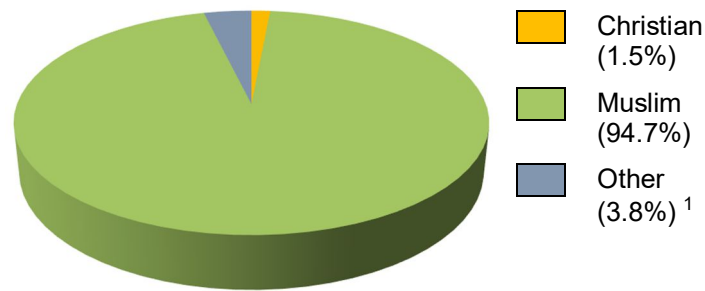


TURKMENISTAN



Area: 488,100 km ²	Population: 5.2 million	Political system: Autocracy ²	Major Language(s): Turkmen, Russian
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Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Concerning developments of a legal nature, one positive sign came in March 2015 when President Berdymukhammedov passed a law allowing individuals, groups and religious organisations to hold “peaceful” public demonstrations.³ The rules however state that these must take place at least 200 metres from any government buildings, including the residence of the President himself, and cannot be funded by lone individuals or foreign governments.

The law on religion, promulgated in 2003 and amended in 2007, bans all unregistered religious activity. In January 2014 new provisions in the administrative code increased the penalties for engaging in the majority of “illegal” religious activities.⁴

The country has more than 120 registered religious groups, 100 of which are Muslim, either Sunni or Shi'a, 13 Russian Orthodox and another 10 or so representing various minority religious groups, including Catholics, Baha'i, Hare Krishna and Protestants.⁵

Private religious instruction is forbidden. Muslims are not permitted to travel abroad in order to study, while the Orthodox, who do not have any educational establishments in Turkmenistan for their own clergy, are permitted to study abroad. Religious literature is subjected to a regime of compulsory censorship by the Council for Religious Affairs (CRA), a government body made up of government officials and representatives of Sunni Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church; this supervises all religious matters. Conscientious objection to military service is a punishable offence.

Incidents

The Catholic community is small and made up for the most part of foreign diplomats and descendants of Polish emigres. It generally operates without any particular restrictions. Present in the country since 1997 as an office of the apostolic nunciature and with diplomatic status, the Catholic Church in Turkmenistan was granted formal legal recognition in 2010 by the Justice Ministry. Today, there are around 160 baptised Catholics and roughly as many catechumens, and they are served by three priests and five religious brothers.⁶

One positive development was the release, between October 2014 and February 2015, of all Jehovah's Witnesses previously imprisoned for offences related to their religious beliefs. On 22nd

October 2014, under a presidential amnesty issued to mark the 23rd anniversary of Turkmenistan's independence from the Soviet Union, the authorities released six Jehovah's Witnesses, imprisoned for conscientious objection, together with two others, who had been arrested for offences related to the free exercise of their religious beliefs.⁷ Another member of the group, Ruslan Narkolayev, who had been sentenced in September 2014 to two years imprisonment, again for refusing to undertake military service, was released on 17th February 2015. He was released together with a Protestant, Umio Gojayev. He had been imprisoned in 2012 and sentenced to four years' imprisonment on a charge of "hooliganism", although this was evidently linked to some form of reprisal for his religious beliefs.⁸

Despite these prison releases and other positive signals, religious believers continue to suffer frequent raids, fines, imprisonments and confiscation of religious materials. These punitive measures are put in place in response to their attempts to express their faith freely or relate to their alleged violation of the law on religion. In recent years, many Muslims who follow versions of Islam not recognised by the state, as well as Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses, have been arrested, fined, imprisoned or sent into internal exile for their religious beliefs or activities. The majority of these prisoners of conscience are incarcerated in the labour camp of Seydi, in the Lebap region, where they are exposed to harsh conditions and frequently subjected to torture.

In May 2015 Bahram Hemdemov, a Jehovah's Witness, was tortured and sentenced to four years' imprisonment on the charge of "inciting inter-religious discord" for having hosted a religious meeting in his own home on 14th March of that year with 38 of his fellow believers. His property was confiscated, including his car. Many of the others were fined.⁹

The imprisonment of Hemdemov followed many other arrests of Jehovah's Witnesses which took place in the early months of 2015. Hemdemov's son had already been imprisoned twice and sentenced to two weeks' imprisonment on each occasion. Other Jehovah's Witnesses also received prison sentences of two weeks, often followed by further sentences and new terms of imprisonment, during which they were beaten and tortured. Among these were Emirjan Jumanazarov, Dovlet Kandymov and Konstantin Vlaskin. On 6th February 2015 Jehovah's Witnesses Viktor Yarygin, Rustam Nazarov, Charygeldy Jumaev and Jamilya Adylova were arrested. They were all interrogated and beaten and one of them, Jumaev, was rendered senseless by the beatings he received. All four were sentenced for hooliganism.

On 20th February 2015 the police in Turkmenabad carried out a raid on the house of Zeynep Huseynova and his son Tohtabay. They confiscated all the religious literature they found there.¹⁰

In August 2014 Bibi Rahmanova, another Jehovah's Witness, was sentenced to four years' imprisonment on the charge – which she denied – of attacking a policeman. She was arrested, together with her husband, on her way to the railway station to collect a consignment of religious texts that had been sent to her. In September 2014 her sentence was suspended on appeal and commuted to house arrest, though not before Mrs Rahmanova had been subjected to "grave physical abuse" during her detention.¹¹

In February 2015 Narmurad Mominov, a Protestant community leader in Galkynysh, in the eastern Lebap region, was fined. It happened after the police raided the community leader's private home. At the time, the family was enjoying a meal to celebrate the return from holiday of a boy studying a considerable distance away. Those present were charged with having taken part in an illegal religious meeting, and many of them were put under pressure to renounce their faith.¹² Mominov had already been fined for his religious activities, and his parents – who were not involved in his community's activities – were put under pressure to force him out of his home, together with his wife and son.

In autumn 2014 a Protestant taxi driver in the northern city of Dashoguz, was fined and had his taxi confiscated, for speaking about his faith to his customers.¹³ In investigating his case, the MSS secret police also questioned another member of his church, Hemra Annayev. His apartment was

raided by the police, leading to the confiscation of the religious texts found there and legal charges brought against him. Two months after the raid, the secret police began an investigation at the workplace of Annayev's wife, claiming to have found irregularities there. She too was fined and was dismissed from her post.

In the field of education too, the families of minority religious communities had difficulties expressing their faith. There were incidents of bullying and other forms of discrimination against their children.

A number of parents complained that at the beginning of the 2014/2015 academic year, they were asked to sign declarations in some schools in Ashgabat stating that their children did not belong to religious organisations. Those who refused to sign did not face direct repercussions but were nonetheless victims of the climate of suspicion and tension that this request was evidently intended to create. In another school, photographs of children from a local Protestant church were pinned up on the school noticeboard, with a message underneath stating: "These are the children of parents belonging to sects. Take notice and beware."

Muslims face state interference and control in a more obvious way than is the case with other faiths. The government supervises all nominations, transfers and promotions of imams, both at the national and regional levels. Forms of Islam other than those approved and promoted by the state are frequently described as "Wahabi" and members of these groups face imprisonment as the price of their independence. The number of Muslim prisoners of conscience currently held in detention or in labour camps is unknown.¹⁴

Prospects for freedom of religion

Over the past year in Turkmenistan there have been small signs of improvement concerning human rights and a slight opening up towards the West. However, the almost total absence of alternatives to the official state sources of information makes it difficult to establish the actual scope of these changes and their consequences.

Turkmenistan is sometimes called the "hermit kingdom" because of the government's apparent desire to isolate the country from the rest of the world. Religious freedom violations in the country are "systematic" to the extent that the news agency Forum 18 described repression by the authorities as "almost scientific".¹⁵ With the government enforcing strict information control, it requires religious groups to register under what the U.S. International Commission on Religious Freedom (USCIRF) calls "intrusive criteria".¹⁶ The USCIRF 2016 report states: "Police raids and harassment of registered and unregistered religious groups continued."¹⁷ Advocates of human rights and other activists face the constant threat of detention, a frequently-used instrument of political reprisal by the government. The complete absence of independent information, together with the difficulty of access to the country for international observers and the frequent bans on residents wishing to travel abroad, makes it extremely difficult to obtain reliable information about the real situation in the country.

Today Turkmenistan is going through a period of great uncertainty. The steep fall in the price of natural gas, and the resulting reduction in revenues, have had severe repercussions, with growing unemployment.¹⁸ The government is even considering abandoning the system of socio-economic subsidies which, for more than 20 years, has been a fundamental means of keeping the population under control.¹⁹ In addition, tension on the border with Afghanistan has continued to worsen; over the course of 2015, roughly 70 percent of the armed forces and military hardware were occupied in patrolling this border.²⁰

Supported by his family clan, President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, who has been in power since 2006, maintains what Human Rights Watch calls "unlimited power and total control over all aspects of public life" in Turkmenistan.²¹ Like his predecessor, this current president is also working to create a personality cult around himself.²² In May 2015 he had erected in his honour a

21-metre high statue, covered in 24 carat gold. It was funded by “donations” from all state employees.²³ A constitutional commission, chaired by the president, is currently studying a revision of the constitution with a view to extending the presidential term of office from five to seven years and at the same time raising the current age limit of 70. These changes, if approved, will not only reinforce Berdymukhammedov’s authoritarian grip on the country but they are also likely to pave the way to his becoming president for life.²⁴

Described as one of the 15 most corrupt nations on the planet,²⁵ Turkmenistan always appears on the blacklist of the NGO Freedom House as one of the world’s most restrictive countries and one with the least respect for civil liberties.²⁶ According to Reporters without Borders, it is also third from the bottom in the world with regard to press freedom.²⁷ Because of its grave violations of religious freedom,²⁸ acting on the recommendation of the USCIRF, in July 2014 the U.S. State Department finally added Turkmenistan to its list of “Countries of Particular Concern”. The USCIRF renewed this same recommendation in its 2016 report.²⁹

The government does not tolerate any form of dissent and censors all the press and electronic media. Many websites, including social media and messaging services, have been blocked.³⁰ The authorities have repeatedly targeted Radio Azatlyk, the Turkmen service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), which is the only alternative news source in the Turkmen language. In August 2015 a correspondent for RFE/RL, Saparmamed Nepeskuliev, was sentenced to three years’ imprisonment on a charge of drugs possession³¹ and other independent journalists have been subjected to similar pressures in order to prevent them engaging in their investigative work.³² Since March 2015³³ the authorities in the city of Ashgabat have forced residents to take down their satellite dishes in order to prevent them from accessing any other form of alternative information, threatening those who refuse to remove them “voluntarily” with fines.³⁴

With regard to positive developments, for the first time in 12 years, a Turkmen delegation was present at the annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).³⁵ Also, perhaps as a result of the country’s economic difficulties, during 2015 there were increased relations with foreign governments and international organisations. Nonetheless, for the time being, it does not appear that this has had a significant impact with regard to human rights.

In January 2015 the government announced its intention to introduce an ombudsman for human rights. Apart from some meetings and workshops that have been held in Turkmenistan on this subject, the proposal remains under discussion for the time being.³⁶

¹ ARDA

² Known for its autocratic government and large gas reserves, Turkmenistan also has a reputation as an island of stability in restive Central Asia; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-16094646>

³ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 12 March 2015

⁴ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report, 2014

⁵ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report, 2014

⁶ Southworld web magazine, 1 November 2015. <http://www.southworld.net/turkmenistan-a-small-community-moving-forward/>

⁷ Asia News del 28 October 2014

⁸ Forum 18 News Service, 18 February 2015

⁹ Forum 18 News Service, 21 May 2015

¹⁰ Forum 18 News Service, 21 May 2015

¹¹ Forum 18 News Service, 29 September 2014

¹² Forum 18 News Service, 12 March 2015

¹³ Forum 18 News Service, 12 March 2015

¹⁴ Forum 18 News Service, 28 October 2014 and 21 May 2015

¹⁵ AsiaNews citing Forum 18 <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Everyday-religious-repression-12973.html>

¹⁶ <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202016%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 7 March 2016

¹⁹ Asia News 2 October 2015

²⁰ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 7 March 2016

²¹ Human Rights Watch – World Report 2013: Turkmenistan - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country-chapters/turkmenistan>

²² Ibid

²³ Asia News 26 May 2015

²⁴ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 15 February 2016

²⁵ Eurasianet, 29 January 2016

²⁶ Eurasianet, 29 April 2015

²⁷ Asia News 26 May 2015

²⁸ The Diplomat, 24 September 2014

²⁹ <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202016%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

³⁰ Human Rights Watch, Annual Report, 2016

³¹ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 8 September 2015

³² The Diplomat, 11 August 2015

³³ Human Rights Watch 19 May 2015

³⁴ 100 manat is the equivalent of approximately 25 Euros. The average monthly salary in the country (in 2013) was approximately 1300 manat. Source: <http://www.nationmaster.com/country-info/profiles/Turkmenistan/Cost-of-living>

³⁵ Human Rights Watch 23 September 2015

³⁶ Human Rights Watch, Annual Report, 2015