

When a government has violated the most fundamental of human rights as egregiously, thoroughly and systematically as Turkmenistan has done, it should take more than formal statutory or regulatory changes before the world should let itself be satisfied that genuine reform is underway. It is all too easy for such countries, which have long since been signatories to international human-rights pacts, simply to continue the deeply entrenched practice of violating their own laws. For example, Turkmen officials have specifically claimed that their government carries out fully its commitments under the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights—a statement which is absurd on its face. It seems pointless even to have such international agreements, acceptance of which by a national government is entirely voluntary, if other governments take no action when the agreements are grossly and flagrantly violated.

Overall, the information now available makes it clear that Turkmenistan's March 11th presidential decree ostensibly relaxing one of the barriers to state registration is simply an attempt to get international credit for reform without actually making any substantial reforms. During the very week that the president's decree was issued, a Jehovah's Witness in Ashgabad was summoned to the Gengeshi (the Soviet-style state council for religious affairs) and pressured to renounce his faith; he refused and was later fired from his job. That same week, police in Ashgabad raided a meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses in a private home and took them to the police station for interrogation. Later that month, the secret police raided the home of a Bahai in Balkanabad in western Turkmenistan and threatened to confiscate his home.

There has been no significant change in the Gengeshi's institutional culture; it remains a closed, totalitarian-style institution in the classic KGB tradition which for example refuses to answer questions from journalists. There is no evidence that any of its officials, responsible for countless cruel violations of the most elementary rights of religious believers, has been fired, reassigned, or even reprimanded. There is no evidence that the Gengeshi has been taken out of the business of approving appointments and promotions of clergymen—just as there is no evidence that the State Security Ministry has been taken out of the business of recruiting informers and otherwise spying on religious communities. The abuses in this area have been so gross that any reforms would have to be dramatic and public; in the absence of such actions, one may fairly conclude that such reforms are non-existent.

Similarly, the government has made no public announcement, dramatic or otherwise, that it is ending its harsh restrictions on the publication and importation of religious literature.

There is no evidence that the Niyazov government has stopped requiring legally registered Muslim and Orthodox Christian communities (or for that matter the state schools) to stop treating the president's vanity pseudo-Scriptures, the "Ruhnama," as if it were a holy book comparable to the Bible or the Koran. Thus in effect Turkmenistan continues to force serious religious believers to commit blasphemy.

There has been no concrete progress in allowing Shia Muslims to worship freely. In fact, in late March Niyazov told officials of the Gengeshi that he was handing over three new mosques to it which evidently will be used for Sunni worship, and that no further mosques will be allowed. This issue should be of particular concern to western governments who are often accused of caring about religious freedom only for Christians, not for Muslims.

Though the Armenian ambassador has chosen to express an optimistic view in public, there has been no visible, substantial progress in allowing the Armenian Apostolic Church to revive any of its 19th-century parishes. This issue too deserves special attention from western governments who are often accused of caring only about western Christian missionaries, not about purely indigenous forms of Christianity.

There is no evidence that any of the Protestant communities whose places of worship had been forcibly closed over the last several years have had those buildings returned. There is no evidence that the Adventists, whose church in Ashgabad was bulldozed by the city authorities five years ago, have been invited to rebuild that church or to build another one.

There are no concrete indications that any Roman Catholic clerics will now be allowed to function in the country, other than emissaries from Vatican City with diplomatic immunity.

There are no concrete indications that Jehovah's Witnesses are now less likely to be imprisoned for being faithful to their religious convictions, such as conscientious objection to military service.

As of early May, not one new religious community had in fact been registered under the new rules. It is true that many have not even applied—but in light of the government's utter failure to make any of the other changes which it could have and should have made immediately, it is totally understandable why religious communities continue to be afraid.

Moreover, since March 11 government officials have specifically reiterated that unregistered religious activity is illegal.

To sum up: As Forum 18 stated last month, "The changes to the law this year show that concerted pressure on the Turkmenistan authorities from outside has led to a public change of the proclaimed policy. However, for religious believers to see real and not spurious change, the Adalat Ministry will have to register all religious communities that apply for registration without discrimination; unregistered religious activity will have to be decriminalized (including abolishing articles of the criminal and civil code which punish unregistered religious activity); believers in prison for their faith will have to be freed; there will have to be an end to police and security ministry raids on private homes where believers are meeting for worship; there will have to be an end to interrogations of and fines on believers; those fined for practicing their faith will have to be compensated; believers who have been fired from their jobs for their membership of minority religious communities will have to be reinstated; those responsible for raiding religious meetings and beating and otherwise punishing believers for the free exercise of their faith will have to be brought to legal accountability; and believers will have to be able to enjoy the right to publish and distribute whatever religious literature they wish to and organize and take part in religious education freely. Only if the authorities meet these obligations will believers in Turkmenistan believe that the situation has changed irrevocably for the better."