

TURKMENISTAN 2020 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Turkmenistan is a secular democracy constitutionally, although President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov effectively controls the country along with a small inner circle. Berdimuhamedov became president in 2006 and was last re-elected in 2017. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights determined the election involved limited choice between competing political alternatives and found "serious irregularities." On September 25, the People's Council (Halk Maslahaty) approved amendments to the constitution to create a bicameral parliament, so that the Halk Maslahaty becomes the upper house and the Mejlis (Parliament) becomes the lower house. The change was scheduled to become effective after the March 28, 2021, parliamentary elections. If implemented, the Halk Maslahaty will consist of 56 members (eight representatives from each of the country's five provinces and eight representatives directly appointed by the president), and the Mejlis will consist of 125 members.

The national police and the Ministry of National Security maintain internal security. The military and border security forces are responsible for external security. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces. In the past there were many examples of security forces committing human rights abuses.

Significant human rights issues included: reports of torture by police and prison officials; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary detention; political prisoners; politically motivated reprisal against individuals located outside the country; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; restrictions on free expression, the press, and the internet, including threats of violence and threats of unjustified arrests or prosecutions against journalists; censorship and site blocking; interference with the freedoms of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; restrictions of religious freedom; restrictions on freedom of movement; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections; restrictions on political

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participation; corruption; lack of investigation of and accountability for violence against women; gender discrimination; trafficking in persons; the existence of laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between men; restrictions on workers' freedom of association; and the existence of forced and child labor.

Officials in the security services and elsewhere in the government were known to act with impunity. There were no reported prosecutions of government officials for human rights abuses during the year, although in recent years some officials were arrested and imprisoned on charges of corruption.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

Opposition media and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) made no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings during the year, nor were there reports of killings by narcotics traffickers or similar criminal groups.

There was a report of the hazing of military conscripts that resulted in three deaths. The law requires that the government protect the health and lives of members of the armed forces.

b. Disappearance

Opposition media and NGOs did not report politically motivated disappearances during the year. Nonetheless an NGO-led advocacy campaign, Prove They Are Alive!, maintained a list of reported disappeared prisoners. The 2019 list included the names of 121 prisoners, the same number as the previous year, including two releases and two new names from 2018, although the NGO estimated the actual number to be in the hundreds. The list included former ministers of foreign affairs Boris Shikhmuradov and Batyr Berdyev, former director of the Turkmenbashi oil refinery Guychmyrad Esenov, and many others accused of participation in an alleged 2002 assassination attempt on previous president Saparmurat Niyazov.

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On August 10, Memorial Human Rights Center based in Russia provided an update on Kakajan Halbayev and Kemal Saparov, Turkmen students who were imprisoned in 2018 after they returned from St. Petersburg, Russia. Halbayev and Saparov received 15 years of imprisonment and were accused of conspiracy violently to overthrow the constitutional order, incitement to religious hatred committed by an organized group, and organization and participation in a criminal community. Memorial reported that, according to the investigation, all the “criminal acts” were committed by them on the territory of St. Petersburg. According to the Memorial report, the government of Turkmenistan alleged 12 citizens of Turkmenistan, who were in St. Petersburg in 2015-16, became members of the religious communities Wahhabi, Salafi, Muslim Brotherhood, and Hizb ut-Tahrir; met in cafes and mosques to discuss religious issues; and with citizens of Russia unidentified by the investigation created an organized criminal group, called for the seizure of power in Turkmenistan, used the internet for their activities, and through the media regularly called for the creation of an Islamic state in Turkmenistan. In 2018 the Ashgabat City Court sentenced Halbayev and Saparov to 15 years in prison in a strict-regime penal colony. They were in Bayramaly colony at the end of the year.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Although the constitution and law prohibit mistreatment, in its January 2017 report (the latest available) the UN Committee against Torture noted its concern at “consistent allegations of widespread torture and ill-treatment, including severe beatings, of persons deprived of their liberty, especially at the moment of apprehension and during pretrial detention, mainly in order to extract confessions.” Activists and former prisoners related mistreatment, such as beating kidneys with plastic bottles full of water so bruises do not show on the body and a practice known as *sklonka*, in which prisoners are forced to stay in the open sun or cold for hours at a time.

In its 2019 review of the country, Amnesty International stated, “Torture and other ill-treatment is reported to be widespread.” Human Rights Watch in its 2019 report stated, “Torture and ill-treatment remain integral to Turkmenistan’s prison system.”

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Officials in the security services and elsewhere in the government were known to act with impunity, although numerous officials were arrested and imprisoned on charges of corruption. There were no reported prosecutions of government officials for human rights abuses.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions reportedly remained unsanitary, overcrowded, and in some cases life threatening due to harsh treatment and inadequate medical care.

Physical Conditions: The prisoners in pretrial detention facilities were predominantly those sentenced but not yet transferred to penal colonies. The six pretrial detention facilities were designed for 1,120 persons but were believed to hold many times that number.

According to RFE/RL, a mosque for 600 individuals was built at MR-E/16 facility. According to the ombudsperson's report, inspected facilities "... in general comply with the requirements of the law; however, some circumstances have been identified that require improvement of activities and ensuring consistent monitoring." The ombudsperson sent three recommendations to the Ministry of Internal Affairs: to comply with labor and health safety rules, safety regulations, and industrial sanitation standards; to provide sports grounds with the necessary equipment to perform physical exercise; and to equip special rooms for cultural leisure activities.

On January 27, *Turkmen.news* published a monologue of a former convict who served at the maximum-security colony LB-K/11 in Lebap Province regarding the deteriorating conditions in the prison system. In June 2019 a commission from the Ministry of Internal Affairs inspected Mary prison hospital MR-B/15, which revealed numerous violations. As a result, the head of the hospital, deputy head, chief doctor, and several staff were demoted and transferred to other places. The inspection also revealed such violations as fake diagnoses and unexplained healthy prisoners living in the medical unit. The former prisoner also reported worsening food conditions.

Prisons were reportedly short on food and medication because the government

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reduced state support around the country. In February and March 2019, prisoners were cut off from quality bread, meat, rice, and pasta.

On August 4, *Chronicles of Turkmenistan (CT)* reported a female penal colony in Dashoguz prohibited movement between prison blocks and created an isolation zone for sick inmates. Doctors and nurses from the city infectious disease hospital were sent to work in the colony's quarantine zone. Inmates were reportedly told to sew their own masks. Some inmates were apparently able to receive medication from relatives, due to a medicine shortage in the colony. *CT* also reported that two prisoners in Lebap's LBK/12 penitentiary died of pneumonia in late July. Relatives were not permitted to take the bodies; Ministry of Interior soldiers reportedly buried the bodies in a Lebap cemetery. The General Prosecutor's Office and the Ministry of Justice apparently agreed to suspend the transfer of convicts to prisons in other provinces.

On August 24, *Turkmen.news* reported that detainee Bayramdurdy Saparov in LBK/11 prison colony in Lebap Province died of COVID-19-related pneumonia. Despite suffering chest pains and a lack of oxygen, he could not be transported to the prison hospital MR-B/15 for proper treatment, since all penitentiary institutions were in quarantine due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions that began in March.

Administration: Authorities claimed they investigated mistreatment; however, the government did not provide written reports of its investigations to the diplomatic community. The government did not confirm whether it established a prison ombudsman.

According to relatives, prison authorities sometimes denied family members access to prisoners; denied family members permission to give food, medical, and other supplies to some prisoners; and did not make religious facilities available to all prisoners.

Turkmen.news reported in May that authorities prohibited relatives from visiting prisoners starting on March 5, due to COVID-19 concerns.

Independent Monitoring: There was no independent monitoring of the prisons.

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d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, but both remained serious problems. Persons arrested or detained are not entitled to challenge the legal basis or arbitrary nature of their detention while detained.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

A warrant is not required for arrest when officials catch a suspect in the act of committing an offense. The prosecutor general must issue an authorization for arrest within 72 hours of detention. If investigating authorities do not find evidence of guilt and issue a formal indictment within 10 days of detention, they must release the detainee; however, authorities did not always comply with this requirement. If evidence is found, an investigation may last as long as two months. A provincial or national-level prosecutor may extend the investigation to six months. The national prosecutor general or deputy prosecutor general may extend the investigation period to a maximum of one year. Following the investigation, the prosecutor prepares a bill of indictment and transfers the case to the court. Courts generally follow these procedures, and the prosecutor promptly informs detainees of the charges against them.

The criminal procedure code provides for a bail system and surety, but authorities did not implement these provisions. The law entitles detainees to immediate access to an attorney of their choice after a formal accusation, although detainees for various reasons may not have prompt or regular access to legal counsel. For example, detainees may have been unaware of the law, security forces may have ignored the entitlement to counsel, or the practice of seeking formal counsel was not a cultural norm. Authorities denied some detainees family visitation during the year. Families sometimes did not know the whereabouts of detained relatives. Incommunicado detention was a problem. The extent to which authorities failed to protect due process in the criminal justice system was unclear.

Arbitrary Arrest: The law characterizes any opposition to the government as treason. Persons convicted of treason faced life imprisonment and were ineligible for pardoning. In the past the government arrested and filed charges on economic or criminal grounds against those expressing critical or differing views instead of

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charging its critics with treason.

There were reports of arbitrary arrests and detentions. Authorities frequently singled out human rights activists, journalists, members of religious groups, ethnic minorities, and dissidents, as well as members of NGOs who interacted with foreigners.

Pretrial Detention: In most cases the law permits detention of no more than two months, but in exceptional cases it may be extended to one year with approval of the prosecutor general. For minor crimes a much shorter investigation period applies. Authorities rarely exceeded legal limits for pretrial detention. Forced confessions also played a part in the reduction of time in pretrial detention. Accused persons are entitled to challenge the court but were unlikely to do so.

Detainee's Ability to Challenge Lawfulness of Detention before a Court:

Persons arrested or detained are not entitled to challenge the legal basis or arbitrary nature of their detention while detained or obtain prompt release if unlawfully detained. Persons arrested or detained unlawfully may seek reimbursement for damages following release. Law enforcement authorities found guilty of unlawful detention or arrest may be punished by demotion or suspension for five years, correctional labor service for up to two years, or imprisonment for up to eight years.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

Although the law provides for an independent judiciary, the executive controls it, and it is subordinate to the executive. There was no legislative review of the president's judicial appointments and dismissals. The president had sole authority to dismiss any judge. The judiciary was widely reputed to be corrupt and inefficient.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for due process for defendants, including a public trial; the right to attend the trial; access to accusatory material; the right to call witnesses; the right to a defense attorney, including a court-appointed lawyer if the defendant cannot afford one; and the right to represent oneself in court. Authorities,

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however, often denied these rights. Defendants frequently did not enjoy a presumption of innocence. The government permits the public to attend most trials, but it closed some, especially those considered politically sensitive. There were few independent lawyers available to represent defendants. The criminal procedure code provides that defendants be present at their trials and consult with their attorneys in a timely manner. The law sets no restrictions on a defendant's access to an attorney. The court at times did not allow defendants to confront or question a witness against them and denied defendants and their attorneys access to government evidence. In some cases courts refused to accept exculpatory evidence provided by defense attorneys, even if that evidence might have changed the outcome of the trial. Courts did not offer interpreters to defendants who did not speak Turkmen.

Legal proceedings are conducted in the state language (Turkmen). Participants in the proceedings who do not speak the state language are guaranteed the right to make statements, give explanations and testimonies, file motions, bring complaints, become acquainted with all the materials of the case, speak in court in their native language or another language that they speak, and use the services of an interpreter. The legal code requires the government to hand over investigative and judicial documents to the defendant and translated into their native language or into another language they speak.

Even when the courts observed due process, the authority of the government prosecutor far exceeded that of the defense attorney, making it difficult for the defendant to receive a fair trial. Court transcripts frequently were flawed or incomplete, especially when there was a need to translate defendants' testimony from Russian to Turkmen. Defendants could appeal a lower court's decision and petition the president for clemency.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

Opposition groups and some international organizations stated the government held political prisoners and detainees.

The precise number of political prisoners remained unknown. Observers estimated a number between 100 and 200, including the NGO Prove They Are Alive's list of

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121 prisoners.

Those convicted of treason faced life imprisonment and were ineligible for pardoning, although they could receive reductions of sentence from the president. The government continued to assert that none of these persons was a political prisoner. Humanitarian and human rights organizations were not permitted to visit political prisoners.

In February 2018 authorities reportedly arrested Omruzak Omarkulyev, a Turkmen university student studying in Turkey. Omarkulyev had created an informal Turkmen students' club at his university in Turkey. In March 2018 Omarkulyev went missing after migration authorities allegedly banned him from returning to Turkey for his studies. RFE/RL and the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, an exile group, reported that Omarkulyev was sentenced to 20 years in prison on unknown charges and was being held at the maximum-security prison in Ovadandep. In September, RFE/RL reported on a video in which Omarkulyev appeared although he did not speak in the video. The video claimed authorities had not arrested Omarkulyev and, instead, he was serving his mandatory two-year military service. The video was Omarkulyev's first appearance since he disappeared in March 2018. Prove They Are Alive! included him in its 2019 report.

Amnesty: Although the president granted pardons to several hundred individuals with criminal convictions, the names of those pardoned were not made public. It was widely assumed that he did not pardon any political prisoners.

Politically Motivated Reprisal against Individuals located Outside the Country

On August 1, RFE/RL reported Dursoltan Taganova, an activist and representative of the Democratic Choice of Turkmenistan (DCT) living in Istanbul, was detained during a July 19 protest in front of the Turkmen consulate. One of the DCT leaders, Myrat Gurbanov, told RFE/RL that Taganova was transferred to a deportation camp in Istanbul because her immigration documents had expired. Gurbanov stated Turkish business representatives were pressuring Turkish authorities to send Taganova to Turkmenistan. According to media reports,

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Turkish officials released Taganova from the detention center on October 13 and granted her asylum in Turkey. On October 30, RFE/RL reported Turkmenistan government officials continued to harass Taganova and her family.

The Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights reported the national security services had increased their efforts to recruit informants among the growing community of Turkmenistani citizens who resided in Turkey. On July 1, *Turkmen News* reported that officials of the Ministry of National Security were persecuting Turkmen activists abroad, as well as their relatives who were in Turkmenistan.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

The civil judiciary system was neither independent nor impartial, as the president appointed all judges. According to the law, evidence gathered during a criminal investigation can serve as the basis for a civil action in a process called “civil lawsuit in criminal justice.” Observers noted that in principle, this could include human rights abuses. In the past there were reports of bribes in the civil court system to ensure a particular outcome. In cases in which it had interests regarding an individual citizen, the state used the judiciary to impose court orders. Persons and organizations may appeal adverse decisions to regional human rights bodies, but local courts were unlikely to reverse decisions despite successful appeals.

Any individual or organization may file a complaint related to human rights abuses with the Office of the Ombudsperson. According to the law, the ombudsperson may then make a recommendation to the offending party on the necessary measures to restore the violated rights or freedoms immediately.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy, family, home, or correspondence, but authorities frequently did not respect these prohibitions. Authorities reportedly searched private homes without judicial or other appropriate authorization.

The law does not regulate surveillance by the state security apparatus, which

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regularly monitored the activities of officials, citizens, opponents, and critics of the government, and foreigners. Security officials used physical surveillance, telephone tapping, electronic eavesdropping, and informers. Authorities frequently queried the parents of students studying overseas and sometimes threatened state employees with loss of employment if they maintained friendships with foreigners.

The government reportedly intercepted surface mail before delivery, and letters and parcels taken to the post office had to remain unsealed for government inspection.

Persons harassed, detained, or arrested by authorities reported that the government caused family members to be fired from their jobs or expelled from school. Authorities sometimes also detained and interrogated family members.

The authorities blocked access to websites they considered sensitive, including YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and social media, as well as to some virtual private network (VPN) connections. The government controlled the internet (there was only one provider in the country) and monitored users' (journalists, civil society, etc.) internet activities.

According to *CT*, surveillance of activists and their relatives consisted of wiretapping, monitoring of postal correspondence, and periodic visits by district police officers. Local authorities conducted personal surveillance in special cases.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for the Press

The constitution provides for freedom of expression, including for the press, but the government did not respect this right.

Freedom of Speech: The law characterizes any opposition to the government as treason. Citizens publicly criticizing the government or the regime face intimidation and possible arrest. The law requires political parties to allow representatives of the Central Election Committee and Ministry of Justice to monitor their meetings. The government warned critics against speaking with visiting journalists or other foreigners about human rights problems.

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On June 19, *Fergana.agency* reported that local authorities arrested Ashgabat resident Murad Dushemov for his active participation in online opposition platforms. According to the news agency, on June 17, one police representative and three men in civil uniforms came to Dushemov's apartment, confiscated his computer, and took Dushemov to the internal affairs department of Kopetdag district of Ashgabat. He was also told that if local authorities found "evidence of an opposition activity" on his computer, he would be sentenced to 15 years of imprisonment. Khydyrov stated that Dushemov was a member of the Telegram chat "activistdvt," created by the new Democratic Movement of Turkmenistan, and administrators of the group banned Dushemov for inappropriate behavior. After that he became active on other opposition platforms.

On June 27, RFE/RL reported that authorities placed Murad Dushemov under house arrest. *CT* reported on September 7 that local authorities in Balkanabat, Balkan Province, arrested Pygamberdi Allaberdiyev, a lawyer for Nebitdag Oil of the Ministry of Oil and Gas of Turkmenistan, for "hooliganism." *CT* claimed he was arrested for allegedly communicating with leaders of international protest movements against the government. He denied these charges. On September 30, he was sentenced to six years in prison on charges of hooliganism and intent to inflict moderate harm to health.

Freedom of Press and Media, Including Online Media: The government financed and controlled the publication of books and almost all other print media and online newspapers and journals. The quasi-independent weekly newspaper *Rysgal* continued to operate, although its stories were largely reprints from state media outlets or reflected the views of the state news agency. The government maintained restrictions on the importation of foreign newspapers.

The government controlled radio and domestic television, but satellite dishes providing access to foreign television programming were widespread throughout the country. Channels including BBC World News and the Turkmen-language version of RFE/RL were widely available through satellite dishes. Citizens also received international radio programs through satellite access.

The government continued its ban on subscriptions to foreign periodicals by nongovernmental entities, although copies of nonpolitical periodicals appeared

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occasionally in the bazaars. The government maintained a subscription service to Russian-language outlets for government workers, although these publications were not available for public use.

There was no independent oversight of media accreditation, no defined criteria for allocating press cards, no assured provision for receiving accreditation when space was available, and no protection against the withdrawal of accreditation for political reasons. The government required all foreign correspondents to apply for accreditation. It granted visas to journalists from outside the country only to cover specific events, such as international conferences and summit meetings, where it could monitor their activities.

Independent journalist Soltan Achilova, who previously worked for RFE/RL and began cooperating with Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, repeatedly faced harassment. In March 2019 migration authorities stopped her at Ashgabat airport as she was departing for Georgia to participate in an international seminar and told her that she had been blacklisted for travel abroad. The migration services later confirmed the ban in writing, without providing any explanation for it. Following international attention to Achilova's case, officials eventually lifted the travel ban.

Violence and Harassment: The government subjected journalists critical of its official policy to surveillance and harassment. There were reports law enforcement officials harassed and monitored citizen journalists who worked for foreign media outlets, including by monitoring their telephone conversations and restricting their travel abroad.

On June 25, *CT* reported the Ministry of National Security monitored the house of human rights activist Natalya Shabunts for two weeks. Reportedly, some stayed in the car and some near the house.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: The law prohibits censorship and provides for freedom to gather and disseminate information, but authorities did not implement the law. The government continued to censor newspapers and prohibit reporting of opposition political views or any criticism of the president. Domestic journalists and foreign news correspondents often engaged in self-censorship due to fear of government reprisal.

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To regulate domestic printing and copying activities, the government required all publishers, printers, and photocopying establishments to register their equipment. The government did not allow the publication of works on topics that were out of favor with the government, including some works of fiction. The government must approve the importation, publishing, and dissemination of religious literature. The government prohibits unauthorized importation of the Quran and the Bible, although authorized imports of these and some other religious texts were approved occasionally, including during the year.

Internet Freedom

The government continued to monitor citizens' email and internet activity. Reports indicated the Ministry of National Security controlled the main internet access gateway and that several servers belonging to internet protocol addresses registered to the Ministry of Communications operated software that allowed the government to record Voice over Internet Protocol conversations, turn on computer cameras and microphones, and log keystrokes. Authorities blocked access to websites they considered sensitive, including YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, as well as to some VPN connections, including those of diplomatic missions and international businesses; it severely restricted internet access to other websites. VPNs, however, were widely used by the general population, with users often having to switch to new VPNs after a VPN was blocked. Qurium Media Foundation reported authorities blocked 133 of the most popular worldwide websites.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The government did not tolerate criticism of government policy or the president in academic circles and curtailed research in areas it considered politically sensitive, such as comparative law, history, ethnic relations, and theology.

The Ministry of Culture censored and monitored all public exhibitions, including music, art, and cultural events. The government strictly controlled the production of plays and performances in state theaters, and these were severely limited. Authorities also strictly controlled film screenings and limited viewings to approved films dubbed or subtitled in Turkmen and Russian, unless sponsored by a

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foreign embassy.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The government restricted freedoms of peaceful assembly and association.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The constitution and law provide for freedom of peaceful assembly, but the government restricted this right. During the year authorities neither granted the required permits for public meetings and demonstrations nor allowed unregistered organizations to hold demonstrations. Unregistered religious groups were not allowed to meet, according to the country's religion law. Groups that defied the law and attempted to meet in private homes faced intimidation and scrutiny from security forces.

Freedom of Association

Although the constitution and law provide for freedom of association, the government restricted this right. The law requires all NGOs to register with the Ministry of Justice and all foreign assistance to be coordinated through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Unregistered NGO activity is punishable by a fine, short-term detention, and confiscation of property. The law requires all religious groups to register with the Ministry of Justice and sets out a schedule of fines for religious activity conducted by unregistered groups.

The government reported that, as of August 23, 2019, 122 NGOs were registered in the country, including four international NGOs. Of the registered NGOs, international organizations recognized only a few as independent. NGOs reported the government presented a number of administrative obstacles to NGOs that attempted to register. Authorities rejected some applications repeatedly on technical grounds. Some organizations awaiting registration found alternate ways to carry out activities, such as registering as businesses or subsidiaries of other registered groups, but others temporarily suspended or limited their activities. Although the law states there is a process for registering foreign assistance, NGOs had difficulty registering bilateral foreign assistance under the 2013 decree requiring such registration.

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Observers noted a number of barriers to the formation and functioning of civil society. These included regulations that permit the Ministry of Justice to send representatives to association events and meetings and requirements that associations notify the government about their planned activities.

New amendments to the law on public associations were adopted on August 22. According to the new amendments, an international public association may be created if there are at least 50 founders, whereas previously the law stated the “international and national public association can be created if there are at least 50 and 400 members, respectively.” To create a national public association, it must have at least 50 founders, and the territorial and local public associations must have at least five founders. In addition a new requirement for state registration is “a statement signed by the members of the governing body of this public association indicating their last names, names, patronymics, date of birth, and place of residence.”

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement

The constitution and law do not provide for full freedom of movement.

In-country Movement: The law requires internal passports and residency permits. Persons residing or working without residency permits face forcible removal to their place of registration. A requirement for a border permit remained in effect for all foreigners wishing to travel to border areas.

Government media reported that during the September 2 session of the State Security Council, the president signed a decree “on improving the passport system in Turkmenistan,” which is aimed at simplifying the registration and issuance of passports to citizens of the country, including their registration at the place of residence. The document charges the Ministry of Internal Affairs with the obligation to issue a passport to a citizen within seven working days, provide

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registration at the place of residence of citizens, and provide extract certificates, as well as preparation of passport books and other official related documents. The document prohibits ministries, agencies, municipalities, and other institutions, regardless of their organizational and legal form, from requiring various certificates from citizens, if the necessary information can be confirmed by presenting the passport of a Turkmen citizen.

Police continued a practice initiated in February 2019 of harassing female drivers. On numerous occasions police confiscated women's licenses and cars for ostensibly minor reasons, such as lacking an item in the legally required first-aid kit.

Foreign Travel: The government continued to bar certain citizens from departing under its Law on Migration. The law states that citizens may be denied exit from the country "if their exit contravenes the interests of the national security of Turkmenistan."

Prove They Are Alive! reported that any of the country's law enforcement bodies can initiate a travel ban on a citizen and that travelers in various categories may be denied departure, including young men obliged to perform military service; persons facing criminal and civil charges or under probationary sentence; relatives of persons reportedly convicted and imprisoned for the 2002 alleged assassination or coup attempt; as well as journalists, civil society activists, and their family members. The group estimated that 20,000 individuals were subject to a travel ban based on political grounds.

Unless the Ministry of Foreign Affairs specifically approved a program in advance, the government routinely prevented citizens from travelling abroad for programs sponsored by foreign governments. Migration officials often stopped nonapproved travelers at the airport and prevented them from leaving.

The law provides for restrictions on travel by citizens who had access to state secrets, presented falsified personal information, committed a serious crime, were under surveillance, might become victims of trafficking, previously violated the law of the destination country, or whose travel contradicts the interests of national security. In some cases the law provides for time limits on the travel ban as well as

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finer for its infraction. Former public-sector employees who had access to state secrets were prevented from traveling abroad for five years after terminating their employment with the government. The law allows authorities to forbid recipients of presidential amnesties from traveling abroad for a period of up to two years.

Exile: The law provides for internal exile, requiring persons to reside in a certain area for a fixed term of two to five years.

e. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons

Not applicable.

f. Protection of Refugees

In 2009 the government assumed responsibility from the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) for making refugee status determinations, but it has not granted refugee status since then. UNHCR had observer status at government-run refugee-status determination hearings.

Access to Asylum: The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system for providing protection to refugees. No new asylum seekers have officially registered in the country since 2005.

UNHCR reported that as of October 2017, 22 UNHCR-mandate refugees resided in the country. Each of these had been individually recognized under UNHCR's mandate between 1998 and 2002. Mandate refugees are required to renew UNHCR certificates with the government annually.

g. Stateless Persons

The country had a significant population of former Soviet Union citizens who became stateless due to the breakup of the Soviet Union. UNHCR's last calculation in 2015 estimated there were 7,111 stateless persons or persons of undetermined nationality in the country. The number of stateless persons who were also refugees was not available. In recent years the government usually granted more than one thousand otherwise stateless individuals citizenship annually.

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Citizenship is derived primarily from one's parents; however, on July 1, the new Law on Civil Status Acts took effect. This law states that the government will register the birth of any child born in the country--including those with undocumented parents. The requirement that applicants for citizenship prove they are not citizens of another country impeded efforts to establish the nationality of undocumented persons. According to UNHCR, however, during the previous 15 years, an estimated 23,000 refugees and stateless persons were granted Turkmen nationality.

The law allows stateless persons to reside in the country legally and travel internationally with government-issued identification and travel documents. Undocumented stateless persons did not have access to public benefits, education, or employment opportunities.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

Despite a constitutional provision giving citizens the ability to choose their government in periodic elections based on universal and equal suffrage, there have been no free and fair elections in the country. There was no bona fide political opposition to the president, and alternative candidates came from derivative party structures, such as the state-controlled Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, or were members of individual initiative groups. Elections were conducted by secret ballot. According to the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE), the election law does not meet OSCE standards.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: In the 2017 presidential election, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov won 97.69 percent of the vote. The government invited an election assessment mission team composed of representatives of the OSCE and the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the Commonwealth of Independent States Executive Committee, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to observe the election. According to the OSCE/ODIHR team, "The presidential election took place in a strictly controlled political environment. The predominant position of the incumbent and the lack of genuine opposition and meaningful pluralism limited

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voters' choice. The lack of clear regulations for key aspects of the process had a negative impact on the administration of the election, especially at lower levels.”

According to the human rights ombudsperson's report for 2019, the Office of the Ombudsperson received no complaints from citizens about violation of the electoral right, including during the election period.

On September 25, the People's Council (Halk Maslahaty) approved the amendments and additions to the constitution that converted the Parliament into a bicameral parliamentary system. In accordance with constitutional law, the People's Council approved the removal of one article, added three articles, and amended and included additions to 27 articles of the constitution. When the changes are implemented, the bicameral Parliament (Milli Genesh) will consist of the Halk Maslahaty (People's Council, the higher house) and the Mejlis (Parliament, the lower house). The Halk Maslahaty will consist of 56 members (eight representatives from each province and Ashgabat, and eight representatives to be appointed by the president). The Mejlis will consist of 125 members.

Political Parties and Political Participation: The law makes it extremely difficult for genuinely independent political parties to organize, nominate candidates, and campaign, since it grants the Ministry of Justice broad powers over the registration process and the authority to monitor party meetings. The law prohibits political parties based on religion, region, or profession as well as parties that “offend moral norms.” The law does not explain how a party may appeal its closure by the government. The law permits public associations and organizations to put forth candidates for elected office.

Neither organized opposition nor independent political groups operated in the country. The three registered political parties were the ruling Democratic Party (the former Communist Party), the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, and the Agrarian Party. The government did not officially prohibit membership in other political organizations, but there were no reports of persons who claimed membership in political organizations other than these three parties and a smattering of representatives of individual initiative groups. Authorities did not allow opposition movements based abroad--including the Republican Party of Turkmenistan--to operate within the country.

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Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups: No laws limit participation of women or members of minority groups in the political process, and they did participate, although their representation and influence were limited. Although women served in prominent government positions, including as speaker of parliament, only one woman served in the 12-member Cabinet of Ministers (as the deputy chairwoman for culture, television, and press). The government gave preference for appointed government positions to ethnic Turkmen, but ethnic minorities occupied some senior government positions. Members of the president's Ahal-Teke tribe, the largest in the country, held the most prominent roles in cultural and political life.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

While the law provides criminal penalties for official corruption, the government did not implement the law effectively. There were numerous reports of corruption in the security forces and in all social and economic sectors throughout the year. Officials frequently engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. According to analysts, factors encouraging corruption included the existence of patronage networks, low government salaries that in the latter half of the year were paid as much as three months behind schedule, a lack of fiscal transparency and accountability, the absence of published macroeconomic data, and the fear of government retaliation against citizens who choose to highlight corrupt acts. According to Freedom House and the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators, the country had a severe corruption problem.

There are no independent institutions tasked with combating corruption. Crackdowns on corruption were typically selective and related to conflicts within the ruling elite. Anticorruption bodies also were allegedly used to extort revenue from wealthy officials and businessmen.

Checks on nepotism and conflicts of interest were also lacking; in February the president's son, Serdar Berdimuhamedov was appointed as Minister of Industry and Construction Production.

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Corruption: On January 20, *CT* reported that a preschool chief in Ashgabat suspected of receiving large bribes for employment was convicted to eight years.

As RFE/RL reported, Switzerland's Minister of Foreign Affairs stated on January 15 that Switzerland had returned \$1.3 million of confiscated funds to Turkmenistan. According to the agreement with the UN Development Program (UNDP), the funds were to be used for UNDP projects in the country, particularly for purchasing antituberculosis drugs. The official statement did not offer specifics, but according to RFE/RL, the funds may have been connected to one of several high-level local officials sentenced for corruption. RFE/RL noted this was the first time illegally obtained funds were confiscated and returned.

During the Cabinet of Ministers meeting on October 9, the prosecutor general reported on the investigation into the educational and cultural spheres. As a result, eight persons in the educational sector were arrested and imprisoned.

Financial Disclosure: The law does not require elected or appointed officials to disclose their incomes or assets. Financial disclosure requirements are neither transparent nor consistent with international norms. Government enterprises are not required to publicize financial statements, even to foreign partners. Local auditors, not internationally recognized firms, often conducted financial audits.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

There were no domestic NGOs that work exclusively on human rights, although some NGOs worked on related social issues, due to the government's refusal to register such organizations and restrictions that made activity by unregistered organizations illegal. The government continued to monitor the activities of nonpolitical social and cultural organizations.

There were no international human rights NGOs with a permanent presence in the country, although the government permitted international organizations, such as the OSCE, to have a resident mission. Government restrictions on freedoms of speech, press, and association severely restricted international organizations'

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ability to investigate, understand, and fully evaluate the government's human rights policies and practices.

The United Nations or Other International Bodies: The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances requested an invitation to visit the country in 2016. The working group again requested an invitation in January 2019 but had not conducted a visit by year's end.

Government Human Rights Bodies: In 2018 the government-run National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights changed its name to the Institute of State, Law, and Democracy. It is not an independent body, and its ability to obtain redress for citizens was limited. The institute, established in 1996, has a mandate to support democratization. The Interagency Commission on Enforcing Turkmenistan's International Obligations on Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law meets biannually to coordinate the implementation of a limited number of recommendations from international human rights bodies. The parliamentary Committee on the Protection of Human Rights and Liberties oversees human rights-related legislation, and during the year it worked with the UN Development Program to draft the country's *National Action Plan for Human Rights*.

By law the ombudsman must be nominated by the president and confirmed by parliament. The law empowers the ombudsman to receive and review human rights violations reported by citizens and confirm or deny the violation and advise the complainant regarding legal redress. The ombudsman is obliged to submit an annual human rights report to the president and parliament, which shall be published and distributed via local media. The ombudsman's report was completed and published for the first time in 2019 and again during the year. The ombudsman enjoys legal immunity and cannot be prosecuted, arrested, or detained for official acts while in office. In 2019 the Ombudsperson's Office recorded a total of 740 appeals.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking

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in Persons

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalizes rape, and penalties range from three to 10 years in prison. Rape of a victim younger than age 14 is punishable by 10 to 25 years in prison. A cultural bias against reporting or acknowledging rape made it difficult to determine the extent of the problem.

The law prohibits domestic violence, including spousal abuse, through provisions in the criminal code that address intentional infliction of injury. Penalties range from fines to 15 years in prison, based on the extent of the injury, although enforcement of the law varied. Anecdotal reports indicated domestic violence against women was common; most victims of domestic violence kept silent because they were unaware of their rights or feared increased violence from husbands and relatives.

Sexual Harassment: No law specifically prohibits sexual harassment, and reports suggested sexual harassment existed in the workplace.

Reproductive Rights: Couples and individuals have the right to decide the number, spacing, and timing of their children, and to manage their reproductive health, and they have access to the information to do so, free from discrimination or violence. The law states that women have the right to medical care including prenatal care and “safe and effective” contraception. Some married women opposed the use of contraception due to cultural attitudes. Some women in remote areas preferred to give birth at home rather than make a long or difficult journey to a hospital or clinic. Official statistics indicated that 76 percent of women of reproductive age satisfied their need for family planning with modern methods and that the adolescent birth rate was 28 percent. Working with the UN Population Fund, the government committed to providing health services including HIV prophylaxis, contraceptive medication, forensic checks, and psychological assistance, to survivors of sexual violence within 72 hours of a reported attack.

Coercion in Population Control: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

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Discrimination: By law women have full legal equality with men, including equal pay, access to loans, the ability to start and own a business, and access to government jobs. Nevertheless, women continued to experience discrimination due to cultural biases, and the government did not enforce the law effectively.

Children

Birth Registration: By law a child derives citizenship from his or her parents. The new Law on Civil Status Acts provides universal birth registration to any child born within the country's territory, and a child born to stateless persons possessing permanent resident status in the country is also a citizen.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The legal minimum age for marriage is 18.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The legal age of consent is 16. The law forbids the production of pornographic materials or objects for distribution, as well as the advertisement or trade in text, movies or videos, graphics, or other objects of a pornographic nature, including those involving children.

International Child Abductions: The country is a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State's *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

Anti-Semitism

There is no organized Jewish community in the country. In 2016 it was estimated that 200 to 250 Jews resided in the country. There were no reports of anti-Semitic activity.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

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Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities in employment, education, access to health care, and the provision of state services in other areas. But practical application, such as the accessibility of both public and private buildings, varied. Members of the disability rights community reported that persons with disabilities were generally unable to find satisfactory employment due to unofficial discrimination.

The government provided subsidies and pensions for persons with disabilities as well as housing, free health care, and tax-exempt status. In 2019 the government constructed or was constructing comprehensive educational and treatment facilities for children with disabilities in all five provinces of the country.

Members of National/Racial/Ethnic Minority Groups

The law provides for equal rights and freedoms for all citizens.

The law designates Turkmen as the official language, although it also provides for the rights of speakers of minority languages. Russian remained prevalent in commerce and everyday life in the capital, even as the government continued its campaign to conduct official business solely in Turkmen.

Non-Turkmen speakers in government noted that some avenues for promotion and job advancement were not available to them, and only a handful of non-Turkmen occupied high-level jobs in government. In some cases applicants for government jobs had to provide information about their ethnicity going back three generations.

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Sexual contact between men is illegal, with punishment of up to two years in prison and the possible imposition of an additional two- to five-year term in a labor camp. The law also stipulates sentences of up to 20 years for repeated acts of pederasty, same-sex acts with juveniles, or the spread of HIV or other sexually transmitted infections through same-sex contact. The law does not mention same-sex sexual contact between women. Enforcement of the law was selective.

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Antidiscrimination laws do not apply to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex persons. Society did not accept transgender individuals, and the government provided no legal protection or recognition of their gender identity.

On May 23, *Turkmen.news* reported the famous Turkmen master of ceremonies with initials G.S. was sentenced to two years' imprisonment for sodomy (sexual relations of a man with a man) imprisoned with several others who signed confessions. *Turkmen.news* claimed he was the son of a well known diplomat. G.S. was arrested in March.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provides for the right of workers to form and join independent unions and to bargain collectively with their employers. The law prohibits workers from striking. The law does not prohibit antiunion discrimination against union members and organizers. There are no mechanisms for resolving complaints of discrimination, nor does the law provide for reinstatement of workers fired for antiunion activity.

The government did not respect freedom of association or collective bargaining and did not effectively enforce the law. Penalties were not commensurate with those for other laws involving denials of civil rights, such as discrimination, because no penalties exist to deter violations. All trade and professional unions were government controlled, and none had an independent voice in its activities. The government did not permit private citizens to form independent unions. There were no labor NGOs in the country.

Each government agency has a trade union that can receive complaints related to labor issues, as can the country's human rights ombudsperson, but reporting was deterred by the required inclusion of names, addresses, and signatures in complaints.

Authorities retaliated violently to labor organizers. Gaspar Matalaev, a labor and human rights activist, was imprisoned for three years for reporting on the

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systematic use of forced and child labor in the cotton harvest in 2016. The prominent NGO Cotton Campaign reported that he was tortured while in prison for his reporting. In September 2019 Matalaev was released from prison, having served a three-year sentence in full.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor. The law allows for compulsory labor as a punishment for criminal offenses, requiring that convicted persons work in the place and job specified by the administration of the penal institution, potentially including private enterprises. Compulsory labor may also be applied as a punishment for libel and for violation of the established procedure for the organization of assemblies, meetings, or demonstrations.

The law provides for the investigation, prosecution, and punishment of suspected forced-labor and other trafficking offenses. The government did not report the number of convictions during the year under its criminal code, identified no victims, and did not implement legal provisions on victim protection. The government did not effectively enforce the law. Resources, inspections, and remediation were inadequate. Information on the sufficiency and consistency of penalties for violations was unavailable, so penalties could not be determined whether they were considered commensurate with those for other analogous serious crimes, such as kidnapping.

The government frequently forced students and public-sector workers to work in unpaid support roles during government-sponsored events such as parades, sporting events, or holiday celebrations. In addition the government compulsorily mobilized students, teachers, doctors, and other civil servants for public works projects, such as planting trees and cleaning streets and public spaces in advance of presidential visits (see Section 7.c.), Forced child labor was reported in the country (see section 7.c.). In June, Eurasianet reported that government officials were forced to use their own money to buy bicycles to take to mass events such as World Bicycle Day.

The government released a National Action Plan to address human trafficking as well as a National Victim Referral Mechanism. The government, however, did not

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report any information on prosecutions or convictions, nor did the government identify any victims, fund victim assistance programs, or implement legal provisions on victim protection.

The law permits employers to require workers to undertake work not associated with their employment. During the year the International Labor Organization's Committee of Experts' report expressed "concern at the continued practice of forced labor in the cotton sector." To meet government-imposed quotas for the cotton harvest, government officials required some employees at private-sector institutions, soldiers, and public-sector workers (including teachers, doctors, nurses, and others) to pick cotton without payment and under the threat of administrative penalties, such as dismissal, reduced work hours, or salary deductions, for refusal to comply. There are also reports that public-sector workers who declined to participate in the cotton harvest were assessed financial penalties to pay for their employers to hire "replacement" pickers through an unregulated, informal system. Those forced to work were compelled to sign declarations that their work was "voluntary," but the *subbotnik*, or civic project, loses its voluntary character due to the association of penalties with nonparticipation. The government also threatened farmers with land seizure if they failed to meet harvest quotas, and individuals were brought to farms far from their homes, lodged in a temporary, unsanitary base facility for 10 or more days, and forced to work long hours with little rest.

Radio Azatlyk reported in September that individuals in Mary Province unable to pay 60 manat (\$17) fines for failing to wear masks were sent by police to pick cotton. Each violator was required to gather 44 pounds of cotton daily.

Workers in construction and rural residents were particularly vulnerable to forced labor and trafficking. Isolated reports suggested that during the year officials might have also coerced farmers to cultivate silkworms under threat of land seizure or assessment of a financial penalty.

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

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c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits all of the worst forms of child labor. According to the labor code, the minimum age at which a person can enter into a labor agreement or contract is 18. A 15-year-old child, however, may work four to six hours per day, up to 24 hours per week, with parental and trade union permission. The law prohibits children younger than 16 from working more than 24 hours per week and prohibits children between the ages of 16 and 18 from working more than six hours per day or 36 hours per week. The law also prohibits children from working overtime or between the hours of 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. and protects children from exploitation in the workplace. A 2005 presidential decree bans child labor in all sectors and states specifically that children may not participate in the cotton harvest. Children work informally in markets and bazaars as porters, transporting carts that can weigh as much as 220 pounds.

The Ministry of Justice and the Prosecutor General's Office are responsible for enforcing the prohibition on child labor and can impose penalties for violations, including fines of up to 2,000 manat (\$570) or suspension of an employer's operations for up to three months, sanctions that were not commensurate with those for other analogous serious crimes, such as kidnapping. There were no official figures available or independent reporting on the number of violations to assess whether the Ministry of Justice and the Prosecutor General's Office effectively enforced the 2005 presidential decree prohibiting child labor.

The law prohibits students ages 14-30 from working during the educational process but permits students to work in voluntary collective production practices in their free time. Some schools had two shifts of school attendance during the school day, which may facilitate children's engagement in child labor in the cotton harvest by accommodating this work within the school schedule.

In June, Radio Azatlyk reported that children whose parents paid the school administration for 20-day summer educational camps in Lebap Province and Darganatinsky District were engaged in forced labor in cotton and potato fields. Children were forced to work for several days and reportedly were not provided food or water. Children complained to their parents about the labor, but parents did not take action because they feared the school would retaliate and give their

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children poor grades. Schools told the parents the children would be forced to work until the potatoes were fully harvested in July. Authorities and state-run media denied the abusive treatment of children and instead reported “a happy life for children.”

Also, see the Department of Labor’s *List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings>.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

The law prohibits discrimination based on nationality, race, gender, origin, language, religion, disability, HIV-status or other communicable diseases, political beliefs, and social status. The government did not always effectively enforce the law, which does not specify penalties for discrimination on these grounds, with the exception of disability; discrimination against persons with disabilities is punishable by fines that were commensurate to other laws related to civil rights, such as election interference. The law does not prohibit discrimination based on age, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

Discrimination in employment and occupation based on gender, language, and disability (see section 6) was widespread across all sectors of the economy and government, to include legal discrimination against women from working in the same jobs as men. Certain government positions required language exams, and all government positions required a family background check going back three generations. Civil society members reported the country retained a strong cultural bias against women in positions of power and leadership, making it difficult for some women to secure managerial positions based on their gender. Although the law defines social protection policies for persons with disabilities and establishes quotas and workplaces for persons with disabilities, it was not broadly enforced. Members of the disability rights community reported that persons with disabilities were generally unable to find satisfactory employment due to unofficial discrimination. There was no information on discrimination against internal migrant workers.

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e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The minimum monthly wage in all sectors was above the poverty line. The standard legal workweek is 40 hours with weekends off.

The law states overtime or holiday pay should be double the regular wage. The law prohibits pregnant women, women with children up to age three, women with disabled children younger than age 16, and single parents with two or more children from working overtime. Laws governing overtime and holiday pay were not effectively enforced. The government, as well as many private-sector employers, required workers to work 10 hours a day or a sixth day without compensation. Reports indicated many public-sector employees worked at least a half day on Saturdays. Penalties for violations of minimum wage and overtime laws were not clearly defined and there was no state agency designated for enforcement, so they were not commensurate with those for similar crimes, such as fraud. In September, RFE/RL reported due to the COVID-19 pandemic, medical personnel complained they were being forced against their will to work in quarantine zones for two-week stints while having to pay from their own pockets for personal protection equipment. In some cases experienced nurses said they were barred from leaving quarantine zones for more than two months.

The government did not set comprehensive standards for occupational health and safety. There is no state labor inspectorate. State trade unions, however, employed 14 labor inspectors, who have the right to issue improvement notices to government industries. According to the law, trade union inspectors may not levy fines, and there are no mechanisms for enforcement of improvement notices. Penalties for violations of occupational safety and health laws were not commensurate with those for crimes like negligence.

Employers did not provide construction workers and industrial workers in older factories proper protective equipment and often made these workers labor in unsafe environments. Some agricultural workers faced environmental health hazards related to the application of defoliants in preparing cotton fields for mechanical harvesting. Workers did not have the right to remove themselves from work situations that endangered their health or safety without jeopardy to their continued employment, and authorities did not protect employees in these situations.

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Statistics regarding work-related injuries and fatalities were not available. Radio Azatlyk reported the Ministry of Health demanded that high-level managers at medical facilities ensure that there is no discussion among their staff regarding the coronavirus or economic or political problems in the country. According to the service, the ministry demanded the managers identify staff members who violated this informal ban, suppress any dissent, and put pressure on outspoken employees through their family members.

According to the International Labor Organization, there was “gross underreporting” of occupational accidents in the country and the surrounding region. In September, *Turkmen.news* reported the deaths of 14 soldiers in a crash on their way to harvest pistachios in Serhetabad Province.