerated – had already been subjected to persecution. Some believers have been imprisoned, while others have been forced either to hide in their own country or leave for exile abroad. Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishna devotees, Baha'is, Jews and even the Armenian Apostolic Church have been denied any public religious activity.

An unjustifiably high qualifying number – 500 adult citizens - is required to register a religious organisation. If members of an unregistered group gather in apartments regardless, then at best they will be fined. However, there have been cases where believers have been imprisoned and where believers have lost their apartments when they have offered their homes for meetings of unregistered religious groups. One such was Marina Ismakayeva, a Seventh Day Adventist who was ordered to leave her flat in the eastern city of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjou), with no alternative accommodation being offered her. The eviction order issued by Turkmenabad city court in December 2001 specifically gave as its reason that an unregistered community of Adventists had been meeting in her flat.

Moreover, for those young people who for reasons of conscience refuse to do military service there is no provision for any civilian alternative. Under criminal law, failure to respond to the call up for military service is punishable by a term in prison and young men are being imprisoned simply for refusing to serve in the army because of their religious convictions. One such is Nikolai Shelekhov, a Jehovah's Witness sentenced in July 2002 to one and a half years in prison for refusing military service, who remains in a labour camp.

However, religious minorities are not the only faiths to be subjected to persecution. The relative freedom of the Sunni Muslims and the Russian Orthodox (the only two registered faiths) may be explained simply by the fact that the leaders of these religious communities unquestioningly carry out President Niyazov's orders and are virtually at one with the state apparatus. For example, the mufti of Turkmenistan and the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Turkmenistan are also deputy chairmen of the government's Committee for Religious Affairs, which answers to the president. However, members of these confessions who want to be governed not only by the directives of their religious leaders in Turkmenistan, but also to receive information from fellow-believers abroad face virtually insurmountable obstacles. Access to the Internet is possible only via state providers that exert strict control over what

information can be accessed. The majority of international religious sites are simply not accessible by an Internet user in Turkmenistan. Moreover, a special computer program searches emails for coded words that could be used to send "unreliable information", while "a suspicious message" will simply not reach the addressee.

Orthodox believers trying to receive alternative information are in a more difficult situation than Sunni Muslims. Under a September presidential decree, the distribution of Russian newspapers and magazines, including religious publications such as the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate, is banned in Turkmenistan. It is noteworthy that the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Turkmenistan, Fr Andrei Sapunov, publicly supported this ban, citing as his reason that "pornographic magazines will stop coming here from Russia". Of the Russian television channels, only a few hours a day of the ORT channel are broadcast, and then only with a day's delay after programmes have been approved by a censor. Currently there are a number of broadcasts on Russian television covering Orthodox issues. The broadcast of Russian cable programmes is forbidden in Turkmenistan, so that unlike in other Central Asian states, local Orthodox believers cannot use this as an alternative source of religious news.

It would be an exaggeration to say that the situation of believers has worsened markedly since the November attack. In a totalitarian state such as Turkmenistan, the rights of believers are so limited that a marked worsening of their position is unlikely. However, the November assassination attempt will allow President Niyazov to adopt an even harsher policy towards believers.

On 7 January Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, an ethnic Uzbek who for the past ten years has led Turkmenistan's Muslims, "requested permission" to step down from his post as deputy chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs, and also from his duties as chief mufti. Niyazov granted Nasrullah's request to step down from his post at the Council for Religious Affairs, while the muftiate gave permission for him to step down as mufti. At Niyazov's "suggestion", the muftiate elected as the new chief mufti Kakageldy Vepayev, a 35-year-old imam from Mari velayat (region) of south eastern Turkmenistan. President Niyazov also appointed Vepayev as deputy chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs. It would be naive to think that in a country like Turkmenistan, Nasrullah could ask to step down or that Vepayev could be appointed without Niyazov's permission.

Niyazov had no serious grounds for dissatisfaction with Nasrullah: as chief mufti Nasrullah unquestioningly deferred to the president. At the time the chief mufti stepped down Niyazov declared: "As a member of the National Council (parliament), the former mufti will have the opportunity to use his rich experience and knowledge in establishing new laws in the country's parliament." One may assume that Niyazov preferred Vepayev because he is much younger and therefore more energetic than his predecessor. Niyazov's warning to Vepayev as he took up his post is also remarkable: "Foreign countries' [citizens] will come here a lot. They will often try to buy you. They tell you that they will give money to your mosques, this and that, do not take [money] from them. Some will turn into imams of mosques trying to build a religious state, if they do not come on their own, they send their people. They give dollars."

It is likely that the unsuccessful attack will worsen the situation of Orthodox believers in Turkmenistan. Because many of those named as alleged organisers of the assassination attempt held Russian citizenship, paranoid anti-Russian sentiment has taken hold in the country. The National Security Committee (the ex-KGB) has started to uncover those who hold dual citizenship (an agreement between Moscow and Ashgabat permits people simultaneously to hold Russian and Turkmen citizenship). Straight after the assassination attempt all Internet cafes were closed down - the majority of their users tended to look at Russian web sites. It has become much more difficult for Russian citizens to receive a Turkmen visa.

As previous experience has shown, Turkmen officials will not simply restrict themselves to banning the receipt of political information from the former metropolis. Purely religious communications between local Orthodox believers and Russia will also fall into the vice of the Turkmen state machine. It will be more difficult for Russian Orthodox priests to get a Turkmen visa and for local Orthodox believers to receive religious literature from Russia.

It is evident that Turkmenistan will be even more isolated from Russia – and individual Orthodox believers more isolated from the Moscow Patriarchate.

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