

Turkmenistan: Elections highlight fundamental pluralism deficit

Brussels, Vienna 9 December 2013. The upcoming parliamentary elections in Turkmenistan highlight the fundamental lack of space for political pluralism and freedom of expression in this country. The elections are set to be another pro-forma event that should prompt the international community to renew calls for true, comprehensive political reforms in Turkmenistan, said International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) and Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR).

On 15 December, 125 members will be elected to the parliament of the post-Soviet Central Asian republic. These are the second elections to this body under current President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov. While President Berdymukhammedov promised democratic reforms when taking office in 2007, he has kept a firm grip on all branches of power, retained the closed nature of the regime, increasingly promoted his own personality cult, and continued to stifle dissent. The recent adoption of new legislation ostensibly aimed at promoting pluralism in politics and media has done little to change the situation in practice.

“It is of key importance that Turkmenistan’s international partners are vocal about the need for fundamental changes to the country’s repressive political system,” said Brigitte Dufour, director of IPHR. “They should insist on systematic and wide-ranging reforms to foster a climate in which different opinions and views can be freely expressed, political alternatives can emerge and leaders respect the will of the people,” she added.

Following the adoption of a first-ever Law on Political Parties in Turkmenistan in 2012, a second political party aside from the previous monopoly one was established at the president’s initiative. As a result, the elections will formally take place on a multiparty-basis this time. Earlier this year, the president stepped down as chairman of the so-called Democratic Party, saying he did not want to grant it undue advantage over the new Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs. He has also stressed the need for “openness and transparency” during the elections. However, the elections will be deprived of meaningful choice as both political parties are staunchly loyal to the president, other candidates have been nominated by government-controlled public associations and none of the 283 [registered candidates](#) run on an independent line.

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights has [pointed out](#) that the participation in the elections of a second political party “is no substitute for a genuinely pluralistic environment” and has refrained from deploying any election observation mission, concluding that this would not “be of added value” at this time. It has sent a limited [assessment team](#).

Currently no political opposition group can operate openly in Turkmenistan, and well-known opposition figures are in exile or in prison. A number of individuals convicted in sham trials for the purported assassination attempt against late President Saparmurad Niyazov in 2002 remain disappeared, and opponent Gulgeldy Annaniyazov continues to serve a 11-year sentence handed down to him in a closed trial when he returned from exile in 2008. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention recently [declared](#) his detention unlawful and called for his release. Last autumn former government minister Geldimurat Nurmuhammedov was arrested after openly criticizing the political situation in the country and seeking to register an initiative group to nominate candidates for the parliamentary elections. He was forcibly held in a drug treatment clinic for nine months before being [released](#) in July 2013.

Other individuals who voice critical views about official policies such as contributors to foreign media and civic activists also remain highly vulnerable to intimidation and harassment, e.g. surveillance by security services, “blacklisting” for travel abroad and arrests on politically motivated grounds. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty journalist Rovshen Yazmuhamedov was [detained without explanation](#) for two weeks in May this year after publishing several articles that generated active discussion on the service's website. Civic activist Natalia Shabunts, who has published numerous appeals on TIHR’s website, has repeatedly [faced threats](#). No independent human rights NGO is registered and international human rights monitors, including all but one UN experts have been denied access to the country.

A new media law that entered into force in Turkmenistan in January 2013 explicitly banned censorship and unlawful interference in the activities of media, and set out objectives of guaranteeing media pluralism and independence. However, in spite of this, the country’s media continue to be tightly controlled by the state and are used as means of ideological propaganda. According to information received by TIHR, control mechanisms have even been intensified in the recent period. While the president gave up his role as founder of all print media earlier this year, officials at government ministries and agencies now in charge of publications are [keeping a close eye](#) at the content of newspapers, fearing to be held accountable for any articles that may displease the president. New rules introduced in October 2013 also require government ministries dealing with issues covered by articles to review these, thus adding one more supervising authority aside from government ministries in charge of publications and specific censorship bodies that continue to operate. Editorial boards of newspapers are known to exercise self-censorship. No new media outlets have been registered since the new media law entered into force, and as previously there are no independent media in the country, while access to foreign media is limited.

In spite of some limited steps to facilitate internet access since President Berdymukhammedov came to power, the internet is still available to only [less than 10%](#) of the population, its costs remain prohibitive and its use is [heavily regulated](#). Foreign websites that publish independent and critical information about developments in Turkmenistan such as TIHR’s website are blocked, and social media resources are also often inaccessible except through proxy servers. In a recent example reported by TIHR of how online communication is obstructed, the Wechat and Line communication services [were blocked](#) in November, similarly to the Whatsap and Viber services a year ago. All these applications are used for sending text messages, sharing photos and files and chatting for free over cell phones, through encrypted channels that prevent interception. Last month the site letters.kremlin.ru also became unavailable, [raising](#)

[suspicion](#) that it had been blocked because dual Turkmen-Russian citizens had used it to appeal to the Russian president on problems and pressure facing them in Turkmenistan.

The lack of any real democratic progress under the current president underlines the importance of reinforced international action to promote follow-through on international human rights obligations and commitments in the country.

“Turkmenistan has received an array of recommendations from international human rights bodies for how to improve its dire record on political and civil rights and build a more open society. As there currently are no forces inside the country that can hold the government accountable for its implementations of these recommendations, we put our hope in the international community to use all available mechanisms to do so,” said Farid Tukbatullin, head of TIHR.

Among the recommendations that the Turkmen government is bound to implement are those addressed to in the framework of the so-called Universal Periodic Review, which is held as a state peer review under the UN Human Rights Council. At the end of the review of Turkmenistan in September 2013, the government accepted and undertook to realize, among others, [recommendations](#) to put into effect the new media law; to put an end to censorship and interference with media and the internet; to facilitate media pluralism and allow access to blocked websites; to allow independent political parties and NGOs to operate freely and ensure fair, prompt and non-discriminatory registration procedures; to ensure that journalists, civil society activists and other individuals are not punished for expressing their opinions; to immediately release all imprisoned without credible charges; and to permit all UN rapporteurs who have requested to visit the country to do so and to draw a timeline for their visits.