

## 5.19 Turkmenistan

### Introduction

The authoritarian rule of President Saparmyrat Niyazov ended when he died suddenly on 21 December 2006. He had been president of Turkmenistan since 1991 and had overseen the severe decline in human rights. Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov was appointed acting president by the supreme legislative body and the constitution amended to allow him to stand for president. He was elected on 11 February 2007 with 89 per cent of the vote, having pledged loyalty to President Niyazov's legacy. Nevertheless, he also promised to introduce a number of reforms, notably in health, education, agriculture, pensions and internet access. He is serious about reform, but it is still difficult to be certain about its longer-term direction or extent.

President Berdimuhamedov discussed human rights with EU Special Representative Pierre Morel and High Representative for EU Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana. During President Berdimuhamedov's visit to Brussels in November 2007, EU officials explained that Turkmenistan's human rights record continued to hold up ratification of the EU-Turkmenistan interim trade agreement and reiterated EU readiness to support Turkmenistan in its efforts to demonstrate commitment to international obligations. At the first EU-Turkmenistan Ad Hoc Human Rights Dialogue, in Brussels in September 2007, Turkmen officials were not briefed on the issues raised and appeared reluctant to engage.

However, with international organisations, including the UN, Turkmen officials have shown a greater willingness to engage on human rights issues. We welcome this. Louise Arbour, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, visited in April 2007 and there is an outstanding invitation to the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief to visit. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the UN in Turkmenistan have broadened their activities, and the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom have visited.

Reforms announced since President Berdimuhamedov took office include the restoration of the tenth year of schooling, and an increase in teachers' salaries.

### Current concerns

There remains a long way to go to achieve concrete progress on the ground. The education system will need time to recover. There is still no press freedom and no freedom of expression. There are no political parties, and religion and civil society are tightly controlled.

The government of Turkmenistan invited ODIHR to send a needs assessment mission for the presidential election. For the first time, there was a choice of candidates for president, although all represented the Democratic Party and all promised to follow President Niyazov's policies. The authorities have undertaken to co-operate with ODIHR and the UN on electoral reform.

Local elections were held on 9 December 2007. According to reports there was a 98 per cent turnout and, as in previous elections, there was a choice of candidates but all professed loyalty to President Berdimuhamedov. The political adviser to the president of the European Parliament visited and was allowed to see three polling stations and meet national observers.

Internal freedom of movement has improved. Checkpoints and roadblocks have been removed and it is easier for Turkmen citizens to travel to border areas.

Fears that the 2005 law on migration would lead to a de facto reintroduction of exit visas, abolished in January 2004, were unfounded. An unofficial blacklist still exists that prevents some people from travelling abroad, but some others have now been allowed to leave. We welcome the Turkmen government's decision to allow Maral Yklimova to join her family in Sweden (see the 2006 human rights annual report). In a contrast to previous practice, the new president has asked the international community to provide scholarships for young citizens of Turkmenistan to study abroad and has publicly encouraged young people to take up these opportunities.

Non-governmental organisation (NGO) registration remains a lengthy and complex process. The

government has not yet addressed this issue. But groups have found other ways to promote civil society activism.

On religious freedom, although the Source of Life Church and the Word of Life Church have registered this year, other groups remain unregistered. Registered religious groups are able to practise their beliefs, but they still face difficulties importing literature and obtaining visas for their guests to visit. Despite some improvements in the situation, human rights organisations based outside Turkmenistan continue to report on arbitrary harassment and arrests by the law enforcement agencies of members of religious groups.

Turkmenistan has started to work on implementing the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, particularly in education and data collection. There is still a long way to go.

In previous years, we have highlighted the use of child labour, particularly in the annual cotton harvest. President Niyazov introduced legislation against this in 2005. On 6 September 2007, President Berdimuhamedov reinforced the ban. As a result, we assess that there has been a decline in the use of child labour.

Turkmenistan set up a commission to hear complaints about law enforcement agencies and a commission on human rights. The Turkmen Institute for Democracy and Human Rights works

with the UN. Turkmenistan submitted reports in line with its international obligations under the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 2004 and under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2005. Since June 2006, Turkmenistan has been working with the UN on a project to build its capacity to draft these reports and to respond to the subsequent conclusions from the UN committees.

Co-operation with the OSCE and the OSCE Centre in Ashgabat has improved and the authorities have accepted more projects. The OSCE has worked with judges and prosecutors on arrest and detention and the rights of the accused. Government officials have participated in activities organised by the High Commissioner on National Minorities and they have been permitted to attend OSCE human dimension activities abroad.

We are concerned that no agreement has been reached between the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the government of Turkmenistan to start visiting detainees according to the ICRC standard procedures.



Turkmen honour guards stand next to the coffin of late President Niyazov during a funeral ceremony in the centre of Ashgabat.

## UK action

The British Embassy worked with UNICEF, Finland and the EU to organise a study visit to Europe by Turkmenistan government officials in the education sector. In the UK, officials visited the Office for Standards in Education, the London Centre for Leadership in Learning, the Training and Development Agency for Schools, and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. With UNICEF, the Embassy also provided computers and other equipment to five rural schools.

In conjunction with one NGO, the British Embassy produced a CD-ROM guide on how NGOs can obtain official registration. We will continue to work bilaterally with Turkmenistan and through the EU-Turkmenistan Ad Hoc Human Rights Dialogue to support the development of civil society, and promote the right of NGOs to register and operate without constraints.

We are encouraging the Turkmen authorities to work with religious organisations to improve Turkmenistan's record on freedom of religion before the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief visits in 2008.

The president pardoned and released from prison Nasrullah Ibn Ibadullah, the former chief mufti, on 10 August 2007. This came just before the visit of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom. The UK had lobbied for Ibadullah's release jointly with EU partners and bilaterally, most recently the week before he was pardoned.

Our Embassy partly funded a human rights course for university students organised by the OSCE in October 2007.

We welcome the release of Kakabay Tejenov in October 2006 and Geldy Kyarisov, former head of the Turkmen Horses Association, in October 2007. Kyarisov was imprisoned for six years in 2002. His family faced harassment and were forced to move their livestock from their former horse farm, but the British Embassy kept in close contact with them. The Embassy called for his release on humanitarian grounds due to Kyarisov's poor health, both bilaterally and with the EU and the OSCE.

Malcolm Wicks, Minister of State for Energy, raised human rights concerns during his visit to Turkmenistan in September 2007.

## Forward look

The UK will continue to lobby Turkmenistan to address human rights issues and will support genuine efforts to do so, both bilaterally and with international partners. We will continue to work through the ad hoc human rights dialogue and through the EU's central Asia strategy, which supports good governance, rule of law and human rights.