

FINAL WWL 2019 COUNTRY DOSSIER

TURKMENISTAN

LEVEL 3/EMBARGO

(Reporting period: 1 November 2017 – 31 October 2018)

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Introduction

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Introduction

World Watch List Turkmenistan	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2019	69	23
WWL 2018	68	19
WWL 2017	67	19
WWL 2016	66	19
WWL 2015	63	20

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country was among the fifty highest scoring countries (Top 50) in the WWL 2015-2019 reporting periods.

Please note: The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.

WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Turkmenistan

Link for general background information

See BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16094646>

Recent country history

After 69 years as part of the Soviet Union Turkmenistan declared its independence on 27 October 1991. Until the death of former President Saparmurat Niyazov in 2006, the country had been in the tight grip of his quasi-religious personality cult, based on his book, called "Ruhnama". This book and its philosophy dominated public life and were taught in schools and universities. Perhaps the climax of this reverence was the construction of a huge tower in the capital Ashgabat which was topped by a golden, rotating statue of Mr. President. The statue was always facing the sun. The official explanation was that the sun followed the statue, not the other way round. It is hardly surprising that observers have referred to the country as the North Korea of Central Asia.

Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov took office after President Niyazov's death in December 2006 and cancelled some of his decisions, e.g. to re-name months and days according to Turkmen heroes, but he had to move carefully in deposing his predecessor who had been revered almost like a god. The compulsory teaching of Ruhnama in the country's education system was gradually reduced. The golden statue was moved to the outskirts of Ashgabat.

It did not take long before Berdymukhamedov developed his own personality cult around the honorary title "Arkadag" (Protector). After Berdymukhamedov's re-election in 2012, a new era was announced: the "Era of Supreme Happiness." The regime decided to tear down thousands of homes and rebuild the capital Ashgabat as a white marbled city. On 25 May 2015 the authorities in Turkmenistan unveiled a giant statue of President Berdymukhamedov on horseback, holding a dove - everything covered with a layer of 24-carat gold. In September 2016 constitutional amendments were made to allow the president to run in future presidential elections regardless of his age.

The religious landscape

According to the World Christian Database (WCD 2018) 96.1% of the population is Muslim – predominantly Sunni. However, it would be wrong to call Turkmenistan a Muslim country. 70 years of atheism during the Soviet era have left a deep influence. The government (the heirs of the atheist Soviets) is staunchly secular and has Islam firmly under control. Muslim citizens follow basic Islamic culture rather than strict Muslim teachings.

According to WCD, the next largest religious categories are agnostics and atheists, found particularly in the capital Ashgabat and other major cities. This is the result of 70 years of forced atheism by the government of the USSR from 1917 to 1991.

Christians are a very small group making up 1.2% of the population. The overwhelming majority of them are Russian Orthodox (i.e. ethnic Russians). As in many other countries in Central Asia the Christian community is having to face the emigration of many Russians. This is not compensated by the increase in the number of converts to Christianity, who currently number about 1,000. One of the major problems for Christians in Turkmenistan (and the other countries in Central Asia) is the fact that there is much division and little cooperation between the various denominations. Unfortunately this makes the Church very weak and it plays into the hands of the government.

There is no freedom of religion in Turkmenistan despite the claims to the contrary in the country's constitution. The dictatorial government of Turkmenistan uses a huge body of state agents (police, secret services, local imams) to closely monitor all religious activities. It has imposed so many restrictions on religious freedom that one can say that this does not exist in Turkmenistan. This is the case for all religions, not only for the Christian faith.

The political landscape

Turkmenistan is a presidential republic, whereby the President of Turkmenistan is both head of state and head of government. No true opposition parties are allowed. Power is concentrated in the presidency; the [judiciary](#) is wholly subservient to the government, with all judges appointed for five-year terms by the president without legislative review.

Turkmenistan is the Central Asian country with the highest level of state control in almost every aspect of life. The US State Department reports that the regime has imposed "laws and policies that restrict religious freedom through registration requirements, strict regulation of the production and dissemination of religious literature, and restrictions on permissible activities of religious groups and individuals."

According to [IRF 2017](#), since May 2015, the State Commission on Religious Organizations and Expert Evaluation of Religious Information Resources (SCROEERIR) is responsible for controlling religious affairs. The Law on Religious Organizations and Religious Freedom requires all religious organizations, including those already registered under the previous law on religion, to reregister with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) to operate legally, a process involving the concurrence of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the Ministry of National Security (MNB), the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), and other government agencies. The law states the MOJ will not register a religious organization if its goals or activities contradict the country's constitution or if it is not recognized as a religion by the State Commission on Religious Organizations and Expert Evaluation of Religious Information Resources (SCROEERIR), under the grand mufti's leadership. The law also states the government may dissolve a religious organization for activities violating the lawful interests of the country's citizens or for harming their "health and morale." It prohibits all activity by unregistered religious groups.

The socio-economic landscape

The state is in charge of the production sector and it also controls the important export sector. As the country is abundantly rich in resources like oil, natural gas and other raw materials, also in cotton and grain, people heading these industries can make a lot of money. Purchasing and trade monopolies are a means of keeping prices well below the world market, but are also points where corruption enters. At least eight of twelve domestic banks are state-owned and as the state decides which ministerial debts are abolished, banking practice is limited.

Despite the country's potential wealth due to enormous amounts of natural gas and other commodities, only a very small elite benefits from it. The unemployment and the poverty rate remain on a very high level and the considerable growth of GDP – per capita as well as in percentage – has not improved the living conditions of all citizens on an equal basis. The huge drop in the oil price since 2014 has had a rather negative effect on Turkmenistan's economy. The planned reconstruction of the capital Ashgabat had to be delayed.

Turkmenistan has a high level of unemployment. According to the [CIA World Factbook](#), the unemployment figures stood at 60% in 2004 and have hardly improved since then. Corruption is

endemic on all levels of administration and government. The power groups within the regime have no interest in losing their opportunity of making money.

Thanks to the former Soviet system of education, practically every citizen in Turkmenistan is literate. This means that people who are interested in the Christian message can receive materials in their own language. The restrictions imposed by the government (all materials must be approved and only registered groups may be active) mean that most distribution etc. must be done unofficially.

Turkmenistan has a bad reputation as far as human rights are concerned and its prisons and labor camps are constantly overpopulated. Literally thousands of people are held in appalling conditions. The best known of these is the Seydi labor camp in the desert some 40 kilometers (25 miles) north-west of the city of Turkmenabad near the Amu Darya River and Uzbek border. Every year there are amnesty days when hundreds of prisoners are released.

In general, Christians experience the same problems as all other people in the country and are not especially targeted economically or socially. The only exception to this is the pressure from the social environment (family, local imams, villagers) on Christians with a Muslim background.

Concluding remarks

Turkmenistan is under the tight control of a dictatorial government which is not under pressure or threat from any side. It is therefore safe to assume that there will be no important change of policy by the current government. For Christians this means that they will continue to live under huge pressure for some time to come.

External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Turkmenistan

- The political landscape: judiciary
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Turkmenistan
- The political landscape: IRF 2017
<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dclid=281038>
- The socio-economic landscape: CIA World Factbook,
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tx.html>

WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2018	Christians	Chr%
5,851,000	69,800	1.2

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

How did Christians get there?

The first Christians to enter Central Asia (including Turkmenistan) were Nestorian missionaries in the 4th century. From the 5th century onwards there were great movements of peoples in Asia and Europe and for Turkmenistan this meant the arrival of a Turkic tribe from eastern Asia named Oghuz (the ethnic ancestors of the Turkmen). In the 8th century Islam entered the region, following the tracks of the Silk Road trade route, and Christians disappeared from the country.

In the 16th century Turkmenistan became part of the Uzbek khanates of Khiva and Bukhara which deeply influenced the country's culture and religion.

The current presence of Christians in Turkmenistan dates from the 19th century. In 1867 the Russian Empire expanded its territory into Central Asia during a number of military campaigns, conquering the khanates of Khiva and Bukhara. The regime brought in ethnic Russians, who mostly belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church. During the Second World War, Joseph Stalin ordered the deportation of large numbers of ethnic Germans, Ukrainians, Poles and Koreans to Central Asia. With them, other Christian denominations found their way into Turkmenistan.

What church networks exist today?

Church networks: Turkmenistan	Christians	%
Orthodox	52,100	74.6
Catholic	280	0.4
Protestant	3,200	4.6
Independent	10,600	15.2
Unaffiliated	3,600	5.2
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	69,780	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	790	1.1
Renewalist movement	3,900	5.6

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. Roman Catholics: All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. Protestants: Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. Independents: Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). Unaffiliated Christians: Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. Doubly-affiliated Christians: Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. Evangelical movement: Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. Renewalist movement: Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

Communities of expatriate Christians do not exist according to Open Doors sources.

Historical Christian communities are by far the largest group of Christians in Turkmenistan, the biggest denomination being the Russian Orthodox Church. This Russian-speaking church is shrinking due to the emigration of its members. The Roman Catholic Church only has about 250 believers.

Converts to Christianity: The number of converts is approximately 1,000. The indigenous church of Turkmenistan is a very young church but growing slowly. These Christians with a Muslim background experience much pressure from family, friends and community (especially in rural areas).

Non-traditional Christian communities consist of about 16,000 Christians made up of Baptists, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Charismatics, Full Gospel and others.

Religious context

Religious Context: Turkmenistan	Numbers	%
Christians	69,800	1.2
Muslim	5,624,000	96.1
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	780	0.0
Ethnoreligionist	920	0.0
Jewish	3,300	0.1
Bahai	1,200	0.0
Atheist	28,200	0.5
Agnostic	122,000	2.1
Other	690	0.0

OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

According to the [2012 census](#) Turkmen form about 85.6% of the population of Turkmenistan, while Uzbeks are 5.7%, Russians 5.1%, Azeris 1.2%, and 3.5% others. Most Christians belong to ethnic minorities - mainly Russian. Except for the indigenous church, the overall number of Christians in Turkmenistan is hardly growing at all. One of the major problems for Christians in Turkmenistan (and the other countries in Central Asia) is the fact that there is much division and little cooperation between the various denominations. Unfortunately this weakens the Church and plays into the hands of the government.

Notes on the current situation

The government of Turkmenistan is one of the most restrictive in Central Asia. There is no freedom of the press, no freedom of religion, hardly any freedom to travel abroad, and increasing restrictions on import of goods from abroad. The country has its own system of prisons and labor camps that are constantly overcrowded. For Christians it means there is constant monitoring by state agents. Forum 18 published its [Religious Freedom Survey January 2017](#) on 6 January 2017 and the following points are just a small selection of the violations of freedom of religion or belief identified in Turkmenistan:

- The passing of laws flagrantly violating the regime's international human rights obligations;
- A ban on all exercise of freedom of religion and belief without state permission;
- Arbitrary denials of legal status to those communities which choose to seek it;

- Secret police informer recruitment inside belief communities;
- Lack of fair trials and due legal process;
- Coercion by officials against non-Muslims to attempt to force them to convert to Islam;
- Severe restrictions on religious education, including banning women from studying academic theology in the country;
- Almost no contact with foreign co-believers permitted;
- Censorship of religious literature and other material.

External Links - WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

- Religious context: 2012 census
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Turkmenistan
- Notes on the current situation: Religious Freedom Survey January 2017
http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244

WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

With a score of 69 points, Turkmenistan ranked 23rd in WWL 2019, rising 1 point in score in comparison to WWL 2018.

What type of persecution dominates?

Dictatorial paranoia: No religious activities beyond state-run and state-controlled institutions are allowed. It is very common that members of Protestant churches are regarded as followers of an alien sect aiming to depose the government. Hence the need for them to be controlled and eradicated.

Islamic oppression: Indigenous Muslims converting to Christianity experience pressure and occasionally physical violence from families, friends and local community to force them to return to their former faith. Some converts are locked up by their families for long periods, beaten and may eventually be expelled from their communities.

Who is driving persecution?

The two main driving forces behind the persecution of Christians in Turkmenistan are the State and the Muslim environment. State persecution comes in the form of police, secret services and local authorities monitoring religious activities and regularly attending church services. State authorities often raid non-registered churches. The general Islamic culture makes life for converts to Christianity particularly difficult.

What it results in

Even Russian Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic churches may experience Sunday services being monitored. The printing or importing of Christian materials is restricted. Christians from a Muslim background bear the brunt of the persecution both at the hands of the state and from family, friends and community. Where churches have not been registered, Christians suffer repeatedly from police raids, threats, arrests and fines.

Violence

The following table is based on reported cases. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures.

World Watch List Turkmenistan	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018	0	25	7	0	2
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	0	20	6	0	10

Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). Christians attacked refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related reasons. Christians arrested refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. Churches attacked refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. Christian-owned houses and shops attacked refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.

Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period

- In April 2018, a house meeting of converts was raided and that all present were arrested, taken to the police station and questioned for several hours. After the questioning all of them were released, but the members of the group have been under strict surveillance of the police since then. (Source: Unpublished Open Doors report)
- Families of converts, the local Muslim community, and the authorities interfere with and often hinder church activities.
- There have been tighter controls on church life ever since a [new law on religion](#) was introduced on 12 April 2016.

External Links - WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

- Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: new law on religion
<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/05/turkmenistans-secret-additions-already-restrictive-religion-law/>

WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 69 points, Turkmenistan ranked 23rd in WWL 2019, rising 1 point in score in comparison to WWL 2018. Christians in Turkmenistan continue to suffer from a high level of control by the authoritarian government – especially in the Private and Church spheres of life.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Turkmenistan	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	EA	Not at all
Denominational protectionism	DPR	Not at all
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

Please note: The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology (long version).

Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong):

No religious activities beyond state-run and state-controlled institutions are allowed. Protestants are frequently branded "extremists" due to their religious activities outside state-sanctioned structures. Members of Protestant churches are often regarded as followers of an alien sect that has only one goal, namely to spy on and destroy the current political system. From this perspective they need to be not only controlled, but if necessary, even eradicated.

Islamic oppression (Strong):

If indigenous citizens (who are Muslim) convert to Christianity, they are likely to experience pressure and occasionally physical violence from their families, friends and local community to force them to return to their former faith. Some converts are locked up by their families for long periods, beaten and may eventually be expelled from their communities. Local mullahs preach against them, so adding pressure. As a result, converts will do their best to hide their faith – they become so-called secret believers.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of Persecution: Turkmenistan	IO	RN	EA	DPR	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG	-	-	-	-	-	VERY STRONG	-
Government officials	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	Very strong	-
Ethnic group leaders	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	-
One's own (extended) family	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Political parties	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology (long version).

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

- *Government officials* at all levels are very hostile to religion. All religious activity is closely monitored to see if they are sanctioned. If not raids, detentions, confiscations and fines are very common in Turkmenistan.
- *Normal citizens* (especially at the local level) will monitor religious activities and report to the authorities.
- Few *political parties* are allowed in Turkmenistan. The ruling party which controls the government of President Berdymukhamedov by definition participates in persecution insofar as much of the persecution is government-sanctioned.

Drivers of Islamic oppression:

- At the community level there is a link between *government officials* and Muslim pressure. Often, active Muslims and local officials know each other. This is why the pressure on converts is stronger at the community level than at the state level, where officials claim that they are secular.
- *Turkmen ethnic leaders*, with the support of the authorities, encourage all the forms of persecution mentioned above. Mahalla community groupings have been provided government sanction in many cases to carry out the state's persecution of Christians, particularly to prohibit missionary activity.

- *Muslim clerics* are open in their hostility to especially non-Orthodox Christians and particularly against converts from Islam.
- *Normal citizens* at the community level will exert additional pressure on converts to return to Islam. In the case of conversion, converts are persecuted severely by the local community and religious leaders.
- *Muslim family members*, especially in the countryside, will exert high pressure on converts to Christianity. This will lead to threats, beatings, house arrest, ostracism.

Context

Turkmenistan is a quickly developing country, mostly due to the discovery of large amounts of oil and gas. However, this is a two-sided coin. On the one hand, it allows huge investments of money which is highlighted in reports of plans to make the capital, Ashgabat, a “marble city”. The flipside of this opportunity is that the country becomes increasingly dependent on the export of oil and gas and – given the high level of secrecy and corruption – that it will only benefit a small group of people. The enormous dip in the price of oil in the WWL 2018 reporting period seriously affected Turkmenistan.

Turkmen are living in many countries, ranging from Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Iran, northern Pakistan, Syria, and Iraq to the North Caucasus (Stavropol Krai). There are contacts between these groups. Sunni Muslims from Turkmenistan have become involved in the struggle of Islamic militants in the Middle East (viz. the Islamic State group) and the Indian subcontinent (viz. al-Qaeda). The government in Ashgabat fears the impact of the jihadists returning to Turkmenistan and therefore monitors all religious activities closely.

The country is considered to be one of the most restrictive places in the world. There is no freedom of information or press. It is made extremely difficult for foreigners to access the country. A new personality cult has been started around President Berdymukhammedov. Additionally, there is a high level of monitoring of each and every group in society (including Christians) as well as highly restricted access to foreign media and resources. Consequently, it is also difficult to get information out of the country. On 12 April 2016 a [new law on religion](#) was introduced, restricting Christian church life more harshly. Since then, life for Christians has remained difficult.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

These do not exist according to Open Doors sources and were therefore not counted as a separate category in the WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities:

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has accustomed itself to the limitations provided by the government and is therefore left more or less undisturbed. Sunday services may be monitored, but they are conducted unhindered and members can meet. Printing or importing Christian materials is restricted.

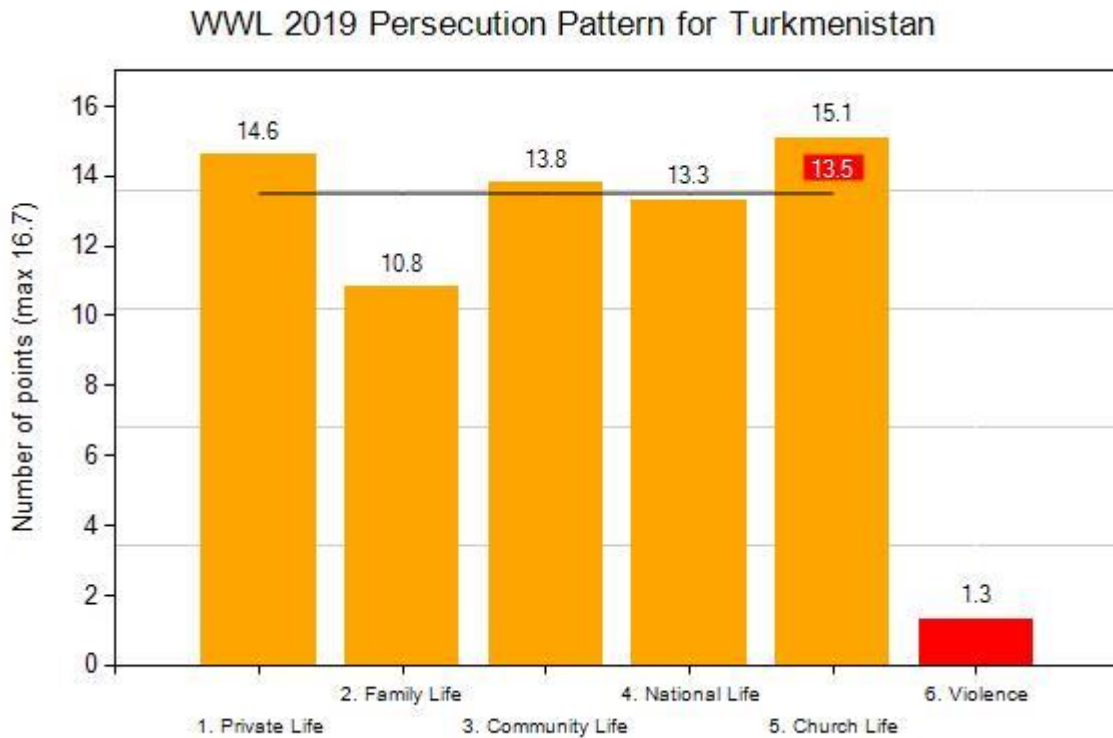
Converts to Christianity:

Christian converts from a Muslim background bear the brunt of persecution in Turkmenistan. Apart from the state, they are also under strong pressure from family, friends and community. The latter pressure is by far the more powerful because it dominates their everyday life.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

After converts, this category of Christians are the second most persecuted group, especially when the churches have not been registered. Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal groups suffer from raids, threats, arrests and fines.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The WWL 2019 Persecution pattern for Turkmenistan shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a very high level (13.5), rising from 13.3 in WWL 2018. Pressure increased in the *Family, Community and National spheres of life*, while it decreased slightly in the *Private and Church spheres of life*. This may be a reflection of the Persecution engine *Islamic oppression* increasing in impact.
- The scores for pressure are extremely high in *Church life* (15.1), *Private life* (14.6) and *Community life* (13.8). The highest score in the sphere of *Church life* is a reflection of the many restrictions on Christians imposed by the state.
- The score for violence is very low, decreasing from 1.9 to 1.3 in WWL 2019. Very few violent incidents were reported.

Private sphere:

Conversion is the issue that triggers the fiercest reaction from the social and cultural environment. It is regarded as an affront to the honor of the family. Conversion is also high on the radar of the state and its agents. Not only converts are under pressure, but also those Christians active in evangelism. The government pays for information about Christian worship in homes. There have been reports of Christians being forced to recant their faith in public. All public media (including Internet access) are under state control – Christians can access them, but not use them to disseminate their message. The state has also banned the use of satellite dishes. It is very risky for a convert to talk about his new faith with members of the family or with non-Christian guests. The level of surveillance on religion in Turkmenistan is huge, and even private meetings between Christians are regularly monitored.

Family sphere:

A citizen's religion is not recorded in official documents such as passports and ID cards. But local authorities, often run by Muslims from the neighborhood, may obstruct wedding, birth and burial registrations. In Turkmenabad and Mary local Islamic leaders declared that no Christians with a Muslim background could be buried at the cemetery. Baptisms of converts can also cause social tensions. Schools are known to arrange anti-Christian lessons together with local Muslim leaders, and all students must attend Islamic holiday celebrations. Children of Christians are usually isolated from having fellowship with other children. They are often humiliated in front of all the other children in their class. When someone who is married converts, family, friends and community will put pressure on the spouse to divorce. Converts in particular risk losing their inheritance.

Community sphere:

Christians are reported to have been victims of threats, harassment, sexual attacks, imprisonment, secret police raids, fines and arbitrary detention. Turkmenistan has one of the most closed regimes in the former Soviet Union region and relies on repressive control. The country's Christians are constantly under surveillance by different state organizations, including secret police. Female converts in conservative Islamic regions run the risk of being kidnapped and married off to a Muslim. Many Christians are ridiculed and excluded from higher education, and active Christians run a high risk of being fired from their job. Homes were the targets of raids where Christians were fined for holding religious meetings even when that was not the case. When meetings are raided in Turkmenistan - and this happens even to registered groups - all those present will be interrogated, many will be detained, many will be fined, and all materials found will be confiscated.

National sphere:

Although freedom of religion is protected by the constitution, Turkmenistan is among the biggest violators of religious freedom in the world. Christians in the country reported cases of imprisonment, detention, threats and verbal insults, beatings, confiscation and sexual assault. All activities by religious groups are under strict scrutiny. Over the past couple of years known Christians have been stopped at the airport when they were trying to go abroad. Many Christian groups cannot get registered, and even registered ones are under constant pressure and their members face risk of persecution on a day to day basis. The media are state-controlled; they refer to Christian churches as "sects" and constantly distort the facts when reporting about Christian activities. Christians suffer from biased treatment against them in court. International monitoring of court cases is not permitted, let alone for those of accused Christians.

Church sphere:

The 2003 religion law forbids worship in private homes and bans religious activities by unregistered organizations. The government has obstructed the registration of new churches. Hardly any permits are issued and some congregations have been attempting to register for more than a decade. Church services continue to be raided and disrupted at times. Youth-work is prohibited. The publication of Christian religious materials in Turkmenistan is strictly forbidden by law. Importing such materials is only allowed for some registered groups like the ROC under strict scrutiny by the government. Openly selling Christian materials is forbidden. Materials are routinely confiscated during raids on churches and houses of Christians. The state does not allow Christian charitable, humanitarian, medical, social or cultural organizations, institutions, or schools etc. to exist. Since the authorities are the biggest persecutor it is extremely dangerous (and futile) to speak out against them.

Violence:

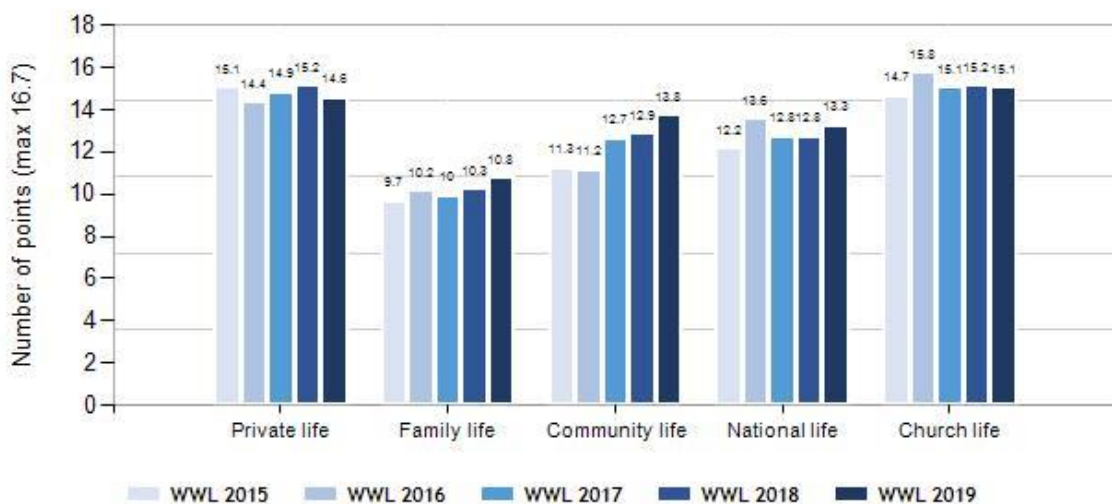
Violent incidents are rarely reported. This is because Christians in Turkmenistan do not dare to share this kind of information with foreigners (out of fear that the information might be traced back to them). In the WWL 2019 reporting period, an estimated 7 Christians were briefly detained by the police and 25 Christians received beatings. 2 houses were damaged during searches by the police.

For a summary of the statistics on violence and examples, please see the Short and Simple Persecution Profile section above.

5 Year trends

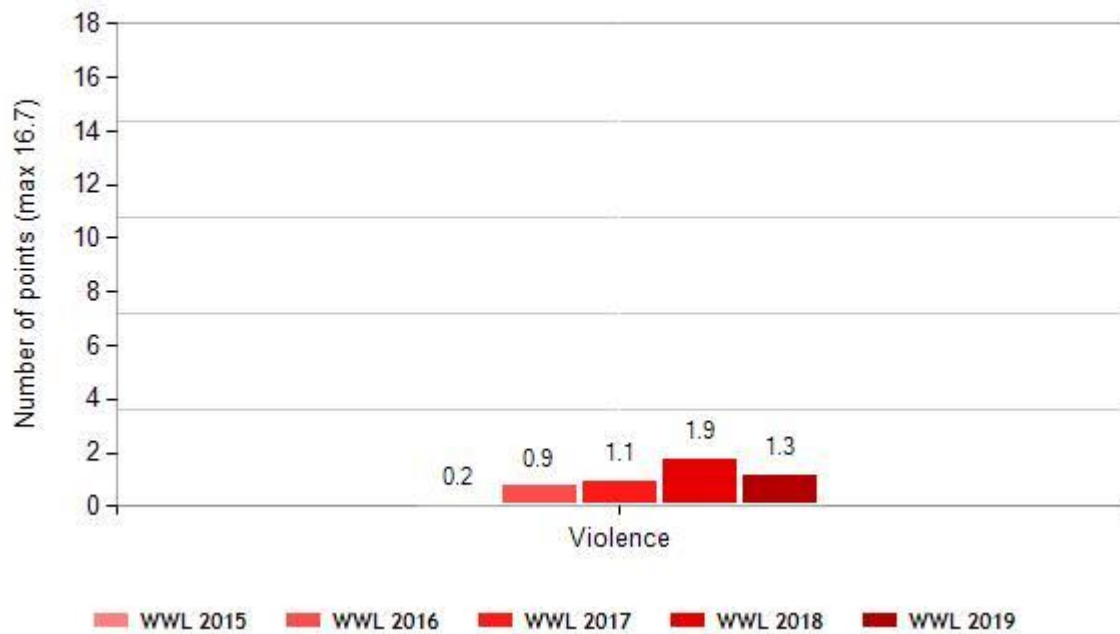
The three graphics below illustrate how the situation for Christians in Turkmenistan has deteriorated gradually since the WWL 2015 reporting period. While the levels of pressure in the *private, national* and *church spheres of life* have been more or less stable over the last five years (first chart), there has been a gradual increase in pressure in the *family* and *community spheres of life*. Since WWL 2015 the average pressure of the 5 *spheres of life* (second chart) shows how the overall pressure on Christians in Turkmenistan is at a very high level and is creeping steadily up. The scores for violence (third chart) have remained more or less stable at a relatively low/very low level over the last five years.

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Turkmenistan (Spheres of life)



WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: Turkmenistan	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2019	13.5
2018	13.3
2017	13.1
2016	13.0
2015	12.6

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Turkmenistan (Violence)



Gender specific persecution

Female:

In Turkmenistan the daily life of indigenous people is based on Islamic culture which puts women in an inferior position to men. Total submission is expected from women to their parents and if married - to their husbands. This makes them more vulnerable to persecution - both as Christians and as women who challenge the existing order. Female converts from Islam are particularly affected by the obligation to follow any pre-marital arrangements made by her parents prior to her conversion. A female convert may experience abduction, home imprisonment, beating, forced marriage and rape. Female Christians with no Muslim background may also experience verbal abuse, threats and loss of employment.

Male:

Church leaders are normally men; they are also normally the heads of their family and the main bread winners. When a Christian man becomes a target of persecution - fined or imprisoned - his whole family will suffer. Losing jobs will affect the whole family. If a man is a church leader his persecution will affect his church and cause fear. The absence of an alternative option for military service is one of

the problematic areas for males. For the following it is mainly Christian men and boys from a Muslim background who are affected: They may suffer from verbal and physical abuse, threats, beatings, detention, interrogation, confiscation, fines, imprisonment, job loss, discrimination, home detention, shaming, divorce and loss of possessions.

Persecution of other religious minorities

Some Shia Muslim communities and the Armenian Apostolic Church are among those known to Forum 18 to have had applications rejected, or to have decided that they should not apply because of the legal and extra-legal restrictions imposed. A number of Protestant communities and Jehovah's Witnesses are known to Forum 18 to be still trying - and still failing - to gain legal status. Many religious communities have stopped applying for registration, and have decided to operate quietly without formal legal status. (Source: [Forum 18, Religious freedom survey, January 2017](#)). There is no focus on any specific religious group - all (Muslims, Christians, Jews, Bahais etc.) suffer under a high level of state surveillance and oppression.

Examples of persecution of other religious groups:

- Three Jehovah's Witnesses were jailed in July 2018 for one year each for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience. They are among at least five conscientious objectors in 2018, all of them Jehovah's Witnesses. Further cases are under investigation by the Prosecutor's office. (Source: [Forum 18](#)).
- On 11 July 2018, the Supreme Court in the capital Ashgabat upheld the 12-year jail terms handed down in Balkan Region in August 2017 to punish five Muslims who met with others to study their faith using the works of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi. (Source: [Forum 18](#)).

Future outlook

The political outlook: The regime of President Berdymukhamedov does not face any significant opposition. This means that the level of political stability in Turkmenistan is quite high.

The outlook for Christians - through the lens of:

- **Dictatorial paranoia:** The current government exerts a very high level of control over the country. Government officials at all levels are the strongest persecutors of Christians in Turkmenistan. They have imposed all kinds of legal restrictions, monitor all religious activities, raid meetings and block religious materials. As stated, the chances that this situation will change are very slim indeed.
- **Islamic oppression:** Islam is not the state religion and is treated by the authorities in the same manner as other religions. However, Islam is the traditional religion of most of the population and the Muslim pressure on Christians in Turkmenistan comes from the far-reaching influence of family, friends and community on converts. The chances that this will change soon are as good as non-existent.

Conclusion: Due to the very high level of stability of the two most important Persecution engines in Turkmenistan, the Church in this country will have to brace itself for living under a continued and considerable level of surveillance and pressure.

External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

- Context: new law on religion
<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/05/turkmenistans-secret-additions-already-restrictive-religion-law/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18, Religious freedom survey, January 2017
http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18
http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2400
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18
http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2399

Additional Reports and Articles

WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

Open Doors article(s) from the region

A selection of articles is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

World Watch Monitor news articles

Use the country search function at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

Recent country developments

Use the country search function at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/> (password: freedom).