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## Turkmenistan

Headed by president-for-life Saparmurat Niazov, Turkmenistan remains one of the most repressive and closed countries in the world. Regressive government policies in education, culture, and health care caused increasing concern in the international community. In an attempt to mollify international critics, Niazov conceded to soften registration rules for religious groups, revoked the notorious law providing for a U.S.\$50,000 fee for registering a marriage with a foreigner, and granted citizenship to over sixteen thousand refugees and stateless persons. Despite these small positive steps, the overall human rights situation in Turkmenistan remains dismal.

During the first ever review of Turkmenistan by the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) in August, the government came under heavy criticism on numerous counts of rights violations, including its policy of forced assimilation; restrictions on national and ethnic minorities in access to employment; forcible internal displacement and other restrictions on freedom of movement; closure of minority cultural institutions and of schools teaching in minority languages; limitations on access to foreign culture and art, as well as to foreign media and the Internet; impediments on Turkmen students wishing to study abroad; and the dominant role played by the *Rubnama* in school curricula.

### ***Persecution of “Internal Enemies”***

In June 2005, several defendants were brought to trial in closed court on charges of conspiring to assassinate the president in November 2002. One of them, Begench Beknazarov, was sentenced to life imprisonment, while the rest received lengthy prison terms. The fate of more than fifty others convicted in previous years for the 2002 assassination attempt remains unknown, as they are still denied visits by and correspondence with relatives. There are unconfirmed reports that some may have died in custody or are seriously ill.

Nearly incessant reshuffles initiated by Niazov in the central government and regional administrations are frequently accompanied by arrest and internal exile, confiscation of property, and persecution of the dismissed officials' family members. In July two influential government figures, Rejep Saparov, the former head of the Presidential Administration, and Yelly Kurbanmuradov, the former Deputy Prime Minister in charge of gas and petroleum, were sentenced to prison terms of twenty and twenty-five years respectively on charges of corruption and links with foreign intelligence services. As in many other cases, a brief and closed court hearing only served to rubber stamp harsh verdicts that had apparently been decided by the president before the trial even started.

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Authorities persisted in their refusal to drop charges brought in 2004 against seventy-eight-year-old writer Rakhim Esenov, who stands accused of the unauthorized publication abroad of a novel on medieval India, and of smuggling eight hundred copies of it into Turkmenistan. In March 2005 state security officials denied Esenov permission to travel to Russia for medical treatment.

The law equating any criticism of presidential policy to high treason is still in place, making any open dissent impossible. In July, Niazov called on the police to identify and fine persons who “spread false rumors.” Dissident Gurbandurdy Durdykuliev remains in a psychiatric hospital in a remote region, having been confined there after asking the president to allow a peaceful demonstration. Relatives of political émigrés openly criticizing Niazov continue to face persecution.

### ***Regression in Education and Culture***

Study of *Rubnama*, a “new holy book” written by president Niazov, is taking the dominant position in school and university curriculum and is gradually replacing other disciplines. By late 2005, Russian-language instruction in grade school had been severely curtailed, and teaching in the languages of other ethnic minorities had ceased altogether. For many children, access even to education within the diminished curriculum is seriously impeded because authorities continue, despite legal prohibition, to widely employ child labor in agriculture.

In February, President Niazov declared his intention to close all libraries with the exception of the central library and those attached to universities. Although this directive has not been fully implemented, over a hundred libraries were closed, including all district and most city libraries.

### ***Civil Society and Media***

Despite the October 2004 decriminalization of membership in unregistered nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), independent NGOs were unable to resume activities, or to register. Their activists remained under security police surveillance, and they frequently found themselves effectively confined to their homes ahead of planned meetings with visiting senior international officials.

In February 2005, Victor Panov, one of the few Russian journalists officially accredited in Turkmenistan, was arrested on false espionage charges and three weeks later was deported to Russia. Also in February, Nikolai Gerasimov, a former correspondent for the *Neutrally Turkmenistan* newspaper, was forced to leave the country following threats he received after having given an interview to Radio Liberty’s Turkmen service.

Internet access remains severely restricted, and the last remaining Internet club in Turkmenistan was shut down in April. That same month import of foreign periodicals was banned.

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## **Religious Freedom**

Despite a certain loosening of religion-related legislation, all confessions faced difficulties registering, which is essential for lawful activities in Turkmenistan. According to official data, as of August only 118 mosques and churches were registered, several times less than the number registered in the mid-1990s.

President Niazov not only banned the construction of new mosques (several old ones having been demolished or transferred to other uses in 2004), but in June also liquidated the theological faculty of Ashgabat State University, the only educational establishment authorized to teach Islam. Niazov ordered that religious practices be unified, through publication of a list of approved Islamic rites and launch of a campaign against those who independently interpret Islam. Under this campaign two Muslims were arrested in Dashoguz in July as “Wahhabis.”

Authorities were delaying registration of twelve parishes and a convent of the Russian Orthodox Church, and denied visas to several priests who were assigned to Turkmenistan. At the same time, Niazov suggested that the Moscow Patriarch should separate Turkmen parishes from the Central Asian Diocese, which was seen by observers as a step towards an “independent Orthodox church” controlled by the Turkmen authorities.

Although under United States pressure authorities registered five protestant congregations in 2005, many religious minorities still cannot obtain registration (among them Shia Muslims, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and the Armenian Apostolic Church). In some cases even registered congregations continue to face harassment and restrictions. Police questioned religious activists, obstructed religious meetings, and confiscated religious literature. Some believers, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, were beaten and intimidated by the police for “rejecting the Muslim faith.” In December 2004 and February 2005, two Jehovah’s Witnesses were given prison terms for evading military service on religious grounds. Two others, convicted in May and June 2004, continued to serve their sentences.

## **Key International Actors**

In December 2004 and again in November 2005, the Third Committee of United Nations General Assembly adopted resolutions on Turkmenistan expressing concern about serious human rights violations and lack of progress in key areas mentioned in the U.N. Commission on Human Rights resolutions of 2004 and 2005. In an apparent response to international criticism, Turkmenistan acceded to several U.N. instruments in 2005, including the optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography, and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. It also submitted its initial report to the CERD, the first ever report submitted by Turkmenistan to any U.N. treaty body, which was examined by the Committee in August 2005.

Relations between Turkmenistan and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) remained tense. OSCE experts were denied visas to observe the December 2004 parliamentary elections.

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However, in early 2005, Niazov agreed to resume dialogue with the OSCE and, as reported, even went as far as to promise OSCE Chairman-in-Office Dimitrij Rupel to give up his presidency for life and retire in 2009. In May OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Rolf Ekéus was allowed to visit the country, and September marked the first time that a representative of the Turkmen government participated in the OSCE human dimension implementation meeting in Warsaw.

U.S. pressure contributed to further softening of the legislation on religion and simplified procedures for registration of religious minority groups. Despite the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's recommendation, however, the U.S. State Department again failed to make full use of the leverage at its disposal and designate Turkmenistan a "country of particular concern" under the terms of the International Religious Freedom Act. The European Union's Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Turkmenistan remained frozen. Russia, in contrast, has muted its criticism of Niazov even on the controversial issue of Turkmenistan's unilateral abolition of dual Russian-Turkmen citizenship.