

Turkmenistan 2024 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Turkmenistan during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; arbitrary arrest or detention; transnational repression against individuals in another country; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence or threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, and censorship; restrictions of religious freedom; trafficking in persons, including forced labor; and prohibiting independent trade unions or significant or systematic restrictions on workers' freedom of association.

The government did not take credible steps or action to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses.

Section 1. Life

a. Extrajudicial Killings

There was one report during the year that the government or its agents

committed an arbitrary or unlawful killing in late 2023. The Amsterdam-based news outlet *Turkmen News* reported on January 29 regarding the November 2023 death from alleged torture of Allamurat Khudairamov. The article reported the Prosecutor General's Office stated that based on forensic data, it had decided not to initiate criminal proceedings and that the medical examination allegedly revealed the cause of Khudairamov's death was cerebral edema caused by the toxic effect of the drug Tramadol.

b. Coercion in Population Control

There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Section 2. Liberty

a. Freedom of the Press

The constitution provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, but the government did not respect this right. Registration of new media outlets or accreditation of foreign media correspondents was strictly controlled by the government. The government restricted freedom of expression and censored information resources.

The law characterized any opposition to the government as treason. Citizens publicly criticizing the government or the regime faced intimidation

and possible arrest. The law required political parties to allow representatives of the Central Election Committee and Ministry of Justice to monitor their meetings. The government warned critics against speaking with visiting journalists, other foreigners, or representatives of human rights and civil society organizations based overseas regarding human rights problems.

The government restricted and disrupted access to the internet and censored online content. Reports indicated the Ministry of National Security controlled the main internet access gateway. Authorities blocked access to websites and social media applications they considered sensitive, including YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, as well as virtual private network (VPN) connections. There were reports the security services summoned some VPN users to discuss their online activities.

Despite these restrictions, some citizens were able to access many of the above-mentioned social media through the increasing use of VPNs.

Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure

Journalists, including those critical of government policies, were subjected to surveillance and violence, harassment, or intimidation by authorities or those acting on behalf of authorities, both online and offline. There were reports law enforcement officials also harassed and monitored citizen journalists including by monitoring their telephone conversations and restricting their travel abroad. According to Radio Free Europe/Radio

Liberty (RFE/RL), journalist Hudaiberdy Allashov, who previously worked for the outlet, died on August 13 from long-term health complications. The RFE/RL article stated authorities harassed Allashov for years following his brief imprisonment in 2016. Independent journalist Soltan Achilova denounced harassment by the government in YouTube videos on July 11 and December 10.

Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups

The government exercised strict control over all media and information sources, including restricting the import of foreign newspapers. Some quasi-independent publications operated, although their stories were largely reprinted from state media outlets or reflected the views of the state news agency. The press and other media practiced self-censorship, due to the government's strict control over all media and the risks of detention, arrest, and conviction of crimes with prison sentences.

To regulate domestic printing and copying activities, the government required all publishers, printers, and photocopying establishments to register their equipment. The government did not allow the publication of works on topics that were out of favor with the government, including some works of fiction. The government had special agencies that screened all printed materials before they went to print, including books, leaflets,

brochures, etc. The government had to approve the import, publishing, and dissemination of religious literature.

There was no independent oversight of media accreditation, no defined criteria for allocating press cards, no assured provision for receiving accreditation when space was available, and no protection against the withdrawal of accreditation for political reasons. The government required all foreign correspondents to apply for accreditation. It granted visas to journalists from outside the country only to cover specific events, such as international conferences and summit meetings, where it could monitor their activities. According to the government, 60 representatives of foreign mass media were accredited in the country, including some with permanent representation, at the discretion of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The government penalized news outlets that published items without appropriate government approval. On September 9, *Turkmen News* reported the government closed the semiofficial news outlet *Salam News* after it published information not previously approved by the government.

b. Worker Rights

Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining

The law provided for the right of workers to form and join independent unions and to bargain collectively with their employers. The law prohibited

workers from striking. The law did not prohibit antiunion discrimination against union members and organizers. There were no mechanisms for resolving complaints of discrimination, nor did the law provide for reinstatement of workers fired for union activity.

The government did not respect freedom of association or collective bargaining and did not effectively enforce labor laws. No penalties existed to deter violations. All trade and professional unions were government controlled, and union leadership was appointed by the government rather than elected democratically by members. Workers could not exercise an independent or representative voice in state-dominated trade union activities. The government did not permit private citizens to form independent unions. There were no labor nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the country.

Each government agency had a trade union that could receive complaints related to labor matters, as could the country's human rights ombudsperson, but these unions were reluctant to report complaints due to fear of retaliation.

The government signed a roadmap of cooperation activities between the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the Government of Turkmenistan for 2024-2025, which included work on strengthening labor inspections, aligning labor legislation to international standards, and acceding to ILO conventions. The government and the ILO publicly released the roadmap in

May, and the government began to implement the roadmap. On July 22, the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection added “cotton picker” and “cotton worker” to the list of hazardous jobs banned for all children younger than 18.

Forced or Compulsory Labor

See the Department of State’s annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acceptable Work Conditions

Wage and Hour Laws

The law provided for a minimum wage for all sectors. The law provided for a workweek to not exceed 40 hours. The law stated overtime or holiday pay should be double the regular wage. The law prohibited pregnant women, women with children up to age three, women with children with disabilities younger than age 16, and single parents with two or more children from working overtime. Laws governing overtime and holiday pay were not effectively enforced. The government, as well as many private-sector employers, required workers to work 10 hours a day or a sixth day without compensation. Reports indicated many public-sector employees worked at least a half day on Saturdays. Penalties for violations of minimum wage and overtime laws were not clearly defined and there was no state agency designated for enforcement. Penalties for labor violations were not

commensurate with those for similar crimes, such as fraud.

Occupational Safety and Health

Occupational safety and health (OSH) standards were not appropriate for the country's main industries. Not all employers provided construction workers and industrial workers in older factories with proper protective equipment; employers often made these workers labor in unsafe environments.

Some agricultural workers faced environmental health hazards related to the application of defoliants in preparing cotton fields for mechanized harvesting. Workers did not have the right to remove themselves from work situations that endangered their health or safety without jeopardizing their continued employment, and authorities did not protect employees in these situations. The ILO began observing working conditions during the cotton harvest in August, based on a 2023 agreement with the government.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that as of September 1, there were 2,269 violations of the labor law.

Labor inspectors required an order from the leadership of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection to initiate unscheduled inspections. There were no provisions in legislation that described the powers of the labor inspector

to undertake a visit with or without prior notice to the employer. Labor inspectors were not authorized to impose penalties for violations. The Ministry of Labor and Social Protection was responsible for initiating sanctions, based on a protocol drawn up by an inspector. The Ministry of Labor and Social Protection imposed sanctions in the form of fines. While the government made efforts to prevent violations, enforcement mechanisms were not always effective. The number of labor inspectors, approximately 327, was insufficient to ensure compliance with minimum wage, overtime, and OSH laws. Credible data concerning the informal economy was unavailable. Wages in the informal sector were unofficial and not regulated by the government.

c. Disappearance and Abduction

Disappearance

There were no new reports of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities. The advocacy campaign led by the NGO Prove They Are Alive! maintained a list of 162 reported cases of previously forcibly disappeared prisoners. The list included former Ministers of Foreign Affairs Boris Shikhmuradov and Batyr Berdyev, former director of the Turkmenbashy oil refinery Guychmyrad Esenov, and others accused of participation in the alleged 2002 assassination attempt on then President Saparmurat Niyazov.

Prolonged Detention without Charges

The law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention. The government generally did not observe these requirements. Persons arrested or detained were not entitled to challenge the legal basis or arbitrary nature of their detention in court.

Families sometimes did not know the whereabouts of detained relatives. Incommunicado detention was a problem. The extent to which authorities failed to protect due process in the criminal justice system was unclear.

On November 20, authorities for the second time prevented independent journalist Soltan Achilova from traveling to Geneva to receive an award for her human rights work. Authorities detained Achilova, her daughter, and son-in-law, and forcibly took them to a hospital for infectious diseases, before releasing them five days later. Achilova faced harassment for years because of her work reporting on human rights abuses in the country.

d. Violations in Religious Freedom

See the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

e. Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at

<https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Section 3. Security of the Person

a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Although the constitution and law prohibited such practices, there were credible reports government officials employed them. Human Rights Watch stated torture was widespread in prisons and security services and other government entities often acted with impunity. The NGO maintained the government did not take steps to increase respect for human rights by the security forces.

b. Protection of Children

Child Labor

The law prohibited all of the worst forms of child labor. According to the labor code, the minimum age at which a person could enter a labor agreement or contract was 18. A child of 15 years, however, could work four to six hours per day, up to 24 hours per week, with parental and trade union permission. The law prohibited children younger than 16 from working more than 24 hours per week and prohibited children between the ages of 16 and 18 from working more than six hours per day or 36 hours per

week. The law also prohibited children from working overtime or between the hours of 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. and protected children from exploitation in the workplace. A 2005 presidential decree banned child labor in all sectors and stated specifically that children could not participate in the cotton harvest. The law prohibited students ages 14 to 30 from working during school hours but permitted students to work in “voluntary” collective production practices in their free time.

The Ministry of Justice and the Prosecutor General’s Office were responsible for enforcing the prohibition on child labor and could impose penalties for violations, including fines or suspension of an employer’s operations for up to three months, sanctions that were not commensurate with those for other analogous crimes, such as kidnapping.

The ILO began providing technical assistance to strengthen the capacities of the ombudsperson to deal with labor complaints during the year. There were no official figures or independent reporting available on the number of violations to assess whether the Ministry of Justice and the Prosecutor General’s Office effectively enforced the 2005 presidential decree prohibiting child labor.

Families living in poverty often compelled children to work as porters in local marketplaces, transporting heavy loads, and to harvest carrots in the fields.

Child Marriage

The legal minimum age for marriage was 18 and was effectively enforced by the government. There were no credible reports of child or forced marriage.

c. Protection to Refugees

The government reported it cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern. In 2009, the government assumed responsibility from UNHCR for making refugee status determinations, but had not granted refugee status since then.

Provision of First Asylum

The law provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government had a system for providing protection to refugees. According to UNHCR, as of late September, the country hosted 13 official mandate refugees. UNHCR estimated that, as of June, the country also hosted 3,500 individuals in refugee-like situations.

d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement

According to an estimate by the Israeli embassy, approximately 400 to 600 Jews lived in the country. There were no reports of antisemitic incidents.

e. Instances of Transnational Repression

Human rights and civil society organizations reported the government engaged in acts of transnational repression. Human Rights Watch released a report on November 11 noting Turkmen living abroad who publicly criticized the government could face detention, prosecution, imprisonment, and torture if they returned to Turkmenistan.

Efforts to Control Mobility

Human Rights Watch reported the law allowed citizens to apply for new passports or extend the validity of their passports overseas, but the government did not implement the law, thus forcing citizens to return to the country to apply for a new passport. There were reports the government did not allow some citizens who renewed their passports to leave the country again. *Turkmen News* reported on August 20 that Turkish authorities did not allow its editor, Ruslan Myatiev, to enter Türkiye. According to the outlet's article, Turkish officials told Myatiev he represented a threat to Türkiye's national security. The article mentioned that this action came at the request of the government.

Bilateral Pressure

Overseas-based Turkmen independent media and international media reported Turkish authorities detained Turkmen opposition activists in

Türkiye at the request of the government of Turkmenistan. Some were deported to the country and immediately arrested, such as Merdan Muhamedov.

According to the NGO Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, on June 26, Turkish authorities deported to Turkmenistan blogger Merdan Muhamedov, who had lived in Türkiye since 2012. The NGO reported Muhamedov, who publicly criticized the Turkmen government in the past, faced charges including conspiracy to seize power by force, conspiracy to change the constitutional order by force, and open calls for extremist or other actions aimed at damaging the national security of the country. Muhamedov faced possible imprisonment of up to 25 years.