

Turkmenistan

by Annette Bohr

Capital: Ashgabat
Population: 5.3 million
GDP/capita, PPP: US\$14,520

Source: The data above are drawn from the World Bank's *World Development Indicators 2015*.

Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
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	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
National Democratic Governance	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Local Democratic Governance	7.00	7.00	6.75	6.75	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	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75
Democracy Score	6.96	6.96	6.93							

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

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkmenistan has been widely regarded as one of the 21st century's most repressive regimes. Although a change of regime took place following the 2006 death of the country's first president, Saparmurat Niyazov, independent Turkmenistan has not experienced a regime transition under the rule of its second president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow. The leadership is able to sustain its brand of authoritarian, personalistic rule through the sale of its vast hydrocarbon resources that it uses to finance extensive security services and patronage networks. The acute shortage of qualified personnel and the relatively small size of Turkmenistan's intelligentsia limit opportunities for reform. Most social groups accept the nature of power in exchange for a number of rewards and concessions, such as the gains reaped informally through corrupt practices.

In 2014, Turkmenistan undertook a number of initiatives intended for public (international) consumption, rather than to promote reform at home. Government leadership adopted new anticorruption legislation and laws on public associations; created a third progovernment party; and announced a series of constitutional reforms, including the introduction of a human rights ombudsman. Despite the formation of a new opposition party in Turkey, most of the Berdimuhamedow regime's opponents remained in exile or confined to Turkmenistan's prisons.

No new public associations were registered, and a new internet law made it illegal to slander the president online. Two positive changes were the release of some prisoners of conscience and a three-fold increase in the number of visas granted to haj pilgrims from Turkmenistan. In May 2014, officials from Turkmenistan informed Russia's Foreign Ministry that the recognition of dual citizenship would cease as of May 2015.

National Democratic Governance. Decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of the executive branch, with the parliament acting as a presidential appendage. Internal security and law enforcement agencies, financed by gas export revenues, ensure that the regime remains in power through tight control of society and by discouraging dissent. Turkmenistan has managed to sustain double-digit growth for many years, but lower gas and oil prices in 2014 prompted the government to cut spending in some areas and reduce state subsidies. Nonetheless, no serious incidents of popular unrest were reported. President Berdimuhamedow's personality cult gained strength in 2014, and his activities continued to be the primary focus of state media. *Turkmenistan's rating for national governance remains unchanged at 7.00.*

Electoral Process. Elections and referenda in independent Turkmenistan have retained many Soviet-era features, such as full participation and near-unanimous

support. The founding congress of a second “opposition” party (the Agrarian Party) was held in September 2014. By making the *pro forma* shift to multiparty politics, the leadership is able to claim that it meets one of the criteria set by some international organizations, governments, and financial institutions as a benchmark for further investment and cooperation. In 2014, a new Turkmen opposition movement called Hereket (“The Movement”) formed in Turkey with the aim of supporting democracy in Turkmenistan, but political opposition—whether underground or in exile—remains weak and prone to internal division. *Turkmenistan’s rating for electoral process remains unchanged at 7.00.*

Civil Society. Domestic and foreign nongovernmental actors (NGOs) remain strictly monitored, and the government continues to introduce constraints against their work. In May 2014, a new Law on Public Associations was signed, replacing the one that had been in force since 2003. While the new law introduced certain improvements, the most onerous restrictions remain in place. All political parties, public associations, and religious congregations are required to register with the Ministry of Fairness to gain legal status. Registration remains difficult to achieve in practice, and no new public associations were registered in 2014. In October, eight out of Turkmenistan’s nine prisoners of conscience were released, however, systematic rights violations remain in practice. These include state control of religious leaders and communities, severe restrictions on religious education, raids on both registered and unregistered groups, and restrictions on places of worship. *Turkmenistan’s rating for civil society remains unchanged at 7.00.*

Independent Media. The authorities maintain near-total control over Turkmenistan’s traditional media, whose primary function is to describe and praise the activities of the president. Extremely low internet penetration limits access to other sources of information, and the government continues to block websites critical of state policy. Text-message filtering and surveillance are common. In December 2014, Turkmen authorities published a new Internet law that makes it illegal for the country’s citizens to insult or slander the president in postings on the web, access pornographic sites, or view sites that reject family values. *Turkmenistan’s rating for independent media remains unchanged at 7.00.*

Local Democratic Governance. Turkmenistan’s governors (*hakims*) are directly appointed by the president. Since coming to power, President Berdimuhamedov has made a number of infrastructural improvements to Turkmenistan’s decaying education system, but a chronic shortage of qualified teachers persists, bribes are regularly accepted for places in higher education institutes, textbooks are laden with ideology, and young people are required to miss significant school hours in order to participate in state events. Similarly, while the president has invested heavily in the country’s healthcare infrastructure, new facilities are neither accessible to the vast majority of the population nor staffed with qualified medical personnel. Rural regions remain underdeveloped, often lacking basic sanitation systems and steady

supplies of electricity and clean water. *Turkmenistan's rating for local democratic governance remains unchanged at 6.75.*

Judicial Framework and Independence. In 2014, Turkmenistan's government announced a series of constitutional reforms, including the introduction of a human rights ombudsman. Although a commission was formed to solicit comments from the public on the proposed amendments, the ensuing debate lacked authenticity. Requests for visits from ten Special Procedures of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council remained pending in 2014, including the request from the Special Rapporteur on Torture, who had already been received by all other Central Asian states. The watchdog group Crude Accountability campaigned throughout 2014 to force Turkmenistan's authorities to provide proof that persons who have disappeared into Turkmenistan's prison system without a trace are still alive. In April, the State Migration Office suspended the issuance of new-style Turkmen biometric passports to people with both Russian and Turkmen citizenships, and in May, officials from Turkmenistan informed Russia's Foreign Ministry that the recognition of dual citizenship would cease as of May 2015, leaving the dilemma of dual passport holders unresolved. *Turkmenistan's rating for judicial framework and independence remains unchanged at 7.00.*

Corruption. Turkmenistan ranks among the world's worst performers in several annual indices measuring corruption and economic freedom. There is 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 the revenues from hydrocarbons sales at his own discretion. In March 2014, Turkmenistan's parliament adopted a draft Law On Combating Corruption that sets out prohibitions and restrictions for certain categories of civil servants as well as on entrepreneurial activity. As with the recently passed laws on political parties, public associations and the media, the new law appears to have been adopted primarily to deflect criticism of internal practices levied by international financial institutions and human rights organizations. *Turkmenistan's rating for corruption remains unchanged at 6.75.*

Outlook for 2015. Despite falling oil and gas prices and consequent cuts to Turkmenistan's extensive state subsidies, significant political unrest is unlikely so long as the rents accrued from gas exports enable the leadership to meet societal aspirations and control dissent. Berdimuhamedow's regime is likely to keep pursuing legal reforms that are primarily intended to deflect criticism from international observers without actually liberalizing Turkmenistan's authoritarian system of governance.

Meanwhile, although internet penetration rates are still very low, the growth of social media and social networking sites nonetheless have been increasing slowly the possibilities for coordinating collective protest.

MAIN REPORT

National Democratic Governance

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

While formal governing institutions have evolved over time in Turkmenistan, they have been manipulated by the leadership to provide a veneer of legitimacy and have no power to influence the decision-making process. The parliament (*Mejlis*), a unicameral body comprising deputies elected in single-mandate constituencies for five-year terms, acts as a presidential appendage. In addition to his role as head of the executive branch of power, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow serves, inter alia, as chairman of the Council of Ministers (prime minister), supreme commander-in-chief of the National Armed Forces, chairman of the Council of Elders, head of the Council for Religious Affairs, and chairman of the Higher Council of Science and Technology. The president appoints the members of government and the Central Election Commission as well as high-ranking judges. Under the revised 2008 constitution, he was granted the power to directly appoint the country's governors at all levels.

Gas dollars amassed in the hands of the few at the top finance the coercive apparatus that carries out the general surveillance and repression of society. In order to maintain power, the regime suppresses dissent and tightly controls independent activity, employing extensive internal security and law enforcement agencies overseen by the Ministry of National Security (MNS), independent Turkmenistan's equivalent to the Soviet-era Committee for State Security (KGB). The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) directs the criminal police, who work closely with the MNS on matters of national security. Both ministries systematically abuse individuals' rights in order to enforce the government's policy of preempting regime threats. The armed forces in Turkmenistan have been stripped of any real security functions, leaving the MNS, rather than the Ministry of Defense, responsible for military counterintelligence. For years, the MNS, the MIA, the armed forces, and the Prosecutor General's Office have been engaged in a battle for the expansion of their respective spheres of influence, engaging in mutual espionage and prompting regular purges of their own ranks. Like his predecessor before him, Berdimuhamedow seeks to maintain an atmosphere of distrust between the four branches, encouraging mutual espionage in order to forestall collusion.

Turkmenistan's presidential personality cult, an integral element of the regime's nationbuilding strategy, was developed under former leader Separmurat Niyazov and continues, with some modifications, under Berdimuhamedow. Niyazov's honorific title was *Turkmenbashi* ("Head of All Turkmen"), and since 2011 Berdimuhamedow has been known as *Arkadag* ("Protector" or "Protective

Mountain”). Particularly lavish or innovative ways of praising the president can result in promotion and access to scarce resources.

Portraits of the president adorn both the insides and outsides of government buildings, and his activities are the primary focus of state media. Apart from school textbooks, most newly published books in Turkmenistan are either tributes to Berdimuhamedow or works allegedly written by the president himself. The latter category includes books on topics ranging from Ahalteke horses to the art of carpet weaving and the use of medicinal plants. Seven volumes of the Arkadag’s selected works, titled *Towards New Heights of Progress*, had been published by mid-2014.¹ Berdimuhamedow’s personality cult was extended to his father (still living), when a statue to the latter was unveiled in the president’s hometown of Yzgant in 2012. The following year, the president published a book about his father’s childhood, entitled *The Bird of Happiness*; a play based the book opened in Ashgabat’s main dramatic arts theatre on Turkmen Independence Day in October 2014.²

Most political appointments are based on loyalty and subservience to the president rather than merit. In the past, fear of potential challengers has led the leadership to carry out widespread, regular purges of officials. However, after initial large-scale purges in 2007–08, officials have been replaced or rotated much less frequently, allowing them more opportunity to establish their own power bases. In April 2014, an unusually wide government reshuffle saw the replacement of the deputy prime minister responsible for culture and mass media, the minister for agriculture, the minister for energy and the minister for construction and architecture.³ During the final years of Niyazov’s rule, *hakims* (governors) typically served less than a year, but more recently it has not been uncommon for regional *hakims* to serve 30 months or longer. When *hakims* are replaced, it is usually by a native of the region in question.⁴

In contrast to Niyazov, who steered clear of kinship- or region-based networks, Berdimuhamedow often appoints his relatives and persons from his home region in the western Ahal Province (dominated by the Ahalteke tribe) to senior posts. The disproportionate number of Ahalteke tribe members in central government is also partly due to the fact that the capital city, Ashgabat, is itself located in Ahal Province. The president’s son, Serdar is purported to have many prominent business connections, to show interest in political life by attending government sessions and, in general, to be amassing support and positioning himself within the country’s elite. Appearances by Berdimuhamedow’s grandson in the local press spark regular speculation that the establishment of a dynasty is in progress. Like his predecessor, the president has also cultivated a close circle of non-Turkmen cronies who are “above clan politics,” comprising a handful of ethnic Jews, Russians, and Armenians in addition to selected Turkish, French, and German businessmen.

Turkmenistan has managed to sustain double-digit growth for many years and a healthy balance sheet, but lower gas and oil prices in 2014 prompted the government to cut spending in some areas and reduce subsidies. In January, it was announced that gas meters would be installed in households, and in April the president ordered an end to free petrol handouts, beginning 1 July. Berdimuhamedow’s government

has been whittling away at the extensive state subsidy system put in place by Niyazov for several years now, arguing that subsidies of gas, water, flour, electricity, and petrol have proved too costly for the state. So far, these cuts have not ignited any significant popular unrest.

Relatively high per-capita gross domestic product (GDP) belies the enormous income gap between a small group of elites and the rest of the population, many of whom live below the poverty line, eking out a living on small-scale subsistence farms that operate entirely within a state-order system. The government does not acknowledge an unemployment problem that could be as high as 50 per cent of the labor force. Turkmenistan does not have private ownership of land and most industries are state-owned, while the private sector remains the smallest in Central Asia.

Electoral Process

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

Elections and referenda in independent Turkmenistan have retained many Soviet-era features, including full voter participation and near-unanimous support for the incumbent leadership. Berdimuhamedow won the last presidential election (in 2012) with a predictable 97.1 percent majority and voter turnout of 96.7 percent. The country's first "opposition" party was founded in 2012, and a second held its first congress in 2014.

According to Central Electoral Commission (CEC), the ruling Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (DPT) won 47 of 124 seats in the December 2013 parliamentary elections, with voter turnout of over 90 percent. For the first time, a second registered party—the recently formed Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs—was allowed to compete with the DPT, winning 13 seats. The remaining seats went to trade unions (33), women's groups (16), the Magtumguly Youth Organization (8), and other citizens' groups (7).⁵ In another tribute to electoral competitiveness, President Berdimuhamedow officially stepped down as chairman of the DPT ahead of the 2013 vote.⁶

The founding congress of Turkmenistan's second "opposition party," the Agrarian Party, was held in September 2014.⁷ With a *pro forma* shift to multiparty politics, Turkmenistan's leadership is able to claim that the country meets one of the criteria set by some international organizations, governments, and financial institutions as a benchmark for further investment and cooperation.⁸ A new veneer of political pluralism also enables Turkmenistan to keep pace with its Central Asian neighbors: Uzbekistan has long had artificial "pocket parties" in parliament, while Kazakhstan finally allowed two additional parties—both of which are loyal to the regime—to enter parliament in January 2012.

Following an official invitation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) deployed an

Election Assessment Mission to observe the 2013 elections. The OSCE/ODIHR had not previously observed or assessed elections in Turkmenistan, although it had sent election support teams to the presidential elections in 2007 and 2012, the parliamentary elections of 2008, and the local elections of 2010.⁹ In its Final Report, OSCE/ODIHR concluded that “the elections took place in a strictly controlled political environment characterized by a lack of respect for fundamental freedoms that are central to democratic elections.”¹⁰

Unrelenting harassment by the authorities has driven the relatively small unofficial opposition 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 from Turkmenistan operating abroad surmount a number of obstacles to publish otherwise unavailable news items, reports and video clips on the country’s domestic and foreign politics. In 2014, U.S.–funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reported that a new Turkmen opposition movement called Hereket (“The Movement”) had formed in Turkey with the aim of supporting democracy and “extricating the Turkmen people from Niyazov’s legacy.” Hereket leader Akmuhammet Baihanow was imprisoned from 2003 to 2008 after meeting in Moscow with the now-deceased first foreign minister of Turkmenistan *cum* opposition leader, Avdy Kuliew.¹¹

Civil Society

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

While in 2000, there were approximately 200–300 registered and unregistered nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operating in Turkmenistan, the United States Agency for International Development estimates that by 2013 only 106 were registered.¹² The vast majority of these support the government or receive direct government funding. Because the prospects for securing official registration are considered so remote, 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: unregistered NGO activity is punishable by a fine, short-term detention, and confiscation of property.

In May 2014, a new Law on Public Associations was signed, replacing the one that had been in force since 2003. While the new law introduced certain improvements, such as granting public associations the right to participate in elections and carry out entrepreneurial activities directly, the most onerous restrictions remain in place. All NGOs continue to be required to register with the Ministry of Fairness (*Adalat*), which also approves their internal governance structures. In addition, the law requires a high number of founding members for registration and a limited territory of operation. Registration remains difficult to achieve in practice, and, despite the adoption of the new law, no new public associations were registered in 2014.¹³ A burdensome resolution that was adopted in January 2013 remains

in force, requiring all foreign funding to registered public associations to undergo approval by at least five government bodies. As a result, it is extremely difficult for NGOs to attract funding from foreign entities and individuals.

As with political parties and public associations, all religious congregations are required to register with the Ministry of Fairness to gain legal status. In 2012, Turkmenistan's government reported that 128 religious communities had state registration, among which 104 were Muslim (Sunni and Shia), 13 were Russian Orthodox, and 11 were of other faiths, including Protestant groups, the Baha'i, Roman Catholics, and the Hare Krishna community.¹⁴ Many minority religious groups, including the Lutheran, Jehovah's Witness, Armenian Apostolic, and Jewish communities, have faced repeated registration refusals. In 2014, Turkmenistan's government raised the number of haj pilgrims in the state-organized group from 188—the number to fill one state-owned aircraft—to 650. Despite this three-fold increase, the number is only one-seventh of the quota of pilgrims allocated by Saudi authorities for Turkmenistan.¹⁵

In October 2014, the religious freedom watchdog Forum 18 reported that eight of Turkmenistan's nine known prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief had been released under a presidential amnesty.¹⁶ In addition to the jailing of prisoners of conscience, systematic rights violations under President Berdimuhamedow include state control of religious leaders and communities, severe restrictions on religious education, raids on both registered and unregistered groups, and restrictions on place of worship.

In order to prevent the emergence of Islam as a locus of oppositional activity, the Turkmen leadership has thoroughly infiltrated the official religious establishment. Religious matters are administered by the Council on Religious Affairs (CRA) set up by Niyazov in 1994, 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.

Little is known about the existence of radical Islamist groups in Turkmenistan beyond a few allusions in unofficial media. Despite a certain immunity lent to Turkmen society by the dominant nature of "folk" Islam—which encompasses a set of local customs—the rise of jihadism as a global phenomenon has been making itself felt even in Turkmenistan, whether via social media sites or in the form of incursions by militant groups in Afghanistan into Turkmen territory.

Independent Media

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

Indices measuring media freedom around the world, including Freedom House's Press Freedom survey, rank Turkmenistan's media environment among the most repressive in the world, alongside North Korea and Eritrea. Virtually all newspapers, magazines, television stations, and radio stations in Turkmenistan are

owned and controlled by the government. The only news agency in the country is the government's Turkmenovlethabarlary (TDH). The state employs a number of techniques to censor information, 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," entered into force in January 2013. Having been drafted with the assistance of the OSCE, the law conforms to international standards but has thus far not served any practical effect in liberalizing the country's carefully controlled media. Belying the new media law, in December 2014, Turkmen authorities published a new Internet Law that makes it illegal for the country's citizens to insult or slander the president in postings on the web, access pornographic sites, or view sites that reject family values.¹⁷

Turkmenistan regularly denies visas to foreign correspondents; the few correspondents who obtain permission to enter the country are accompanied by "minders" from the security services who severely restrict their movements and choice of interviewees.

Ordinary citizens are still unable to subscribe to any foreign periodicals at their home addresses, and foreign print matter remains generally inaccessible.¹⁸ Aside from the radio broadcasts of the Turkmen Service of RFE/RL ("Azatlyk") and the German Deutsche Welle in Russian, both of which are specifically targeted at Turkmen listeners, satellite television—widely viewed in the capital as well as in other cities—provides the most popular as well as only source of alternative media in Turkmenistan for those without access to the internet.

Since 2010, the civic media initiative Alternative Turkmenistan News (ATN)—a service operated by Turkmen exiles in conjunction with the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and Amnesty International—has been copying news on a range of "forbidden" topics from different websites into a single file and distributing it as an underground e-newsletter within Turkmenistan.¹⁹ In July 2014, ATN, which had been operating through Facebook, opened its own dedicated site.²⁰

Turkmenistan has one of the world's lowest official internet penetration rates—about 9.6 percent in June 2014, compared with 54.9 percent in Kazakhstan and 41.2 percent in Uzbekistan.²¹ Dial-up access rates are prohibitively expensive for the average citizen and service is unreliable and slow; neighboring Afghanistan's average download speed is more than twice as fast.²²

Websites critical of official government policy, independent news sites, and other undesirable online content are blocked by the authorities through the use of new filtering technologies, although patterns of censorship are inconsistent. It is not always a straightforward process to determine which websites have been selected for censorship, since some bandwidth that is purchased from Uzbekistan and Iran has already been subject to filtering by authorities in those countries.²³ In early 2014, authorities were reported to have restored access to Facebook and YouTube, both of which had been blocked by the government in 2009.²⁴ Electronic mail is monitored, although there are reports that communications between Gmail account users can be more difficult for authorities to intercept.

Mobile phones, which are much cheaper than fixed lines, are estimated to be used by over 80 percent of the population (4.3 million subscribers) as of early 2014.²⁵ In November 2013, it was reported that the government had blocked the mobile messaging communication services Wechat and Line, having blocked the popular applications Whatsapp and Viber the previous year.²⁶

In accordance with the longstanding practice of maintaining a news blackout on popular revolts taking place in other post-Soviet states, Turkmenistan's media remained silent during headline events in 2014 in the greater region, including the removal of Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, and the resulting upheaval in eastern Ukraine.

Local Democratic Governance

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
7.00	7.00	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75

State 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 (*gengeşler*), 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.²⁷ In reality, however, they follow the instructions of the *hakims*, who are directly appointed by the president.

Tribal identities, which play an important role in Turkmen society and informal local politics, manifest primarily in social practices, such as 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.

Although slightly over half of the country's population lives rurally, there is little investment in agriculture—which accounts for only 15 per cent of GDP but employs just under half of the labor force—in large part owing to the existence of the state order system.²⁸ Despite improvements under Berdimuhamedow, basic rural amenities remain underfunded. Dozens of villages lack steady supplies of electricity and basic sanitation systems. Clean water supplies are often unavailable, requiring rural residents to use well or surface water that can contain residues from pesticides, fertilizers, and animal waste. Poor water quality, in turn, has contributed to the spread of infectious diseases, such as hepatitis.

The government claimed to have implemented the program to provide gas (either piped or compressed in cylinders) to the whole country only by January 2014—despite the country's abundance of hydrocarbons.²⁹ Nonetheless, gas

shortages persisted in some parts of the country, leading several dozen women in the Dashoguz Region to block a highway in October to draw official attention to the matter.³⁰

In April 2014, the government introduced an annual Month of Health and Sports, during which thousands of citizens participated in long walks and took part in compulsory fitness classes. Unlike his predecessor, Berdimuhamedow has invested heavily in the country's healthcare infrastructure, building sanatoriums and diagnostic and specialist centers in Ashgabat and regional capitals. Prestige medical projects include a \$47 million traumatology center, a \$56 million ophthalmology center, and an eight-story, gold-façaded oncology center, all of which are located in Ashgabat. Turkmen media estimate the cost of constructing such facilities over the past decade at more than \$1.5 billion. From 2012 to 2016, the government plans to allocate another \$500 million for pharmaceutical factories, five emergency centers in regional capitals, and the purchase of modern medical equipment.³¹ The regime has also liaised with international organizations to introduce maternity and immunization programs.

Despite this investment, most new 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. Modern medical facilities are confined to the capital and certain regional administrative centers, while rural hospitals remain unrenovated, with many lacking running water, heating systems, and modern toilets.³² Statistical data is notoriously unreliable, medical education is substandard, hospital staff are discouraged from reporting malpractice, and infant mortality rates are among the highest in the world—approximately 47 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2013, more than three times the rate of Kazakhstan.³³ 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.³⁴

Berdimuhamedow has made a number of changes to Turkmenistan's decaying education infrastructure, which was virtually dismantled during the last seven years of Niyazov's rule. General secondary schools switched to a 12-year education system starting from the 2013-2014 academic year. High school students are no longer required to undergo two years of practical work before applying to universities. Foreign degrees are once again recognized—although, in 2014, the procedure for “legalizing” them was “temporarily suspended.”³⁵ New areas of study have been introduced or reintroduced (e.g., physical education and the social sciences), and postgraduate and doctoral studies have been reestablished at certain universities. The Academy of Sciences, which had been the mainstay of the scientific and academic community before its closure in 1993, was reopened in 2007.

Universities and institutes have been permitted to remove Niyazov's quasi-spiritual guidebook for the Turkmen nation, *The Rubnama* (Book of the Soul), from their curriculums. As of September 2013, it was no longer a mandatory subject in primary and secondary schools. In 2014, an exam on the book's content was replaced by one on Turkmenistan's history and social customs as an entry requirement for university applicants.

In practice, many of Berdimuhamedow's educational reforms lack substance. The tenth year's curriculum reportedly repeats that of the ninth year and textbooks for most years and subjects are outdated, ideologized and in short supply. 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 to procure a place in universities, institutes, and even some secondary schools has not abated, and bribes required to enter the most prestigious institutions can reach \$40,000–\$70,000.

University students have become subject to greater restrictions on their personal lives, including dress codes and curfews. As of 2013, students are required to sign an oath that they will not drive an automobile or travel with another student driving an automobile until they have finished their studies, under threat of expulsion.³⁶ They are also forbidden to frequent discotheques and bars and, since March 2014, to visit mosques.

Many Turkmenistani students go to Belarus for their studies—6,514 in 2013, compared to only 67 students in 2006—owing to the long-standing friendly relations between the two authoritarian states, the relatively high standards of education in Belarus, and the favorable conditions offered to foreign students, including accommodation, reasonable tuition rates, and the possibility to study in Russian.³⁷

Judicial Framework and Independence

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

In 2014, Turkmenistan's government announced a series of constitutional reforms. Although a commission was formed to solicit comments from the public on the proposed amendments, the ensuing debate lacked signs of authenticity. Proposals set out by the government included introducing a new post of human rights ombudsman, expanded powers for local governments, and new property rights regulations.³⁸

Unchanged since the Soviet era, the court system in Turkmenistan consists of a Supreme Court, six 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. Convictions are often based on confessions extracted by force, including the use of torture and psychotropic substances.

Under the proceedings of the Universal Periodic Review held in Geneva in May 2013, the UN Human Rights Council delivered 183 recommendations to

Turkmenistan, of which the government ultimately fully accepted 166, partially accepted 1 and rejected 16.³⁹ While the government accepted the recommendation to investigate the use of torture, requests for visits from ten Special Procedures of the UN Human Rights Council remained pending in 2014, including the request from the Special Rapporteur on Torture, who had already been received by all other Central Asian states.⁴⁰ In 2014, ATN issued a report on the systematic use of forced labor in Turkmenistan, focusing on the involuntary conscription of low-paid public sector employees and students to harvest cotton in the autumn and perform menial jobs throughout the year.⁴¹

One notorious aspect of Turkmenistan's prison system is that a number of people have disappeared into it without a trace, including some 50 prisoners convicted in connection to the November 2002 attempted coup. The watchdog group Crude Accountability campaigned throughout 2014 to force Turkmenistan's authorities to provide proof that the disappeared—including the so-called Novembrists—are still alive.⁴² In 2014, one Novembrist, Stanislav Romashchenko, was amnestied and deported to Russia after having spent 11 years in prison in Turkmenistan. On the other hand, persistent efforts to obtain any information on the fate of the former Turkmen foreign minister Boris Shihmuradow, a Russian-Turkmen dual citizen who was sentenced by Turkmen authorities to life imprisonment in 2002 as a "traitor to the Motherland" for having masterminded the attempted coup, resulted in Russia retracting his citizenship.⁴³

The population figures for Turkmenistan's ethnic minorities are disputed, as are the general population statistics periodically issued by the government, which are widely agreed to be inflated. While local media announced the birth of the country's six millionth citizen in 2003, external estimates of the country's population more than a decade later still ranged from only three to five million. Turkmenistan carried out its first population census since 1995 only in December 2012, despite a UN resolution calling for a census to be carried out every ten years. The data is unverifiable, as it was collected verbally and without any required corroboration. Census workers revisited households in Aşgabat in early 2014 in order to collect data that had been "lost," indicating technical problems with the method.⁴⁴ Despite a promise to publish preliminary results in late 2013, the State Statistics Committee had not only failed to release any data by the end of 2014 but had dropped discussion of the census altogether.

With the advent of independence, Turkmenistan accorded a *de facto* higher status to its titular population, ethnic Turkmen, and legitimized the adoption of policies and practices that promoted their specific 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. In 2000, Turkmen was introduced as the language of instruction in all of the country's schools, including in regions where ethnic Uzbeks or Kazakhs are preponderant. There are only a few schools in the country that offer classes with Russian as the language of instruction (approximately 30 classes in 2011), and these are mainly intended for members of ethnic minorities.⁴⁵

In June 2013, a series of phone calls between Turkmen and Russian heads of state was required to make headway on the vexed issue of rights for the approximately 43,000 residents of Turkmenistan holding both Turkmen and Russian passports,⁴⁶ in violation of a 2008 constitutional provision against dual citizenship. From July of that year, new biometric passports became mandatory for travel outside the country, although Russian passport-holders were reportedly denied their new-style Turkmen documents unless they surrendered their existing Russian ones. With only one month to go before the expiration of the old-style passports, Turkmenistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a press release stating that the Migration Service would issue new passports to those holding Russian citizenship—but only if it had been acquired before 2003, the year in which Turkmen authorities unilaterally rescinded the 1993 agreement between Turkmenistan and Russia. The deal was reportedly a quid pro quo for an agreement by the Russian authorities to finally ratify the 2003 protocol abolishing dual citizenship.⁴⁷

However, in April 2014 it was reported that the State Migration Office had suspended the issuance of new-style Turkmen biometric passports to people with both citizenships.⁴⁸ In May—less than a year after coming to agreement with Russian authorities—officials from Turkmenistan informed Russia's Foreign Ministry that the recognition of dual citizenship, whether acquired before 2003 or after, would cease as of May 2015, leaving the dilemma of dual passport holders unresolved.⁴⁹

Corruption

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75

Turkmenistan's president presides over a system that enables him to control and use at his own discretion the revenues from hydrocarbons sales, which form the country's primary source of income. The government is able to sustain its rule through the receipt of these export revenues, which it uses to finance pervasive security services and vanity construction projects as well as to secure the support of patronage networks.

Turkmenistan does not publish its national budget in full, contributing to a widespread lack of transparency in economic figures. Those figures that are published are often compiled from local economic reports that have been inflated to show growth. No information has been released regarding export revenues held by former president Niyazov in foreign banks, and it remains unclear what share of export revenues are currently being diverted by the Berdimuhamedow leadership to off-budget accounts.

Political elites in the country have traditionally built up local power bases by allocating key posts and opportunities to their loyalists. A limited number of patronage networks commanded by Berdimuhamedow control the country's economy, which is divided into spheres of influence dominated by a close circle

of the president's appointees. The existence of patronage networks as the basis of power has inevitably given rise to a political culture of bribery, nepotism, and embezzlement. Bribe-taking is particularly prevalent among customs, licensing, and social service agencies. Although officials are often convicted on corruption charges, in reality, neither Niyazov's nor Berdimuhamedow's governments waged a genuine fight against corruption. For the most part, civil servants were sentenced and then amnestied, while the harshest penalties have been levied out to officials who showed themselves to be disloyal to the ruling regime.

Turkmenistan ranks among the world's worst performers in several annual indices measuring corruption and economic freedom, including the *Wall Street Journal's* Index of Economic Freedom and Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. The World Bank does not even include Turkmenistan in its annual Doing Business report. In 2014, Transparency International ranked Turkmenistan 169 out of the 175 countries surveyed, having received the lowest score of all the Central Asian states with regard to perceived levels of public sector corruption.⁵⁰

State control of the economy, the slow pace of economic reform, and a restrictive visa regime remain major disincentives to foreign investment.⁵¹ Forging a personal relationship with the president or, alternatively, working through established foreign businessmen or high-ranking foreign officials remain the best ways to penetrate the country's market. Because of the nontransparency of capital expenditures, the awarding of contracts for the construction of large physical assets such as ministry buildings, hotels, or airports is a preferred means of providing elites with opportunities to pocket some of the allocated funds. U.S. diplomatic cables obtained by the antisecrecy organization WikiLeaks identified construction as the most corrupt industry in Turkmenistan, with contractors inflating costs by up to 30 percent to cover bribe payments.⁵² Foreign contractors, such as the Turkish Polimex and French Bouygues, regularly pay kickbacks to Turkmen officials.

In March 2014, Turkmenistan's parliament adopted a draft Law On Combating Corruption that sets out prohibitions and restrictions for certain categories of civil servants as well as on entrepreneurial activity.⁵³ As with the recently passed laws on political parties, public associations and the media, the new law appears to have been adopted primarily to deflect criticism of internal practices levied by international financial institutions and human rights organizations. Moreover, the law is expected to have no significant impact on the actual state of corruption in Turkmen society owing to a general perception among the population that the organs responsible for combating corruption have little incentive to eliminate bribe-taking in practice or to guarantee immunity to potential whistleblowers.⁵⁴

■ AUTHOR: ANNETTE BOHR

Annette Bohr is an associate fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Institute of International Affairs in London (Chatham House). She is the author or co-author of two monographs, in addition to the forthcoming Chatham House report Turkmenistan: Power, Politics and Petro-authoritarianism, and numerous articles on Central Asian politics, contemporary history and ethnic and language policies.

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