turkmenistan

PERSECUTION 101



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Despite constitutional guarantees of religious freedom, the government of Turkmenistan seeks control over nearly every aspect of religious life in the country

Turkmenistan's hostility toward religious freedom is part of the country's larger trend away from civil liberty. The country enjoys little access to outside information, there is no independent media, and citizens can be arrested for any perceived criticism of the government. In this repressive environment, loyalty to a religious organization is often viewed with suspicion and government attempts to eradicate "extremism" are simply an extension of the government's greater effort to control all aspects of society. Even Turkmens living abroad, in countries friendly with Turkmenistan, are at risk and have been deported back to the country where they face imprisonment and torture in the country's notorious prisons.

QUICK FACTS



Type of Government
Presidential
Republic

Head of Government
President Serdar
Berdimuhamedow

Total Population
Approx. 5.74 million

Religious Demography
93% Muslim - 5.34 million
6.4% Christian - 367,000
0.6% Other - 34,000

Ethnic Demography
85% Turkmen
5% Uzbek
4% Russian
6% Other

TYPES OF PERSECUTION

Regulation of Religious Affairs

The government of Turkmenistan bans unregistered religious activity and heavily regulates the internal affairs of registered religious groups in the country.

Torture and Imprisonment

The government of Turkmenistan weaponizes its penal system against citizens seeking to peacefully exercise their religion.

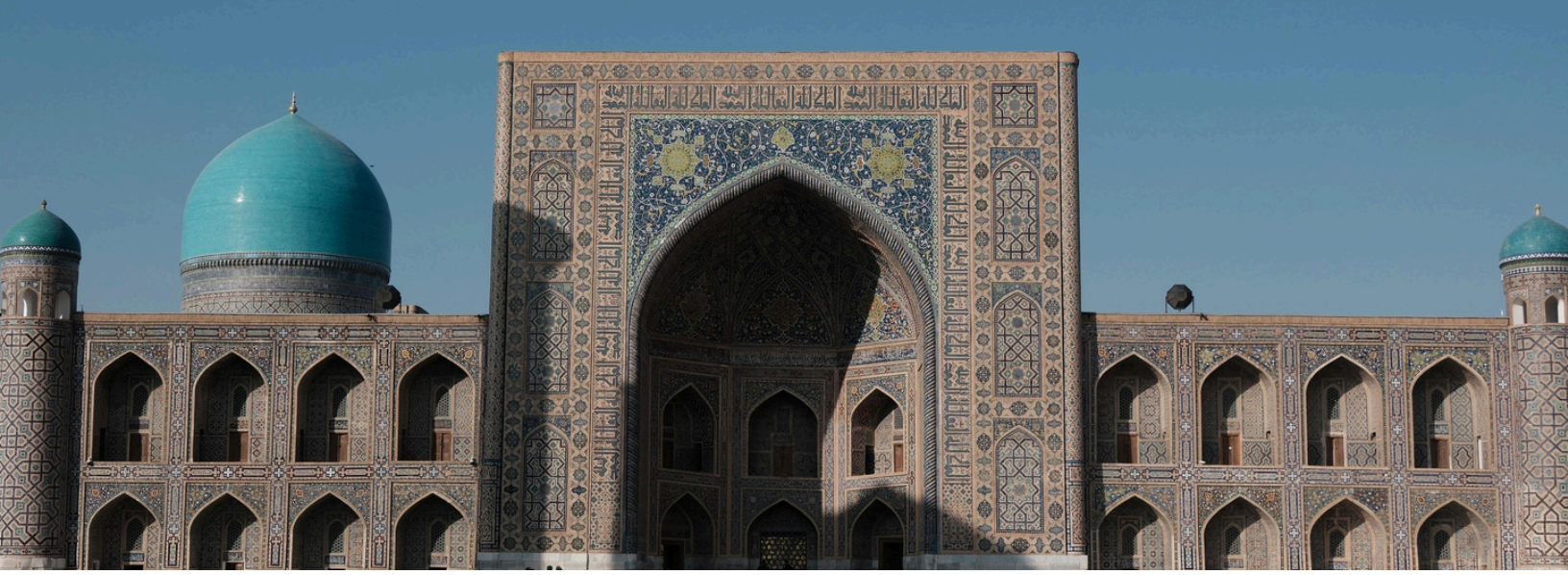


Backgrounder on Religious Freedom in Turkmenistan

The Turkmen constitution lays out a clear framework of government respect for religious freedom. According to Article 41, each citizen has the right to "profess any religion or none, to express and disseminate beliefs related to attitude toward religion, [and] to participate in religious observances, rituals, and ceremonies." Sadly, despite these assurances, the government of Turkmenistan has consistently ranked among the worst countries in the world in terms of religious freedom and is engaged in a long-term campaign to eradicate free religious expression.

In 2016, the country adopted a law that, despite reaffirmations of the country's secular nature, was described by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom as "a comprehensive legal basis to systematically restrict religious activities."

Among other provisions, the law criminalizes unregistered religious activity, giving the government nearly complete control over religion in the country. This registration requirement forces religious groups to choose between operating independently, but at constant risk of fines and imprisonment, and submitting themselves to the government's draconian rules and regulations.



For groups that choose to register, the government requires that applying organizations contain at least 50 adult members and reserves the right to demand that groups submit names and biographic details on anybody affiliated with the organization. These rules apply not just to denominations or national religious organizations but to each individual congregation, making it impossible for small churches to operate legally.

The law allows officials from the Ministry of Justice to monitor any religious gathering and to question church leaders about their activities. Combined with the country's animosity toward dissenting religious and political opinion, this provision creates significant pressure on religious groups and leaves them with little room to operate freely.

Not content with monitoring and controlling religious organizations, the government exercises a great deal of control over individual religious practice as well. Reports of individual harassment abound, including multiple incidents in which the police rounded up men with beards—a sign of religious fervor in some communities—and forced them to shave. Penalties for violating the government's many religious regulations include fines and imprisonment, with the penal system being notorious for ill treatment of prisoners and regular use of torture.

Social pressure also serves to limit religious freedom in the country, especially for Christian converts from Islam. Testimony from Muslim-background Christians in the country suggest that some converts are locked up by their families, beaten, or expelled from their communities in attempts to punish them for their newfound faith.

As a result of this broad governmental and social pressure, Christians and members of other unfavored religious groups are often forced to practice their faith in secret, with severe consequences for being found out by their communities or the government.

Resources and Reports

State Department 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom – Turkmenistan Chapter

USCIRF 2023 Annual Report – Turkmenistan Chapter



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