

POLITICAL AUTHORITY, AUTHORITARIAN CONSOLIDATION, AND THE VIOLATION OF HUMAN AND ETHNIC MINORITY RIGHTS IN TURKMENISTAN

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After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkmenistan developed into an authoritarian state whose political ideology openly promoted the superiority of ethnic Turkmen over non-Turkmen communities. From the earliest years of independence, the authorities placed up to a quarter of the population, composed of ethnic minorities, in a subordinate and marginalized position. The 1991 Constitution, which formally declared independence in the name of securing Turkmen statehood, was accompanied in practice by the gradual erosion of protections for minorities and by policies that reinforced exclusion and discrimination. The situation of non-Turkmens and non-Muslims worsened significantly as they faced systemic obstacles ranging from employment restrictions to outright persecution.

The deterioration became particularly pronounced after the alleged assassination attempt on President Saparmurat Niyazov in 2002, which served as a pretext for the government to intensify nationalist policies. In 2005, authorities enacted laws that resulted in the expulsion of thousands of Russian-speaking residents, continuing a trend of coerced migration and demographic manipulation aimed at consolidating an ethnically homogeneous state. These measures echoed earlier authoritarian practices in the Soviet Union, where dissenting voices and vulnerable minorities were silenced through censorship, harassment, arrests, and deportations. Human rights monitors such as Vyacheslav Mamedov and international researchers faced persecution and expulsion for exposing the treatment of minorities, while statistical and

demographic data on these processes became increasingly difficult to access due to pervasive censorship.

The leadership of Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, who came to power in 2006 following Niyazov's death, did not bring liberalization. Instead, it perpetuated and intensified authoritarian and nationalist policies. Elections remained non-competitive and tightly controlled, with implausibly high participation and approval rates. Cultural and political life was reshaped through policies such as the mandatory wearing of traditional Turkmen clothing in schools, restrictions on students studying abroad, and the creation of new instruments of surveillance and censorship. The authorities further constrained civil liberties by targeting journalists, activists, and religious and ethnic minorities, using measures such as blacklists of "unreliable elements," confiscation of personal property at borders, and prohibitions on travel. Despite early gestures suggesting a possible departure from Niyazov's personality cult, Berdymukhamedov soon constructed his own, reinforcing a nationalist and isolationist framework that marginalized non-Turkmens and non-Muslims, entrenched authoritarian governance, and rendered Turkmenistan one of the most closed and repressive regimes in the post-Soviet space.

The regime extended its repression to dissidents and opposition figures who had fled the country and systematically persecuted their relatives who remained in Turkmenistan. The cases of Akmukhammet Baykhanov and Geldy Kyarizov illustrated this practice: both men had been persecuted and imprisoned in Turkmenistan for criticizing government policies before fleeing to Russia, where they reported ongoing threats, while Kyarizov's relative who remained in Turkmenistan was physically attacked and injured. Within the country, the authorities continued to harass and persecute dissidents. In 2015, human rights activist Gaspar Matalaev was sentenced to three years in prison on fabricated fraud charges in retaliation for monitoring forced labor

during the cotton harvest. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty journalist Soltan Achilova was assaulted on several occasions and in 2018 was threatened, beaten, and subjected to harassment that extended to her relatives, whose car was confiscated until she left their town. The authorities also lured Turkmen students abroad into returning, such as Omruzak Omarkulyev, who created an informal Turkmen student club in Turkey. After his return in 2018 he was barred from leaving Turkmenistan, went missing, and was later reported to have been sentenced to twenty years in prison. Other critics, including teachers like Batyr Batyrov, who had complained about corruption in education, were subjected to death threats directed at themselves and their families.

Turkmenistan functioned as a selective police state where the law was applied arbitrarily. Citizens could not freely access information, participate politically, speak openly, or rely on legal protections. Equality before the law was absent, and those with connections to the president or his inner circle enjoyed immunity while accumulating illegal profits under the protection of powerful patrons. Ordinary Turkmen, facing poverty and lacking legitimate means to improve their condition, were often pushed into breaking laws. The regime not only silenced opposition within the country but also pursued those active abroad. Exile-based human rights organizations, including the Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation and the Memorial Human Rights Center, documented detentions of individuals suspected of links to opposition groups abroad and intimidation of their families within Turkmenistan. Relatives were summoned, threatened with dismissal, beaten, or harassed. In 2020, a series of repressive measures were recorded: Murad Dushemov was detained after a YouTube appeal for exiled opposition unity, Reimberdy Kurbanov was punished for online communication with critics abroad, and Pygambergeldy Allaberdyev was sentenced to six years in prison on fabricated charges and denied family visits and supplies. The harassment extended even to relatives of exiles, such as the violent break-in at

the Kyarizov-Serebryannik family apartment after they criticized the government's Covid-19 response. These patterns underscored the role of the National Security Committee, or KNB, which had evolved from the Soviet-era Committee for State Security into an even more powerful and expansive body. With personnel exceeding that of its predecessor, the KNB was deployed to exercise total control over society, including the monitoring of foreigners, with appointments to its leadership and that of the Ministry of Internal Affairs subject to presidential approval.

Turkmenistan had been among the most closed countries in the world. It functioned as a repressive authoritarian state in which political rights and civil liberties were almost entirely denied in practice. Elections were tightly managed to produce near unanimous victories for the president and his supporters. The state dominated the economy, corruption was systemic, religious communities faced persecution, and political dissent was not tolerated.

The regime prosecuted and persecuted those who criticized or challenged its authority. Citizens feared expressing opinions or disclosing evidence of abuse, mistreatment, or arbitrariness by officials. They understood that even limited criticism or the release of sensitive information could trigger reprisals that included imprisonment, enforced disappearance, or death. The system of total governmental control reproduced some of the most coercive features of the Soviet legacy and adapted them to contemporary conditions.

In March 2021, President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov appointed his son Serdar as a vice premier, signaling an intention to arrange a family-based transfer of power. In March 2022, Serdar Berdymukhamedov won the presidential election by a wide margin after an unusual delay in the announcement of results, with the electoral commission reporting nearly 73 percent of the vote. This event marked the first hereditary succession in Central Asia's post-Soviet history and

followed a rapid rise of the younger Berdymukhamedov through senior posts. Taken together, these developments made prospects for democratization exceedingly bleak.

Turkmenistan's political system is among the most repressive in the post-Soviet space, marked by absolute executive dominance, the absence of meaningful opposition, and a pervasive culture of fear. Elections lack genuine competition, the judiciary is subordinated to the ruling elite, and the security apparatus serves primarily as an instrument of intimidation. The authorities restrict access to information and systematically censor independent voices, insulating the state from domestic criticism and international scrutiny. In this environment, dissent is swiftly suppressed, and the political culture is defined by obedience, silence, and repression.

The authoritarian order is sustained not only through the concentration of political power but also through policies that deliberately marginalize ethnic and religious minorities. Non-Turkmen populations are systematically denied equal access to education, employment, and political participation, while restrictive language and nationality laws institutionalize their exclusion. Russian-speaking communities, Uzbeks, Azeris, Armenians, and other groups face forced displacement, denials of citizenship rights, and the erosion of cultural and linguistic freedoms. These measures reflect a state project of nation-building that privileges Turkmen identity and leaves minority groups in a persistently precarious position.

The consolidation of authoritarian rule, combined with entrenched discrimination, creates a pervasive climate of repression that stifles pluralism, erodes civic trust, and obstructs the formation of an inclusive national identity. The silencing of dissenters, together with the deliberate weakening of minority communities, reinforces the regime's control while undermining the foundations of social cohesion. Minority exclusion is not peripheral but integral

to the political order, functioning as a mechanism for consolidating power and limiting potential sources of opposition.

These dynamics are further entrenched by the transfer of power from father to son and the empowerment of the restructured People's Council. Political change does not signal reform but deepens authoritarian practices. Decision-making concentrates in executive-aligned institutions, representative bodies are sidelined, and no meaningful opposition is permitted. Restrictions on media, the internet, and civic association combine with surveillance, travel bans, and impunity for abuses by security services. Arbitrary detention, unfair trials, and ill-treatment reveal a system designed to pre-empt dissent rather than protect rights. Within this environment, ethnic minorities remain structurally disadvantaged, excluded from full participation, and subject to policies that perpetuate fear and exclusion. Together, authoritarian consolidation and ethnic discrimination reinforce one another, leaving Turkmenistan isolated and resistant to democratic change.

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