

TURKMENISTAN 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the freedom of religion and for the right of individuals to choose their religion, express and disseminate their religious beliefs, and participate in religious observances and ceremonies. The constitution maintains the separation of government and religion, stipulating religious organizations are prohibited from “interference” in state affairs. The law on religion requires all religious organizations, including those previously registered under an earlier version of the law, to reregister with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) every three years in order to operate legally. According to religious organizations, government security forces continued to surveil religious organizations and ban the importation of religious literature, and it remained difficult to obtain places of worship. According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, as of the end of the year, 10 Jehovah’s Witness conscientious objectors were imprisoned for refusing military service, including several new cases of Witnesses sentenced during the year, to terms from one year to four years. The government continued not to offer civilian service alternatives for conscientious objectors. The international religious freedom nongovernmental organization (NGO) Forum 18 reported that police in Ashgabat and Lebap Province forced men under 40 to shave their beards and mustaches. The government did not register any previously unregistered religious groups during the year. Two previously registered groups successfully reregistered during the year although they stated that registration requirements were onerous. According to local religious communities and international advocacy groups, members of some registered and unregistered Christian organizations continued to face official and unofficial harassment, raids, and house searches, usually as a result of attempting to gather for purposes of communal worship. The government continued to appoint all senior Muslim clerics and scrutinize or obstruct religious groups attempting to purchase or lease buildings or land for religious purposes. In September and November, the Ministry of Justice hosted roundtable meetings for all registered and unregistered religious groups in which members could advocate for their organizations, ask questions, and refer problems to a panel of government ministry representatives. The government promised to identify a point of contact for groups to contact to ask questions and resolve issues, and to create a website that would have information and a portal for posing questions. Many religious groups stated this was a productive meeting and a small sign of progress, but continued to experience an either poor or complete lack of response to inquiries.

Outside of the roundtable meeting and direct communication with the ministries, religious groups have no official methods of advocacy.

Religious leaders and others stated they were reluctant to speak out publicly about religious freedom issues out of fear of harassment, ostracism, or public shaming by their family members, friends, and neighbors. Between September 2018 and May 2019, Jehovah's Witnesses reported that unknown individuals distributed leaflets in Russian and Turkmen containing defamatory statements about the Witnesses. Numerous citizens stated that the government's suspicion of religion was often mirrored in the private sector, and that membership in a minority religious organization or even "excessive" expressions of religion could result in the loss of employment or employment opportunities. Some members of minority religious groups reported societal prejudices against religious groups that are not Sunni Muslim or Russian Orthodox.

In meetings and official correspondence with government officials, the Ambassador, embassy officials, and other U.S. government representatives, including the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, continued to express concerns about issues of religious freedom in the country. U.S. officials raised issues, including the legal status of conscientious objectors, the country's listing as a "Country of Particular Concern," the ability of religious groups to register and reregister, and easing restrictions on the importation of religious literature. The Ambassador personally requested that the president pardon all Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned as conscientious objectors. Embassy officers met on a regular basis with 11 minority religious groups to discuss their challenges in the face of a restrictive environment for religious freedom. Topics discussed with these groups included: the status and challenges of the groups' registration and reregistration, the groups' ability to secure a permanent place of worship, the requirement to keep a legal address in a location physically separate from the place of worship, the challenges of importing religious literature, harassment of members by both government and nongovernment entities, restrictions on proselytizing, the religious groups' relations with the government, interfaith cooperation, the ability of clerics to access prisoners and military personnel, and the organizations' ability to carry out educational and charity activities.

Since 2014, Turkmenistan has been designated as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 18, 2019, the Secretary of State redesignated Turkmenistan as a CPC

and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompany designation as required in the “important national interest of the United States.”

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.5 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to U.S. government estimates, the country is 89 percent Muslim (mostly Sunni), 9 percent Eastern Orthodox, and 2 percent other. There are small communities of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Shia Muslims, Baha’is, Roman Catholics, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and evangelical Christians, including Baptists and Pentecostals.

Most ethnic Russians and Armenians identify as Orthodox Christian and generally are members of the Russian Orthodox Church or Armenian Apostolic Church. Some ethnic Russians and Armenians are also members of smaller Protestant groups.

There are small pockets of Shia Muslims, consisting largely of ethnic Iranians, Azeris, and Kurds, some located in Ashgabat, with others along the border with Iran and in the western city of Turkmenbashi.

According to the Israeli embassy, approximately 200 Jews live in the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship and for the right of individuals to choose their religion, express and disseminate their religious beliefs, and participate in religious observances and ceremonies. The constitution separates the roles of government and religion, stipulating religious organizations are prohibited from “interference” in state affairs or carrying out state functions. The constitution states public education shall be secular in nature. It provides for the equality of citizens before the law regardless of their religious preference.

The law requires all religious organizations, including those that had registered previously, to reregister with the MOJ every three years in order to operate legally within the country. The law permits only the registration of “religious organizations,” which must have a minimum of 50 resident members above the age of 18. The law defines a religious organization as a voluntary association of

citizens affiliated with a religion, organized to conduct religious services and other rites and ceremonies, as well as to provide religious education, and registered in accordance with the country's legislation.

According to the law, the State Commission on Religious Organizations and Expert Evaluation of Religious Information Resources (SCROEERIR) is responsible for helping registered religious organizations work with government agencies, explaining the law to representatives of religious organizations, monitoring the activities of religious organizations to ensure they comply with the law, assisting with the translation and publication of religious literature, and promoting understanding and tolerance among different religious organizations. The law states SCROEERIR must approve all individuals appointed as leaders of religious organizations, although the law does not specify the procedures for obtaining the required approval. SCROEERIR operates under the leadership of the grand mufti, who is appointed by the government, as are all other senior Muslim clerics. The deputy chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers for education, health, religion, sports, tourism, science, new technologies, and innovation oversees SCROEERIR's work.

To register, organizations must submit to SCROEERIR their contact information; proof of address; a statement requesting registration signed by the founders and board members of the organization; two copies of the organization's charter; a registration fee of 100 manat (\$29); and the names, addresses, and dates of birth of the organization's founders. Once SCROEERIR endorses an application for registration, it is submitted to the MOJ, which coordinates an interministerial approval process involving the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Ministry of National Security (MNB), Ministry of Interior (MVD), and other government offices. According to government procedures, the MOJ may additionally request the biographic information of all members of an organization applying for registration. The law states that leaders of registered religious organizations must be citizens who have received an "appropriate religious education," but does not define that term. Each subsidiary congregation of a registered religious organization must also register, and the registration process is the same as that which applies to the parent organization.

The tax code stipulates registered religious organizations are exempt from taxes.

The law states the MOJ will not register a religious organization if its goals or activities contradict the constitution or if SCROEERIR does not endorse its application. The law does not specify the standards SCROEERIR uses to make

that determination. The law assigns the Office of the Prosecutor General to monitor the compliance of a religious organization with the constitution. The law specifies a court may suspend the activities of a religious organization if it determines the organization to be in violation of the constitution, and that suspension may only be overcome if the organization submits documentation satisfying the court that the activities that led to suspension have been stopped. The law also states that grounds for dissolution of a religious organization include activities “that violate the rights, freedoms, and lawful interests of citizens” or “harm their health and morale.”

The administrative code covering religious organizations delineates a schedule of fines for conducting activities not described in a religious organization’s charter.

Unregistered religious organizations and unregistered subsidiary congregations of registered religious organizations may not legally conduct religious activities; establish places of worship; gather for religious services, including in private residences; produce or disseminate religious materials; or proselytize. Any such activity is punishable as an administrative offense by fines ranging from 100 to 1,000 manat (\$29-\$290), with higher fines for religious leaders and lower fines for lay members.

The law states MOJ officials have the right to attend any religious event held by a registered religious organization and to question religious leaders about any aspect of their activities.

The administrative code stipulates penalties from 200 to 500 manat (\$57-\$140) for officials who violate an individual’s right of freedom to worship or right to abstain from worship.

The criminal and administrative codes provide punishment for the harassment of members of registered religious organizations by private individuals. According to the administrative code, obstructing the exercise of religious freedom is punishable by a fine up to 1,000 manat (\$290) or detention for 15 days. The criminal code states such an obstruction is punishable with a fine up to 7,900 manat (\$2,300) or one year of “corrective labor,” which involves serving in a government-assigned position in a prison near one’s home or at a location away from one’s home. If an obstruction involves a physical attack, the punishment may entail up to two years in prison. According to the criminal code, the fine is calculated as five to 10 average monthly wages (3,950 to 7,900 manat – \$1,100-\$2,300).

The law allows registered religious organizations to create educational establishments to train clergy and other religious personnel after obtaining a license to do so. The Cabinet of Ministers establishes the procedures for obtaining a license. The law also states individuals teaching religious disciplines at religious educational establishments should have a theological education and carry out their activities with the permission of the central governing body of the religious organization and the approval of SCROEERIR.

Local governments have the right to monitor and “analyze” the “religious situation” within their jurisdiction, send proposals to SCROEERIR to change or update legislation on religious freedom, and coordinate religious ceremonies conducted outside of religious buildings.

Under the criminal code, polygamy carries penalties of up to two years of labor or fines of 15,800 to 23,700 manat (\$4,500-\$6,800).

The law prohibits the publication of religious literature inciting “religious, national, ethnic, and/or racial hatred,” although it does not specify which agency makes this determination. SCROEERIR must approve imported religious literature, and only registered religious organizations may import literature. Registered religious organizations may be fined for publishing or disseminating religious material without government approval. The administrative code sets out a detailed schedule of fines, ranging from 200 to 2,000 manat (\$57-\$570), for producing, importing, and disseminating unauthorized religious literature and other religious materials.

The law allows local governments, with the approval of SCROEERIR, to make decisions regarding the construction of religious buildings and structures within their jurisdiction.

Religious instruction is not part of the public school curriculum. The law allows registered religious organizations to provide religious education after school to children for up to four hours per week with parental and SCROEERIR approval, although the law does not specify the requirements for obtaining SCROEERIR’s approval. Persons who graduate from institutions of higher religious education, and who obtain approval from SCROEERIR, may provide religious education. According to the law, citizens have a right to obtain religious education, although obtaining religious education in private settings such as residences is banned. Persons offering religious education in private settings are subject to legal action. The law prohibits unregistered religious groups or unregistered subsidiary

congregations of registered religious organizations from providing religious education. The administrative code sets out a detailed schedule of fines, ranging from 100 to 500 manat (\$29-\$140), for providing unauthorized religious education to children.

The constitution states two years of military service are compulsory for men over the age of 18. Although service in noncombat roles is allowed, the government does not offer civilian service alternatives for conscientious objectors. Refusal to perform the compulsory two-year service in the armed forces is punishable by a maximum of two years in prison or two years of “corrective labor.” In addition, the state withholds part of the salaries of prisoners sentenced to corrective labor in the amount designated by the court. Salary deductions range between 5-20 percent. The law states no one has the right for religious reasons to refuse duties established by the constitution and the law.

The constitution and law prohibit the establishment of political parties on the basis of religion, and the law prohibits the involvement of religious groups in politics.

The law does not address the activities of foreign missionaries and foreign religious organizations. The administrative code, however, bans registered religious organizations from receiving assistance from foreign entities for prohibited activities.

The law requires religious groups to register all foreign assistance with the MOJ and provide interim and final reports on the use of funds. The administrative code provides a detailed schedule of fines – up to 10,000 manat (\$2,900) – for both unregistered and registered religious groups for accepting unapproved funds from foreign sources.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Military-age Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to be arrested and imprisoned for refusing military service. As of the end of the year, 10 Jehovah’s Witnesses conscientious objectors were imprisoned for refusing military service. According to Forum 18, on January 7, a court in the eastern Lebap Province sentenced Jehovah’s Witness Azamatjan Narkulyev to one year in prison for refusing compulsory military service, and in March, a court in the southeastern town of Bayramaly handed down a one-year sentence to Jehovah’s Witness Muhammetali

Saparmyradov for the same offense. Forum 18 also reported that Jehovah's Witness Bahtiyar Atahanov from Turkmenabat was jailed in July by a court in Tejen for four years, which it said was the longest jail term known to have been handed to a conscientious objector; the authorities deemed him a soldier committing medical fraud to avoid military service after forcibly conscripting him.

On March 29, the UN Human Rights Committee (UNHRC) adopted a decision finding that the government had violated the rights of two Jehovah's Witnesses former prisoners of conscience, Vladimir Nuryllayev and Aibek Salayev in a 2014 case. Nuryllayev and Salayev were wrongly imprisoned on pornography charges, according to UNHRC. Salayev said he was subjected to numerous beatings and threats while in pretrial detention. Also, on March 29, the UNHRC adopted a decision finding that the government had violated the rights of Jehovah's Witness Arslan Dawletov (Dovletov), a conscientious objector in a 2013 incident. These were the eleventh and twelfth UNHRC decisions finding that the country had violated the rights to religious freedom of Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Jehovah's Witnesses annual report published in December stated there were numerous incidents of police brutality, intimidation, and house searches of Witnesses. Police reportedly harassed, interrogated, and pressured the Witnesses, even threatening to "arrange an accident" if they did not renounce their faith. The report said that officials charged members of the Witnesses under the administrative code with the "production, import, export, distribution of religious literature." On February 8, a village official in Lebap Province stated that a complaint had been received and police escorted a male Witness to the police station, where several law enforcement officers were waiting, including a district inspector and a criminal investigation officer. The officers interrogated him, searched his house, and seized personal belongings. The report said they took him back to the police station and threatened to push a pole with the national flag attached down his throat in an attempt to force him to kiss the flag. On March 15, he was summoned to the Carjew District Court and fined \$55.

On February 5, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses, a Witness was called to her daughter's principal's office in the Balkan Region. In the office, a law enforcement officer criticized her religious beliefs and threatened to fine her \$832. The officer ordered the mother to stop teaching her child her religious beliefs and photographed the mother and daughter.

Forum 18 reported on its website that in Lebap Province on December 26, police raided a private home where a group of Protestant women had gathered for a

Christmas celebration. Officers reportedly searched the home, seized telephones, and questioned the women at a police station. Forum 18 reported the women had not been fined.

The status of more than 100 Muslims from in and around Turkmenabat who had previously been reported incarcerated in Ovadan Depe Prison was unclear at year's end.

Unlike previous years, local human rights groups did not report surveillance of Muslim groups and religious minorities. According to local religious community members and international advocacy groups, members of some Christian organizations faced harassment, raids, and house searches, usually as a result of attempting to gather for purposes of communal worship. They reported that security services interviewed members of religious organizations and demanded they provide information on their communities' activities. Some members also reported that security officials interrogated their friends and family members, asking about the members' religious activities. In one case, local security forces continuously harassed the pastor of a Christian group in the city of Turkmenabat and interrogated his friends and business associates. Eventually, the security forces threatened to arrest his friends unless the pastor ceased his religious activities. The pastor fled the country.

A member of a Christian group reported that on August 29 a Turkmenabat resident was interrogated by local security forces regarding the religious activities of the resident's Christian relative. The resident was allegedly threatened in order to make the relative stop holding services and preaching. The member said that this situation was common among members of her group.

Christian groups reported that the Turkmen who converted from Islam experienced government scrutiny and were discriminated against. For example, converts were denied government jobs or fired from jobs based on their religion.

Unregistered groups stated their members were subject to arrest for "unlawful assembly" in addition to fines stipulated by law. Members of these groups said they continued to practice discreetly, mostly in private homes, and could do so as long as neighbors did not file complaints with local authorities. According to Open Doors USA, in areas where churches have not been registered, police repeatedly raided, threatened, arrested, and fined Christians.

Some registered and unregistered Christian groups reported that their venue rentals would be canceled at the last minute or that plainclothes “officials” would appear at the venues and prevent the groups from gathering. Other registered and unregistered Christian groups reported no problems with the rental of venues. Religious groups reported the fewest issues with obtaining venues in Ashgabat. Finding venues in the regional capitals was sometimes more difficult and attempts to meet outside the major cities met with the most official resistance.

Representatives of registered Christian groups said some government officials continued to require them to obtain approval to carry out routine religious activities, such as weekly services, as well as social and charitable activities, including summer camps for children. Some groups sought official approval of such activities even if they did not believe that approval was required, in order to assure the events would not be disrupted.

The government provided funding for 160 citizens to undertake the Hajj pilgrimage. The government reported that 2,133 persons self-funded their Hajj travel while a local media source reported that 2,242 pilgrims self-funded.

Two religious groups reported that, after attempting to do so for one to three years, they were finally successful in reregistering their organizations as required by law. Other groups reported their attempts to register or reregister had stalled due to onerous requirements such as the need to include petitions with personal information, an ambiguous approval process, overlapping bureaucratic responsibilities, general unresponsiveness from the government, and intentional obfuscation on the part of the government. One common complaint was the requirement for an organization’s legal address to be separate from the place of worship. This requirement, which was not official but nonetheless widely imposed, posed a burden of renting an offsite office location as a legal address, a burden some of the smaller and less financially endowed organizations were unable to meet.

Religious groups reported the government continued to prevent or severely limit the importation of and access to religious literature although some groups were successful in importing literature. Although by law registered religious groups were allowed to import religious literature, they said the government’s opaque procedures for seeking the approval of religious literature made it extremely difficult. The Quran remained unavailable in state bookstores in Ashgabat, although many individuals kept a Soviet era copy in Arabic or Russian in their homes. Few translations were available in the Turkmen language.

One Christian church reported that it successfully imported 50 copies of the Bible, 25 in Russian and 25 in Turkmen. While multiple churches reported success in importing Bibles, they were only able to import a small number of books and the imports could not exceed the number of registered members of the church.

Forum 18 reported that in January, security officials at Ashgabat Airport prevented a citizen from boarding an airplane to return to her job in Turkey, stating she had been banned from leaving the country. In December 2018, Forum 18 said that security personnel at the airport detained her because she was bringing back copies of the Quran. Officers seized the copies of the Quran and held her at the airport for 24 hours. “The police officer asked no questions, but the men in civilian clothes asked questions one after the other,” the woman told Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), according to Forum 18. She said the two men shouted at her: “Aren't you ashamed bringing such books with you, you're a woman! So you're trying to bring in religious/political propaganda!” Once she was released, local security officers also questioned her in Lebap Region. According to Forum 18, the Migration Service in Ashgabat refused to explain why she was prevented from leaving the country.

During the year, the Muftiate of Turkmenistan published two religious books: “Prayer book (teaches you how to pray, 2017)” and “Fasting Book (teaches you how to fast, 2019).” They were available in local bookstores, making it the first time religious books were made available in a government bookstore in at least six years, according to local observers.

Members of various religious groups reported the government and state-affiliated enterprises continued to interfere in the purchase or long-term rental of land and buildings for worship or meeting purposes. Some of the groups reported that landlords feared government reprisal if they leased or rented properties to be used as places of worship. Some groups reported that they had secured properties only to have the landlords renege on the contacts after being instructed by the government. Other groups stated that attempts to purchase land or property to use as a place of worship were stymied by intentional government obfuscation or flat denial. Registered and unregistered religious groups reported continued difficulty in renting space for holiday celebrations from private landlords, which they attributed to landlords' concerns about potential government disapproval.

On January 8, RFE/RL reported that persons who practiced Islam in Lebap and Dashoguz Provinces during working hours were prevented from doing so by local

security forces. The report said that government employees were threatened with termination if they practiced Islam at work and were questioned by authorities over their religion.

RFE/RL reported on January 30 that security services did not allow high school students to attend Friday prayer at local mosques in Ashgabat. The parents of these students reported that local security services dressed in civilian clothing prevented high school students from entering mosques.

On February 5, Forum 18 reported that police in Ashgabat and Lebap Provinces forced men under 40 to shave their beards and mustaches as they were allegedly viewed as extremist Wahhabis. Reports stated that police conducted a similar campaign in September.

According to a May 10 report on RFE's Turkmen Service, the muftiate and state-controlled media did not announce the beginning of Ramadan, and few people in the country observed the fast during Ramadan. Forum 18 reported that some Muslims said they feared the police or security services would brand them as "extremists" if they were widely known to be observing the Ramadan fast.

According to a report in May on RFE/RL, religious sermons in the country's state-controlled mosques often contained language praising the president and wishing him health and success. An RFE/RL correspondent who attended prayers in several mosques in Ashgabat said that one imam called on his congregation to love the president and to pray for the downfall of his foes. "May Allah save [the president] from all misfortunes and may his enemies fall at his feet," the correspondent recalled the imam saying on May 17.

Mosques were under construction in Tejen and in Turkmenabat at year's end. The theology faculty in the Turkmen State University history department in Ashgabat continued to be the only university-level faculty members allowed to provide Islamic higher education. The MNB reportedly continued to vet student candidates for admission to this program. It was not possible to study theological subjects other than state-approved Islamic theology. Women remained banned from the program.

According to members of the Protestant community, clergy in Protestant organizations continued to receive their religious education abroad or via distance learning.

The government continued its practice of approving the appointment of all senior Muslim clerics. The Russian Orthodox Church and other religious groups continued to be financed independently; the government was not involved in appointing their leadership, but the senior Russian Orthodox priest was required to be a Turkmen citizen.

Unlike previous years, leaders of religious groups stated they could travel abroad during the year.

The government continued its practice of denying visas to foreigners suspected of conducting or intending to conduct missionary activity. Religious groups able to obtain religious visitor visas for foreign religious speakers said the government continued to grant such visas for very short durations and required the groups to complete burdensome paperwork. As in previous years, the government did not report the number of religious visitors it allowed to visit the country, nor did it report the number of visa applications of foreign religious visitors it had denied. According to the official government newspaper *Neytral'nyy Turkmenistan*, on September 14, during an extended Cabinet of Ministers meeting, Prosecutor General Batyr Atdayev reported on corruption and bribery at the muftiate. Reportedly, the chief specialist of the mufti's administration, Rovshen Allaberdiyev, chief specialist of the human resources department at the Muftiate Muhametmyrat Gurbangeldiyev, and chief specialist of the department conducting liaison with religious organizations at the Cabinet of Ministers Gurbanberdi Nursahedov took bribes from September 2018 to July 2019 from individuals who wanted to participate in the Hajj. All three were arrested and their property confiscated, including money and four apartments.

Opposition media continued to report that, despite the quota of approximately 5,000 pilgrims authorized by the Saudi government, the government restricted the number of Hajj pilgrims to the number that could be carried onboard a Turkmenistan Airlines Boeing 777. A government media website, however, reported that 2,242 citizens self-funded their travel.

In September and November the MOJ conducted roundtable meetings with leaders of registered and unregistered religious organizations. Many religious groups stated this was a productive meeting and a small sign of progress, but continued to experience an either poor or complete lack of response to inquiries. Outside of the roundtable meetings and direct communication with the ministries, religious groups have no official methods of advocacy.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Minority religious groups said persons who are not Sunni Muslim or Russian Orthodox continued to report harassment, such as public shaming, by their family members, friends, and neighbors. Members of registered Christian groups continued to report hostility from acquaintances due to their religious affiliation. Religious leaders and others stated they were reluctant to speak out publicly about religious freedom issues out of fear of harassment, ostracism, or public shaming by their family members, friends, and neighbors. Numerous citizens stated that the government's suspicion of religion was often mirrored in the private sector, and that membership in a minority religious organization or even outward expressions of religion could result in the loss of employment or employment opportunities. Some members of minority religious groups reported continued societal prejudices against religious groups that were not part of the Sunni Muslim majority.

Persons who joined non-Sunni Muslim or Russian Orthodox religious groups reported continuing societal criticism. Ethnic Turkmen who converted from Islam received more societal scrutiny than ethnic non-Turkmen converts and continued to be ostracized at community events, especially in rural areas, according to representatives of religious minority groups.

Between September 2018 and May 2019, Jehovah's Witnesses reported that unknown individuals distributed leaflets in Russian and Turkmen containing defamatory statements about the Witnesses. The Witnesses stated that the "leaflets included slanderous material designed to incite hatred, but they also targeted individual Witnesses and included personal data, photographs, names, birth dates and addresses." Officials took no action to stop these distributions.

According to Christian community leaders, Muslims who converted to Christianity faced pressure from families, friends, and local communities to return to their former faith.

Forum 18 reported the level of societal harassment again increased for Jehovah's Witnesses, who stated they continued to be treated with suspicion and scrutiny by fellow citizens.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In meetings and official correspondence with government officials, the Ambassador, embassy representatives, and U.S. government officials continued to

express concerns about issues of religious freedom in the country. These included the legal status of conscientious objectors, Turkmenistan's listing as a "Country of Particular Concern," the ability of religious groups to register or reregister, and easing restrictions on the importation of religious literature. U.S. officials engaged counterparts both in Turkmenistan and the U.S.-Turkmenistan Annual Bilateral Conference in Washington, D.C. The Ambassador, personally in meetings, and the embassy, via diplomatic notes, requested that President Berdimuhamedov pardon all Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned as conscientious objectors.

In October the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom sent a letter to President Berdimuhamedov urging him to "take the concrete steps necessary to bring Turkmenistan's laws and practices on religion into line with international standards..." and "...allow us to remove Turkmenistan from the CPC list."

Embassy officers met on a regular basis with eleven minority religious groups to discuss their challenges in the face of a restrictive environment for religious freedoms. Topics discussed with these groups included: the status and challenges of the groups' registration and reregistration, the groups' ability to secure a permanent place of worship, the requirement to keep a legal address in a location physically separate from the place of worship, the challenges of importing religious literature, harassment of members by both government and nongovernment entities, restrictions on proselytizing, the religious groups' relations with the government, interreligious cooperation, the ability of clerics to access prisoners and military personnel, and the organizations' ability to carry out educational and charity activities. Outreach to majority Muslim communities remained difficult due to government restrictions, government control of Islamic clergy and institutions, and fear of government reprisal for speaking with foreign officials.

Since 2014, Turkmenistan has been designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 18, 2019, the Secretary of State redesignated Turkmenistan as a CPC and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompany designation as required in the "important national interest of the United States."