
CASE STUDY I—TURKMENISTAN

The following case study provides a useful example of how many of the previously discussed international institutions and bodies can be activated successfully for religious freedom concerns. Case Study 1 focuses on the Central Asian country of Turkmenistan, which has arguably the worst record on human rights in the entire fifty-six-nation OSCE region. The Turkmenistan case study is instructive, as between 2002 and 2005 religious freedom advocates utilized many of the previously highlighted offices and institutions of policymakers, monitoring bodies, and complaint recourse mechanisms with varying degrees of success.¹

Gaining independence after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Turkmen people “elected” as president in 1992 their former communist boss, Saparmurat Niyazov. Niyazov ruled Turkmenistan with an iron fist until his death in December 2006. Named “President for Life” and referring to himself as the Turkmenbashi, the father of all Turkmen, Niyazov created a pervasive cult of personality. His face adorned almost every government building, and the months of the year were renamed, one after himself and one after his deceased mother. Niyazov wrote his own spiritual book, the *Rubnama*, a rambling collection of thoughts on morality that was required by law to be physically placed in mosques on the same level as the Koran. Niyazov also made the book required reading in schools and at government jobs, and it was incorporated into the driving test. These nonsensical policies, however, disguised a brutal regime that allowed no dissent and significantly limited religious freedom.

Under the Niyazov regime, only two religious groups were allowed to operate openly—the Russian Orthodox Church and Sunni Islam—but with significant government interference and control. For instance, Turkmen authorities selected imams (or preachers) for mosques and limited the number of Orthodox services. For other groups to obtain permission to enjoy basic religious freedoms, like meeting for corporate worship, a congregation had to

prove that its membership exceeded five hundred adult citizens in the locality where it wished to meet—an impossible hurdle for small groups to overcome. Many risked government action and met “illegally.” The repercussions could be severe; for example, Turkmen authorities had the Adventist church in the capital, Ashgabat, bulldozed to the ground in 1999.

Religious freedom advocates and representatives of religious communities struggling to operate in Turkmenistan during this period began meeting with U.S. State Department officials, in either Ashgabat, Washington, or Vienna at the U.S. Mission to the OSCE. In addition, advocates and coreligionists petitioned members of Congress and their staffs, asking offices to write to Niyazov and meet with the Turkmen ambassador to raise the possibility of reducing U.S. assistance to the country if improvements were not made. NGOs wrote letters to then-Secretary of State Colin Powell and to USCIRF, urging CPC designation, and also spoke out at the yearly HDIM meeting in Warsaw.

Governments and international institutions began to respond to these awareness-raising efforts. For instance, NGOs worked with the State Department and the European Union to utilize UN monitoring bodies further to pressure Turkmenistan. Working together in 2003, the United States and the European Union collaborated on a UN Commission on Human Rights resolution criticizing the repressive Turkmen policies and highlighting specific religious freedom abuses.² The Commission on Human Rights approved a similar resolution on Turkmenistan’s human rights record the following year that again highlighted restrictions on religious freedom.³ Also in 2004, the UN General Assembly spoke for the first time about religious freedom abuses in a resolution on human rights in Turkmenistan, which echoed the Commission’s concerns.⁴ In 2005, the General Assembly again passed a resolution on Turkmenistan that noted some improvements in the regime’s record on religious freedom but continued to pressure the government for additional reforms.⁵

The U.S. Embassy in Ashgabat became engaged, in response to increasing reports of religious freedom violations brought forward by advocates. The Embassy offered protests to Turkmen authorities, making clear that the bilateral relationship could suffer because a CPC designation was a real possibility unless concrete steps were taken to relax the registration system and allow greater religious freedom.⁶ State Department officials from the IRF Office, DRL, and the desk reinforced this message in Washington to Turkmen offi-

cial. Concern was also expressed by U.S. officials to the OSCE in Ashgabat and at the Warsaw HDIM.⁷ Other participating states, religious freedom advocates, and NGOs also expressed their alarm at the HDIM.⁸ (The OSCE Mission in Ashgabat could do little, as it was already on bad terms with the government.) The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom also nominated Turkmenistan for CPC designation in its annual report (which it has since done repeatedly).⁹ A coalition of human rights groups also wrote to U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to urge for CPC designation of Turkmenistan.¹⁰

Advocates were also successful in moving members of Congress to act, and many called upon the State Department to designate Turkmenistan as a Country of Particular Concern. Thirty-four members of the House and Senate wrote to Secretary Powell in October 2003, calling for the CPC designation of Turkmenistan, as well as of Vietnam and Saudi Arabia.¹¹ The next year, the Helsinki Commission and USCIRF held a joint congressional briefing to highlight the limits on religious freedom to members of Congress and their staff, and to push for change.¹² In addition, the Helsinki Commission sent President Niyazov a letter asking for improvements on religious freedom and for the release of the former grand mufti as well as six Jehovah's Witnesses jailed for conscientious objection.¹³

By successfully creating a confluence of pressure from the U.S. Embassy and State Department, USCIRF, the Helsinki Commission, Congress, and the UN, advocates were able eventually to move the strange and reclusive Niyazov to liberalize Turkmen policies. Initial attempts, however, fell short of the line set by the international community when the government issued "reforms" that were actually additional regulations to increase governmental control of religious practice. Not deceived by these paper promises, the United States maintained its insistence on real progress if Turkmenistan wanted to avoid CPC designation.

Finally, Niyazov issued a new presidential decree reducing the registration threshold from five hundred per locality to five individuals nationally and registered many communities. In addition, in response to the Helsinki Commission Chairman's letter, authorities released the six Jehovah's Witnesses after they had served more than two years in abysmal conditions for conscientious objection to military service. Religious groups reported that the climate had actually improved, with groups allowed to meet more freely without the continuous threat of policy harassment or jail time. While religious freedoms are

still not fully enjoyed in Turkmenistan, minority religious communities have reported an improvement in the overall climate and a greater ability to enjoy their religious liberties. Consequently, these advances have been enough for the country to avoid CPC designation as of this writing.

While Turkmenistan represents a victory for religious freedom advocacy, it also shows how difficult achieving success can be. A tremendous amount of effort was needed to move the government to act, and despite these improvements, reports continue to surface of sporadic instances of police harassment of religious meetings and jailing of religious leaders. The government has also not reduced its control of Islamic institutions. Continued pressure will be necessary to ensure that the full respect of religious freedom is enjoyed in Turkmenistan.