



NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2024

Turkmenistan

CONSOLIDATED AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

0
/100

Democracy Percentage	0.00 /100
Democracy Score	1.00 /7

LAST YEAR'S DEMOCRACY PERCENTAGE & STATUS

0 /100 Consolidated Authoritarian Regime

The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The Democracy Percentage, introduced in 2020, is a translation of the Democracy Score to the 0-100 scale, where 0 equals least democratic and 100 equals most democratic. See the methodology.

Author

- Anonymous

Score changes in 2024

- **No score changes in 2024.**

Executive Summary

In 2023, Turkmenistan remained an autocracy ruled by the strongman Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow and his son, President Serdar Berdimuhamedow. The year was marked by the elder Berdimuhamedow's return to power. In January, the parliament adopted constitutional changes that again made the Halk Maslahaty (People's Council), which Gurbanguly chairs, the highest political body in Turkmenistan. The amendments also bestowed upon Gurbanguly the constitutional status of "National Leader of the Turkmen people," which gave him far-reaching authority to shape domestic and foreign policy. ¹

The quick adoption of this sweeping "reform" demonstrated the regime's disrespect for democratic values and the absence of checks and balances that would constrain the Berdimuhamedow family. Commentators viewed the move as an insurance policy to safeguard the ruling family's vast political and economic power and solidify their hereditary rule for generations to come. ² The law makes the ruling family immune from prosecution, protects their assets and property from government seizure, and requires the national security services to provide them with protection.

The personality cult of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow also strengthened in 2023. In June, the authorities inaugurated Arkadag, a multibillion-dollar city named after Gurbanguly ("Arkadag" is his official title). ³ The government also launched a television network and a newspaper with the same name. ⁴ The authorities scaled up Serdar Berdimuhamedow's cult of personality as well, although his father remained the dominant political force in Turkmenistan. Like his father, Serdar was awarded the "Hero of Turkmenistan" title on September 24. ⁵ He wrote his first book, about Turkmenistan's youth, which was published in December. ⁶

With his father again in power, Serdar's political role in 2023 was reduced to managing the domestic bureaucracy and implementing policies in line with the strategic goals defined by Gurbanguly. Under Serdar's presidency, there was no meaningful progress in democratic governance, civil society and media freedom, local governance, judicial independence, and anticorruption policies. Like his father, he undermined the autonomy of key institutions, including through major personnel shakeups at all levels of government.

A worsening water shortage and massive methane emissions from the oil and gas industry were the government's most pressing challenges in 2023. The government employed its typical top-down approach to address these issues. Turkmenistan remained poorly prepared for accelerating climate change that could make the country uninhabitable in the near future. **7** The construction of the Qosh Tepa irrigation canal in neighboring Afghanistan exacerbated the water crisis, which is expected to worsen when the project is completed. **8** Although the government took some steps to address the issue, **9** more diplomacy will be needed to improve regional river management rules.

To address methane leaks, the authorities adopted the 2023–2024 Methane Roadmap, formed the Intersectoral Commission for the Reduction of Methane Emissions, and acceded to the Global Methane Pledge in December. **10** Despite these positive steps, the government must initiate systemic reforms, improve its monitoring capacity, data transparency, and public communication practices, and ensure engagement with civil society and the public.

The economy remained in a downturn, but it was difficult to determine its severity due to the lack of reliable and publicly available data on crucial macroeconomic indicators such as unemployment, poverty, and inflation. Dual exchange rates for the Turkmen manat further cloud the economic picture. The official fixed rate is 3.5 manats per dollar and the black-market rate is 19 manats per dollar. The Turkmen Progres Foundation's Palaw Index for measuring food inflation estimated that inflation decreased by 13 percent in 2023 as a result of global food and transportation price decreases rather than government policies. **11** However, the availability of food staples decreased during the year and their prices increased. The shortage of staples, their inferior quality, and increasing costs provoked protests in various localities. **12**

On foreign policy, the government pursued more foreign contacts and stepped up its diplomacy in an attempt to take advantage of the Russia-Ukraine war. Turkmenistan held meetings with top officials from the EU, the United States, Germany, and Arab countries. However, Turkmenistan failed to achieve greater cooperation with Western countries due to its poor human rights record and hostile investment climate. As such, Turkmenistan continued to prioritize cooperation with neighboring Central Asian countries, Russia, China, Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Iran. It focused its diplomacy on expanding oil and gas exports and utilizing the country's transport and logistical potential, i.e., joining the International North – South Transport Corridor (INSTC). ¹³ Russia's influence has considerably grown in recent years, which was highlighted by the increase in visits by high-level officials and business leaders, as well as deepening cooperation in various areas, namely increased Russian investments in energy, infrastructure, and industry and enticing Turkmenistan to join the aforementioned INSTC. ¹⁴

In March, Turkmenistan held Mejlis, subnational, and local government elections. The executive branch tightly controlled the elections, which were marred by serious irregularities. Election observers from the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE ODIHR) noted major shortcomings, including an inadequate legal framework for elections, an election commission that lacks independence, the absence of political pluralism and genuine competition, and the failure to meaningfully engage with the electorate. ¹⁵ Newly elected Mejlis representatives remained unable to check executive power. On the contrary, Serdar Berdimuhamedow highlighted the Mejlis's subservience to the executive branch by dictating its priorities and determining its working committees. ¹⁶

The dire situation for civil society persisted in 2023 and human rights violations continued unabated. The legal and operational environment for civil society remained repressive. Civic space remained constrained, with a small number of government-organized NGOs and their affiliates working at the direction of the authorities. Independent NGOs cannot operate in Turkmenistan and remain in exile abroad.

In 2023, some of these independent NGOs published reports that highlighted the government's failure to fulfill its human rights commitments under international law as part of Turkmenistan's Universal Periodic Review at the UN. Although they

worked outside Turkmenistan, independent NGOs remained vulnerable because the government escalated its use of transnational repression to intimidate activists. Turkey- and Russia-based activists in particular faced retaliation from the authorities in those countries. Throughout the year, independent media outlets and human rights defenders reported on activists who were arbitrarily detained and deported back to Turkmenistan, **17** where they faced potential imprisonment, torture, and forced disappearances.

The few independent journalists and activists still working in Turkmenistan also endured intimidation, harassment, and arbitrary restrictions from the authorities, **18** while numerous activists continued to serve prison sentences on politically motivated charges. **19** Hundreds of Turkmen, including former high-level officials, have disappeared while in prison, as documented by the international “Prove They Are Alive!” campaign. **20**

The government also violated the rights of women, religious groups, and LGBT+ people in 2023. In recent years, the government has curtailed women’s rights. During the year, women faced restrictions in accessing abortion care, obtaining and renewing their driver licenses, and using cosmetic services, such as Botox, eyelash extensions, and tattoos. **21** The authorities also used national media to promote “traditional values” and “gender norms.” Religious minorities and devout Muslims faced intimidation and harassment. **22** Same-sex relationships are criminalized.

The authorities retained strict control over the flow of information. The media lacked independence and was used by the regime to glorify its rule and reinforce its viewpoints. The authorities severely limited internet access to prevent citizens from reading independent news sources. Throughout the year, the government blocked the internet or disrupted network connections, arbitrarily blocked websites, and cracked down on circumvention tools used to access blocked materials. **23**

The government continued to force public employees to participate in state-sponsored events and activities, threatening to dismiss those who did not comply. In June, independent human rights watchdogs published a report that highlighted the widespread use of child labor in the cotton industry. **24** The regime also interfered with citizens’ freedom of movement. The government continued to

deny passport renewals to citizens living abroad. Domestically, it imposed bureaucratic barriers to passport renewals and visa processing to curtail widescale emigration. **25** Government human rights institutions and the judiciary remained powerless to defend citizens' rights. The judiciary lacked independence, was riddled with corruption and incompetence, and continued to serve the interests of the regime.

Despite the repressive political environment, a number of spontaneous protests occurred during the year. Local residents staged protests in response to food shortages, rising prices for subsidized food, and inadequate delivery of public services. **26** Local officials often tried to quickly end demonstrations by meeting the demands of protestors on such issues. However, local governments generally lacked the autonomy, competency, and resources needed to fulfill their limited mandates. Local officials were also frequently scapegoated by the central government for policy failures.

Corruption, nepotism, and clientelism remained pervasive, while the government's anticorruption efforts continued to be largely symbolic and politically motivated. The Berdimuhamedow family and their close associates maintained control over the most profitable industries. During the year, Turkmen.news published a series of investigative reports spotlighting corruption in the oil and gas and chemical industries, which implicated public figures with ties to the ruling family. **27**

At-A-Glance

Turkmenistan has a consolidated authoritarian regime that has remained a cult of personality under the rule of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow and his son, Serdar Berdimuhamedow, who serves as president. Elections are strictly controlled by the executive branch and lack political pluralism and transparency. Independent civil society is practically nonexistent due to the repressive legal and operational environment, with government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) advancing regime interests. The government controls the media and uses it to endorse government viewpoints and promote the personality cult of the ruling duopoly. Local governments lack autonomy and are tasked with furthering the regime's policies. The judiciary is not independent and helps the executive branch, security services, and law enforcement suppress dissenting voices and critical views. Corruption is

deeply entrenched and permeates all levels of the government. Anticorruption campaigns primarily target those who fall out of favor with the regime.

National Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the democratic character of the governmental system; and the independence, effectiveness, and accountability of the legislative and executive branches.	1.00 /7.00
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- Turkmenistan lacks democratic and publicly accountable institutions. In January, the parliament approved constitutional amendments that formally returned Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow to power. The constitutional overhaul dissolved the bicameral parliament, transforming the Mejlis (the lower chamber) into a unicameral legislature and the Halk Maslahaty (the People’s Council, the upper chamber) into a supreme representative body under the elder Berdimuhamedow’s direct leadership. **28** The refashioned council was set to include all high-ranking government officials, including the president, as well as the heads of subnational governing institutions, political parties, public associations, and “society representatives” as its members. The amendments gave the council vaguely defined, broad powers, such as determining domestic and foreign policy and changing the constitution, which effectively elevated it above the executive and legislative branches. **29**
- The amendments also made Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow the “National Leader of the Turkmen people,” which empowered him to make important domestic and foreign policy decisions and address public institutions such as the parliament and political parties. The law granted Gurbanguly and his family immunity from prosecution, protected their property and assets from seizure, and granted them protection through the national security services. **30** In his new role, Gurbanguly hosted meetings with government officials, **31** occasionally represented Turkmenistan during foreign trips and international summits, **32** and held talks with high-ranking foreign officials and business leaders. **33**
- Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow’s personality cult reached new heights in 2023. On June 29, his birthday, authorities unveiled Arkadag, a multibillion-dollar city that glorifies his persona. **34** Designated a “city of national importance,” **35** Arkadag features a 43-meter-high monument of Gurbanguly and a healthcare facility named after him. **36** Public sector

employees and students were required to attend the grand opening under the threat of dismissal and other repercussions. **37**

- Following the constitutional changes, Serdar Berdimuhamedow's political role was downgraded to managing domestic affairs, such as reappointing government officials and scapegoating members of the government for policy shortcomings. **38** Although he too headed some delegations during foreign visits and international summits and met with high-ranking foreign officials, **39** the elder Berdimuhamedow defined the country's foreign policy objectives and determined the approach to strategic partners, namely Russia, China, and Turkey.
- Turkmenistan's "rubber stamp" parliament does not fulfill its constitutional mandate because the executive branch tightly controls it. In line with the practice established by his father, Serdar presided over the first session of the newly elected parliament (see Electoral Process section), where he outlined the priority areas the new Mejlis should focus on and determined its eight committees. **40**
- The regime also built Serdar's personality cult, although his father remains the dominant political force in Turkmenistan. "Happy Youth with Arkadag Serdar" was declared the country's official motto for 2023. **41** Serdar was also designated "General of the Army." **42** He was awarded the "Arkadag" medal **43** and given the title "Hero of Turkmenistan" for his "enormous personal contribution to strengthening" the state. **44** In December, Serdar followed his father's example and published his first book, *Youth is the Support of the Motherland*. **45** Gurbanguly has written more than sixty books.
- In June, Turkmen.news and the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights published a joint report on the government's practice of annually forcing public sector employees to pick cotton under the threat of dismissal. The report said that because many government workers avoid harvesting cotton by paying a bribe, widespread child labor is used to fill the gap. **46** Children pick cotton in place of their parents or other relatives, or to provide for their families. **47**
- Massive methane emissions remained a major issue in 2023. The state-owned oil and gas industry's outdated extraction practices and poor infrastructure both contributed to substantial methane leaks. **48** National and local officials also lacked the expertise to effectively address the

problem. **49** In 2022 alone, Turkmenistan had the most methane super-emitter events from fossil fuels in the world, with 184 such incidents. **50** Throughout the year, the authorities held talks on the issue with foreign representatives, including John Kerry, the US special presidential envoy for climate. In June, the authorities established a government commission to focus on the problem and developed a roadmap to reduce methane emissions in 2023 and 2024, which included close collaboration with international partners. **51** In December, Turkmenistan officially joined the Global Methane Pledge, committing to reduce methane emissions and strengthen the government monitoring and reporting capacity in line with IPCC guidance. **52**

Electoral Process 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines national executive and legislative elections, the electoral framework, the functioning of multiparty systems, and popular participation in the political process.

1.00
/7.00

- In March, Turkmenistan held elections to the Mejlis, the 125-seat unicameral parliament, and to the subnational representative bodies (see Local Democratic Governance section). As in past polls, the 2023 parliamentary elections lacked transparency and allowed no genuine competition from opposition candidates. The electorate was neither well-informed nor engaged in the process. The regime has firm control over elections. The president personally appoints all 15 members of the Central Election Commission (CEC), including the chairperson. **53** Commission members serve five-year terms and are confirmed by the Mejlis.
- Mejlis deputies are elected to five-year terms in single-mandate constituencies. They can be nominated by political parties or “initiative groups” of citizens in their constituency. Only three political parties competed in the 2023 parliamentary elections: the ruling Democratic Party of Turkmenistan, the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, and the Agrarian Party. No new parties have been registered since 2015. There is no genuine opposition party and all recognized political parties endorse the regime’s political agenda. Only two candidates competed in 117 of the Mejlis races and three candidates ran in the other 8 races. **54**

- Political parties failed to meaningfully engage with the electorate during the campaign. Candidates did not have substantive policy discussions or debates and they did not present coherent political platforms. According to OSCE ODIHR election observers, the use of uniform candidate posters, standardized candidate bios in newspapers lacking party logos, homogeneous 10-minute TV addresses, and campaign events with potential voters – all organized and supervised by the CEC and local election commissions underscored “the absence of choice”. **55**
- The lack of a centralized voter register allowed for duplicate registrations, family and proxy voting, ballot box stuffing, and other irregularities. The CEC reported that voter turnout was nearly 84 percent by 5 PM on election day, which independent media outlets said was likely an inflated figure that was reached through ballot box stuffing. **56**
- On March 29, CEC chair Gulmyrat Muradov announced the official election results and reported that turnout was 91 percent. The Democratic Party of Turkmenistan won 65 seats, the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs captured 18 seats, the Agrarian Party took 24 seats, and “independent” candidates nominated by “initiative groups” won 18 seats. **57**
- The parliamentary elections were monitored by around 3,000 national observers and 60 international observers. The Commonwealth of Independent States election observation mission prepared a government friendly election assessment report stating that the elections had been held in line with democratic norms and without any irregularities. **58** The OSCE ODIHR Election Assessment Mission concluded that the elections lacked genuine competition and were “very restricted.” **59** It further noted that observers were not consistently allowed to observe all aspects of the election process. **60** The mission provided recommendations on improving electoral legislation and government practices to align them with international standards. **61**

Civil Society 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses the organizational capacity and financial sustainability of the civic sector; the legal and political environment in which it operates; the functioning of trade unions; interest group participation in the policy process; and the threat posed by antidemocratic extremist groups.

1.00
/ 7.00

- Independent civil society is practically nonexistent in Turkmenistan due to the repressive legal and operational environment. There are 136 NGOs officially registered with the government, ⁶² nearly all of which are government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) and their affiliates. There are no independent NGOs in Turkmenistan that challenge the government. No organizations that focus on human rights, political participation, or democracy promotion are allowed to operate.
- In a welcome development, pediatrician Khursanai Ismatullaeva and democracy activist Pygamberdy Allaberdyev were released from prison in December 2022. Ismatullaeva was sentenced to nine years in prison in 2021 after her conviction on fabricated fraud charges. ⁶³ Her arrest came after she told a media outlet that she had been illegally fired from her job at a perinatal clinic. ⁶⁴ Allaberdyev, a lawyer, was sentenced to six years in prison in 2020 for his prodemocracy activism. Following his release, Allaberdyev continued to face onerous restrictions. He was barred from returning to his job, forbidden from leaving the country for medical treatment, and required to report regularly to the local police. ⁶⁵
- In 2023, the authorities continued to impose wide-ranging informal and arbitrary restrictions on women's rights and promote patriarchal gender social norms, including through the national media. ⁶⁶ In January, reports emerged that authorities were requiring women to provide a marriage certificate and an employer reference in order to obtain a driver license. ⁶⁷ Women younger than 40 were informally prohibited from obtaining or renewing their driver licenses. ⁶⁸ In March, an informal ban on a range of cosmetic procedures was reinstated, a move that particularly affected female public sector employees. ⁶⁹
- Officials publicly denied that the government discriminated against women during Turkmenistan's Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council. The delegation insisted that the government shut down beauty salons to bring their services in line with "health standards" following "reports of harm being done to women." ⁷⁰ It said the government denied driver licenses to women on a "temporary" basis because the authorities had identified a "large number of women drivers without any license." ⁷¹ The officials also repudiated claims that the government enforced a mandatory dress code for women that only exempted female university students. ⁷²

- In 2023, authorities continued to use transnational repression to silence activists and dissidents residing abroad. Turkey- and Russia-based activists were particularly vulnerable to being arrested and extradited to Turkmenistan to face politically motivated charges and imprisonment. In May, the Turkish police reportedly detained government critic and blogger Farhad Meymankuliev (better known as Farhad Durdyyev) and secretly deported him back to Turkmenistan. **73** In August, the Turkmen Helsinki Foundation reported that Meymankuliev had received a lengthy prison sentence on unknown charges. **74**
- In early December, blogger and activist Malikberdi Allamyradov reportedly went missing in Russia, raising concerns that he too might have been abducted and forcibly returned to Turkmenistan. In 2021, Allamyradov had staged a protest against government-imposed money transfer limits for Turkmen students studying abroad. Since then, he has been critical of the authorities online. **75**
- In November, Turkey banned human rights activist and Turkmen Helsinki Foundation chairperson Tajigul Begmedova for five years, claiming she was a “threat to national security.” **76** Turkey reportedly imposed the ban at the request of Turkmen authorities. **77** The foundation has actively assisted and collaborated with Turkmen dissidents and activists residing in Turkey. **78**

Independent Media 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines the current state of press freedom, including libel laws, harassment of journalists, and editorial independence; the operation of a financially viable and independent private press; and the functioning of the public media.

1.00
/7.00

- All media outlets operating in Turkmenistan are either government-owned or tightly controlled by the government. The government heavily censors the media and many journalists practice self-censorship to avoid punishment. The government uses the media to promote its viewpoints and perpetuate the ruling family’s cult of personality. In June, the government launched a new television network and newspaper serving the newly-unveiled Arkadag city. **79** They produced the same content as the country’s other media outlets, which largely recirculate the State News Agency of Turkmenistan’s propaganda. **80**

- The few independent journalists working in Turkmenistan face intimidation and persecution. In November, border officials at the Ashgabat airport deliberately damaged the passports of journalist Soltan Achilova and her daughter to prevent them from attending the Martin Ennals Awards ceremony in Geneva, which honors human rights defenders. In 2021, Achilova was selected as an award finalist for her reporting on the regime's dismal human rights record. In recent years, she has faced persistent intimidation from the authorities, including physical attacks and verbal abuse, in retaliation for her investigative reporting and criticism of the regime. **81**
- In December, Hudaiberdy Allashov, a former correspondent for Radio Azatlyk, was reportedly jailed for 15 days for "hooliganism." **82** When Allashov worked for Radio Azatlyk in 2016, she was jailed for using chewing tobacco and released in mid-February 2017 following an international outcry. Although Allashov no longer works at Radio Azatlyk, she and her family have continued to experience harassment and persecution from the authorities. **83**
- Foreign-based media outlets and activist-bloggers are among the few independent news sources on Turkmenistan. To make it harder for these outlets to reach audiences in Turkmenistan and limit the flow of information, the authorities escalated their crackdown on internet access in 2023. State-directed network interferences have become the norm, particularly during major events. During the Arkadag unveiling ceremony in June, Cloudflare Radar detected a major decrease in internet traffic, which remained unusually low for several weeks. **84** Internet traffic also dipped in late July and early November, which likely meant that the government had disrupted access. **85**
- Around three-fourths of all IP addresses are arbitrarily blocked in Turkmenistan, including major hosting sites and services, messaging platforms, social media networks, and online gaming sites. **86** The authorities also increasingly blocked VPN services and pressured VPN users. In January, the government blocked users from downloading the ICQ messaging app because it provided VPN keys to users. **87** In July, the authorities blocked internet access via the Tor Project's bridges (free overlay network for enabling anonymous communication). **88**

- The government has denied that it restricts internet access and curtails media freedom. In March, during the 137th session of the UN Human Rights Committee, the Turkmen delegation claimed that the government provided favorable conditions for the media and ensured internet access for all citizens. **89**

Local Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the decentralization of power; the responsibilities, election, and capacity of local governmental bodies; and the transparency and accountability of local authorities.

1.00
/7.00

- Local governments lack political and financial autonomy. The president appoints and dismisses the heads of provincial, city, and district executive bodies. Local representative bodies are popularly elected. In March, Turkmenistan held elections for provincial, district, and city representative bodies, as well as local self-governance bodies in rural areas. By the end of February, 515 candidates had reportedly been registered to stand in provincial elections, 2,001 candidates in district and city elections, and 12,098 candidates in local self-governance elections. **90** These elected bodies have little to no say in local affairs and are primarily tasked with implementing the policies dictated by the central government.
- The president frequently scapegoats local officials for the central government's socioeconomic policy failures or falling short of agricultural quotas that the government sets (these quotas are often set without considering local capacity or other factors). In July, Serdar Berdimuhamedow fired the heads of four provinces for a poor grain and cotton harvest that was caused by the water shortage. **91** In August, two of the fired governors were reportedly sentenced to 25 years in prison for abuse of office and corruption related to the allocation of land plots to farmers. **92**
- The central government also demands that local governments resolve crises that they lack the capacity and resources to address on their own. As water scarcity worsened during the year, the ruling tandem demanded that local authorities improve the situation, including through the renovation of outdated irrigation channels. **93** Lacking funds and other resources, local officials instead prohibited farmers from growing vegetables and crops on

their private plots. **94** When irrigation channels dried up, local authorities barred farmers from using them, claiming the channels could only be used on certain government-designated farmland, in an apparent effort to conceal the water shortage. **95**

- Thousands of residents of Ashgabat and surrounding areas continued to be forcefully evicted from their homes so the local government could carry out urban renewal and beautification projects. In May, Chronicles of Turkmenistan reported that some evicted residents, who had been relocated to Bezmein, were denied residence documents for their new addresses due to bureaucratic delays. **96** These residents remained registered at homes that already demolished. **97**
- Despite the repressive environment, several small protests occurred across the country, largely in response to food shortages and price increases for subsidized food. In some cases, local officials were responsive to the protests. In April, residents of Kaka, in Ahal province, organized a protest against price increases for bread and shopkeepers' practice of illegally selling subsidized food to private shops. **98** Local authorities responded by reducing bread prices. **99** That same month, several hundred residents of two villages in Dashoguz province protested when stores stopped offering food staples at subsidized prices in March and April. The protests led to skirmishes between protestors and local police, which resulted in 15 arrests. Local authorities subsequently delivered the demanded subsidized products. **100**
- Local authorities respond to their residents' complaints on rare occasions. In August, Chronicles of Turkmenistan reported that two months after it published a story on Gazojak residents' complaints about trash being dumped near the town's main market, local authorities removed the refuse, paved the streets, and repaired the water supply network. **101**

Judicial Framework and Independence 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses constitutional and human rights protections, judicial independence, the status of ethnic minority rights, guarantees of equality before the law, treatment of suspects and prisoners, and compliance with judicial decisions.

1.00
/7.00

- While the constitution guarantees judicial independence, the president has the power to appoint, reappoint, and dismiss judges and prosecutors at all levels. ¹⁰² In February, Serdar removed Guvanchmyrat Ussanepesov, the chairperson of the Supreme Court, and two of his deputies, for corruption, falsifying criminal charges, fabricating cases, and failing to acquit any defendants. ¹⁰³ While such dismissals are welcome, they are not complemented by structural reforms to address the factors that enable abuse of office in the judicial system.
- In March, the UN Human Rights Committee reviewed Turkmenistan's fourth periodic report on implementing provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The Turkmen delegation denied that its judiciary and government human rights institutions lacked independence and stated that allegations of corruption within the judiciary were false. The delegation also said the government did not violate human rights or persecute journalists and civic activists. The delegation refused to comment on the government's plans to decriminalize adult consensual same-sex conduct. ¹⁰⁴
- Turkmenistan denied that it had rejected a request to visit the country from the UN's special rapporteurs on torture and on extrajudicial or summary or arbitrary executions and the Working Group on Enforced Disappearances. ¹⁰⁵ The delegation said Turkmenistan supported a dialogue on enforced disappearances from Turkmenistan's prisons and that "the prisoners referred to were alive and accounted for." ¹⁰⁶ In reality, the government concealed information about the whereabouts of disappeared persons, including those whose prison terms had ended. ¹⁰⁷ The "Prove They Are Alive" campaign's list of confirmed enforced disappearances from Turkmen prisons contained 162 names as of 2021. ¹⁰⁸
- In November, during the 44th Session of the Universal Periodic Review, the Turkmen delegation denied allegations that poor conditions persisted in the country's prisons. ¹⁰⁹ However, prisons in Turkmenistan are overcrowded, unsanitary, and fail to provide adequate nutrition and medical care. The situation is particularly dire for political prisoners such as Nurgeldy Halykov, Murat Dushemov, and Mansur Mingelov. In August, the authorities told the UN Human Rights Committee that they would "consider" releasing these prisoners, ¹¹⁰ however, they remained in prison throughout 2023.
- During the year, the authorities failed to release critically ill political prisoner Mansur Mingelov as required by law. Mingelov has remained in prison since

2012, when he was convicted on bogus drug trafficking charges after complaining that his brother had been tortured in police custody. ¹¹¹ In June, he was diagnosed with bone tuberculosis at a prison hospital after his health deteriorated. ¹¹² In late September, Mingelov was reportedly transferred from the hospital back to prison, an egregious violation of the law requiring the early release of critically ill persons. ¹¹³

- Detainees are often subjected to torture and inhumane treatment that may result in death. In early December, after drug trafficking suspect Allamurat Hudayramov died in custody, the authorities returned his body to his family. There were numerous injuries on Hudayramov's body, including to his head. ¹¹⁴ Following his death, law enforcement pressured Hudayramov's relatives to remain silent about the incident who sought to bring to justice those responsible for his death. ¹¹⁵
- Turkmenistan does not comply with international human rights laws on freedom of conscience and religion. In September, the human rights NGO Forum-18 reported that earlier in the year, police in the Balkan Region raided homes and questioned devout Muslims, seized religious literature, and detained a Muslim cleric. ¹¹⁶ The report also said that in 2022, law enforcement frequently intimidated and harassed Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestants. ¹¹⁷
- The authorities curtailed freedom of movement and attempted to prevent mass emigration by imposing bureaucratic hurdles that made it difficult to obtain a passport. In February, the government temporarily suspended the issuance of passports for foreign travels. ¹¹⁸ Beginning in March, individuals traveling abroad were required to name a "guarantor" ensuring their return to Turkmenistan and sign documents pledging to refrain from antigovernment activism while abroad. ¹¹⁹ State Migration Service officials purposely slowed the passport application process so that travelers would have to wait several months to receive their documents, which was part of a scheme to solicit bribes to expedite the process (see Corruption section). In May, for example, residents of the Lebap Region were forced to wait until at least September to renew their passports. ¹²⁰ Persons with valid travel documents were also occasionally barred from boarding international flights on spurious grounds. ¹²¹ Turkmen citizens also faced difficulties in obtaining visas from Turkey. In August, Turkmen.news reported that the Turkish visa

center in Turkmenistan accepted around 20 percent of all visa requests and was only issuing 15-day visas. ¹²²

Corruption 1.00-7.00 pts

Looks at public perceptions of corruption, the business interests of top policymakers, laws on financial disclosure and conflict of interest, and the efficacy of anticorruption initiatives.

1.00
/7.00

- Corruption is endemic at all levels of government. Anticorruption campaigns are often arbitrary and politically motivated, aiming to punish those who fall out of favor with the regime. In October, Turkmenistan joined the International Anti-Corruption Academy and announced plans to join the Global Operational Network of Anti-Corruption Law Enforcement Authorities. ¹²³ It remains to be seen whether joining these bodies will make an impact because the government has not yet implemented any systematic reforms.
- Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow and his extended family have benefited greatly from their elevated position. In December, Turkmen.news, Gundogar, and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) published an investigation revealing that when Gurbanguly was president, he signed decrees that allowed the government-built Aesthetics Center to be privatized. ¹²⁴ The company that the government approved to buy the center had connections to Gurbanguly's relatives. ¹²⁵ The center was sold to this company at a discounted price without any competitive tender or public scrutiny into the deal. ¹²⁶
- Public officials with ties to the ruling family also use their privileged position for promotion. In May, for example, Batyr Amanov reportedly became the deputy prime minister overseeing the lucrative oil and gas sector because he was the cousin of the president's brother-in-law. ¹²⁷ In June, Turkmen.news reported about quarrels between Amanov and Ashyrguly Begliyev, the president's advisor on oil and gas, who also obtained his position due to his ties to the ruling family, resulting from both officials' attempts to expand their influence by promoting loyalists to high posts within the industry and removing proteges of the other. ¹²⁸
- In 2023, a series of investigative reports by Turkmen.news exposed widescale corruption in the chemical industry. Niyazly Niyazlyev, during his tenure as

the head of the state-controlled Turkmenhimiya chemical company, reportedly accepted kickbacks in exchange for awarding an \$18-million chemical plant construction contract to a company he had connections to.

129 In July, he was removed from office. **130** In November, Niyazlyev was reportedly arrested for “the theft of state property on an especially grand scale.” **131**

- Lower-level government employees are regularly required to make “voluntary” donations to charities or public projects, or ordered to subscribe to certain newspapers. **132** People seeking employment are also asked to pay bribes. **133** For example, individuals must pay between \$200 and \$300 to the officials of state-owned transportation company’s branch in Dashoguz velayat to obtain employment as a taxi driver. **134**
- Corruption is also widespread in law enforcement, the security services, and the military. In February, Turkmen.news reported that the Cybersecurity Service of Turkmenistan demanded bribes of between \$1,000 and \$2,000 from organizations and individuals that sought unrestricted internet access. **135** Military officials exploited the mandatory conscription service to solicit \$5,000 to \$7,000 bribes from recruits so they could be assigned to units with better conditions. **136** State Migration Service officials demanded bribes of \$400 to \$500 to “facilitate” expedited passport processing. **137**
- Corruption is also prevalent in higher education. University applicants frequently pay bribes of up to \$10,000 for a spot in an Ashgabat-based university. The “prices” are generally lower in the provinces. For example, prospective students pay around \$2,000 for a spot at Dashoguz State Agricultural University. **138**

Footnotes

- 1** “Halk häkimiýetiniň ýokary wekilçilikli edarasy — Türkmenistanyň Halk Maslahaty döredildi” [The People’s Council of Turkmenistan, the highest representative body of people’s power, was established], Turkmenistan State News Agency, 21 January 2023, <https://tdh.gov.tm/tk/post/34446/halk-hakimiyetinin-yokary-wekilcilikli...>
- 2** Victoria Clement, “The Aura of Governance in Turkmenistan,” The Diplomat, 14 March 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/the-aura-of-governance-in->

turkmenistan/.

- 3 “Открытие Аркадага: второй памятник Гурбангулы Бердымухамедову и два электромобиля TOGG от Эрдогана” [The unveiling of Arkadag: the second monument to Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow and two electric cars TOGG from Erdogan], 30 June 2023, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2023/06/arkadag-opening-ceremony/>.
- 4 “ [The unveiling of Arkadag],” <https://www.hronikatm.com/2023/06/arkadag-opening-ceremony/>.
- 5 “President Serdar Berdimuhamedov Awarded With Hero of Turkmenistan Title”, Business Turkmenistan, 24 September 2023, <https://business.com.tm/post/10811/president-serdar-berdimuhamedov-awar...>

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Population

6,431,000

Global Freedom Score

1/100 **Not Free**

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