

## **Turkmen Police Reforms Insufficient**

**Author:** [IWPR staff](#)

Even repeated purges of senior interior ministry staff will not reduce abuses by an overbearing police force, say analysts.

Observers say current attempts to shake up Turkmenistan's security services are positive but will only have a limited effect. Fundamental political and cultural changes will be needed if the police are to stop behaving as the repressive arm of the state and start respecting the rule of law, they say.

In the last six months, President Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov has taken a series of steps to reform his law-enforcement agencies, including sacking ministers, reshuffling staff and responsibilities, and establishing a police complaints commission.

However, analysts say these measures are insufficient; what is needed, they say, is a thorough overhaul of both the interior ministry – which controls the uniformed police – and the Ministry for National Security, MNB, the successor to the Soviet KGB. They are also calling for a sea-change in attitudes to policing, which has traditionally been seen as the instrument of state repression.

Attempts to reform the security ministries began the month after Berdymuhammedov came to power in February, when he established a commission to investigate complaints made by members of the public against the law-enforcement agencies.

Also in March, the interior ministry was relieved of responsibility for guarding important military and civilian facilities, but was given the traffic police back from the MNB.

In early April, the president fired Interior Minister Akmamed Rahmanov, whom he had inherited from his predecessor as president Saparmurad Niazov, who died in December. The following month, interior ministry staff began going through an appraisal system and some were reassigned to new posts.

However, these efforts were clearly not enough. On October 8, Berdymuhammedov sacked the man he had put in to replace Rahmanov only five months earlier, Hojamyrat Annagurbanov. Two deputy interior ministers, Nuryagdy Yagmyrov and Muhammetdurdy Ataev, were also dismissed.

At a meeting at the ministry, the president delivered a blistering attack on Annagurbanov and the ministry.

“It’s as if the winds of change haven’t even touched the interior ministry, where levels of accountability, competence and rigour have fallen lower than ever,” he said.

These abuses were uncovered both in the course of checks carried out on the ministry, and from the submissions made to the special complaints commission – the number of which, the president said, had recently doubled.

After Berdymuhammedov had finished, Turkmenistan's chief prosecutor Muhammetguly Ogshukov read out a litany of abuses the minister was said to have presided over, including taking bribes and fabricating

criminal cases.

As part of this latest cull, the chiefs of police in the capital Ashgabat and in the northern Dashoguz region have also lost their jobs because of “serious shortcomings” in their performance. In his speech, the president revealed that more than 300 policemen across the country had been sacked in recent months for various misdemeanours.

The focus has been on the interior ministry, but two other security agencies that arguably carry more political clout have also seen changes at the top.

At the same time as he sacked Annagurbanov, the president also removed National Security Minister Geldymammed Ashirmammedov, another holdover from the Niazov era. However, while the interior minister was stripped of his police rank and all his service benefits, the outgoing MNB chief was simply shunted off to a senior post at the country’s Military Academy.

In May, the president got rid of the man many believe engineered his swift accession to the presidency after Niazov’s death. Akmurat Rejepov headed the Presidential Guards Service, a paramilitary force that was independent of both the MNB and the interior ministry. He was dismissed and soon afterwards found himself facing a 20-year term in prison.

The Turkmen leader’s attempt to address law enforcement issues has been welcomed by some in the country.

“I think the president is absolutely right not to want to work with people who worry about nothing other than lining their own pockets,” said one Ashgabat resident, who did not want to be named.

A commentator in the capital welcomed the fact that the police complaints body appears to be listening to people.

“The very fact that the commission exists makes it possible to rein in the completely unchecked behaviour of interior ministry, MNB and prosecution officials,” he said. “Everyone is aware that in recent years, these institutions have taken it in turns to be Niazov’s favourite, and that this gave them carte blanche to do things that were often against the law. Interior ministry, MNB and prosecution service officials and even ministers were accused of trafficking drugs, racketeering, abducting people, driving people to suicide, and the like.

“Now the state leadership wants to hear about such cases from those who suffered personally.”

Several low-ranking members of the interior ministry police said replacing senior staff was a significant step.

“I think it’s going to get easier to be a policeman, since those [top] posts were previously held by mafia figures who were bound together by shady business,” said a police cadet.

Despite the number of dismissals, however, analysts say Berdymuhammedov's reforms still only scratch the surface.

"The police force in Turkmenistan long ago became a monster that scares the population," said a local journalist.

A lawyer in Ashgabat said the interior ministry reforms were inadequate as the bulk of staff remained in their posts, behaving the same as before.

"The attempt to reform the interior ministry through purges, reshuffles and punishment raises many questions.... For instance, how should rank-and-file staff who commit offences on a daily basis be dealt with?" asked the lawyer.

Much of the attention has been on the interior ministry, and less so on the MNB, whose role in intelligence-gathering and surveillance on behalf of the regime is all-pervasive.

"The [interior ministry] police are completely subordinate to the MNB, which plays a central role in all areas. Reforming law enforcement in isolation is of doubtful value - it should be pursued alongside political changes," said Vyacheslav Mamedov, leader of the Civil Democratic Union, a Turkmen émigré group.

Tajigul Begmedova, chair of the Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, which is based in Bulgaria, said the police need a complete change of ideology and culture.

"There is a need to change attitudes to work among law enforcement staff, as they are still convinced they are working for a punitive agency," she said. "Most important of all, this change in police attitudes has to be founded on a respect for the constitution."

Begmedova argues that despite some systemic improvements as a result of Berdymuhammedov's reforms, the police have not become more legally accountable.

"The changes are simply that whereas Niazov kept a grip on everyone and people were afraid, that grip has now relaxed or disappeared - but nor is there law, a fear of the law," she said.

**Location:** [Central Asia](#)  
[Uzbekistan](#)  
[Turkmenistan](#)  
[Tajikistan](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/turkmen-police-reforms-insufficient>