

Of Golden Statues and Spiritual Guidebooks: A Report on Freedom of Religion and the Cult of the President in Turkmenistan

Alex Norman

Introduction

For the majority of humans, religious belief is a central organising factor in one's life. The freedom or right to manifest that belief is therefore of utmost importance. Indeed it has been considered so important that the United Nations (UN) wrote the right to freedom of religion and belief into its Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.¹ However this freedom is far from being universally enjoyed. The focus of this paper, the Central Asian state of Turkmenistan, is a case in point. The regime of Turkmenistan has been described as one of the world's most oppressive and totalitarian. With a human rights climate described in terms of 'a fundamental absence' of religious freedom, and the actions of President Niyazov towards religions not approved by the state, the open practice of religion has become dangerous to safety and to liberty.² This paper describes recent events in which the government of Turkmenistan has interfered with its peoples' right to freedom of belief. The ideological gap left by the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent struggle for control and national identity has led to many serious breaches of this right. It is argued that these actions are clearly a part of an attempt by President Niyazov to construct a 'Turkmen' nation from the Soviet ashes, which has included a personality cult of great vanity. These events will be shown to be a clear instance of discrimination against religious groups, founded in the fear of losing control of the government and of the 'identity' of the nation. The ramifications of such discrimination in the light of the 'War on Terror' provide an insight to the political workings of global diplomacy.

¹ United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1949.

² United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2006 Annual Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom* (Washington, 2006) 166.

On a Panegyric Note

The rejection of difference is a key motivating factor in religious discrimination, as are notions of superiority or exclusivity of religious truth. When the state is responsible for such discrimination, the situation becomes much more complex, especially for the scholar attempting to find the reasons behind it. Religiously, Turkmenistan is predominantly Sunni Islamic (88.5%), the remainder of the population being mostly Russian Orthodox Christians (11.4%).³ Historically, the Sunni population has shown little inclination to follow the fundamentalist strains exhibited in other countries and most follow their own brand of vernacular Islam. Nissman claims that ‘Islam manifests itself in almost every aspect of Turkmen life’.⁴ In Turkmenistan, he maintains, Islam remains closely linked with tribal and clan institutions. Most ethnic Turkmen identify themselves as a member of one of the five major tribes: the Tekes of Mary, the Tekes of Attok, the Ersaris, the Yomuds and the Goklans, all of whom speak dialects of the same Orguz Turkic language. Ethnic Turkmen are estimated to compose 73.5% of the population and are the most traditional, in terms of division along tribal lines, of the Central Asian peoples.⁵

At the time of independence, Turkmenistan had the highest rate of unemployment, highest infant mortality rate, lowest literacy level, and the most polluted agricultural land in the Soviet Union.⁶ Sadly, little progress has been made in moving from the authoritarian style of government of the Soviet to a more democratic one and Turkmenistan remains, alone amongst the post-Soviet bloc countries, a one-party state.⁷ Article 1 of Turkmenistan’s constitution (of 18 May 1992) states that Turkmenistan is a ‘presidential republic’. It has a president, a prime minister and a parliament called the ‘Supreme

³ S K Batalden and S L Batalden, *The Newly Independent States of Eurasia* (Phoenix, 1993) 157.

⁴ D Nissman, ‘Turkmenistan: Just Like Old Times’ in I Bremmer and R Taras (eds) *New States, New Politics: Building the Post-Soviet Nations* (Cambridge, 1997) 642.

⁵ J Minahan, *Miniature Empires: A Historical Dictionary of the Newly Independent States* (Westport, 1998) 265.

⁶ A Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism?* (Karachi, 1994) 188.

⁷ Minahan, *op cit*, 271.

Soviet'. The government also includes the *Khalk Maslakhaty* (Peoples' Council) for passage of constitutional amendments. However the party system and constitutional process are at best nominal, as in reality all power has lain in the hands of President Niyazov. Other parties trying to register have been banned on the basis that they have the potential to promote ethnic, religious or political tensions within society. The Turkmenistan Democratic Party (TDP – the renamed Turkmenistan Communist Party (TCP)) has pledged reforms in economics, politics and culture to democratise Turkmenistan's society, and to cultivate and develop Turkmen history and traditions. It has promised to act without regard for nationality or personal beliefs, and to promote equality. Turkmenistan has been recognised by most countries and is a member of the UN and the Islamic Cooperation Organisation. Turkmenistan is also a signatory of the Helsinki Convention – a hypocritical position considering the disregard for many of the freedoms set out in the act. Indeed, Turkmenistan has been referred to as a 'worst-case scenario of post-Soviet development'.⁸

Religious Freedom and Religious Discrimination in Turkmenistan

During the Soviet era, all religion in Turkmenistan was either controlled or suppressed. The present situation had its beginnings in February 1990, when Turkmenistan's First Deputy Procurator (similar to the role of vice president in the *oblast* administrative division) announced that measures would be taken against 'unregistered movements'. The party line was that those organisations not contributing to 'perfecting socialism' would meet opposition. A statement by the former head of the Islam Democratic Party, Abdureshid Saidov, to the effect that Islam was incompatible with Marxism-Leninism, understandably left the predominantly

⁸ S Badertinov, 'Turkmenistan Country Report' in A Karatnycky, A Motyl and A Schnetzer (eds) *Nations in Transit 2001: Civil Society, Democracy, and Markets in East Central Europe and the Newly Independent States* (New Brunswick, 2001) 379.

On a Panegyric Note

Marxist-Leninist staffed government in a difficult position in a society in which Islam is the dominant religion.⁹

President Niyazov was elected to office by the TCP on 27 October 1990 and retained his position throughout the process of independence. Since that date, numerous and regular human rights violations have occurred. Critics of the party or the president are suppressed and censorship utilised to support government ideology. Religious minorities, especially those that do not fit the president's ideal of Turkmen culture, are also suppressed. Vitaly Ponomarev of the Moscow-based Central Asia Human Rights Information Centre states that 'Turkmen authorities have increasingly used falsified criminal charges to combat minority religious groups'.¹⁰ Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostal Christians, other Protestant denominations, and Bahá'ís have been particularly targeted, usually on the spurious grounds of holding unregistered religious gatherings. A 2001 US State Department report on religious freedom in Turkmenistan claims that the governmental harassment of unregistered religious groups has intensified in recent times. However the report makes the important point that this harassment is not present at a societal level.¹¹ Socially the vast majority of interactions between religious traditions appear to have been peaceful, tolerant and inclusive.

Turkmenistan's constitution provides for freedom of religion, as does the 1991 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations, which was amended in 1995 and 1997. In practice, however, the law has been interpreted to control religious life tightly and to severely restrict the activities of all religions. Article 6 of Turkmenistan's Constitution states that people are free to practice

⁹ Nissman, *op cit*, 642-643.

¹⁰ Quoted in S Blagov, 'Religious Minorities Doomed in Turkmenistan', *Asia Times*, 30 September 1999, accessed 12 December 2006, <http://www.atimes.com/c-asia/AI30Ag01.html>.

¹¹ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, US Department of State, *2001 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom: Turkmenistan* (Washington, 2001).

religion;¹² Article 11 states: ‘Everyone has the right independently to determine her or his own religious preference, to practice any religion alone or in association with others, to practice no religion, to express and disseminate beliefs related to religious preference, and to participate in the performance of religious cults, rituals, and ceremonies’.¹³ The government’s legal justification for discrimination against religious groups comes from Article 3. This ensures freedom of conscience and states that the freedom to profess a religion is subject only to restrictions necessary to safeguard ‘public safety and order, life and health of the people, and morale’.¹⁴ The vagueness in the wording provides the government enormous latitude in interpreting the concepts of ‘public safety, order, and morale’. As a result, the government seeks to maintain a close relationship with religious representatives and institutions.

It does so by exercising control over all religious activities. All religious organisations must register with the government, although only two religious organisations have had an easy time doing so: the Russian Orthodox Church and the state-approved Spiritual Directorate of Muslims. In order to attain registration, an organisation must have at least five hundred adult citizens in each locality in which it wishes to operate. This makes the position of minority religious traditions almost impossible, as they may not have five hundred members nationwide, and effectively prevents all but the state-approved Islam and Orthodox Christianity from registering. There are for example only an estimated one thousand Jews in Turkmenistan. The situation is further exacerbated by government officials’ harassment of those who do publicly sign documents pertaining to their religious beliefs. Non-registered religious groups are prohibited from conducting religious activities, including gathering, disseminating religious materials and proselytising. The

¹² Cited in Nissman, *op cit*, 643.

¹³ Quoted in Z T Caldwell, *A Global Review of the Denial of Religious Freedom, Summer 2001* (International Association for Religious Freedom, 2001) accessed 12 December 2006, <http://www.iarf.net/GlobalIssues/Updates/Summer%202001.pdf>.

¹⁴ Cited in Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, ‘*Turkmenistan*’: *Implementation of the Helsinki Accords: Human Rights and Democratisation in the Newly Independent States of the Former Soviet Union* (Washington, 1993) 183.

On a Panegyric Note

Baptists actually meet the numerical criteria for registration in some regions, yet were long denied recognition.¹⁵ When citizens openly proclaim their attempt to register, authorities regularly harass signatories in order to make them withdraw their support.¹⁶

Members of religious groups not approved by the state have faced harassment, imprisonment, loss of employment and confiscation of property. These measures have typically been carried out by the National Security Council (KNB, formerly KGB), which appears to have long been under the direct control of the president. In February 2000, authorities arrested Muslim religious leader Khoja Ahmed Orazylych for criticising the government and the president in a Radio Liberty broadcast. Subsequently they demolished the mosque he operated and burnt copies of his translation of the *Qur'an* that the government itself had commissioned and approved.¹⁷ In June 2001, a family of Jehovah's Witnesses was evicted from their home for conducting Bible study meetings there.¹⁸ Members of Jehovah's Witnesses who had been imprisoned for conscientious objection were not released at the end of their term because they refused to swear an oath of loyalty to the president.¹⁹ The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) has also been the target of harassment and in 2001 the government demolished their temple in Mary. The Keston News Service reported in February 2001 that local authorities of the Niyazov district of Ashgabat (named after the president) had sealed the country's last functioning Baptist church. In March 2001, the authorities reportedly broke the seals and removed

¹⁵ F Kazemzadeh, *Testimony on the State of Democratization and Human Rights in Turkmenistan*, presented before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 21 March 2000.

¹⁶ International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, *Religious Intolerance in Selected OSCE Countries in 2000: Report to the Seminar on Freedom of Religion or Belief in the OSCE Region* (The Hague, 2001) 26.

¹⁷ Badertinov, *op cit*, 385.

¹⁸ Jehovah's Witnesses Office of Public Information, 'A Turkmenistan Family Loses Apartment for Studying the Bible', 29 June 2001, accessed 12 December 2006, http://www.jw-media.org/region/asia_pacific/turkmenistan/english/releases/religious_freedom/tuk_e010629.htm

¹⁹ US Department of State, *2001 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom: Turkmenistan*.

the church's contents. The church had been in existence for 20 years, was corporately owned by the congregation and had been registered under the Soviet Union, but had lost registration in 1997 under the new law.²⁰ A further, unregistered Baptist congregation was also evicted in March 2001, this time from the private house in which it had held religious services for over twenty years.²¹ Finally, in early May 2002, Protestants in a Turkmen village were ordered to swear an oath on a copy of President Niyazov's 'spiritual book', the *Rukhnama*, renouncing the Bible and their faith in Jesus.²² Interestingly, the one minority religion that has so far been able to practice quasi-legally and without harassment has been the Catholic Church. Its three priests enjoy diplomatic immunity.²³

These are just some of many continuing examples of restrictions and violations of religious freedom the people of Turkmenistan have faced in recent years. Those particularly active in unauthorised religious groups are regularly detained on fabricated charges, and university students have been threatened with expulsion if they continue 'illegal' religious activities. The *Gengeshi* (Council for Religious Affairs), Justice Ministry, the police and local authorities, in addition to the KNB, have all been involved in these acts. These institutions are understood to have been under the direct command of President Niyazov. It must be noted, however, that keeping an up-to-date account of the state of religious freedom in Turkmenistan is difficult, as no locally based human rights groups are allowed to operate in the country.

The government also restricts and controls access to religious education. Critical of religious schools in the past, President Niyazov ordered all remaining *madrasas* (Islamic schools) in the country closed in 2001. This measure relates to the government's position on parents who raise their children according to their religious beliefs,

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² F Corley, 'Turkmenistan: Protestants Forced to Renounce their Faith', *Keston News Service*, 17 May 2002.

²³ International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, *Religious Intolerance*, 29.

On a Panegyric Note

which it sees as detracting from a nationalist upbringing. An Adventist pastor was detained in Turkmenabad in October 2000 because the children of congregation members were present at the prayer service.²⁴ Further restrictions have been placed on ‘non-traditional’ religious traditions by the ruling that foreign missionary work is prohibited. Ethnic Turkmen found to be disseminating the religious material of unregistered religious groups have been found to receive harsher physical and legal treatment than non-ethnic Turkmen,²⁵ further highlighting the president’s peculiar aim (unsettlingly reminiscent of Nazi policies) to create a national Turkmen identity

In 1997 the government passed a new version of the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations, which effectively banned all religious movements apart from the two state sanctioned religions – over which the government exerts a great deal of control in the selection of religious clergy.²⁶ Many religious groups that had been registered for some time, including Baptists and Bahá’is, were suddenly ‘deregistered’ and prevented from reregistering due to the onerous registration requirements. This law appears to be an attempt to rid Turkmenistan of religious groups deemed ‘non-traditional’ by the president.

The legal position of religious movements is made more tenuous by corruption in the legal system in Turkmenistan. The president appoints most judges and oversees the functioning of the courts in the interests of the regime. Public prosecutors are given broad powers, whilst defendants are often denied due process rights, such as the right to a public hearing, the right to access evidence, the right to call witnesses to testify on their behalf and the right to legal council and representation. Compounding this, most of the available lawyers are employed by the state. In addition, many defendants are coerced into

²⁴ US Department of State, *2001 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom*.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2002 Report on Turkmenistan* (Washington, 2002) 3.

confession.²⁷ As a result the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has for a number of consecutive years recommended that Turkmenistan be designated a ‘Country of Particular Concern’ for ‘egregious, ongoing, and systematic violations of religious freedom’.²⁸ The motivation of the government is best expressed by former Commissioner Firuz Kazemzadeh of the USCIRF: ‘The government lives in fear. It is frightened of events that have overtaken Afghanistan’.²⁹ Thankfully some of this pressure has recently been eased. In 2004 President Niyazov issued decrees decriminalising unregistered religious activity and easing some requirements for registration.³⁰ Nevertheless, the government continues to see religious organisations as a potential threat to its own power and stability.

The Cult Of The President And The Creation Of The Turkmen Nation

In its quest to construct a Turkmen nation, the government has emphasised stability and gradual reform, whilst focusing on nationalism and the glorification of president Niyazov. The 1993 OSCE report on Turkmenistan claims that, despite the repressive policies, the government may well have ‘bought’ this stability: the country’s relatively small population and large natural resources mean that the government may effectively mollify the population economically.³¹ Rashid argues that this policy has been superficial at best, however, as loyalties lie first with the extended family, then the clan and then the tribe. The state still usually figures last in the minds of most Turkmen.³² The US State Department sees the current situation as a holdover from the Soviet era. The government believes

²⁷ International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, *Judicial Systems and Human Rights in the OSCE Region in 2001* (The Hague, 2002) 36.

²⁸ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2002 Annual Report*, 13.

²⁹ Kazemzadeh, *op cit*.

³⁰ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2006 Annual Report*, 167.

³¹ See Nissman, *op cit*, 642.

³² Rashid, *op cit*, 200.

On a Panegyric Note

that liberal religious policies may lead to political dissent. This may be the case with extremist movements prevalent in neighbouring states, but the government also views participation in moderate, non-traditional religions as a threat to the state's stability and neutrality.³³ In spite of the oppressive measures and restrictions on personal freedoms outlined above, however, Turkmenistan has proven to be the most politically stable of the new Central Asian states.

President Niyazov placed great emphasis on developing a strong national identity to aid stability, maintaining a cultural identity by stopping outside influence, and strengthening Turkmenistan's position internationally. A part of the present problem has been his perception of the ideological competition present through Central Asia for the past two centuries between Islam, tribalism, nationalism and socialism.³⁴ In Turkmenistan, political unity as such is relatively recent, developing mainly in the twentieth century. Under Russian rule, language and religion (Islam) were the two main factors that transcended tribal division and the putative national concept, and helped to maintain some form of cultural belonging. A third, more elusive factor can be called 'Turkmenism', what it means to be a Turkmen as opposed to anything else.³⁵ In addition to this, the strengthening of Turkmen language in schools has been identified as an important step towards developing a new national identity. After independence, Niyazov encouraged a nationalist ideology as part of a nascent personality cult. Indeed, the situation in Turkmenistan became so bizarre that it has been compared to that of North Korea, with its system of lifetime leadership and the personality cults surrounding its leaders.³⁶

Underlying and permeating the factors that influence the control of religion and belief is the lasting effect of more than one hundred years of Soviet control. Motyl argues that the current political

³³ US Department of State, *2001 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom: Turkmenistan*.

³⁴ Rashid, *op cit*, 25.

³⁵ Nissman, *op cit*, 637.

³⁶ S Blagov, 'Turkmenistan's President-for-Life Slated as Destabilising', *Asia Times*, 6 January 2000.

situation is a legacy of the country's history under communist rule. The level to which a country was politically, economically and socially dominated during the communist era, he argues, determines the extent to which institutions such as those instantiated in a democracy, free market and civil society can exist. Turkmenistan (perhaps the most dominated, certainly one of the least technologically advanced, and the least developed in terms of infrastructure and autonomous government) faced the almost impossible task of constructing a democracy, an economy and a social morale from what was effectively chaos. It is therefore unsurprising, Motyl asserts, that a totalitarian regime emerged from the desperate struggle for control.³⁷ Rashid makes the interesting point that in the 1917 revolution, most people were eager for independence and were denied it, whereas in the 1991 revolution, many people did not want the independence that was thrust upon them.³⁸ However, this does not seem to take into account the 1991 referendum mentioned above, that overwhelmingly supported independence.

Prior to the Russian conquest, the dominant forces in Turkmen life were the tribe, clan, family and the Islamic religion; these remain strong forces today. The Soviet policy was directed at dismantling tribal and religious systems and institutions of power, and especially the Islamic clergy, who were considered anti-Bolshevik.³⁹ Rashid argues that the Russians viewed the Central Asian peoples as primitive barbarians, in memory of the centuries lived under the Mongols and the Tartars.⁴⁰ To what extent this group memory features in modern Turkmen politics, he leaves unclear. It is reasonable to assume, however, that the feeling was mutual and that the Turkmen memory of Russian rule is equally bitter. Following independence Turkmenistan faced a massive economic crisis. Food shortages, huge inflation and a sudden need to privatise industry and

³⁷ A Motyl, 'Ten Years After the Soviet Collapse: Persistence of the Past and Prospects for the Future' in Karatnycky, Motyl and Schnetzer, *op cit*, 39.

³⁸ Rashid, *op cit*, 25.

³⁹ Nissman, *op cit*, 635.

⁴⁰ Rashid, *op cit*, 9.

On a Panegyric Note

find buyers for its massive, and now expensive, gas reserves resulted in chaos for the new democratic government. Turkmenistan was initially the most ill-prepared of the Central Asian republics to deal with the problems of independence.⁴¹ The end of the Soviet communist era left an ideological and psychological gap that the government is still trying to fill. We thus see the promotion of an artificial nationalism and the bizarre cult of the leader, where the president is portrayed as an almost superhuman being – even a prophet. The tactics employed by the government in the service of this ideology are reminiscent of Stalinist and Soviet-era repression.

Niyazov sought to keep Turkmenistan isolated and free from political turmoil, continuing the discourse of nationhood implanted by Soviet rule.⁴² To this end, he has created a Stalinist personality cult around himself. He named himself *Turkmenbashi*, ‘the father of the Turkmen nation’, and in December 1999 the *Khalk Maslakhaty* (the supreme legislative body) amended the constitution to make him president for life.⁴³ Ironically, the cult of personality surrounding Niyazov can be seen as quasi-religious: it even included a gold-plated statue that rotates 360 degrees every twenty-four hours so as always to face the sun. The break-up of the Soviet Union gave rise to a significant growth in religious life in Central Asia in both traditional and non-traditional religions. The number of mosques in Turkmenistan has more than tripled since 1990, for example.⁴⁴ Seeing this rise, and noting the increasing influence of foreign systems of belief, Niyazov wrote the *Rukhnama*, a spiritual guidebook on Turkmen culture and heritage, released in February 2001. In the years since its release, the personality cult has been elevated to a new level, the president becoming not only the political ruler but also the spiritual leader of

⁴¹ See E Allworth (ed), *Central Asia: 120 Years of Russian Rule* (Durham, 1989); I Bremmer, ‘Post-Soviet Nationalities Theory: Past, Present, and Future’ in Bremmer and Taras, *op cit*; Rashid, *op cit*, 203.

⁴² Adrienne Lynn Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton and Oxford, 2004) 265.

⁴³ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Commonwealth of Australia, *Turkmenistan: Country Information* (Canberra, 2002) accessed 19 May 2002 <http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/turkmenistan/index.html>.

⁴⁴ Nissman, *op cit*, 642.

the nation. *Rukhnama* is a Perso-Arabic word literally meaning ‘soul book’.⁴⁵ It is portrayed by the state-controlled media as a repository of truth about morality and a guide for the conduct of life for the Turkmen people; it is described using an Islamic idiom that suggests it is revelation that has ‘descended to earth’.⁴⁶ Following the release of the *Rukhnama*, many of Niyazov’s admirers have likened him to a prophet. Indeed, his spokesperson once said he believed Niyazov was a prophet. Niyazov believed the *Rukhnama* should rank in importance next to the Bible and the *Qur’an*. The four hundred page book of moral and ethical commandments was adopted by the *Khalk Maslakhaty* and earned the president the ‘Hero of Turkmenistan’ award for ‘outstanding service’ to the Turkmen people. Incidentally, this was the fourth time he had received the award. He was, to that date, its only recipient.⁴⁷

One of the most disturbing aspects of such violations of human rights was their long-term ramifications. Political repression and refusal to open the economy to attract foreign investment make Turkmenistan one of the most potentially unstable states in Central Asia. The constitution carries many guarantees that do not exist in practice, and many rights and freedoms enshrined in it are open to legislative manipulation due to ambiguous wording.⁴⁸ The most important issue, however, is the interaction between religion and politics. As Boyle and Sheen note poignantly, ‘The interweaving of the religious and the political, whether explicit or concealed, continues to underlie attitudes and behaviour, and to fuel and entrench conflicts’.⁴⁹

The 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the USA have motivated many countries to take ‘anti-terrorist’ steps with the aim of protecting

⁴⁵ Kazemzadeh, *op cit*.

⁴⁶ D Hunsicker, ‘Niyazov Moves to Expand Personality Cult’, *EurasiaNet*, 30 April 2001, accessed 19 May 2002, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav043001.shtml>.

⁴⁷ International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, *Human Rights and Terrorism in the Central Asian OSCE Member States* (The Hague, 2001) 20.

⁴⁸ Nissman, *op cit*, 641.

⁴⁹ K Boyle and J Sheen (eds), *Freedom of Religion and Belief: A World Report* (London and New York, 1997) xv.

On a Panegyric Note

citizens and institutions. In countries such as Turkmenistan, however, this has come at the further expense of basic human rights. Indeed, the UN itself may unintentionally be legitimising the actions of the Turkmen government. Resolution 1373, adopted by the UN Security Council under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, which is binding for all member states, is directed at the combating of 'terrorist acts'. This calls on states to withdraw any support from 'terrorist' organisations and to ensure that the perpetrators of such acts and those assisting them be brought to justice. There has been some concern that the terms 'terrorist' and 'terrorist acts' were vaguely defined and open to differing interpretations. In the case of Turkmenistan, this may have facilitated and legitimised the government's violations of human rights and provided further grounds for action against groups it perceives to be threatening.⁵⁰ At this stage, no action has been taken that directly results from the adoption of the resolution. Turkmenistan needs to retain good foreign relations, especially with its neighbours, as almost all of its export revenue comes from oil, gas and cotton.⁵¹

The increasing violations of human rights in countries such as Turkmenistan must be considered for their potential to contribute to terrorism. Violations of human rights erode confidence in the government, contribute to radicalisation of minority political and religious groups, legitimate the ideologies of militant insurgents and, indeed, constitute a form of state terrorism themselves. With the pretext of the threat of terrorism or, in the case of Turkmenistan, the threat to national stability, repression has in all likelihood contributed to the very situation it seeks to redress. As the OSCE stressed in its 2001 report on terrorism: 'A campaign against terrorism will only be successful when it is also a campaign for human rights'.⁵² The same

⁵⁰ See Amnesty International, *Statement by Amnesty International on the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1373*, 1 October 2001, accessed 23 January 2007, <http://web.amnesty.org/802568F7005C4453/0/6034B129B9D7E8AD80256ADA005D9FCC?Open>. See also International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, *Human Rights and Terrorism*, 4.

⁵¹ Blagov, 'Religious Minorities Doomed in Turkmenistan'.

⁵² International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, *Human Rights and Terrorism*, 4.

report goes on to state that Turkmenistan's human rights record has been the worst in the OSCE region.⁵³ At a 2002 OSCE regional conference on freedom of belief and expression, it was stressed that 'denial of individuals' basic right to worship and to follow a religion of their choice can destabilise a society'.⁵⁴ Disturbingly, the majority of governments' dealings with Turkmenistan seem to be more focused on the short-term tactical goals of maintaining an ally rather than addressing its flagrant human rights abuses. Since the late 1990s, the USCIRF, the advising agency on religious freedom to the US Department of State, has consistently designated Turkmenistan as a 'Country of Particular Concern'. The State Department has consistently failed to do so in its annual reports, however, for reasons that remain unclear.

Niyazov appears to have been out of touch with the terrorised and impoverished population. A recent edict, requiring school-teachers to publish praise of the president in order to qualify for higher pay levels, only serves as further evidence of his megalomania.⁵⁵ Much of the money in the state budget has been spent on monuments sustaining his personality cult, rather than improvements for the country's general economic situation.⁵⁶ Politically and economically, Turkmenistan remains the least changed of all the former Soviet republics. The 1992 post-communist constitution was drafted and passed without public consultation and effectively makes the parliament a rubber-stamp office of the president.⁵⁷ The government views any nongovernmental organisation (NGO) with suspicion, most evident in the fact that authorities generally deny them registration. These are all factors that destabilise the country and contribute to a

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ M McNamara, 'Conference on Freedom of Belief and Expression in Central Asia Calls for Dialogue and Tolerance', *OCSE Newsletter*, March 2002, 9.

⁵⁵ Adrian Blomfield, 'Praise Turkmen Leader or Else, Teachers are Told', *The Telegraph*, 16 September 2006.

⁵⁶ International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, *Human Rights in the OSCE Region: The Balkans, the Caucasus, Europe, Central Asia, and North America, Report 2001* (The Hague, 2001) 309.

⁵⁷ Badertinov, *op cit*, 384.

On a Panegyric Note

rise in militant activism. Until very recently, the situation regarding freedom of belief seemed, for the foreseeable future, unchangeable.

The present situation of religious freedom in Turkmenistan must be considered of great importance. The long-term effects on the nation, and in particular the potential for the repression of religious minorities to promote militant action, is of great concern. The sad irony is that it has been under the pretext of stability that such measures have been taken. Fifteen years after independence, the country is still feeling the effect of over 100 years of Russian rule, which has left it in economic and ideological crisis. The motivations of the government in repressing religious minorities seem to be an attempt to make the country culturally homogenous. The repressive policies and actions of the government towards religious movements seem to be based not so much based on intolerance or on a claim to the exclusivity of the truth, as on fear of diversity and of losing control. Nevertheless, they are grossly misguided.

Coda: A New Dawn?

Heraclitus wrote that ‘the only constant is change’ and, while the political climate in Turkmenistan has been in stasis for some time, there is now great hope for a new beginning. On 21 December 2006, President Saparmurat Niyazov died after suffering cardiac arrest. Human rights commissions and NGOs were quick to highlight the good fortune in this event and to recommend that the Turkmen government take steps to dismantle Niyazov’s self-created personality cult and cease the human rights abuses.⁵⁸ Initial indications are that the country is set for very slow change at best, with the six presidential candidates (all TDP members elected by the People’s Council) pledging to follow the ideals laid out by Niyazov.⁵⁹ Given that Niyazov occupied the positions of president, prime

⁵⁸ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Turkmenistan: Ending the Personality Cult* (Washington, 2007).

⁵⁹ ‘Turkmenistan’s Presidential Candidates Pledge Fealty to Niyazov’s Ideas’, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 1 January 2007, accessed 27 January 2007, <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/01/c4fe9cf4-fe26-4651-8c9d-868f4387b2c1.html>.

minister, commander of the armed forces and leader of the TDP (the only political party allowed in the country), and given that there is no heir apparent, some media sources speculate that infighting will be the likely result.⁶⁰

There are nevertheless some signs that change may be in the winds. On 11 February 2007, the country elected a new president, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, who has stated that restrictions on internet access, making it available only to government officials and embassies, must be lifted.⁶¹ He has likewise pledged significant social reforms, stating, 'I want to be president of a democratic country, where rich people live and work, where all conditions for free life and free work are created'.⁶² This apparent shift in social ideology is a marked change from the previous regime, which prided itself of isolation and the quashing of difference and dissent. What is in store for the religious groups of Turkmenistan can only be guessed. What is certain is that the new president and his government will have the opportunity to end what has recently been one of the world's most oppressive and restrictive environments for the practice of religion. We can only watch and hope.

⁶⁰ Breffni O'Rourke, 'Turkmenistan: President's Death Brings Muted World Reaction', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 21 December 2006, accessed 27 January 1007, <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/12/dbe5205b-39ae-481b-91b8-d55df844d4b0.html>.

⁶¹ 'Internet Cafes Open in Turkmenistan After Ban Reversed', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 16 February 2007.

⁶² Al Jazeera News, 'Turkmenistan Voters Promised Reform', *Al Jazeera.net*, 4 January 2007, accessed 27 January 2007, <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/6D91951B-69FB-4528-BAE8-CE6BCCE16CB6.htm>.