

TURKMENISTAN: CURRENT POLITICS

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Late in December 2006, President Niyazov, who had been in power for over twenty years, suddenly died. This death defrosted the political process driven to a standstill by the advent of the Golden Age in Turkmenistan and kindled hopes of positive developments both inside and outside the country: indeed, death was the only thing that could end Turkmenbashi's unlimited rule. During his lifetime the expert and political communities agreed that under Niyazov the country was well protected against a Color Revolution (which cannot be said about its CIS neighbors). No Color Revolution shook the republic after his death either.

Today Turkmenistan is sending positive signals to the world: opera and circus have returned to the country of barchans and camels; the country's leaders restored the nation's favorite holidays, International Women's Day (8 March) and Victory Day (9 May), and annulled the former president's birthday (19 February) as a national holiday. These were the initiatives of the new president, Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov, who in February 2008 marked his first anniversary in power. This short period has brought numerous changes for the better: the local people agree that life has become easier, there are fewer limitations, and much more freedom. There is talk about a "thaw" after the long period of Niyazov's authoritarian and cruel rule. It is no surprise that the term and positive changes bring to mind the Soviet past associated with Nikita Khrushchev: the image of the late president was desacralized, people no longer pledge loyalty to the president every day (this ritual is reserved for official events), the nation is no longer obliged to study *Rukhnama*, the moral code of the Turkmens. Will the trend continue? Which direction will be chosen for the political process?

While the president was still alive, political scientists and the ordinary people asked themselves what would happen to the country after his death. Having become an authoritarian leader with no

contenders or opposition on the political field, he (very much like Stalin before him) gave little thought to a potential successor and to his country's life after his death. Despite the unending stream of wishes of "many happy returns of the day" and good health coupled with the lavishly paid services of the best Western cardiologists, his heart failed. This death put an end to a cruel and tragic period in the country's history, which the court historians chose to call the Golden Age of Turkmenbashi.

The sudden death of any autocratic head of state is fraught with serious political troubles and risks. This is especially true of the East. The outwardly closely knit Turkmenian society is torn apart by clan, regional, and tribal contradictions, however, by the time President Niyazov died the political scene had been purged to the extent that no more or less plausible candidate could be seen. The late leader refused to keep his own son by his side; he did not trust him and never thought of him as a potential successor. Some time will elapse before we know why Berdymukhammedov was selected as the future president, but his steps as acting and then elected president preserved stability and excluded excesses. In the very first days after President Niyazov's death, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, who headed the funeral commission, won the nation's sympathy by the way he conducted the burial rituals. The ceremony was attended by the heads of state of many countries. The successor's active stance and what he did to forestall unwelcome developments demonstrated that, like the late president, he was no mean tactician—a talent indispensable for any political leader. The country's political system, which had been tuned to meet the idiosyncrasies of the charismatic leader, abounded in traps, while further developments showed that the new president had skillfully avoided them all.

Art 61 of the country's Constitution proved to be the first barrier: "If the President, for some reason, is not capable of meeting his or her obligations ... his or her powers shall be transferred to the Chairman of the Parliament" and further: "A person meeting the obligations of the President may not be a candidate in the presidential election." Berdymukhammedov, who chose to ignore the "constitutional trifles," proved equal to his predecessor; he promptly adjusted, to the accompaniment of general approbation, the constitution to the circumstances. Criminal charges against the speaker of the Mejlis neutralized him and swept him off the stage; all of a sudden the Security Council became the country's main structure—this infringed on the powers of the People's Council (Khalk Maslakhaty) which the late president had designed as the executive, legislative, and consultative structure rolled into one and with the only function of adding legitimacy to his personal decisions. Berdymukhammedov avoided this trap by timing the election of the new chairman of the People's Council (one of the country's key posts) to coincide with its next convocation. He was obviously following in Turkmenbashi's footsteps by concentrating power in his hands and winning the election.

As distinct from the past, the nation was offered several candidates. Those who knew enough of the real situation were aware that there was no real choice, however, compared with the recent past, this was a step forward. Under Niyazov, the election campaign was limited to unanimous approbation of the only candidate, the president himself; during the first post-Niyazov campaign, people were given the opportunity to meet the candidates and read about them and their programs in the newspapers. This meant that the main candidate and his closest circle were absolutely sure of victory. The lightning campaign would have been impossible without the support (deliberate or otherwise) of the presidential security service headed by influential General Rejepov. As was expected, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov declined the role of puppet of the omnipotent special services—he was moving ahead. On 30 March, 2007, he was elected Chairman of the Khalk Maslakhaty, which allowed him to confirm his position as the nation's leader. Had the post gone to a different person, especially one appointed by the paramilitary ministries, the situation might have been different. In this case, the elected chairman would have won the central position: much would have depended on his closeness to the president and on the administrative resource he could have gathered. In fact, the election became a watershed between the new president, who while pledging loyalty to the old regime hinted that he was prepared to slacken its grip on the country, and the conservative wing of the Niyazov guard. Later it

became obvious that he had negotiated this obstacle too. The 20th congress of Khalk Maslakhaty disappointed those who expected another 20th Congress of the C.P.S.U. and denunciation of the Niyazov personality cult. Two weeks later, however, the world learned that General Rejepov and his closest supporters had been arrested and sentenced to long terms in prison. This launched a wide-scale campaign that deprived many officials of the top posts they filled under Niyazov. On the other hand, General Rejepov was considered the main guarantor of the old regime; with him out of the way the new president could go on with his policies. He has obviously come to stay: the self-control and presence of mind of the former doctor are the best evidence of this.

To what extent is the new president prepared to rely on his predecessor's "rich" heritage? In the post-Soviet era, Saparmurad Niyazov, who blended the Soviet political school with the Oriental traditions of perfidy and authoritarianism, soon developed from an obedient and slavish Moscow puppet into a political monster. He mastered the rich arsenal of skirmishes behind the scene and even surpassed his Soviet teachers. Power was his only purpose in life. Many of his initiatives were absurd and looked hilarious to outside observers—inside the country few were bold enough to oppose the tyrant. The wisest of his retinue preferred to join in the chorus of bootlickers, nearly all of whom were doomed to disfavor. The very fact that Berdymukhammedov spent ten years at the top (in 1997 he was appointed health minister) and survived the periodical cruel purges shows that the president had a soft spot for him. President Niyazov probably looked at him as a reliable official and a person without power ambitions. He was suspicious and grew even more apprehensive toward the end of his life: there were too many highly placed officials who hated him enough to remove him. Thanks to his perspicacity as a doctor and his no mean political talents, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov feigned absolute loyalty and obedience; this explains why the head of the special services, in turn, expected to acquire an obedient and tractable president.

As soon as he entrenches himself at the very top, Berdymukhammedov will have to chart his course and its ideological underpinnings with due account of the political legacy of the previous period. The personality cult has not yet been condemned—this is unlikely to happen at all. Khrushchev's "thaw" and Gorbachev's perestroika, which brought down the "idols of the epoch," ended in disasters for those who initiated them. Even though Berdymukhammedov has first-hand experience with the negative traits of the "father of all Turkmens," he is still keeping his image alive. Golden profiles of the late president no longer appear on TV screens, there are fewer portraits in the streets, his birthday is no longer a national holiday, and very soon his portraits will disappear from the banknotes, while the main attribute of the Niyazov era—*Rukhnama*, the nation's cultural and moral code—has already left the officials' desktops. This is a natural process; over time his image will develop into the image of a "kind grandfather" and will remain a historical and architectural landmark; the unlimited personality cult will develop into a barely discernible cult (akin to the cult of Ataturk in Turkey) to supply new leaders with the chance to refer to the great behests of the founder of the Turkmenian state.

There is a more disquieting trend: at the inauguration ceremony the new president responded to the speech of First Secretary of the Political Council of the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan Onjuk Musaev, who peppered it with "great president," with the comment that the epithet "great" was premature and that he would have to work hard to earn it. Several months later, however, his portraits appeared more frequently in the press, he is widely quoted on TV; new coins with his portrait were minted, while his books are recommended to the nation.

Having avoided the traps on the road to absolute power, he reached the most dangerous of them. By this I mean the system of economic management and the execution of all sorts of decisions. The first moves suggest that he is unlikely to abandon the old practices because, first, any transformation might destabilize the country's social and political situation; and second, is there any real need to invent a new system and share power? It is much easier to whitewash the façade and add "democratic hues"

to it. On the other hand, a system tailored to a charismatic leader can hardly function in the context of the systemic crisis of the economy, education, and social policy. Based on continuous rotation (achieved by the use of force) of the top and medium managers, it cannot function long.

The reforms that the new president has already announced are natural and predictable. Since the mid-1990s, Turkmenian society had been stagnating; by the turn of the 21st century its degradation had become obvious—this called for changes, if not radical, then superficial. It looks as if the new young and active president would like to get rid of the unattractive image of the country ruled by a petty tyrant. A U-turn, on the other hand, may cause havoc; even the best and most professional ministers might prove unequal to the task of extricating national industry, agriculture, education, health services, culture and science out of the quagmire. Professional managers are few and far between; corruption has spread everywhere, which means that the new leaders might find it hard to push through even the best of decisions.

Aware of the precipice, the new president launched reforms of the education system and health services, which had suffered a lot under Niyazov. In full accordance with his election promises, he restored ten-year school education; the time spent on *Rukhnama* was allocated to more important subjects: physics, mathematics, and foreign languages. Graduates will receive certificates accepted in Russia and the other CIS countries. He also restored five-year higher education and doubled the number of young men sent to study abroad on state grants. Some of the Russian higher educational institutions agreed to open their branches in Turkmenistan. In June 2007, President Berdymukhammedov restored the Academy of Sciences closed by his predecessor at the very beginning of his presidency. The consistent educational reforms show that the new president knows the future of the country depends on the ability of the younger generation to adapt to the contemporary world.

These are not systemic reforms—they look more like fire extinguishing. The old educational policy, degradation of the educational system and the social policy, its *Rukhnama-zation*, and isolation from the rest of the world and its cultural expanse are ruinous. If the process continues, the republic will lose not only managers, doctors, and teachers, but also skilled technology specialists.

Being a doctor, President Berdymukhammedov never hesitated: he annulled the “novelties” of his predecessor, who had closed hospitals and outpatient clinics in outlying districts and the countryside to force people to travel to the capital for medical assistance. After reopening them in the countryside, the authorities discovered that there were not enough medics to staff them. By another decree, President Berdymukhammedov restored pensions and social benefits. Under President Niyazov, 100 thousand to 300 thousand senior citizens had either been deprived of their pensions or had had their pensions cut. On 1 July, 2007, the Social Security Code initiated by the new president and adopted a month after his inauguration which ensured old-age pensions for all citizens came into force. The president preserved subsidized gas, water, and power supplies, as well as salt and flour; very soon all citizens will be entitled to a certain amount of free gasoline.

The new people in power should tread cautiously in order to overcome legal mayhem. The human rights issue might become another headache for the new president. In the past, human rights violations and political prisoners made the country a target of scathing criticism by all sorts of human rights organizations. On 24 September, 2007, speaking in front of students and lecturers of Columbia University in New York, he obviously preferred to leave this painful issue alone: “I am a young president and I am mainly concerned with my country’s economy.”

He used his newly acquired power as president to release from prison and return from exile some of the officials (repressed by President Niyazov for failures and shortcomings) with whom he used to work and whom he trusted. On the eve of the Night of Clemency, the new president released 10 thousand prisoners, most of whom were convicted as criminal offenders. Lauded as another bold step by the new president, this was nothing more than continuing Niyazov’s tradition of mass amnesties. President Berdymukhammedov, however, suggested that in future amnesty be practiced throughout the

entire year by the permanent State Commission. The decree said in part: "The Commission is set up to develop democratic foundations in the state and public life of Turkmenistan, to protect human rights and freedoms proclaimed by the Constitution of Turkmenistan, and to improve the way citizens' addresses related to the functioning of the law-enforcement structures are investigated."

This was said because first, the new government wanted to flaunt its democratic intentions; second, it acquired another instrument of control over the law-enforcement bodies; and third, this would allow the president to shift the blame for the past repressions onto former heads of the Ministry of the Interior and the National Security Council. By that time, the new president had pardoned only 14 people of those accused of the attempted assassination of President Niyazov in November 2002. All of them, including the country's former mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, were only indirectly related to the murder case. The regime, which was lauded for this important step toward greater democratization, still keeps hundreds of political prisoners behind bars; nothing is known about the fate of former foreign minister Boris Shikhmuradov. President Berdymukhammedov is obviously not ready to revise the system: indeed, when released from prison, these people might prove strong rivals of the new (and in many ways old) regime. The new government might decide to uphold its democratic image by exchanging the freedom of all political prisoners for their loyalty to the regime. Later political émigrés might receive a similar proposition. So far, the opposition leaders in exile have failed to consolidate and formulate a joint position. Many of them, including Boris Shikhmuradov, were top bureaucrats: fear for their lives, rather than strong ideological convictions, drove them out of the country. With the Niyazov regime off the scene, they might at least find a common language with the new rulers; the new rulers might offer them government posts to remedy the deficit of skilled managers and administrators.

The president's meeting with the local intelligentsia said a lot about the future of the country's democratization and the "thaw." The president spared no words to criticize the press, which, as he put it, "fails to adequately reflect the stability reigning in all spheres of the country's state and public life, including the performance of the bodies of state power and administration." Foreign information agencies reported that the president lashed at the journalist corps for its inadequate professional level: out of the vast "eighty-thousand-word vocabulary of the Turkmenian language," they use "the same 200 words." Under President Niyazov, Turkmenistan was a tightly controlled society in which official channels were limited to propaganda of Turkmenbashi and his genius; the local media concentrated on lauding the president's ruinously expensive projects, his regime, and himself. "Foreign" cultural influence in the form of literature, opera, and ballet brought in by the Soviet regime was wiped away. The void was filled with *Rukhnama*, a collection of Niyazov's philosophical deliberations. Translated into many foreign languages, it was the central part of the educational process in kindergartens, secondary schools, and higher educational establishments; every year state officials had to confirm their knowledge of the president's creation.

The local journalists have found it hard to change their ways—it is not easy to abandon the stereotypes created by many years of fear and pressure. The new president insists on fresh approaches, while journalists and editors remain under the spell of old habits, they are not yet ready to change their ways at their own risk. They have to look before they leap so as not to endanger their jobs or even freedom. Indeed, in a country where all the positive developments are ascribed to one person and where the nation's leader insists on his personal responsibility for everything in the country, even the most timid of criticisms can be interpreted as an encroachment on state order. As long as the government goes on with its deliberations about "caring for the people," rather than showing the practical side of its intentions, the Turkmenian media will remain devoted to their 200 words. So far the new government has only partly lifted the ban on freedom of movement inside the country, opened subscription to some foreign publications, and criticized the Turkmenian media. This can be taken as a resolution to improve the situation in this sphere, but nothing has been done so far to ease control over the media.

The new president continues to appoint the editors of all the newspapers; there are special government commissions for the protection of state secrets that censor all materials before publication.

At the same time, there is information that the president allocated considerable sums for modernizing the technical basis of radio and television, and a decision has been made to build a TV tower 211 meters high in the Kopet-dag foothills (in the outskirts of Ashghabad). It is much easier to allocate some of the gas money (there is more of it because of the higher export prices) than to make TV and radio programs more interesting; self-control and fear still prevail. Real changes in this sphere will come together with real liberalization (even if limited) of public life when the security services ease their control. Over time, liberalization might clash with the very foundations of the president's personal power; we can expect, on the other hand, that new government is prepared to offer journalists a "new reality."

The time has come for the new elite to choose the right road leading to a viable Turkmen state. When talking to the intelligentsia, President Berdymukhammedov revealed some of his ideas for the first time. He spoke about a secular state ruled by law and about a market economy. "I am convinced," said he, "that protecting human rights and freedoms, ensuring the equality of all citizens before the law and their absolute abidance by the law, and building a highly developed society are my main goals." He also spoke about a "strong democratic state that will serve the people." The new leader pushed aside the "immortal" behests of the old leader about the country's special road to replace it with a new ideology of "the state for the people" guided by human values. He said that the new ideology of Turkmen society was about spiritual renovation, new national awareness rooted in "the nation's creative upsurge," and a new generation with different and better ideals. He voiced his conviction that this doctrine would help create a secular state ruled by law and a market economy.

Most of the expert community interpreted this as a final divorce from the old eccentric ideology of *Rukhnama* and the personality cult. This is not completely correct: as a man of a somewhat different generation, the new president is fully aware of the absurdity of Niyazov's *Rukhnama* and the surrogate nature of its spirituality. Forced to maintain the illusion of continuity, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov is looking for an ideological platform of his own. Over time, *Rukhnama* will be forgotten—he will not need the book written by his predecessor to develop his own ideology and, probably later, his own personality cult. It will be probably replaced with a different book written by the president or by one of his cronies. When talking to the intelligentsia, the president called on cultural figures to promote the new ideology. He has forgotten or probably merely ignored the fact that President Niyazov destroyed the Turkmen culture. The reopened circus and opera can do nothing: those who created culture and developed it either emigrated or moved to different spheres.

The media showed no mean enthusiasm when describing the "new ideological doctrine" as the Great Renaissance. Articles about Turkmenbashi's behests disappeared to give space to articles and reports about the new president's novelties. Any careful observer, however, will find nothing new, let alone novel, in the new doctrine. Politicians all over the world are fond of holding forth about democracy and human rights, a better life for the people, better education, culture and economy, as well as peace and friendship among nations. In this respect, President Niyazov differed little from his colleagues. What we see today is nothing more than change of political scenery. The fairy-tale of the Golden Age has been replaced with another fantasy called the Renaissance. Placed in the historical context, the new president's Renaissance boils down to the simple fact that he merely returned to the people what they had been robbed of during the Golden Age and led the country out of the world of absurdities back to where it started. Access to the Internet, which figured prominently during the election campaign, is still a luxury, while the very popular satellite dishes will fill the information vacuum and replace the state controlled systems of cable TV.

The human rights activists insist that the president's ideological novelties would look better if supported by practical steps toward democracy and freedom. The new ideology should rest on the firm

foundation of democratic institutions if the president is resolved to build “a state for the people.” He will hardly abandon the state’s total control over society—this would be too exotic for post-Soviet Central Asia; the same can be said about giving people, the media, and NGOs genuine freedom. It seems that we should expect another personality cult and another *Rukhnama*: the ideological doctrine lauds Berdymukhammedov and his time as “the Age of the Great Renaissance.”

In some fields, the new government is following the old course; the style of leadership remains the same: ministers are publicly humiliated and fired. It should be said that the country, which was completely isolated from the rest of the world under Turkmenbashi, has become more open. During his first year in power, the new president visited scores of countries and revived political contacts with Russia, China, the U.S., and Western Europe; he normalized relations with the closest neighbors, and resumed talks with Azerbaijan on the controversial Caspian gas fields. Many took this for democratization. It seems, however, that this is a fairly severe, but somewhat softened and modernized, authoritarian system which has dropped the aberrations of the past. There is no firm conviction that the political system based very much as before on the unlimited power of one man (who looks reasonable and intelligent) will not slide into tyranny. Is Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov wise, moderate, and intelligent enough not to become Turkmenbashi-2? If official Ashghabad refuses to carry out radical political and social reforms, it will channel its efforts toward building an imitation of the political process, while in the economy and social sphere it will limit itself to overripe and inevitable changes. The administration system, meanwhile, needs radical changes, the lower levels should become freer and more responsible, and power should no longer be concentrated in the hands of one man. The market economy cannot rest on slogans: the people at the top should be prepared to abandon the old style of state administration when the nation’s civil initiative, competition, private enterprise, and development of business activities demand this. Will reason triumph over the intoxicating taste of unlimited power?
