

AI Index: PRE01/645/2013
12 December 2013

Turkmenistan: Total repression ahead of elections

Turkmenistan's authorities have simply paid lip service to reform in a bid to appease the international community said Amnesty International in the run up to parliamentary elections this weekend (15 December).

"Holding these elections will not address the atmosphere of total repression, denial of the basic human rights, and the all-permeating fear that has gripped society in Turkmenistan for years, and all pretence of progress is simply deceitful," John Dalhuisen, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director at Amnesty International.

In 2012, the authorities in the strategically placed oil and gas rich country pushed through reforms which they claimed would lead to the establishment of a second political party. It also allowed, in theory, for an independent media.

"Recent reforms amount to no more than token gestures designed to distract the international community. Eager foreign investors should not be fooled by these moves or use them to justify uncritical engagement." said John Dalhuisen.

"There is still no genuine opposition party, no independent media and not a single independent human rights organization operating freely inside the country."

Amnesty International's report, *Turkmenistan: An "Era of Happiness" or more of the same repression?*, provides an overview of human rights violations in this closed and tightly controlled country. Independent observers are barred from Turkmenistan, and information from inside is brutally suppressed. The climate of fear extending far beyond Turkmenistan's borders.

"The systematic harassment of any kind of opposition or dissent, the persistent reports of torture in places of detention, the widespread denial of the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly continue unabated. The natural resources and the strategic geographic location of Turkmenistan should not blind its partners to the real situation," said John Dalhuisen.

Climate of fear

Turkmenistani sources have told Amnesty International that people avoid socialising for fear of a misplaced word. All individuals are expected to report any criticism of the state to the authorities and conversations about politics simply do not take place openly. People expressing views that differ from the government's are treated as enemies of the state.

There is near total control of communications and information. The Turkmenistani authorities have reportedly invested heavily in monitoring internet and telephone communications.

More than 37,000 people -- dissidents, members of religious communities and their families -- are reported to be blacklisted and barred from leaving Turkmenistan even for life-saving medical treatment.

Amnesty International is among a number of human rights organizations barred from entering the country.

Torture and imprisonment

Torture is widely used in Turkmenistan to elicit confessions and secure convictions in unfair trials. Methods of torture reported to Amnesty International include: pushing needles under fingernails; electric shocks; asphyxiation; systematic sexual violence; forcibly administering psychotropic drugs; beating with batons, truncheons, or plastic bottles filled with water; punching; kicking; food and drink deprivation; and exposure to extreme cold. There have been no effective independent investigations into any allegations of torture.

Prisoners serving life sentences are reportedly kept in shackles for lengthy periods of time and beaten regularly. Cells in one high security prison in Turkmenistan were reportedly built with a maximum height of 1.5 meters in order to prevent detainees from standing upright. All communication with families is barred, and people behind bars are effectively “disappeared” from the outside world.

No political opposition

The 2012 Law on Political Parties provides no real challenge to the ruling Democratic party. The new Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs should be viewed as the government’s ally rather than as a contender to power: A portrait of President Berdymukhamedov looked over their first party meeting. In 2012 the Economist Democracy Index ranked Turkmenistan joint 161st with Uzbekistan, of a total of 167 countries.

No independent media

The new law on mass media has not created space for genuinely independent media. The few independent reporters still working in the country face regular harassment.

RFE/RL correspondents in Turkmenistan are singled out for harassment by the security services and repeatedly imprisoned. The death in custody of RFE/RL journalist Ogulsapar Muradova in 2006 has never been investigated. Her relatives reported seeing her body with a head injury and marks around her neck, as well as bruises and cuts on her hands. In its Press Freedom Index 2013, Reporters without Borders ranks Turkmenistan as 177th out of 179 countries.

“This overview of human rights violations in Turkmenistan is the very tip of the iceberg and the picture it paints is miles away from the ‘Era of Might and Happiness’ under President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov’s leadership as declared by state media,” said John Dalhuisen.

“It is crucial that the international community keeps political and civil liberties and widespread violations of human rights firmly on the agenda in its discussions with the Turkmenistani authorities.”