

## **Turkmenistan: Gulag Threat for Dissenters**

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President Niazov looks to crack down further on his opponents in the wake of last year's alleged assassination attempt.

Turkmenistan's controversial president has introduced a series of new decrees, which will further reduce the freedom of his people - and lead to many being sent to modern-day gulags.

Saparmurat Niazov has imposed the legislation in the wake of an alleged assassination attempt in the capital Ashgabat on November 25. However, analysts fear that these so-called "anti-terrorist" laws are a veiled attempt to crack down even harder on dissenters.

One decree passed at the beginning of the month - full details of which have been kept secret to date - allows for the formation of penal settlements in certain districts to house people who have "lost faith and deserve universal disapproval".

While the document itself is classified, some aspects of it were aired at a special Council of Elders meeting held in the capital Ashgabat on December 30 to discuss the assassination attempt and denounce those suspected of involvement.

There, it was suggested that the settlements be located in the remote Bekdash region, a desolate, sandy area with no water or arable land, situated west of the Karakum desert.

Referring to the dreaded labour camps set up by Stalin in 1937, Niazov said, "In their time, the ancestors of the Turkmens turned to this humane but effective measure, and it served to make society healthier, cleansing it of people who compromised themselves [and letting them] atone for their guilt with hard but honest labour.

"It is necessary for us to bring back this tradition, bringing it into line with the current legislation in Turkmenistan."

The president-for-life - who likes to be called Turkmenbashi, or "Father of all Turkmens" - has also given sweeping powers to his council for state security, which will be given special martial powers in the event of a coup attempt.

Footage from the closed trial of Boris Shikmuradov, the former foreign minister convicted of organising the attempt on Turkmenbashi's life and jailed for life at the end of December, was shown during the Council of Elders.

This was greeted by hysterical scenes inside the building, with government officials and the state-owned media denouncing Shikmuradov and his alleged co-conspirators as "traitors of the homeland", while council delegates chanted "death, death, death" and waved banners calling for the convicted men's executions.

Observers believe that the whole performance was stage-managed to allow Turkmenbashi to bring in harsher legislation to attack his opponents within the republic.

Six days after the council meeting, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, deputy head of the council for religious affairs, was dismissed from his post – apparently because he did not join in the chorus of voices denouncing Shikmuradov.

This dismissal was followed on January 7 by the sackings of three officials - Gurbandurdy Saryev, Rozmyrat Perdaev and Ovlyaguly Khuseinov – evidently for shortcomings in their work.

However, it is believed that the trio lost their jobs purely because they worked in the south-eastern province of Lebap, on the Uzbek border, where Shikmuradov is thought to have entered the country.

A number of purges have also taken place in the department of frontier forces and the Turkmen defence ministry. All the dismissed officers were born in the same districts as the “traitors of the homeland”.

The wave of repression has not been restricted to government officials accused of wrongdoing. Recently, the children of a former KGB officer, suspected of involvement in the attempted assassination, were expelled from university.

The new decrees also have serious implications for foreigners visiting the former Soviet republic. As any attempt to seize power, says the president, would probably have an international involvement “all necessary measures should be taken to increase control over foreign citizens when they enter Turkmenistan, when they stay in the country and when they leave it”.

As a result, a new state institution is to be set up to register foreign nationals – and the Turkmen who invite them. Those who hold dual citizenship are already finding it harder to enter and leave the country.

“I don’t know what will happen to foreigners, but we will suffer most of all,” said Maral Meredova, a resident of Ashgabat. “My children are studying abroad and the new rules may make it difficult for them to come home.”

Arslan Atamanov is the pseudonym for a journalist in Turkmenistan

**Location:** [Turkmenistan](#)

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