

# **The State of the World's Human Rights; Turkmenistan 2023**

## **Background**

In January the constitution was amended to abolish the bicameral parliamentary system, conferring ultimate power to take decisions on domestic and foreign policy to the People's Council. Former president Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov was confirmed as the chairperson of the People's Council and given the title of National Leader of the Turkmen People.

The country remained closed to international human rights NGOs and independent foreign media outlets which, together with internal censorship, greatly constrained information gathering.

## **Freedom of expression**

The state controlled the flow of information, strictly limiting access to the internet and censoring any reporting on negative developments, including economic hardship, shortages of essential food items, the impact of climate change and forced labour. An April study of internet censorship by two universities in the USA found that over 122,000 domains were blocked, including all WordPress sites, as well as scores of news, business and social media sites. By deliberate policy, internet speed remained one of the slowest and most expensive in the world; penetration was low by international standards, disadvantaging rural communities.

## **Repression of dissent**

The authorities persisted in attempting to suffocate all forms of peaceful dissent and public criticism at home and abroad.

In March the UN Human Rights Committee expressed serious concern about the imprisonment and treatment of independent journalist Nurgeldy Khalykov, civil society activist and blogger Murat Dushemov and human rights activist Mansur Mingelov. In May Nurgeldy Khalykov and Murat Dushemov wrote to the UN from their detention facility in the eastern Lebap region describing the torture and other ill-treatment they went through. Mansur Mingelov, suffering from advanced skeletal tuberculosis, was reportedly denied access to necessary medical treatment.

The authorities continued to persecute activists and critics based abroad and harass their families at home. Dursoltan Taganova, an activist and blogger based in Türkiye, described how officers of the Ministry for National Security had questioned her 12-year-old son in Turkmenistan about her activities and attempted to recruit him as an informant. They had also intimidated other relatives in an attempt to stop her criticizing the authorities.

## **Discrimination**

### **Women and girls**

The authorities made no progress on adopting a comprehensive law criminalizing all forms of violence against women and gender-based violence.

In June the CEDAW Committee expressed particular concern about persistent patriarchal attitudes in relation to gender-based violence. The committee raised alarming reports that women and girls were forced to “abide by gender stereotypes”, and that their “fundamental liberties” were restricted “in order to preserve the culture and the nation, including through the imposition of dress and appearance codes and other discriminatory practices”.

## **LGBTI people**

In April the UN Human Rights Committee expressed regret that the authorities had failed to decriminalize consensual same-sex relations. The committee was also concerned about continuing reports of “police brutality motivated by the sexual orientation and gender identity of the victims”, and the resulting climate of fear which prevented LGBTI people from reporting their aggressors.

## **Right to a healthy environment**

Turkmenistan remained almost wholly reliant on gas and oil for energy, and subsidized fossil fuels heavily. A major contributor to global methane emissions, research published in May showed Turkmenistan was responsible for most global super emitter events in 2022. Following international pressure, the president signed a methane reduction roadmap in June and the Global Methane Pledge at COP28 in December. The USA and Turkmenistan governments had previously agreed to set up a working group on methane mitigation with a view to cooperate on leak detection and remedial action.

## **Freedom of assembly**

The authorities tightly controlled the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and sought to clamp down on spontaneous small-scale protests in relation to social and economic issues such as shortages of food staples, access to justice and healthcare.

In March police detained around 30 women who had gathered outside the presidential palace in the capital, Ashgabat, to raise their concerns about police corruption directly with the president, having failed to get their complaints addressed by local and regional authorities. The women were taken to a police station, denied access to food and water for over six hours, and forced to sign official statements of their detention before being released.

In April police detained 15 people following spontaneous protests by hundreds of demonstrators against bread shortages at a local bread factory in the city of Mary. Police used unnecessary and disproportionate force to break up protesters blocking traffic on a main road.

## **Forced labour**

Investigations by Cotton Campaign, a coalition of international human rights and labour NGOs, independent trade unions and brand and retail associations, concluded that thousands of public sector workers were forced to participate in the cotton harvest or pay for others to replace them. Women were particularly affected as they make up most of the public sector workforce. The government continued to reject all claims that forced labour was used systematically, but in September allowed medical doctors and qualified teachers in three districts to stop working in the cotton fields without the need to pay for replacements. Independent monitors, journalists and human rights defenders continued to document conditions during the harvest at great personal risk.

