

# TURKMENISTAN 2021 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

According to its constitution, Turkmenistan is a secular democracy, although President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov authoritatively, with a small inner circle, controls the country. Berdimuhamedov became president in 2006 and continued as president following the 2017 election that was not considered free nor fair by the international community. Experienced, nonpartisan international observers did not monitor the presidential elections. Parliamentary elections in 2021 were monitored by 440 national observers. During the year a parliamentary secret ballot process selected Berdimuhamedov to be chairperson of the *Halk Maslahaty* (upper house of parliament), making him head of both the executive and the legislative branches of the government.

The national police and the Ministry of National Security maintained internal security while the military and border security forces were responsible for external security. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces. There were credible reports that members of the security forces committed human rights abuses.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment by police and prison officials; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary detention; political prisoners; politically motivated reprisals against individuals in another country; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; serious restrictions on free expression and media, including threats of violence and threats of unjustified arrests or prosecutions, including for criminal libel, against journalists; serious restrictions on internet freedom including censorship and site blocking; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association including overly restrictive laws on the organization, funding, or operation of nongovernmental organizations and civil society organizations; particularly severe restrictions of religious freedom; severe restrictions on freedom

of movement and residence and on the right to leave the country; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections; serious and unreasonable restrictions on political participation; serious government corruption; serious government restrictions on and harassment of international human rights organizations; lack of investigation of and accountability for gender-based violence; trafficking in persons; the existence of laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults; significant restrictions on workers' freedom of association; and the existence of forced and child labor.

Officials in the security services and elsewhere in the government committed human rights abuses and engaged in corruption with impunity. There were no reported prosecutions of government officials for human rights abuses or corruption 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**

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

There were some reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

On March 7, Chronicle of Turkmenistan (CT), an opposition media outlet, reported that Turkmen activists held a protest in Times Square, New York, demanding Turkmen authorities hold a fair trial and punish those responsible for the death of 14-year-old athlete Suleyman Tursunbayev. On February 15, CT reported that Tursunbayev, was beaten to death in the Baherden district of Ahal Province where he took part in judo competition. Before the fight, he was allegedly pressured to lose to a rival affiliated with the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Turkmenistan but won the fight and became the champion in his weight category. Immediately following the match, Tursunbayev and his coach were reportedly beaten.

Tursunbayev was found by passersby and taken to a hospital in Ashgabat, but doctors there reportedly refused to help him and sent him to his place of residence. A few days later his family took Tursunbayev to the district hospital where he died. It was unclear whether authorities opened a criminal investigation into his death.

## **b. Disappearance**

There were no new reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities during the year. Nonetheless, an advocacy campaign led by nongovernmental organization (NGO) Prove They Are Alive! (PTA) maintained a list of reported disappeared prisoners. In June, PTA issued a press release that documented more than 120 cases of individuals who entered the detention and prison system and whose whereabouts were unknown. The NGO estimated there were hundreds of such disappeared individuals. The list included former ministers of foreign affairs Boris Shikhmuradov and Batyr Berdyev, former director of the Turkmenbashi oil refinery Guychmyrad Esenov, and others accused of participation in an alleged 2002 assassination attempt on former president Saparmurat Niyazov. According to PTA, Yazgeldy Gundogdyev, a former high-ranking government official included in the list, died in custody in December 2020. Gundogdyev was arrested in November 2002 after the alleged 2002 assassination attempt on Niyazov, charged with involvement in the coup attempt, tried, and sentenced in January 2003 to 25 years of imprisonment.

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

Although the constitution and law prohibit such practices, there were reports that government officials employed them. Human Rights Watch stated that torture and mistreatment of detainees occurred regularly in the prison system. In its 2017 report, the UN Committee Against Torture alleged that the use of torture by jail and prison offices was widespread and routinely used to extract confessions from detainees. This report detailed activists' and former prisoners' claims of mistreatment, including beating kidneys with plastic bottles full of water so that 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. CT reported in December 2020, that three male guards at the women's colony in Dashoguz Province attempted to rape a female prisoner. Law enforcement agencies reportedly demanded the prisoner withdraw her detailed accusatory rape statement addressed to the prison director in exchange for financial compensation and a promised pardon. At year's end the outlet had not provided an update on the case.

Officials in the security services and elsewhere in the government often acted with impunity, and the government took no steps to increase respect for human rights by the security forces.

### **Prison and Detention Center Conditions**

Opposition media reported prison conditions were harsh and life threatening due to food shortages, gross overcrowding, physical abuse, and inadequate sanitary conditions, while Human Rights Watch reported torture and ill-treatment continued to be endemic within the prison system.

**Physical Conditions:** Gross overcrowding was a significant problem according to opposition media. The six pretrial detention facilities reportedly were designed for 1,120 persons but were believed to hold many times that number. The government did not build new pretrial detention facilities during the year.

Official data on the average sentence or numbers of prisoners, including incarcerated juveniles, was not available. The prisoners in pretrial detention facilities were predominantly those sentenced but not yet transferred to penal colonies. According to the opposition press, men and women were kept separately within the prison system and in pretrial detention. Juveniles were also reportedly kept separately from adults.

On February 15, CT reported that a prisoner in Lebap Province died from hepatitis D after spending a month in the prison's medical unit. The prisoner had not been transferred to a specialized medical institution even after his condition worsened. Turkmen.news reported on May 5 that an unspecified number of prisoners died from lack of food and different diseases in prisons. The organization also relayed one prisoner's claim that prisons experienced a chronic shortage of food.

On August 24, Turkmen news reported that detainee Bayramdurdy Saparov in the LBK/11 prison colony in Lebap Province died of COVID-19-related pneumonia. Despite his medical condition, he was not transported to the prison hospital MR-B/15 for proper treatment because all penitentiary institutions were in quarantine due to COVID-19 restrictions.

**Administration:** The government claimed, but provided no evidence, that it

conducted investigations of credible allegations of mistreatment.

Official media reported access to prisoners was dependent upon COVID-19 quarantine status. Prison facilities frequently banned visits and parcel deliveries reportedly as pandemic preventative measures, according to opposition media. Although relatives of some prisoners confirmed access was not always denied, other prisoners stated they had not received visitors or parcels in the last year. According to opposition media, prisons were still restricting visits in early November but were loosening restrictions on parcel deliveries to prisoners.

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

**Improvements:** The government reported it made efforts to improve prison conditions during the year by reconstructing some detention facilities; providing additional food, clothing, and bedding for prisoners; and working to improve sanitary standards to combat COVID-19. Independent observers could not confirm these improvements.

#### **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.

##### **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 up to 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 may face punishment of up to 25 years in prison. In the past, the government arrested and filed charges on economic or criminal grounds against those expressing critical or differing views; charges of treason have become more common in recent years.

There were reports of arbitrary arrests and detentions. Authorities frequently singled out for harassment, arrest, or detention human rights activists, journalists, members of religious groups, ethnic minorities, and dissidents, as well as members of NGOs who interacted with foreigners, or family members. The arrest and October conviction of Khursunai Ismatuallaeva, a medical doctor, on questionable fraud charges, drew international attention.

**Pretrial Detention:** The law governing pretrial detention is unclear. In most cases the law permits detention of no more than two months; however, in exceptional cases with the approval of the prosecutor general, the detention may be extended up to one year. Opposition media reported that authorities routinely exceeded legal limits for pretrial detention.

**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 retains sole authority to dismiss any judge. The judiciary was widely reputed to be corrupt and inefficient.

### **Trial Procedures**

The law provides for the right to a fair and public trial, but authorities routinely denied these rights. Defendants frequently did not enjoy a presumption of innocence and were not informed promptly of the charges against them. The constitution and the criminal procedure code do not compel accused persons to testify or confess guilt. The government permits the public to attend most trials but closed those considered politically sensitive. 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 offered interpreters to defendants who did not speak Turkmen, but the quality of the translation allegedly was questionable.

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 translate into their native language or into another language they speak.

Even when the courts observe due process, the authority of the government prosecutor far exceeds that of the defense attorney, making it difficult for defendants to receive a fair trial. Flawed or incomplete court transcripts remained a problem, 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 120 political prisoners.

Those convicted of treason faced 10 to 25 years' imprisonment, although the president could reduce the sentencing period. 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. At year's end authorities continued to hold Mansur Mingelov, Nurgeldi Halykov, and Rustem Djumaev, among other political prisoners.

**Amnesty:** Although the president granted pardons to several hundred individuals with criminal convictions, the names of those pardoned were not made public.

In honor of *Gadyr Gijesi* (Omnipotence Night), the president pardoned 16 Jehovah's Witnesses conscientious objectors and ordered their release from prison.

### **Politically Motivated Reprisal against Individuals Located Outside the Country**

**Extraterritorial Killing, Kidnapping, Forced Returns, or Other Violence or Threats of Violence:** The Russian Human Rights Center Memorial reported several Turkmen citizens who protested at the Turkmen Consulate in Istanbul on August 2 were arrested and transferred to a deportation center by Turkish police.



According to eyewitnesses, the activists were attacked by unidentifiable supporters of Turkmen authorities. According to the Turkmen Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Aziz Mammedov was attacked after filming the protest and publicizing it online. One of the demonstrators was taken away by an ambulance, reportedly with significant injuries. Farhad Durdyev, a blogger, was reportedly offered a ride by two persons posing as protesters and later was forcibly escorted to the Turkmen Consulate in Istanbul. CT reported on August 5 that nine of the 10 individuals were released.

**Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, and Coercion:** On August 25, Turkmen. News reported that a quasi-independent blogger, Shatlyk Shyhyev, posted a video on YouTube with the participation of the mother of Farhad Durdyev, who tearfully begged her son to change his mind and not be led by “destructive forces.” Opposition media asserted that Durdyev’s mother was coerced into the recorded statement.

In July 2020 opposition media reported that Merdan Jorayev, living and working in Turkey, began criticizing the government on TikTok. On April 20, local authorities in Turkmenabat, Lebap Province, reportedly interrogated Jorayev’s sister, Aziza Hemrayeva, and warned her to tell Jorayev not to speak on the internet. On May 4 and May 11, Hemrayeva was summoned to the local police station and warned that her family would suffer if Jorayev did not stop criticizing the government. Jorayev also received threats from individuals located in Istanbul.

On April 14, the migration service in Istanbul summoned Dursoltan Taganova (without her lawyer) to discuss her residence permit. Two unknown men questioned Taganova about her petition, place of residence, relatives, and her activities and speeches on the internet. The men said her activities could harm bilateral relations with Turkey and threatened that continuing her work could lead to difficulties while resident in Turkey. On April 20, CT reported that Turkish authorities began pressuring Turkmen activists, including Taganova, for criticizing the government via the internet.

On May 7, CT reported that two officers of the Ministry of National Security and a juvenile police inspector interrogated a 14-year-old minor, Jumamurat Jumamuradov, a nephew of Turkey-based civil political activist and government

critic Rozybay Jumamuradov. Rozybay Jumamuradov's mother reportedly was also brought in for interrogation.

**Efforts to Control Mobility:** Opposition and international media alleged that Turkish authorities detained Turkmen opposition activists in Turkey at the request of the government.

The government restricted the ability of Turkmen journalists to travel abroad. The country's borders have remained closed to commercial traffic since March 2020, limiting movement of media and Turkmen citizens alike. Individual Turkmen citizens have been allowed to leave provided they receive permission from the Ministry of Health-led Extraordinary Committee for Countering the Spread of Disease.

### **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. The state continued to use the judiciary to impose court orders targeting particular individuals. Persons and organizations may appeal adverse decisions to regional human rights bodies, but local courts in the past have not reversed their decisions despite such 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 forbid such actions, 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 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.

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

According to CT, authorities conducted surveillance of activists and their relatives. Some persons harassed, detained, or arrested by authorities for their activism reported that the government detained and interrogated their family members.

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, and others) internet activities.

## **Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties**

### **a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media**

The constitution provides for freedom of expression, including for the press, but the government did not respect this right. According to the criminal code, the penalty for slander is punishable by fines in the amount of 10 to 30 times the average monthly wage or up to three years' imprisonment.

**Freedom of Expression:** 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.

On August 18, CT reported that Murad Dushemov was sentenced to four years' imprisonment for "intentional infliction of harm to health of moderate severity" and "extortion." On July 7, Murad Dushemov and one of his two companions were arrested after blocking a COVID-19 check point and questioning authorities. Dushemov's female companion was fined and released. Dushemov reportedly injured several other prisoners during his detention.

On March 31, Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reported that the Ministry of National Security detained two supporters of the Democratic Choice of Turkmenistan, Didar Ashirov and Dovran Gylyjov, for posting leaflets that called for the resignation of the president. The leaflets were distributed in Ashgabat, Turkmenabat, Mary, and Bayramaly. At year's end there was no update on their whereabouts.

On February 21, several UN human rights authorities communicated to the government their concerns about the case of Nurgeldy Halykov, who was imprisoned in 2020 on fraud charges shortly after he had allegedly shared a photograph of a World Health Organization delegation that visited the country in July 2020. The government responded that in accordance with a verdict issued by the Bagtyyarlyk District Court in Ashgabat in September 2020, Halykov was sentenced under article 228(2) of the criminal code to four years of deprivation of liberty for fraud. Halykov was serving his sentence at the LB-E/12 institution of the police administration of Lebap Province.

According to the report *Closed Civic Space in Turkmenistan* prepared by International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) and Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR), Devlet Bayhan, an activist who is based in Germany and runs a video blog critical of the government, told TIHR that national security officials visited and threatened his relatives in the city of Mary several times during the year. According to the report, the mother of Sultan Ovezov, who lives in Turkey, was subjected to intimidation after her son participated in several online conferences organized by Turkmen activists based abroad to discuss human rights issues in Turkmenistan. Unlike many other participants, Ovezov exposed his face during the conferences, making it easy for Turkmen authorities to identify him. According to Memorial and the Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation (THF), on February 23, security service and plain clothes officers harassed Ovezov's mother,

who lives in Turkmenabat, Lebap Province. Without introducing themselves, they asked her about her son, his whereabouts and civic engagement and demanded that he return to the country.

**Freedom of Expression for Members of the Press and Other Media, Including Online Media:** The government controls the publication of books, almost all other print media, and online newspapers and journals, sometimes blocking popular social media sites, YouTube, and Google. The quasi-independent weekly newspaper *Rysgal* continued to operate, although its stories were largely reprinted 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 all radio and domestic television outlets, 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 to ban subscriptions to foreign periodicals by nongovernmental entities, although copies of nonpolitical periodicals appeared occasionally. 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. According to the government, 47 representatives of foreign mass media have been accredited.

**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 including by

monitoring their telephone conversations and restricting their travel abroad.

**Censorship or Content Restrictions:** Authorities did not implement legislation that prohibits censorship and provides for freedom to gather and disseminate information. Domestic journalists and foreign news correspondents often engaged in self-censorship due to fear of government reprisal.

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 have been approved in the past.

### **Internet Freedom**

The government restricted and disrupted access to the internet and censored content online. There were credible reports that the government illegally monitored private online communications. 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 in 2019 authorities blocked 133 of the most popular worldwide websites. There were reports that the security services summoned VPN users to discuss their online activities.

On March 15, Turkmen.news reported that local authorities blocked VPNs, Zoom, and PayPal websites.

According to IPHR and TIHR, the government arbitrarily blocked the websites of independent organizations based outside the country, social networks, and communication platforms physically located inside the country. Reporting also suggested that authorities have recently stepped up their campaign against internet circumvention tools used to access otherwise unavailable sites by systematically blocking such tools and intimidating individuals who use them to access online content critical of the government.

### **Academic Freedom and Cultural Events**

The government restricted academic freedom and cultural events. The government did not tolerate criticism of government policy – particularly the official government position that COVID-19 was not present in the country – or the president in academic circles and curtailed research in areas it considered politically sensitive.

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 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 did not grant the required permits for public meetings and demonstrations and did not allow unregistered organizations to hold demonstrations. Unregistered religious groups were not allowed to meet, according to the country's religion law. Security forces intimidated groups that attempted to meet in private homes in defiance of the law.

## **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 129 NGOs were registered in the country, including seven international NGOs. Four new public organizations were registered. Of those registered NGOs, international organizations recognized only a few as independent. NGOs reported the government presented numerous 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 were forced to temporarily suspend or limit 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.

Observers noted several 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.

### **c. Freedom of Religion**

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

### **d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country**

The constitution and law do not provide for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation.



**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.

Police continued a practice initiated in 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.

On January 26, Turkmen.news reported that local authorities began to renew driver's licenses for all women, regardless of their place of work and social status.

**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" national security.

The NGO 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 fines 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.

On August 14, the progovernment website Ata-Vatan Turkmenistan reported that the Ministry of Health-led Extraordinary Committee for Countering the Spread of Disease would review applications of citizens to study abroad. High school and university students who had been studying abroad but were currently in the country on school break and those who intended to begin their studies abroad for the fall 2021 semester were subsequently allowed to submit their applications. The committee did not review most of these applications fast enough, however, to allow the applicant to arrive in time for the start of the fall 2021 semester. The committee has allowed almost all the applicants to depart the country in time for the spring 2022 semester, however. The committee has not yet approved applications for training, master's degree programs, internships, and PhD students. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs implied these travel restrictions were motivated by the global health pandemic.

**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**

The government did not cooperate with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern. In 2009 the government assumed responsibility from UNHCR for making refugee status determinations, but it has not granted refugee status since then.

**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, a total of 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. UNHCR no longer had access to the country, and the government has not provided updated information. The number of stateless persons who were also refugees was not available. In recent years the government usually granted citizenship to more than 1,000 otherwise stateless individuals annually. In December 2020 the government granted citizenship to 2,580 individuals and in September granted citizenship to an additional 2,657 persons.

Citizenship is derived primarily from one's parents; however, the Law on Civil Status Acts, which took effect in July 2020, 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. Presidential elections are conducted by secret ballot administered by the Central Commission for Holding Elections and Referendums in Turkmenistan. According to the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE), the election law does not meet OSCE standards.

## **Elections and Political Participation**

In the 2017 presidential election, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov won 97.69 percent of the vote. There were numerous reported irregularities during the presidential election, including proxy voting and multiple voting, in polling stations visited. The government invited an assessment mission from 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. ODIHR said the vote was held “in a strictly controlled political environment” and that the election lacked genuine opposition and suffered from procedural irregularities.

**Recent Elections:** The first elections to the Halk Maslahaty (People’s Council) of the Milli Gnesh (National Assembly) took place on March 28 in which 112 candidates ran for 48 seats and the president appointed eight members. There were 440 national observers who monitored the secret ballot election process and no international observers.

**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.

**Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups:** No law limits 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 the lower house (Mejlis), 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**

**Corruption:** There were numerous reports of government corruption during the year. Freedom House, Transparency International, and the World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators assessed the country as having a severe corruption problem.

While the law provides criminal penalties for official corruption, the government did not implement the law effectively. 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.

There are no independent institutions tasked with combating corruption. While

there were no reports during the year, crackdowns on corruption in recent years were typically selective and related to conflicts within the ruling elite. Anticorruption bodies were allegedly used to extort revenue from wealthy officials and businesspersons.

## **Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights**

No domestic NGOs worked exclusively on human rights, although some worked on related social issues. The government refused to register organizations to work exclusively on human rights and 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 permits international organizations, such as the OSCE, to have a resident mission. Government restrictions on freedoms of speech, press, and association severely restricted international organizations' 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.

The country submitted its third periodic report to the UN Committee Against Torture in December 2020, but at year's end the committee had not provided any recommendations in response.

**Government Human Rights Bodies:** The Institute of State, Law, and Democracy 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. Both houses of parliament have committees specifically tasked with protecting human rights within the country.

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.

There was no information on appeals this year. In 2020 the office of Human Rights Ombudsperson received 305 written and 226 oral appeals. Only 111 of the written appeals were accepted for consideration. Sixteen requests from 2020 and one request from 2019 were satisfied.

## **Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses**

### **Women**

**Rape and Domestic Violence:** The law criminalizes rape, and penalties range from five to 15 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 criminalizes 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 went unreported; 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. Reports suggested sexual harassment continued to take place in the workplace.

**Reproductive Rights.** There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities. Working with the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), the government whenever possible provided health services including HIV prophylaxis, contraceptive medication, forensic checks, and psychological assistance to survivors of sexual violence within 72 hours of a reported attack.

The law states that women have the right to medical care including prenatal care and “safe and effective” contraception. Women have the right to freely use contraception. Some women in remote areas give birth at home rather than make a long or difficult journey to a hospital or clinic. UNFPA reported 74 percent of women ages 15 to 49 utilized some type of birth control for family planning purposes. According to UNFPA the adolescent birth rate per 1,000 girls aged 15-19 was 28 out of 1,000 or 2.8 percent.

**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.

## **Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination**

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

The law designates Turkmen as the official language, and it is now the primary language taught in public schools, although the law also provides for the rights of speakers of minority languages. Russian remained prevalent in commerce and everyday life. Outside the capital, Turkmen was widely used. The government continued to transition toward conducting 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.



## 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/>.

## 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.

## **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. Antidiscrimination laws do not apply to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) persons. The government provided no legal protection to transgender individuals or recognition of their gender identity.

On August 9, Turkmen.news reported local authorities detained a well-known hairdresser and stylist in Turkmenabat during a raid intended to apprehend LGBTQI+ individuals. According to Turkmen.news, a second hairdresser was detained in early August and was required to provide the government with names of male homosexuals in Turkmenabat.

## **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 its own labor laws. Penalties for labor-related

violations 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 in practice, these unions are reluctant to report complaints due to fear of retaliation.

## **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 this 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 it was unclear whether penalties were 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.) or public holidays. Forced child labor was reported in the country (see section 7.c.).

The government released a *National Action Plan* in 2019 to address human

trafficking. The government, however, did not 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 2020 a Committee of Experts' report by the International Labor Organization (ILO) expressed "concern at the continued practice of forced labor in the cotton sector." It was reported that, 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 were 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.

Turkmen.news reported on June 23 that during the International Labor Conference on June 18 in Geneva, the ILO published conclusions related to the country's report on the *Abolition of Forced Labor Convention* implementation. The conclusions described "the persistence of the widespread use of forced labor" in the cotton harvest and the government's failure to take steps to address this abuse. 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/>.

### **c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment**

The law prohibits 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 with heavy loads.

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 manats (\$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.

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

### **d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation**

The law prohibits discrimination based on nationality, race, gender, origin,

language, religion, disability, HIV status, other communicable diseases, political beliefs, and social status, but does not prohibit discrimination based on, sexual orientation, or gender identity. The government did not always effectively enforce the law. 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 specify penalties for other categories of discrimination.

Certain government positions require language exams, and all government positions require 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. 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. In March RFE/RL reported police in the southeast of the country were randomly detaining individuals who look disheveled or were wearing old clothes. Individuals stopped on the street by authorities were accused of begging or being homeless and were taken away by police, eyewitnesses told RFE/RL correspondents. A police source told RFE/RL the authorities sent some of the detainees to toil as a “free workforce” on state-owned farms.

## **e. Acceptable Conditions of Work**

**Wage and Hour Laws:** 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. Human Rights Watch reported in January, due to the government denial of COVID-19, health-care workers lacked essential personal protective equipment and basic medications and equipment to treat patients. In October, RFE/RL reported, sources in the health-care system said the number of actual deaths linked to COVID-19 was likely higher than 25,000, noting that regional health workers were downplaying the scale of the pandemic because they feared government retribution.

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 jeopardizing their continued employment, and authorities did not protect employees in these situations. Statistics regarding work-related injuries and fatalities were not available.

On June 9, CT reported that on June 4, a 40-year-old worker passed out at the construction site of the Ak Oy (Turkmen White Yurt) in Turkmenabat, Lebap Province. He was reportedly taken to the multidisciplinary hospital of Turkmenabat. Doctors found out that the man had a heart attack but could not provide qualified assistance. He died the next day. The man was reportedly forced to work from 8 a.m. until midnight in 113 degrees Fahrenheit temperatures to complete the project on schedule. It was unknown whether the family received any compensation.

On April 10, CT reported that since March 20, during the green campaign, officials held subbotniks in Ashgabat. Reportedly, state employees, higher educational students, and seniors of secondary schools swept the streets and collected garbage in the areas allocated to their offices, educational institutions, and in parks.

The 2020 Human Rights Ombudsperson's report outlines an amendment to the labor code, which states that if an employee was unable to perform their duties due to circumstances beyond the control of parties, their labor relationship should be

considered as continued during the period when the worker could not perform their duties. In such cases payments and other benefits should be carried out in accordance with the law. The report alleged this provision would help workers who were stranded abroad due to border closures during the global health pandemic.

IPHR and TIHR reported that, in connection with the Nowruz spring holiday in late March, local authorities mobilized public-sector employees and students to participate in mass celebrations in the capital Ashgabat and other parts of the country.

**Informal Sector:** Credible data was unavailable regarding the informal economy. The government does not release this information. Due to the pandemic, it is reasonable to believe the number of workers in the informal sector grew, as the pandemic aggravated living conditions and affected the service sectors of the economy. Wages in the informal sector are unofficial, and the field was not regulated by the government. In 2020 the United Nations reported that agriculture was the largest provider of employment both in formal and informal sectors. The report also noted that women who work in the informal sector and are not covered by any social protection may be affected due to impacts of the pandemic.