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Grewal is now N.J.'s longest-serving attorney general in a quarter century. Here's how it's going.

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It's been more than a quarter century since a New Jersey attorney general stayed this long.

Gurbir Grewal has been the state's top law enforcement leader for three years as of Saturday, the first to hit that mark since the early 1990s.

His historic appointment — he's the nation's first Sikh attorney general — was followed by one of the most challenging periods for law enforcement in modern history, defined by nationwide protests, a global pandemic and a mob attack incited by the country's commander in chief.

Amid the crises, Grewal's office overhauled rules governing police use of force for the first time in a generation and jointly sued the federal government more in three years than New Jersey had in the previous four decades, all while continuing to investigate and prosecute a range of crimes.

“The last three years, the destructiveness of the federal government has left tremendous voids when it comes to policing, civil rights, environmental enforcement,” Grewal told NJ Advance Media. “We've filled those voids.”

His tenure has brought criticism.

The gun manufacturer Smith & Wesson Brands Inc. accused Grewal of “following in the abusive footsteps” of “repressive regimes” after Grewal's office demanded the company share internal documents.

Federal immigration officers blasted state rules limiting when local cops can turn over undocumented immigrants, saying they threatened “the safety and security of the very people the New Jersey Attorney General is charged with protecting.”

President Donald Trump's transition team once said Grewal's office only sued them for media attention.

But while there are disagreements over specific policies, many state leaders said Grewal still included them in the decision-making process, according to more than a dozen interviews with civil rights advocates, law enforcement officials, legal experts and current and former state employees.

“We’re adversaries” that can still collaborate, said Joseph Krakora, the state’s top public defender who is currently fighting Grewal’s office in court to release more people from jail.

“During the Christie administration, we had a new AG about every 15 minutes,” said Pat Colligan, president of the Policemen’s Benevolent Association. (Five attorneys general worked during former Gov. Chris Christie’s eight years.)

Consistent leadership made it easier to get things done, Colligan said. “Until the recent lawsuit, we’ve had input in virtually every new policy.”

The “recent lawsuit” refers to the ongoing fight over whether Grewal has the power to name disciplined cops, information which has long been hidden in New Jersey.

It’s also one example of Grewal changing his mind.

Grewal had long supported keeping internal police records private. That changed after George Floyd’s death in May.

“He called and said, ‘I was wrong,’” said Rev. Charles Boyer, a pastor and founding director of the nonprofit Salvation and Social Justice. “I found that refreshing.”

Grewal said months of listening to community members turned him around.

“If one thing became more crystalized for me in the wake of George Floyd’s killing, it’s really the fact that we need to acknowledge that systemic racism exists,” he said. “It exists in law enforcement, it exists in the criminal justice system.”

Some police and prosecutors have said they wanted more input on that change especially, and felt it was largely an attempt to grab headlines.

Police unions sued to stop names from being released, and union officials have also protested other policing decisions, including the launch of an investigation into whether the State Police discriminate when hiring and promoting.

Grewal’s “constantly trying to tweak us as if there’s something wrong,” said Pete Stilianesis, head of the State Troopers Non-Commissioned Officers Association.

On the flip side, many civil rights advocates feel his reforms haven’t gone far enough.

“The attorney general speaks about transparency and how important it is all of the time,” said CJ Griffin, a prominent public records attorney. “But then they fall short of actually providing that transparency.”

New Jersey is one of 20 states where internal affairs records are private, and Grewal’s plan would still shield many misconduct investigations from view.

At the very least, Grewal should advocate for legislation to open up those files, Griffin said.

Grewal defended his decisions.

He was always finding ways to listen and compromise, he said, and the new rules governing police force was another good example.

“While that policy didn’t reflect what every group wanted, it reflected the best policy we could develop collaboratively,” Grewal said.

He’s also pushed back against calls to “defund the police,” arguing that more spending is needed to improve training.

Grewal’s office is one of the most powerful in the country.

No other state attorney general can unilaterally give orders that apply to cops and prosecutors statewide, according to Paul Nolette, an expert on the political power of state attorneys general and the chair of Marquette’s political science department.

Grewal’s used that power to limit when prosecutors rely on jailhouse informants and restrict when juveniles can be locked up. His office expanded opioid treatment, sued a bevy of alleged polluters, called for expanding bias education in the classroom and launched a public corruption team that has made several arrests.

“I get to take the credit, but the hard work’s done by the 8,000 or so folks who work at the department,” he said.

Lawmakers also passed a bill to force his office to investigate every time somebody dies in police custody, another change he initially opposed but now supports.

Grewal has also worked more in the public eye than some predecessors.

He frequently speaks at schools and community meetings. He’s appeared on CNN, was profiled in *The Atlantic* and co-wrote an op-ed for *The New York Times*.

“He’s certainly changed the way that we think about an AG,” said Matthew Hale, an associate political science professor at Seton Hall University.

Grewal’s visibility has been important for Sikh Americans, said Satjeet Kaur, head of the national civil rights organization the Sikh Coalition.

A few years ago, Kaur walked into a government building in Trenton and saw Grewal’s framed portrait on the wall.

“It took me a minute to process,” she said. “I’ve grown up in New Jersey, and it’s not every day that you ever would see a Sikh on TV or in a government building or talked about in the newspapers.”

Grewal’s religion has drawn out a fair share of racism, including a radio host who said Grewal’s turban prevented him from remembering Grewal’s name.

Grewal’s parents are from India, and he’s often said he became a prosecutor partially to be a “visible minority.”

“I remember sitting in those high schools, knowing what it’s like to look different and perhaps be teased,” he said. “Perhaps me coming in to talk about the opioid epidemic made a kid who comes from the same background as me stand a little bit taller.”

Several people interviewed also noted that Gov. Phil Murphy has been more comfortable sharing the spotlight than previous governors. (See: Christie, Chris.)

Murphy praised Grewal in a statement, saying he’s “been a driving force behind consequential legal and policy decisions that have made our state safer, stronger, and fairer.”

“I’m proud of his accomplishments in this critical post,” Murphy said.

In the unlikely event that their relationship soured, it’s unclear if Grewal could be fired.

“There’s not a clear answer to that,” said Robert Williams, professor emeritus at Rutgers Law School in Camden and a state constitutional law expert.

New Jersey’s constitution says the attorney general does not “serve at the pleasure of the Governor,” suggesting he’s protected.

Yet a different section says the governor may launch an investigation into “any officer or employee who receives his compensation from the State of New Jersey,” and after a public hearing the governor “may remove any such officer or employee for cause.”

Williams said he was not aware of that happening to an attorney general.

As it stands, Grewal’s term ends when Murphy’s does, early next year.

He’s got a lot on his plate before then.

The New Jersey Institute For Social Justice wants him to move more incarcerated youth into residential centers. Grewal said he agreed the state should keep shrinking juvenile prisons.

Environmentalists are pushing him to sue big oil companies. Grewal said they're considering more climate change litigation.

And as Trump's administration rushes to finalize some federal rules with less than a week left, Grewal has filed at least four new lawsuits against the federal government since New Year's Day, bringing the total to at least 77.

Some of those complaints were a "silly waste of resources," said state Sen. Declan O'Scanlon, R-Monmouth. "I disagree with him on some of his more leftist policies."

At the same time, Grewal's "not a blind ideologue," O'Scanlon said. "He's someone you can work with."

Elie Honig, a former head of the criminal justice division, said he's impressed with the last three years.

"It's almost impossible to do the AG job perfectly — there are just too many competing constituencies and interests — but Gurbir has come darn close," he said.

Grewal said he plans to at least finish his term, but he would like to be re-nominated for another four years if Murphy is re-elected.

"I think this is the greatest job, and if he thinks that I am doing a good job I'd love to continue," Grewal said. "I don't have any regrets."

Grewal is 47 and a Democrat, and his name is often brought up as a contender for bigger gigs.

Grewal said that's not where his head is at.

"Once you start thinking about your next opportunity, you lose focus of the work ahead of you," he said.

NJ Advance Media staff writers S.P. Sullivan and Alex Napoliello contributed to this report.