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**A Sobering Reality:  
Fundamental Freedoms in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan  
Twenty years after the Soviet Collapse**

**March 2012**

**SUMMARY**

Twenty years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, fundamental freedoms remain under serious threat in the Central Asian former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Despite promises of gradual reform made by the authorities of these countries, the human rights situation in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan has not improved in any meaningful way in the recent period, while the situation in Kazakhstan has deteriorated.

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In **Kazakhstan** power has been firmly in the hands of President Nursultan Nazarbaev throughout independence. He was re-elected in April 2011 elections that offered no real choice and his ruling party remains essentially unchallenged even if parliamentary elections held in January 2012 formally ended its monopoly in the law-making body. The opposition Communist Party was prevented from running in the parliamentary elections because of a court decision that suspended its activities on questionable grounds.

Attacks on freedom of expression in the media have recently increased, and in particular opposition media have come under growing pressure through criminal and administrative charges, civil defamation suits involving excessive claims for damages, and intimidation and obstruction of the work of journalists. Internet sites containing information critical of the authorities are regularly blocked and vague allegations of “extremism” have increasingly been used to justify restrictions on online content. New legislation from early 2012 provides for enhanced government control of electronic media.

The authorities’ response to the recent oil worker protests, which began in western Kazakhstan in May 2011, has highlighted long-standing challenges to fundamental freedoms. In the course of 2011, peaceful protest actions held by oil workers were forcefully dispersed and participants detained and brought to court; leading figures in the labor protest movement were criminally convicted in politically motivated trials; and political opposition activists were harassed for showing solidarity with the workers. New disturbing developments have taken place in the aftermath of the 16 December 2011 unrest in the strike region. Actions taken during the investigation into these events have given rise to concerns that the authorities are using it as a pretext for a new crackdown on the labor protest movement, the political opposition, as well as opposition media. A

series of detentions, interrogations and spurious criminal charges have targeted labor activists, and opposition members and journalists who have supported them.

A new harsh Religion Law was adopted in October 2011 despite strong national and international criticism. The law introduced new restrictions on religious activities and retained the ban on unregistered religious communities, while making the process of registration more difficult and open to arbitrary implementation. Already prior the adoption of the law, so-called non-traditional religious communities were increasingly subjected to harassment.

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In **Turkmenistan** President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov continues his repressive rule after being re-elected in sham elections held in February 2012. The reform agenda on which he set out when taking power after the death of *Turkmenbashi* in 2006 has produced few if any tangible human rights gains and he has increasingly promoted his own personality cult.

The Turkmen authorities tightly control the country's media and use them as outlets for state propaganda. The internet remains heavily regulated and censored, satellite TV has come under renewed attack and the only competitor to the state-owned cell phone provider was kicked out of the country in late 2010. In connection with the July 2011 explosions at an ammunition depot, the government's information monopoly was challenged by citizens who used electronic media to communicate information about the explosions to the outside world. The government responded with denunciation, intimidation and measures to prevent a similar scenario during the 20 years independence celebrations in October 2011.

Journalists who contribute to foreign media, civil society activists and other civil society members who are considered "disloyal" to the state are subjected to intimidation and harassment, including surveillance, interrogations, travel bans, arrests and politically motivated charges and convictions. The run-up to the February 2012 presidential elections saw new attempts to intimidate and silence critics of the regime. The website of Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, which is well-known for its independent coverage of developments in Turkmenistan, was disabled by a cyber attack for the second time in less than a year.

The Turkmen authorities continue to promote the role of government-controlled organizations in place of independent civil society groups, and the adoption in early 2012 of a first-ever law on political parties is likely to remain another symbolic measure without any real impact. The threat of state reprisal effectively discourages public protests and the only known attempt at a protest in 2011 was quashed.

Restrictive legislation on the practice of religion remains in force and members of religious minority communities continue to be singled out for persecution. No civilian alternative to compulsory military service exists and new cases have been reported in the past year when Jehovah's Witnesses were convicted for their refusal to serve in the army on conscientious grounds.

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The regime of **Uzbekistan's** long-time leader President Islam Karimov continues to control all branches of power, suppress dissent and limit basic rights of citizens. Only pro-presidential parties are able to operate

openly in the country, and political opposition movements remain marginalized and divided, with their leaders living in exile abroad.

The authorities tightly control the country's media and try to prevent the circulation of information deemed unfavourable. The recent wave of protests in the Arab world has prompted new attempts to rein in the internet, whose users have increased rapidly in the last few years.

Members of the country's small community of independent journalists and human rights defenders face ongoing harassment, ranging from surveillance and house arrest to physical attacks and politically motivated charges. Numerous journalists and human rights activists continue to languish in prison despite a few recent releases apparently made as concessions to the international community. One of the few international NGOs to have worked in Uzbekistan, Human Rights Watch was forced out of the country in 2011.

Small-scale peaceful pickets staged by known critics of the regime continue to be broken up by police. The fate remains unknown of many of those who were imprisoned for participating in the rare mass protest in Andijan in 2005, which was put down in a bloody fashion by Uzbek government troops. Some of these prisoners are reported to have died as a result of harsh prison conditions and torture. The Uzbek authorities have rejected calls for an independent and impartial investigation into the Andijan events.

Minority religious communities remain under pressure and the authorities continue their indiscriminate campaign against independent Muslims who practice their faith outside strict state control. In 2011-2012 the Independent Group of Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan has documented dozens of new cases of arbitrary arrests, torture and ill-treatment, fabricated criminal cases and unfair trials against individuals branded as religious "extremists." Serious concerns remain about 28 individuals who were extradited from Kazakhstan to Uzbekistan on religious "extremism" charges in the summer of 2011 in spite of a well-founded fear of persecution.