

Everyone a Suspect in Turkmenistan

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The president looks for foreign spies, while his own country is under total surveillance. The recent arrest of a number of human rights activists was surrounded by lurid stories of treachery and espionage, video cameras hidden in spectacles, and secret trysts with subversive foreigners.

It is all very reminiscent of the Soviet Union in the late Thirties, when Stalin staged show trials to demonstrate that repression was a justifiable weapon against foreign-inspired subversives.

But the artificial hysteria created in the state media has highlighted real evidence of espionage - that of one man against a whole nation.

President Saparmurat Niazov, who is generally known as Turkmenbashi, has constructed a web of secret policemen, informers and spies to allow him to keep tabs on anyone who might, one day, disagree with him.

That includes watching out for anything from opposition activity to rude emails about the president, and using the information gathered for show trials of "enemies of the people".

In the latest round of arrests, seven people associated with the Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation, a human rights organisation, were detained between June 16 and 19.

Four of them - human rights activist Elena Ovezova, and journalist Ogulsapar Muradova's daughters Sona and Maral and son Berdy - were released on July 1, a day after the Paris-based media watchdog Reporters Without Borders urged the G8 leaders to put pressure on the Turkmen government.

Muradova herself and Annakurban Amanklychev, both journalists, and human rights activist Sapardurdy Hajiev, are still in detention. According to Amnesty International, they are being held incommunicado and are at risk of torture.

At a government meeting, the authorities built up a case against the alleged spies. They were said to have helped British and French journalists film scenes such as the demolition of homes, which the authorities say damages Turkmenistan's reputation, but which would not normally be regarded as espionage.

Stranger still, the government says the suspects were assisted by a French diplomat and a staff member of the OSCE office in Ashgabat. These charges - rejected by both the French and the OSCE - show an unusual level of hostility towards the outside world. Although the Turkmen president has pursued a policy of isolationism, he has not in the past sought confrontation with western governments.

At the government meeting where the activities of the alleged spy ring were detailed, the National Security Committee, the former KGB, inadvertently revealed the extent of its own surveillance of Turkmen journalists and civil society activists.

The watchful eye of the secret police is all too familiar to local reporters, and to anyone who has even the most innocent contact with the outside world. Phone calls, emails and internet access are all monitored carefully by the security service. Anyone who has travelled abroad is regarded with particular suspicion.

One Ashgabat-based journalist who asked to remain anonymous said even putting together a brief article can be an ordeal.

“There is simply no escape from surveillance. If you gather information by telephone, the conversation is suddenly cut off, and if you dial a second time the line goes dead at the most interesting point, and you realise that contact is impossible. To gather a single figure or fact, you have to travel to the other end of town,” he said.

Even a trip abroad is enough to put you on the list of possible dissenters.

Ashgabat has just hosted an international conference of English-language teachers from south and southeast Asia, but many schoolteachers from across Turkmenistan were quietly barred from attending.

“I have visited the United States, and I received an invitation to the international teachers’ conference, but unfortunately I didn’t go,” said one teacher from the east of the country. “The headmaster said he advised me not to go, so I couldn’t disobey him. Or rather I could have done, but then I would have had to hand in my resignation.”

Surveillance extends to the use of internet, a key link with the world beyond Turkmenistan and its strange state media, which spend much of the time ritually praising the “Great Turkmenbashi”, the popular term at the moment.

There used to be a number of internet providers in Turkmenistan, but the communications ministry removed their licenses and made the state-run Turkmentelecom the monopoly service provider. Internet clubs and cafes were then forced to close one after another.

Now public access to the web exists only at five resource centres run with the support of foreign organisations. Staff there commonly monitor usage by visitors, and stop them accessing banned websites.

“I recently opened the centrasia.ru site when an employee came up to me and demanded I close it,” said one disappointed user.

An employee of the Turkmen communications ministry said the government wanted to create an “information vacuum”. He said the ministry had been required by the National Security Committee to set up a special office which trawls through the internet and decides which sites are acceptable and which are not.

The list of undesirable sites includes opposition organisations in exile and uncensored information about Turkmenistan carried by Russian news sites, but it is always expanding. One young woman told how she was hoping to apply to a European university to do a master’s degree there, but found its site was blocked.

It is not only media and civil society activists who are under suspicion - servants of the regime seem to be distrusted at least as much.

Ministers, regional governors, city mayors and civil servants all have their phones tapped.

This appears to be official policy, as the president often refers to surveillance transcripts at cabinet meetings. At these sessions, extracts of which are often carried by official broadcasters, Turkmenbashi exerts control through public humiliation, and backs up his remarks by asking subordinates why they have made certain phone calls, and then gives details of the conversation.

When a minister is heading for disgrace and arrest, the cabinet meeting serves as a courtroom that finds him or her guilty before any judicial trial has started.

A senior official at provincial level described how he and his colleagues live in fear of an invitation to meet the president.

“When we’re invited to the presidential palace for a meeting, we say goodbye to our families as if we are leaving them forever, because when we go through the arches of the magnificent shining palace, we aren’t sure we will return home safely,” he said.

“The agenda isn’t announced beforehand. Turkmenbashi holds trials directly in cabinet. The meetings are shown on national television, so the entire nation knows what is going on. The officials who are singled out by the president are taken away in handcuffs to pre-trial holding cells. The relatives usually aren’t informed of where the prisoners are being held.”

Provincial governors exercise a fair amount of power in their regions, but they have to watch out. The security ministry is constantly listening and watching, and will have infiltrated their administrations or recruited members of their staff.

One former governor could hardly hide his relief when his superiors in Ashgabat shifted him to another position.

“I’m very glad I was able to step down from the post of governor. I felt I was constantly being watched. I had to control myself all the time, who I talked to and what about, who I visited - or rather whose invitations I had to turn down,” he said.

“Many of my friends were probably surprised at my behaviour, but it was impossible to admit it at the time. Now I can say I wouldn’t wish that job on anyone until the political regime in this country changes.”

The latest arrests have heightened the general sense of unease, and if Turkmenbashi intended them to show his people that everyone is being watched, it seems he has succeeded.

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