



Honor guards by the coffin of late Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov during his funeral on 24 December 2006. © AP/Garanich

The sudden death of Turkmen President-for-Life Saparmurat Niyazov in December 2006 gave rise to hopes for democratic change and human rights progress. The IHF, the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) and the Human Rights Centre Memorial called on the international community to seize the opportunity to press Turkmenistan about “its grave shortcomings as a democratic and law-governed state” and to “end the retrograde practices of Niyazov’s regime.”¹ However, the steps taken toward appointing a successor of Niyazov in late 2006 – which included the nomination of a hand-picked field of candidates and a frontrunner backed even by the Election Commission – did not reflect a democratic process and it was clear that conditions were not in place for democratic elections on the date scheduled for February 2007.

Throughout the year, the human rights situation remained of serious concern.

President Niyazov controlled the executive, judicial as well as legislative branch and fully dominated public life through an excessive personality cult gradually built up over many years. No independent media or civil society groups existed in the country, and dissidence was systematically repressed. Internet was not available to most citizens and the official Turkmen internet provider systematically blocked access to any sites containing information critical of the regime. The import of foreign publications was prohibited and foreign TV- and radio-channels could only be received by those who had satellite antennas.

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) examined the first state report submitted by Turkmenistan under the Convention on the Rights of the Child with a delay of almost ten years. In its concluding comments, the committee highlighted a number of major human rights problems in the country, such as the strict

government control of media and other sources of information; the widespread use of torture and ill-treatment; the persistent pattern of discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities; the prevalence of poverty among broad segments of the population; and the deterioration of the education system, which has largely resulted from the heavy emphasis given to teaching of the spiritual guide *Rukhnama* authored by President Niyazov. With particular respect to children's rights, the committee, *inter alia*, expressed concern that "children belonging to families of persons condemned on political grounds are often victims of discriminatory and punitive practices, notably in access to education and other services."²

Elections

Following the death of President Niyazov in December, the Turkmen constitution would have required that the chairperson of the *Mejlis* (parliament) be appointed acting president. However, Deputy Prime Minister and Health Minister Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, who pledged to protect the country's "stability and peace" and "keep alive the legacy of Saparmurat Turkmenbashi,"³ was given this task instead. Moreover, only a few days after the announcement of Niyazov's death, new presidential elections were scheduled for February 2007, and, after amending a constitutional provision barring the acting president from running, Berdymukhamedov was nominated along with five other candidates from within the old regime. No exile opposition candidates were allowed to register as candidates. The head of the Election Commission said that he would "do everything" to make sure Berdymukhamedov wins "because he is a worthy candidate."⁴ In the elections held on 11 February 2007, Berdymukhamedov won with 89% of the vote.⁵

In July elections to local *Gengeshes* (decision-making bodies in rural areas)

and December elections to district and municipal *Khalk Maslahatias* (People's Councils), virtually all candidates were nominated by the authorities, with loyalty to the president being the main criterion for nomination. A resolution adopted by the national *Khalk Maslahaty* on 25 October clearly spelled out that the elections were aimed at the selection of individuals "who, from the bottom of their hearts, are loyal and ready to honestly serve the Motherland and our Great Serdar" (an expression commonly used to refer to President Niyazov).

Given the absence of any legal political opposition in the country, all elections that have taken place in Turkmenistan in recent years have been undemocratic.

Prison conditions

As prisons remained largely closed for the outside world, it was difficult to obtain information about prison conditions. However, overcrowding was reportedly a serious problem, and abusive treatment of prisoners was believed to be a widespread problem.

In mid-2005 President Niyazov publicly criticized corrupt practices and violence against inmates in the DZ-K/8 prison colony in Dashoguz, the only female prison in the country. Mass dismissals of prison staff members were subsequently carried out and male prison guards were replaced with female officials.⁶ However, other problems reportedly persisted in the prison, including serious overcrowding, scarce food rations and inadequate sanitation. Since the end of the 1990s the number of prisoners held in the colony had gradually increased from about 600 to over 2,000, and the situation remained critical although more than 1,000 women were released under the annual amnesty in November.⁷

Two protest actions were organized in the prison in October and November, re-

sulting in the dismissal of the new prison head appointed in 2005.⁸

Conditions in so-called narcotics dispensaries, where drug addicts were forcibly detained, were also reported to be critical. Sometimes such facilities accommodated as many as ten times the number of people they were designed to accommodate,⁹ and those held there did not receive adequate treatment for their drug abuse. The detainees were also typically forced to carry out physical labor without payment, were poorly fed and were regularly subjected to torture and humiliating treatment by guards.¹⁰

The authorities continued to refuse independent observers, including those of the International Red Cross, access to the country's prisons and detention facilities.

Freedom of expression and human rights defenders

Freedom of expression was extremely curtailed. No independent media or civil society groups could legally work in the country and journalists, civil society activists and others who engaged in any form of criticism of official policies were highly vulnerable to persecution. During the year, there were numerous cases in which human rights activists and other critics of the regime were arrested, imprisoned or forcibly placed in psychiatric institutions. One journalist/human rights defender died in prison.

◆ On 4 January, 70-year old Kakabai Tedjenov was arrested in his hometown Turkmenabat and forcibly placed in a psychiatric hospital.¹¹ Tedjenov had repeatedly sent letters to the authorities protesting social and other government policies and prior to his detention he had sought to distribute a written statement to foreign embassies and international organizations, in which he called on the international community to impose sanctions on Turkmenis-

tan for its human rights violations. The circumstances of the case clearly suggested that Tedjenov was targeted for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression. Previously, in May 2004, Tedjenov had been detained together with about 50 other people who protested official policies during a visit by President Niyazov to Turkmenabat.¹² Following numerous international appeals and actions in support of Tedjenov,¹³ he was eventually released after more than eight months in detention.¹⁴

◆ In April, 66-year-old Gurbandurdy Durdykuliye was released after more than two years in psychiatric detention. Durdykuliye was arrested in the village of Suvchy in western Turkmenistan in February 2004 and forcibly placed in a psychiatric hospital after attempting to organize a peaceful demonstration to protest government policies.¹⁵ His release followed a series of international interventions for his release, including an appeal made by 54 US senators and congressmen.¹⁶

◆ In June, three persons associated with the Bulgaria-based Turkmen Helsinki Foundation (THF), Ogulsapar Muradova, Annakurban Amanklychev and Sapardurdy Khadjiyev, were arrested in Ashgabat. Muradova had also worked as a journalist for Radio Liberty.¹⁷ In a closed trial held in August, to which international organizations and embassies were denied access, they were all sentenced to prison on illegal weapons possession and other charges; Muradova and Amanklychev received six-year sentences, and Khadjiyev a seven-year sentence.¹⁸ Statements made by authorities and state media sought to implicate the three in subversive activities, e.g. because they had attended human rights training abroad, and there were credible allegations that Muradova and Amanklychev were forcibly administered psychotropic drugs in an attempt to force them to "confess" to such activities.¹⁹ In September,

Muradova died in custody under unclear circumstances. While security officials insisted that the death was natural, relatives who saw the body reported that it bore signs of possible torture, including a large wound on the head and strangulation marks on the neck.²⁰ International organizations called for a prompt, independent and transparent investigation into the death of Muradova,²¹ but no investigation results had been made public by the Turkmen authorities at the end of the year.

◆ Andrey Zatoka, a well-known Turkmen ecologist and environmental activist was arrested in the city of Dashauz on 17 December 2006. The reasons for his detention were unclear, but its circumstances suggested that it was aimed at punishing him for his civil society engagement. Zatoka had been involved in efforts to improve environmental conditions in Turkmenistan for many years and served as the co-chair of the Dashauz Ecological Club, which was closed down by a court in 2003. He was detained the same day as he was supposed to leave for Ashgabat, from where he was due to travel to Moscow to attend a meeting of the International Socio-Ecological Union and subsequently celebrate the New Year with family members residing in Russia.²² At the beginning of 2007, Zatoka remained in detention and had reportedly been charged with unlawful acquisition, possession or distribution of weapons.²³

There were also reports of intimidation and harassment of relatives of exiled Turkmen human rights activists and opposition members, such as threatening visits by security officials, arrests and bans on traveling abroad. These incidents clearly represented attempts to put pressure on the relatives of exiled critics of the Niyazov regime to force them to give up their efforts to shed light on the human rights situation in Turkmenistan and promote democratic changes in the country.²⁴

Freedom of movement

Freedom of movement was violated through restrictive rules concerning residence and occupation inside the country as well as “black lists” for travel abroad. Such lists reportedly included the names of as many as 16,000 persons.

Women’s rights

Reports received by TIHR indicated that government departments were involved in the sexual exploitation of young women, who were forced to provide sexual services to high-ranking guests and businessmen from foreign countries. A total of 30 to 40 women were believed to be victims of this form of organized sexual practice every year, and some of those affected were reportedly “sold” to other countries.²⁵ In two cases, victims were known to have been able to flee the country and seek asylum in European countries.

Economic and social rights

A new law on pensions signed by the president in January retroactively deprived about 100,000 people of pensions and other benefits they had already received and significantly reduced benefits for other pensioners and disabled people. The law changed the rules for calculating the number of years of professional experience, on the basis of which pensions are paid. Hence, under the law, for example, work periods completed in other republics of the former Soviet Union, maternity and sick leaves as well as vacations could no longer be counted as periods of professional experience and were deducted from the experience registered for those already receiving pensions. As a result, the professional experience of many elderly people shrunk to less than the required minimum of 25 years for males and 20 years for females to receive a pension.²⁶

SOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

- ◆ Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) (in exile in Vienna), at www.chrono-tm.org

Other organizations:

- ◆ Turkmen Helsinki Foundation (in exile in Varna, Bulgaria, at www.tmhelsinki.org/)
- ◆ Human Rights Centre Memorial, at www.memo.ru
- ◆ Amnesty International, at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/eng-tkm/index>
- ◆ Human Rights Watch, at www.hrw.org/doc?t=europe&c=turkme

IHF and TIHR information:

- ◆ IHF, TIHR and Memorial, "Turkmenistan: Human Rights after Dictator's Death," 11 January 2007, at www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=58&d_id=4361
- ◆ IHF and TIHR, "Turkmenistan: Release Political Prisoners and Prisoners of Conscience," 21 December 2006, at www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=58&d_id=4359
- ◆ OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw, 02-13 October 2006 - *Interventions and Recommendations by the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights*, at www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=58&d_id=4307
- ◆ IHF, "Imprisoned Turkmen Journalist and Human Rights Defender Dies in Custody," 4 September 2006, at www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=58&d_id=4302
- ◆ IHF, TIHR and six other NGOs, "Turkmenistan: Open Letter from a Coalition of Human Rights Organizations," 18 July 2007, at www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=58&d_id=4280
- ◆ IHF and TIHR, "Open Letter: Forced Psychiatric Detention of Turkmen Pensioner," 13 February 2006, at www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=58&d_id=4197
- ◆ IHF, *Central Asia: Human Rights Groups Facing Increasingly Restrictive Legislation*, February 2006, at www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=58&d_id=4193
- ◆ Other IHF information on Turkmenistan can be found at www.ihf-hr.org/documents/?sec_id=58

General review:

- ◆ Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding observations: Turkmenistan, 2 June 2006, at [www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/\(Symbol\)/dfe43af483155c99c125719a00653527?Opendocument](http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(Symbol)/dfe43af483155c99c125719a00653527?Opendocument)

Endnotes

- ¹ IHF, TIHR and Memorial, "OSCE Must Seize Chance to Press Turkmenistan on Human Rights and Democracy," 11 January 2007, at www.ihf-hr.org/viewbinary/viewhtml.php?doc_id=7184.
- ² Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Concluding observations: Turkmenistan*.
- ³ *The International Herald Tribune*, "Turkmen nominate successor to leader," 26 December 2006, at www.iht.com/articles/2006/12/26/news/turkmen.php.
- ⁴ "Turkmenistan registers presidential candidates," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 28 December 2006, at www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/12/f02efa71-93bf-478a-9200-d909ecb87380.html.

- ⁵ "New Turkmen President Sworn in," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 14 February 2007, at www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/2/29F5FC12-0EE2-4E95-A44A-46EF09D5B4C0.html
- ⁶ TIHR, "Replacement of prison staff brought no improvements for female inmates," 4 August 2006, at www.chrono-tm.org/?0257042140000000000000011000000.
- ⁷ TIHR, "On lists of the convicts to be pardoned," November 2006, at www.chrono-tm.org/?0257042688000000000000011000000.
- ⁸ TIHR, "Riot in the female colony," 16 October 2005, at www.chrono-tm.org/?0257042670000000000000011000000; TIHR "A new riot of female inmates," 25 November 2006, at www.chrono-tm.org/?0257042709000000000000011000000.
- ⁹ For example, in the dispensary located in the Trud village of the Parahatsky etrap (Mary velayat), 500 persons were undergoing forcible treatment although the facility was designed to accommodate no more than 50 patients.
- ¹⁰ TIHR, "How drug users are treated in Turkmenistan," 30 November 2006, at www.chrono-tm.org/?0257042721000000000000011000000.
- ¹¹ See www.memo.ru/hr/politpr/asia/2006/pres-tu/tu060208.htm
- ¹² See IHF and TIHR, "Open Letter: Forced Psychiatric Detention of Turkmen Pensioner," 13 February 2006, at www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=3&d_id=4197.
- ¹³ See also IHF, "An Open Letter for Freedom of Expression in Turkmenistan: Turkmen Dissident Remains in Forced Psychiatric Detention Despite International Appeals," 30 August 2006, at www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=58&d_id=4293.
- ¹⁴ See <http://amnesty.org.ru/pages/goodnews-index-rus>
- ¹⁵ Amnesty International, "Prisoner of conscience Gurbandurdy Durdykuliev forcibly detained in psychiatric hospital," 2004, at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGEUR610082004?open&of=ENG-TKM>
- ¹⁶ At www.turkmenmedia.cjes.ru/news/?id=560.
- ¹⁷ IHF and TIHR, "Members of the Turkmen Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights and Radio Free Europe Arrested in Ashgabat," 19 June 2006, at www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=58&d_id=4265.
- ¹⁸ IHF, "Turkmenistan: Human Rights Activist Sentenced to Prison Terms," 25 August 2006; www.eurasianhome.org/xml/t/print.xml?lang=ru&nic=digest&pid=1438.
- ¹⁹ "Turkmenistan: Open Letter from a coalition of human rights organizations," 18 July 2006, at www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=58&d_id=4280.
- ²⁰ IHF, "Imprisoned Turkmen Journalist and Human Rights Defender Dies in Custody," 14 September 2006, at www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=58&d_id=4302.
- ²¹ See www.prima-news.ru/news/news/2006/9/19/36762.html#print.
- ²² IHF and TIHR, "Turkmen Environmental Activist Detained," 19 December 2006, at www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=58&d_id=4357.
- ²³ Amnesty International appeal, 5 January 2007.
- ²⁴ "New cases of intimidation of relatives of exiled Turkmen opposition leaders and human rights activists," 15 September 2006, at www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=58&d_id=4304.
- ²⁵ TIHR "Ministry of Trade turns Turkmen girls into trade commodities," 8 November 2006, at www.chrono-tm.org/?0257042696000000000000011000000.
- ²⁶ TIHR "Outcome of pension reform," 7 August 2006, at www.chrono-tm.org/?0257042404000000000000011000000