

Turkmenistan

by Annette Bohr

Capital: Ashgabat
Population: 5.1 million
GDP/capita, PPP: US\$8,690

Source: The data above are drawn from the World Bank's *World Development Indicators 2013*.

Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Electoral Process	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Civil Society	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Independent Media Governance*	7.00	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
National Democratic Governance	n/a	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Local Democratic Governance	n/a	7.00	7.00	7.00	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75
Judicial Framework and Independence	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Corruption	6.25	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75
Democracy Score	6.88	6.93	6.96	6.96	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93

* Starting with the 2005 edition, Freedom House introduced separate analysis and ratings for national democratic governance and local democratic governance to provide readers with more detailed and nuanced analysis of these two important subjects.

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s). The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite initial hopes that the rule of President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow would result in a gradual opening of society, independent Turkmenistan has experienced no meaningful democratic liberalization since the death of its first ruler, Saparmurat Niyazov, in 2006. The leadership is able to sustain its rule through extensive security services and patronage networks financed by revenues from hydrocarbon exports. This continuity has rendered the person of the leader relatively interchangeable, despite the existence of a highly developed presidential personality cult. The acute shortage of qualified personnel and the relatively small size of Turkmenistan's intelligentsia also limit opportunities for reform.

In 2012, Berdimuhamedow was elected to a second term in a tightly controlled, multicandidate election. Turkmenistan's human rights record drew criticism from the United Nations Human Rights Committee, which in March reviewed the country's first-ever report to the body, submitted over a decade after its initial due date. Throughout the year, the leadership maintained extreme restrictions on citizens' personal freedoms. Nevertheless, the growth of social-networking and video-sharing websites has increased the possibilities for coordinating potential opposition.

National Democratic Governance. Turkmenistan's political institutions continue to be manipulated by government leadership to provide a veneer of legitimacy to the regime; in reality, all decision-making power is concentrated in the executive branch. The parliament operates as a presidential appendage, and presidential decree is the usual mode of legislation. In February 2012, Berdimuhamedow, entering his second term, confirmed the appointments of all government ministers and the heads of law enforcement and military organs. Unlike former president Niyazov, who avoided developing kinship-based networks, Berdimuhamedow has appointed relatives and persons from his home region in the Western Ahal Province to a number of senior government posts. *Turkmenistan's rating for national democratic governance remains unchanged at 7.00.*

Electoral Process. February 2012 saw the first multicandidate presidential election in Turkmenistan's history, though the process and outcome of the vote remained carefully controlled. Elections in independent Turkmenistan retain many of the features of the Soviet era, such as full participation and near-unanimous support for the winning candidate. Every one of the 2012 election's eight candidates, including Berdimuhamedow belonged to the government-sponsored Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (DPT). Berdimuhamedow was reelected with a predictable landslide majority. In January, the Mejlis adopted a long-awaited Law on Political Parties—too late for candidates from alternative parties to participate in the 2012

presidential poll. The law, which eventually led to the creation of Turkmenistan's first state-sponsored, "opposition" party, also placed onerous restrictions on the creation and operations of new parties. *Turkmenistan's rating for electoral process remains unchanged at 7.00.*

Civil Society. The work of domestic and foreign nongovernmental actors remains strictly monitored, and the leadership introduces hurdles and penalties against entities whose operations it wishes to impede. The Peace Corps, which had operated in Turkmenistan since 1993, closed all its programs in December. Unregistered NGO activity is punishable by a fine, short-term detention, and confiscation of property. All political parties, public associations, and religious congregations are required to register with the Ministry of Fairness to gain legal status. In 2012, there were numerous prisoners of conscience in the country, including Jehovah's Witnesses who refused or evaded compulsory military service. In February, a Pentecostal pastor sentenced in 2010 to four years in prison on trumped-up charges was freed under a general amnesty, but later in the year Protestant Christians became subject to increased raids and pressure. *Turkmenistan's rating for civil society remains unchanged at 7.00.*

Independent Media. Despite nominal constitutional protections for press freedom and freedom of expression, the government maintains near-total control over the media. The state employs a number of censorship techniques, from information blackouts in state media to internet and text-message filtering, cyber-attacks, and surveillance. Turkmenistan's first media law, which claims to forbid censorship and "interference in the activities of the media," was passed by the Mejlis in December 2012. Turkmenistan has one of the world's lowest official internet penetration rates, though an additional 14 percent of the population accesses the internet through mobile phones. In August, Russia's Mobile TeleSystems (MTS) resumed service to Turkmen users after being cut off by the government in 2010. *Turkmenistan's rating for independent media remains unchanged at 7.00.*

Local Democratic Governance. Tribal identities remain strong in Turkmenistan and play an important role in Turkmen society and informal local politics. The country's *bokims*, or governors, are directly appointed by the president. Since 2007, Berdimuhamedow has made a number of changes to the decaying education infrastructure. In 2012, national universities accepted more students than in the previous year, and it was announced that general secondary schools would switch to a 12-year system. However, there is a chronic shortage of qualified teachers; bribes are regularly accepted for places in universities; students enrolled at foreign universities are often barred from traveling abroad to continue their studies; and youth are required to miss significant amounts of instruction time to participate in state events. Berdimuhamedow's regime has also invested heavily in the country's healthcare infrastructure: in April 2012, the government announced plans to pour an additional \$500 million into the healthcare system by the end of 2016. However, new medical

facilities are neither accessible to the vast majority of the population nor staffed with qualified medical personnel. Meanwhile, relatively few funds have gone toward the modernization of basic infrastructural needs, particularly in Turkmenistan's villages. *Turkmenistan's rating for local democratic governance remains unchanged at 6.75.*

Judicial Framework and Independence. In March 2012, Turkmenistan submitted its initial report to the United Nations Human Rights Committee, which pointed to various aspects of the country's "troubling" human rights record, including the use of torture and degrading treatment in detention facilities.. Turkmenistan's imprisonment rate is reported to be among the highest in the world, which has led to serious overcrowding and the spread of disease in the prison system. In April, after years of rebuffed requests, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was permitted to visit a juvenile correction facility, though the government has yet to allow the ICRC to visit a standard prison. The former chairman of parliament, Ovezgeldy Atayev, once designated to succeed Niyazov as interim president, was released from prison in March. Authorities have used "blacklists" and arbitrary confiscation of passports to restrict freedom of movement, and a the revised Law on Migration adopted in April gives officials even greater discretion to restrict entry to and exit from Turkmenistan. There were reports of a sharp growth in the number of deportations of Turkmen citizens living illegally in Turkey and other countries, prompting authorities to step up border controls. Residents holding both Turkmenistani and Russian passports continued to feel pressure to relinquish their Russian citizenship in order to receive new biometric passports, possession of which will become mandatory in 2013 for travel outside the country. *Turkmenistan's rating for judicial framework and independence remains unchanged at 7.00.*

Corruption. Turkmenistan ranks among the world's worst performers in annual indices measuring corruption and economic freedom. There is still a notable lack of transparency with regard to economic figures, including government income, spending, and extra-budgetary accounts. Berdimuhamedow presides over a system that enables him to legally appropriate and use at his own discretion the revenues from hydrocarbons sales. The country's patronage networks have given rise to a political culture of bribery, nepotism, and embezzlement, and in 2012, there were several reports alleging cronyism among the president's relatives. Berdimuhamedow also continued to use public monies to fund showcase architectural projects carried out by foreign firms. *Turkmenistan's rating for corruption remains unchanged at 6.75.*

Outlook for 2013. Investment in the country's infrastructure—including the construction of expensive vanity projects—will continue, while strict political controls and a lack of qualified specialists will persist in impeding the implementation of political and economic reforms. Liberalization is unlikely to come to Turkmenistan until a collection of social and cultural changes occur, including higher levels of education and a concomitant growth in the number of intellectual elites, increased levels of occupational specialization and urbanization, and a freer media environment.

MAIN REPORT

National Democratic Governance

2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
n/a	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

Despite constitutional stipulations regarding the separation of powers, only the executive branch exercises any real authority in practice. President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow retains broad powers to appoint officials and enact laws, and the parliament (*Mejlis*) operates as a presidential appendage. Presidential power draws strength from a cult of personality that Berdimuhamedow's administration (including public officials at all levels) actively nurtures, as well as an extensive security apparatus that suppresses political opposition.

President Berdimuhamedow holds the posts of president of the republic, chairman of the Council of Ministers (prime minister), chairman of the Council of Elders, head of the Council for Religious Affairs (*Gengeş*), supreme commander-in-chief of the National Armed Forces, chairman of the Higher Council of Science and Technology, and chairman of the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (DPT). He has also accumulated honorific titles and degrees, including "Hero of Turkmenistan," two doctor of sciences degrees (for economics and medicine), the title of army general, and a black belt in karate that was awarded to him for his contribution to the development of the sport. In 2010, the anniversary of the president's inauguration (February 14) began to be celebrated as a national holiday. In 2012, the president's activities remained the primary focus of state media and, by mid-year, five volumes of his selected works, entitled *Towards the New Heights of Progress*, had been published.

Reminiscent of former president Saparmurat Niyazov's honorific title of *Turkmenbashi* ("head of all Turkmen"), in 2011, the Council of Elders bestowed on Berdimuhamedow the title of *Arkedag*, which means "Protector" or "Protective Mountain." In October 2012, a national contest among writers, artists, and singers to praise the country produced winning songs titled, for example, "Together with Arkedag" and "Arkedag the Hero."¹ Theaters throughout the country staged productions glorifying the president, such as *The Heart of the Protector Beats for His People* and *Protector, Let Your Path be Glorious*.² The personality cult was also extended to Berdimuhamedow's still-living father in October 2012, when a monument to him was unveiled in the president's hometown of Yzgant.

Particularly lavish or innovative ways of praising the ruler can result in promotion or access to scarce resources. Thus, the leadership cult is not simply manufactured and promulgated "from the top" but is also sustained "from below," as both an accepted and familiar means for civil servants to facilitate social mobility and remain above suspicion. Turkmenistan is a police state in which the Ministry of

National Security (MNS) has the responsibility of ensuring that the regime remains in power by tightly controlling and discouraging dissent. The Ministry of Internal Affairs directs the criminal police, who work closely with the MNS on matters of national security. Both ministries, as well as the president's private militia, abuse the rights of individuals. The armed forces have been stripped of any real security functions, with the consequence that the MNS is responsible for military counter-intelligence, rather than the Ministry of Defense. Meanwhile, the revised 2008 constitution grants notable authority to the State Security Council, a body of leading defense and security officials that is empowered to choose a deputy prime minister to serve as acting president in the event that the president is no longer able to perform his duties.

The president appoints the members of government and the Central Election Commission, as well as high-ranking judges. He was also granted the power under the 2008 constitution to directly appoint the country's governors. In February 2012, Berdimuhamedow confirmed the appointments of all government ministers and heads of law enforcement and military organs.

Over time, the fear of potential political challengers has led to widespread, regular purges of officials. However, after large-scale shakeups in 2007-2008, Berdimuhamedow's regime has replaced or rotated officials much less frequently, allowing them greater possibilities to establish their own power bases. Whereas during the final years of Niyazov's rule, governors (*hokims*) typically served less than a year, under Berdimuhamedow, it has not been uncommon for some regional *hokims* to serve 30 months or even longer. When they are replaced, it is generally by a native to the region in question, as opposed to an outsider.³

A disproportionate number of influential positions in the central government tend to go to members of Niyazov and Berdimuhamedow's own tribe, the Ahalteke, although this is in part owing to the fact that the capital of Ashgabat is located in the Ahal Region, where Ahaltekes predominate. Notable under Berdimuhamedow is the appointment of relatives and persons from his home region in the Western Ahal Province to some senior posts, in sharp contrast to the orphaned Niyazov, who steered clear of kinship-based networks.

Electoral Process

2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

Elections in independent Turkmenistan have retained many of the features of the Soviet period, such as reportedly full participation and near-unanimous support for winning candidates. The 2012 presidential election marked the first time that an incumbent president ran in a multicandidate election for the presidency. Niyazov had a lifelong tenure in the post, and Berdimuhamedow was interim president at the time of the 2007 presidential election. The authorities solved the problem of

finding candidates to run against the exalted *Arkedag* by hand-picking candidates, all from the government-sponsored Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (DPT), through orchestrated nominations by citizens' initiative groups comprised of public sector employees.

The seven candidates to run against Berdimuhamedow came from all regions of the country and represented a variety of industries and professions, thereby diluting the standing of any single opponent while giving the contest the necessary appearance of pluralism. One schoolteacher from Aşgabat who was supported by an unregistered nongovernmental organization (NGO) claimed that her application to run for president was rejected by election officials.⁴ Berdimuhamedow won with a predictable landslide majority (97 percent).⁵ Elections were later held in August for district, town, and village councils (*gengeşlar*). The Central Election Commission announced that these elections were multicandidate as well.

All political parties are required by law to register with the Ministry of Justice (renamed the Ministry of Fairness in September 2003), thereby allowing the government to deny official status to groups that are critical of its policies. Until 2012, other than the DPT and the Galkynyş National Revival Movement, which had been established to unite several state-sanctioned NGOs, no parties or movements were legally registered. In December 2011, Galkynyş was dissolved when the president declared that public associations must henceforth “act on their own, feeling their responsibility to state and society.”⁶

Despite the registration requirement, no law on political parties had been adopted in Turkmenistan prior to 2012, meaning even the DPT was formed without a legal basis. The *Mejlis* finally adopted legislation in January 2012—too late, however, for candidates from alternative parties to contest the forthcoming presidential election. Moreover, the Law on Political Parties included several onerous restrictions on the formation of new parties: No fewer than 1,000 members are required to found a party; a party must be represented in all regions and cities with regional status; and the names of all members must be reported to the Ministry of Fairness, whose representatives must be permitted to attend party meetings.

Using this new legislation to its strategic advantage, the state-sponsored Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs launched Turkmenistan's first “opposition” party, the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, in August. Ostensibly, the party would bring together representatives of small- and medium-sized businesses. Little information was published about the party's agenda or its chairman, Orazmammed Mammadov, except that he had studied teaching at Turkmenistan State University and was a “specialist” for the union.⁷ By making the superficial shift to multiparty politics, Turkmenistan's leadership is able to claim that it meets one of the criteria set by some international financial institutions and Western governments for further investment and cooperation. It also enables the country to keep pace with its Central Asian neighbors: Uzbekistan has long had artificially created “pocket parties” in its parliament, while Kazakhstan finally allowed two additional parties—both of which are loyal to the regime—to enter its parliament in January 2012.

Unrelenting harassment by the authorities has driven Turkmenistan's relatively small, unofficial opposition either underground or into exile, primarily in Russia and some Western European countries. The opposition-in-exile remains weak and prone to internal division, although some independent human rights activists operating abroad publish regular reports on the country's domestic and foreign politics.

Civil Society

2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

The state of civil society has changed little on the ground under Berdimuhamedow's leadership. The work of domestic and foreign nongovernmental actors remains strictly monitored, and the leadership introduces hurdles and penalties against entities whose operations it wishes to impede. After years of government wariness towards the program, the Peace Corps, which had sent more than 740 volunteers to the country since 1993, closed all its programs in December 2012.⁸

The 2003 Law on Public Associations requires all NGOs to register with the Ministry of Fairness, which also approves their internal governance structures. The law demands a high number of founding members for registration, and authorities can suspend registration after two written reprimands.⁹ All foreign assistance must be also registered with the Ministry of Fairness and coordinated with the Ministry of Economics and Development and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Groups without official sanction wishing to register as NGOs continue to have their applications either turned down or dragged out for years. Consequently, many groups have chosen either to register as business societies or to forego the bureaucratic process and operate covertly, although the penalties for unregistered activity can be severe: fines, short-term detention, and confiscation of property. While in 2000 there were approximately 200-300 registered and unregistered NGOs, by 2011, that number had dwindled to 99 public associations registered with the Ministry of Fairness, the vast majority of which either supported the government or received direct government support. Sports groups and government-organized NGOs were reported to account for more than three-quarters of the list of registered public associations.¹⁰

Human rights activists live under constant threat of persecution and imprisonment. According to Human Rights Watch, state security services warned human rights defenders in July and August 2012 not to attend welcoming meetings for either the new ambassador to Turkmenistan from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) or the OSCE representative on freedom of the media.¹¹ In February, one of the few openly active human rights defenders in the country found a bloody sheep's head on her door in Ashgabat after giving an interview to the Turkmen Service of the U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL).¹²

Religious activity also remains tightly controlled in Turkmenistan. Religious matters are administered by the Council on Religious Affairs (CRA), whose members are appointed by the government and report to the president. The CRA controls the hiring, promotion, and firing of Sunni Muslim and Russian Orthodox clergy, who are required to report regularly to the CRA.

All religious congregations are required to register with the Ministry of Fairness. Unregistered religious activity is banned. In its first-ever report to the United Nations Human Rights Committee, reviewed in March 2012, Turkmenistan's government stated that 128 religious communities were registered, among which 104 were Muslim (Sunni and Shiite), 13 were Russian Orthodox, and 11 were of other faiths, including Protestant religions, Baha'i, Catholicism, and Hare Krishna.¹³ Minority religious groups such as the Lutherans, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Armenian Apostolic church, and Jewish communities remain unregistered.

According to a joint report issued in 2010 by the religious freedom watchdog Forum 18 and the Open Society Foundations (OSF), Berdimuhamedow's regime has taken "a significant step backward" in the sphere of religious rights by "presid[ing] over the renewed imprisonment of conscientious objectors to compulsory military service."¹⁴ In October 2012, Forum 18 reported that, in addition to an unknown number of Muslim prisoners of conscience, at least four Jehovah's Witnesses were in prison for refusing compulsory military service. Another five were serving suspended prison sentences.¹⁵

Other systematic religious rights violations under Berdimuhamedow include severe restrictions on religious education, raids on both registered and unregistered groups, and restrictions on places of worship. In February 2012, a Pentecostal pastor sentenced in 2010 to four years in prison on trumped-up charges of swindling was freed under a general amnesty.¹⁶ Later in the year, however, Protestant Christians became subject to increased raids and pressure.¹⁷ Forum 18 and OSF have found that the only religious group to be exempt from some government restrictions is the Russian Orthodox Church, though it is not clear why.

Since the late 1980s, the country's leadership has attempted to co-opt Islam as a fundamental component of its overarching nation-building campaign and prevent its emergence as a locus of oppositional activity. In 2012, as in most previous years, one planeload of 188 pilgrims—including MNS secret police and other officials—was allowed to travel to Mecca, which represented less than 5 percent of the quota believed to be allocated to Turkmenistan by authorities in Saudi Arabia.¹⁸ Muslims are not allowed to travel abroad for religious education, and the Magtymguly Turkmen State University remained in 2012 the only university-level institution where the government allowed a small number of men to be trained as imams.

Little is known about the existence of radical Islamist groups in Turkmenistan beyond a few allusions in unofficial media. According to the seasoned Turkmen blogger and journalist operating under the pen name Annasoltan, pockets of followers of Hizb-ut-Tahrir and other groups, including Tablighi Jamaat, Atageldi aga, and Myrat aga, "play a much more significant role in Turkmenistan's underground political life than the government ever admitted," although the

evidence is circumstantial. According to Annasoltan, rather than advocating jihad, “hidden Islamists” are using the internet “to directly propagandize regular Turkmen.”¹⁹

Independent Media

2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

Turkmenistan’s first media law, which claims to forbid censorship and “interfering in the activities of the media,” was passed by the *Mejlis* in December 2012.²⁰ Having been drafted with the assistance of the OSCE, the law conforms to international standards, but it is highly unlikely to serve any practical effect in liberalizing the country’s carefully controlled media. Turkmenistan continues to employ a number of techniques to censor information, from internet and text-message filtering, cyber-attacks, and surveillance to old-fashioned blackouts in state-run media. In the lead-up to the presidential election in February, for example, the website of the Austria-based Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights was disabled for nine days owing to hacking, which was widely believed to have been undertaken by state officials.²¹

The country’s media organizations uphold the ideological line of the state, which controls the mass media through the State Information Agency of Turkmenistan (TDH). In addition to 25 newspapers and 15 journals, 7 state television channels and 4 state radio stations function as mouthpieces for government propaganda. Much of their content focuses on praising the president. Turkmenistan regularly denies visas to foreign correspondents; the few correspondents who manage to enter the country are accompanied by “minders” from the security services who severely restrict their movements and choice of interview partners. According to the Russian newspaper *Argumenty i Fakty* (Arguments and Facts), foreign journalists in Turkmenistan who meet with unauthorized persons are subject to a fine and/or a 14-day jail sentence and expulsion from the country.²² Ordinary citizens are still unable to subscribe to any foreign periodicals at their home addresses, and foreign print matter remains generally inaccessible.²³

In May 2011, Turkmenistan founded a National Space Agency, a major goal of which is to launch a commercial satellite in 2014 to develop the country’s communications systems.²⁴ The satellite should end Turkmenistan’s dependence on the Russian JSC Gazprom Space Systems satellite for TV transmissions. Aside from the radio programs of the Turkmen Service of RFE/RL and the Russian service of Deutsche Welle that are specifically targeted at Turkmenistani listeners, satellite television—widely viewed throughout Aşgabat and in other cities—provides the most popular as well as the only source of alternative media information. A new presidential order to remove private satellite dishes was issued in August 2011, which the government is likely to enforce with greater vigor once Turkmenistan launches its own satellite and creates a cable network, thereby enabling the

authorities to control the selection of both domestic and foreign channels available to the country's viewers.

The expansion of mobile telephone services, estimated to be used by 63 percent of the population,²⁵ is arguably has been the Berdimuhamedow regime's greatest contribution towards increased personal freedom, although this progress experienced a major setback at the end of 2010. In December, Turkmenistan's Communications Ministry suspended the operations of Russia's Mobile TeleSystems (MTS), the largest mobile services provider in the country, instantly cutting off nearly half of the population's mobile phone access and drastically reducing their internet usage. The move was widely viewed as an attempt on the part of Turkmenistan's government to halt MTS's rapid takeover of the country's market at the expense of Altyň Asyr, a subsidiary of state-owned Turkmen Telekom. It was also posited that the authorities had been dissatisfied with their ownership stake in MTS as well as with their dwindling ability to monitor the mobile access to the internet that MTS provided. Following the suspension of MTS's operations, huge lines formed at the offices of Altyň Asyr, requiring officials to call in troops to maintain order. Altyň Asyr proved unable to meet demand, with the result that authorities were forced to ration SIM cards²⁶ and ultimately decided to restore MTS's license. MTS resumed providing services in August 2012 and reported that it had connected 615,000 subscribers on its first day of operation alone.²⁷

Turkmenistan has one of the world's lowest official internet penetration rates at 2.2 percent, excluding mobile access. (Mobile internet users are estimated at 14 percent of the population, of which 6 percent had 3G service.) Turkmen Telekom undertook to connect private citizens to the internet for the first time only in June 2008, and long waits and administrative requirements, including a signature from the local police station, continue to hinder access. Additionally, dial-up access rates are inordinately expensive for the average citizen and service is unreliable and slow—even Afghanistan's average download speed is more than twice as fast.²⁸ Authorities block internet websites critical of official government policy and many independent news sites, although patterns of censorship are inconsistent. Unlike in other closed societies, such as China and Iran, circumvention tools used to bypass internet blocking systems are relatively unknown in Turkmenistan, while many internet users who are aware of them are fearful of using them.²⁹ However, in April 2012, there were over 80,000 page views of a popular Turkmen news service via Psiphon, an open-source web proxy that can be used to access blocked sites.³⁰

Although many sites like YouTube and LiveJournal remain blocked, Berdimuhamedow's rule has seen the advent of a small Turkmen-language online community, or the "Turkmenet." Although pseudonyms are widely used and overtly political discussions are generally avoided, the Turkmenet has allowed for limited sharing of views that dissent from the official government line.³¹ Blogs have also been posted on a number of subjects not discussed in state media, ranging from Turkmen-language hip-hop and other popular underground music to political Islamism. Chat sites, such as Talyplar.com and Teswirler.com, have grown in popularity. Teswirler.com, which was heavily used by graduates of the Turkmen-

Turkish schools, closed in July 2011, due to pressure from the government to monitor comments of a political nature.³² It has been replaced by Ertir.com. While Facebook and Twitter can be very slow to open, prompting increasing numbers of Turkmen to try forums such as Vkontakte.ru and Odnoklassniki.ru, one of the most active pages on the Turkmenet is the Facebook page “JaPBaKlaR,” named after characters in a novel by the Turkmen writer Berdi Kerbabayew. It receives as many as 30,000 unique visits per week.³³

Local Democratic Governance

2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
n/a	7.00	7.00	7.00	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75

Power in Turkmenistan’s five regions (*welayatlar*), its districts (*etraplar*), and its cities is vested in the largely decorative people’s councils (*halk maslahatlary*). Villages have legislative councils (*gengeşlar*), whose members are directly elected for five-year terms. The more than 600 *gengeşlar* are administered by councilors (*arçinlar*), who are elected from among their respective memberships. The *gengeşlar* are responsible for confirming local budgets, accounting for the rational use of natural resources, protecting the environment, overseeing sanitation and water-supply sources, and organizing moral and patriotic education among youth.³⁴ In reality, however, they follow the instructions of the *hokims*, who are directly appointed by the president.

Tribal identities, which continue to play an important role in Turkmen society and informal politics, manifest in the maintenance of preferential networks, endogamy, and the persistence of dialects. Virtually all Turkmen have at least a minimal knowledge of their own tribal affiliation, which is still a relatively reliable indicator of birthplace. There are some 30 tribes, comprising more than 5,000 clans. The state flag contains five carpet guls (a design used in producing rugs), each of which is associated with a different tribe.

With the advent of independence, Turkmenistan accorded a *de facto* higher status to its titular population, ethnic Turkmen, and adopted policies and practices to promote their interests. Many jobs in the public sector were effectively closed to non-Turkmen, particularly in the judicial system, law enforcement, security agencies, and financial and military organizations. A *de facto* ban exists on all ethnic cultural centers and non-Turkmen media sources (with the exception of two print publications in the Russian language). In December 2012, Turkmenistan carried out its first census since 1995, the information-gathering stage of which was completed in just 12 days by 25,000 workers across the country, according to the State Statistics Committee.³⁵ The 1995 census data listed a population of 4.481 million, 77 percent of whom were Turkmen, 9.2 percent Uzbek, and 6.7 percent Russian.³⁶ Turkmenistan told the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in the mid-2000s that the country’s ethnic composition was 94.7 percent Turkmen and 5.3 percent minorities, which, if accurate, would mean a more than 17 percent increase in the share of the titular population over roughly

ten years.³⁷ The results of the 2012 census will reveal the government's new official breakdown of population groups.

From approximately the year 2000, Niyazov's government dismantled key areas of the country's public sector, including education. Since coming to power, Berdimuhamedow has made a number of changes to the decaying education infrastructure, including restoring the tenth year of compulsory education, extending the period of higher education from two to five years, and widening the range of academic subjects available for study. He reopened the Academy of Sciences, which, before its closure in 1993 had acted as the mainstay of the scientific and academic communities, and established a Supreme Council on Science and Technology. In August 2012, it was announced that general secondary schools would switch to a 12-year system starting in 2013.³⁸ One month later, the president asked his cabinet to consider setting up a new English-language university in Aşgabat—a proposal that bears a striking resemblance to the establishment of Nazarbayev University in neighboring Kazakhstan.³⁹ National universities also accepted more students in 2012 than in the previous year, and the newly established State Oil and Gas Institute welcomed its first students in September.

In practice, however, many of Berdimuhamedow's educational reforms lack substance. The tenth year's curriculum is reported to be the same as that of the ninth year; textbooks for most years and subjects are outdated, ideologized and in short supply; and despite the flurry of new schools being built, there is a chronic shortage of qualified teaching personnel. Furthermore, unofficial reports indicate that the long-standing practice of paying large bribes—sometimes thousands of U.S. dollars—to procure a place in universities, institutes, and even some secondary schools has not abated.

The government sponsors students each year to study in foreign countries, although a far greater number arrange to go abroad privately,⁴⁰ particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where tuition fees are relatively low. In a continuation of a practice begun in 2009, in July and August 2012, the migration office of the Aşgabat airport barred some students enrolled at foreign universities from traveling to continue their studies. As on previous occasions, the government did not provide an explanation for these actions, although they appear to have been attempts to circumscribe the exposure of students to alternative models of education and ideologies; moreover, many young Turkmen studying abroad have chosen not to return to Turkmenistan after receiving their degrees. In 2011, the authorities transformed Turkmen-Turkish secondary schools that had been in operation since the early 1990s into regular state schools, ostensibly owing to concerns about the influence of the Turkish Islamic movement, Nurchilar, that had supported the schools since their inception; only the Turkmen-Turkish University in Aşgabat was unaffected.⁴¹

Participation in state-sponsored events, such as national holiday celebrations, cultural festivals, and greetings for high-ranking visitors, continue to be compulsory for teachers and students, reducing instruction time by up to 80 days a year. In the run-up to the anniversary celebrations of Turkmenistan's independence in October

2012, hundreds of students from the sixth to the tenth grades were exempted from school for up to a month in order to participate in daily rehearsals at stadiums and squares. Moreover, in order to demonstrate large-scale participation, some celebrations were staged and prerecorded, and students and public sector employees were sent from one regional event to another so that TV crews could gather footage.⁴² The Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights reported that festivities for Neutrality Day (12 December) were halted when two students caught pneumonia and died after having to rehearse outdoors for long periods in light clothing.⁴³

In contrast to his predecessor, Berdimuhamedow has invested heavily in the country's healthcare infrastructure. The regime has constructed a number of sanatoria and diagnostic and specialist centers in regional capitals, including the International Center for Head and Neck Diseases and the Oncology Center in Aşgabat, which is eight stories with a gold façade. According to Turkmen media, the total cost of constructing health facilities over the past 10 years exceeded US\$1.5 billion. From 2012–2016, the government plans to allocate another US\$500 million for the construction of pharmaceutical factories, five emergency centers in regional capitals, and the purchase of modern medical equipment.⁴⁴ The regime has also liaised with international organizations to introduce maternity and immunization programs.

Despite this investment, most new medical facilities—many of which contain state-of-the-art equipment—are neither accessible to the vast majority of the population, nor staffed with qualified medical personnel. Statistical data is notoriously unreliable, medical education is sub-standard, hospital staff are discouraged from reporting malpractice, and infant mortality rates are among the highest in the world. Not least, the existence of certain communicable diseases is neither acknowledged nor addressed. The multi-drug resistant form of tuberculosis in particular poses a high risk of creating a serious health crisis.⁴⁵

Moreover, relatively few state funds have gone toward the modernization of basic infrastructural needs. Many parts of the country still lack sanitation systems and unified gas supply systems, despite the country's abundance of hydrocarbons. Dozens of villages lack steady supplies of electricity, and clean water supplies are often unavailable, requiring rural residents to use well or surface water that often contains residues from pesticides, fertilizers, and animal wastes.

Judicial Framework and Independence

2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

Unchanged since the Soviet era, the court system in Turkmenistan consists of a Supreme Court, 6 regional courts, and approximately 60 district and city courts. The Supreme Economic Court hears all commercial disputes and cases involving conflicts between state enterprises and ministries. There is no constitutional court,

and the president appoints all judges for five-year terms without legislative review. Judges and lawyers, however, play a marginal role in the legal system compared to the prosecutor general, a political appointee whose primary function is repression rather than oversight. In 2012, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting reported that the Soviet-era practice of holding show trials for individuals accused of relatively minor economic crimes continued.⁴⁶ Moreover, convictions are often based on confessions extracted by forcible means, including the use of torture and psychotropic substances.

In March 2012, the UN Human Rights Committee pointed to various aspects of the country's "troubling" human rights record, including the use of degrading treatment in prisons.⁴⁷ Under an annual amnesty mandated by law, the government releases thousands of inmates each year on state holidays, primarily to relieve overcrowding. According to a report released by the Vienna-based Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) in 2010, the country's imprisonment rate is among the highest in the world—534 per 100,000 inhabitants, compared to 348 in Kazakhstan and 80-90 in European countries. Overcrowding has led, among other things, to the spread of disease.⁴⁸ Although individuals convicted of serious crimes are theoretically ineligible for amnesty, those who can pay bribes are generally freed in the annual releases, regardless of the type of crime for which they were imprisoned. Of the thousands of prisoners amnestied by Berdimuhamedow, fewer than two dozen were considered political prisoners by international human rights groups.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has yet to be allowed to visit a standard prison. After years of rebuffed requests, however, in April 2012, the ICRC was reported to have visited a juvenile correction facility under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. It was also granted permission to visit an occupational therapy center for detainees in July 2011.⁴⁹ The ICRC and Turkmen officials have discussed joint plans for a new women's prison project in Dashoguz, which, if realized, the authorities are likely to use to showcase improvements in penal system conditions that will not be evident elsewhere.⁵⁰

One notorious aspect of Turkmenistan's prison system is the number of persons who have disappeared without trace. This includes former foreign minister Boris Shikhmuradov, sentenced to life imprisonment in 2002 as a "traitor to the Motherland" and two members of the Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation. The former chairman of parliament, Ovezgeldy Atayev, was once a part of this group of missing prisoners. He was designated under the constitution to succeed Niyazov as interim president, but when he proved to be a procedural impediment to Berdimuhamedow's takeover, Atayev was duly arrested the day of Niyazov's death, charged with criminal activity, and imprisoned. He was reportedly released in March 2012.⁵¹

Berdimuhamedow's government has eased internal travel restrictions by reducing the number of roadside checks and inspections between cities. However, at the same time, authorities have used a number of measures to prevent freedom of movement, such as drawing up an extensive "blacklist" of citizens prohibited from

leaving the country and the arbitrary confiscation of passports. A new edition of the Law on Migration adopted in April 2012 contains provisions giving officials even greater discretion to restrict entry to and exit from Turkmenistan. In particular, it cites the unspecific formulation “national security interests” as the basis for refusing an entry visa to a foreign or stateless person and for refusing to allow a citizen of Turkmenistan to exit the country.⁵² There were reports in 2012 of a sharp growth in the number of deportations of Turkmen citizens living illegally in Turkey and other countries, prompting authorities to step up border controls. The deported citizens are reportedly placed on a central register upon their return to Turkmenistan, and a stamp is issued in their passports prohibiting them from leaving the country.⁵³

The new constitution adopted in 2008 formally enshrined Turkmenistan’s non-recognition of dual citizenship. The issuing of new biometric passports in the summer of 2008 exerted new pressure on residents holding both Turkmenistani and Russian passports under a 1993 agreement. A policy has reportedly gone into effect requiring dual citizens to give up their Russian citizenship in order to receive the new biometric passports, which will become mandatory in 2013 for travel outside the country. Dual citizens have also reportedly faced obstacles when attempting to renew their passports at the Russian Consulate in Ashgabat.

Corruption

2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
6.25	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75

Turkmenistan regularly features at the bottom of the list of countries in many annual indices measuring corruption and economic freedom, such as *The Wall Street Journal’s* Index of Economic Freedom and Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index. The lack of an established rule of law, inconsistent regulatory practices, and the absence of international business norms remain major disincentives to foreign investment, according to the U.S. State Department’s Investment Climate Statement-Turkmenistan for 2012.⁵⁴ Under both Niyazov and Berdimuhamedow, Turkmenistan’s government has canceled licenses and contracts with foreign firms, as with Russia’s MTS, and in some cases had their assets seized.

There is a high degree of non-transparency with regard to economic figures, and state data are unreliable or unavailable. Both the overall amount of export revenues, which form the country’s primary source of income, and the share of revenues diverted to extra-budgetary accounts remain closely guarded secrets. Moreover, other than a vague breakdown by sector, there is virtually no information available on government spending. In 2008, the authorities announced a stabilization fund to be based on the state budget surplus balance, but the specific investment rules and the overall amount of foreign exchange revenues channeled through the fund have never been made public.⁵⁵ In addition, it is difficult to discern whether there is a budget surplus in any given year.

Through the State Agency for the Management and Use of Hydrocarbon Resources under the President of Turkmenistan, Berdimuhamedow continues to preside over a system that enables him to legally appropriate and use at his own discretion the revenues from hydrocarbons sales.⁵⁶ The agency has the exclusive right to issue licenses for resource exploration and extraction, conclude contracts and production-sharing agreements, manage all oil and gas companies in the country, organize statistical reporting for hydrocarbon resources, and run international tenders.

After the collapse of the USSR, Turkmenistan saw its Soviet-era client-patron networks evolve and become entrenched as part of the system of governance. A limited number of networks commanded by Berdimuhamedow control the country's economy, which is divided into spheres of influence dominated by a close circle of presidential appointees, and imbued with a culture of bribery, nepotism, and embezzlement. Bribe-taking is particularly prevalent among customs, licensing and social service agencies. In 2012, there were several reports alleging cronyism among the president's relatives, who were said to hold lucrative positions in various economic sectors, particularly trade, where they amass personal fortunes.⁵⁷ Berdimuhamedow's son, Serdar, became a deputy minister of agriculture in June, giving rise to speculation that he is positioning himself for greater power.

In 2012, Berdimuhamedow continued to use public monies to fund “dictator chic” architectural projects. The awarding of construction contracts for ministry buildings, hotels, and airports is a preferred means of providing elites with opportunities to pocket funds owing to the nontransparency of capital expenditures. U.S. diplomatic cables obtained by WikiLeaks identified construction as the most corrupt industry in Turkmenistan, with contractors, including foreign ones that regularly pay kickbacks to officials, inflating costs by up to 30 percent to cover bribe payments. Among the showcase projects are an Olympic village in Aşgabat (US\$1.9 billion)⁵⁸ and the ongoing transformation of the Caspian Sea town of Turkmenbashi into a free economic zone and world-class resort, complete with an artificial river, a yacht club, and an oceanographic center (est. \$7 billion).⁵⁹ At the end of 2012, it was announced that the Turkish company Polimex had won a contract worth over \$2 billion to build a new airport near the capital city.⁶⁰

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