

Turkmenistan

Population: 5,300,000

Capital: Ashgabat

Political Rights: 7

Civil Liberties: 7

Status: Not Free

Overview:

Before his sudden death in December 2006, President Saparmurat Niyazov continued past practices, ruling single-handedly behind a facade of vitiated formal institutions, frequently reshuffling high-level officials, fomenting a cult of personality, maintaining iron control over the media environment, and crushing all real and imagined hints of political opposition. The emergence of a successor, Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov, raised hopes of improvement, although no substantive reforms took place through the end of 2006. Meanwhile, the country's natural gas reserves underpinned its place in the international arena; Turkmenistan secured price increases from Iran, Russia, and Ukraine, even as it established closer ties with China amid plans to build a new gas pipeline across Central Asia to China by 2009.

The southernmost republic of the former Soviet Union, Turkmenistan was conquered by the Mongols in the thirteenth century, seized by Russia in the late 1800s, and incorporated into the USSR in 1924. Turkmenistan gained formal independence in 1991, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Saparmurat Niyazov, the former head of the Turkmenistan Communist Party, was the sole candidate in elections to the newly created post of president in October 1990. After the adoption of a new constitution in 1992, he ran unopposed again and was reelected for a five-year term with a reported 99.5 percent of the vote. The main opposition group, Agzybirlik, which was formed in 1989 by leading intellectuals, was banned. In a 1994 referendum, Niyazov's tenure as president was extended for an additional five years, until 2002, which exempted him from having to run again in 1997 as originally scheduled. In the December 1994 elections to the National Assembly (Mejlis), only Niyazov's Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (DPT), the former Communist Party, was permitted to field candidates.

In the December 1999 Mejlis elections, every candidate was selected by the government and virtually all were members of the DPT. The Central

Election Commission (CEC) claimed that voter turnout was 98.9 percent. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), citing the lack of provision for nongovernmental parties to participate and the executive branch's control of the nomination of candidates, refused to send even a limited assessment mission. In a further consolidation of Niyazov's extensive powers, parliament unanimously voted in late December to make Niyazov president for life. With this decision, Turkmenistan became the first country in the Commonwealth of Independent States to formally abandon presidential elections.

Although Niyazov continued to exercise widespread power throughout the country, cracks in his regime emerged during 2002. Several high-level government defections, along with a purge by Niyazov of Turkmenistan's intelligence service, highlighted growing political tensions and challenges to the government. On November 25, Niyazov survived an alleged assassination attempt in Ashgabat when gunmen fired at the president's motorcade. The incident sparked a widespread crackdown against the opposition and perceived critics of the regime, drawing condemnation from foreign governments and international organizations, including the OSCE and the United Nations.

While some observers speculated that Niyazov himself had planned the shooting as an excuse to increase repression of his political enemies, others maintained that it was a failed attempt by certain members of the opposition to oust the president from power. According to the government, former foreign minister and prominent opposition leader Boris Shikhmuradov, along with three other former high-ranking officials living in exile, had organized the attack. Shikhmuradov was alleged to have returned to Turkmenistan from exile in Russia with the help of the Uzbek authorities, an accusation which soured already strained relations between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Shikhmuradov was arrested on December 25, 2002 and made a televised confession four days later that critics maintain had been coerced. On December 30, he was sentenced to life in prison following what human rights groups condemned as a Soviet-style show trial. Two of the alleged co-conspirators received life sentences in absentia, while many other suspects were given lengthy prison sentences.

The president subsequently announced early elections for the Halk Maslahaty (People's Council) in April 2003. Observers noted that the decision to hold the poll two years ahead of schedule was most likely intended to eliminate any remaining opposition to Niyazov's government through a redistribution of legislative posts. There was no election campaign, and the state media did not provide information about the candidates, all of whom were nominated by the presidential administration. The CEC announced voter turnout of 99.8 percent, although the true figure is believed to have been much lower.

In the run-up to the December 19, 2004, Mejlis polls, the list of candidates was reportedly personally approved by Niyazov. The government refused to invite any international observers to monitor the election, which most

analysts described as little more than a staged vote. As in previous elections, only the DPT was allowed to field candidates. Voter turnout was officially listed as 77 percent.

High-level government reshuffles, a prominent feature in Turkmen political life in 2005, continued in 2006, pointing to the irrelevance of formal institutions under Niyazov's rule and the president's deepening political paranoia. Long-serving prosecutor-general Gurbanbibi Atajanova, who had presided over a far-reaching purge of the country's energy sector leadership, was herself purged amid traditional accusations of corruption. As in past years, Niyazov also dismissed several governors and district heads for failing to meet projected cotton harvest targets.

Niyazov's death on December 21 from an apparent heart attack was followed by the rapid and seemingly well-orchestrated ascent of Deputy Prime Minister Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov to the position of acting president. The succession was orderly but appeared to circumvent constitutional norms, as criminal charges were brought against parliament speaker Ovezgeldy Ataev, who would have been next in line to succeed Niyazov according to the constitution, within hours of Niyazov's death. This removed Ataev from contention and cleared the way for Berdymukhammedov to assume the presidency. The Security Council, which brings together the country's top military and security officials, played a key role in the succession process, suggesting that the country's powerful security and intelligence services continue to play a crucial role in the absence of independent institutions and oversight.

Turkmenistan's importance as a supplier of natural gas dominated the country's relations with the outside world. When Russia cut off gas deliveries to Ukraine in January 2006 in the course of a pricing dispute, cheap Turkmen gas made possible a compromise solution in which Ukraine agreed to pay \$95 per 1,000 cubic meters for a combination of expensive Russian natural gas and cheaper gas from Turkmenistan. Later in the year, Turkmenistan threatened to cut off gas to Russia and successfully secured a higher price in the fall.

In April, Turkmenistan signed an agreement to build a gas pipeline to China by 2009. However, skeptics cast doubt on the project's feasibility and suggested it could be a bargaining ploy to secure future price increases from Russia, Ukraine, and Iran, the main buyers of Turkmen gas. Meanwhile, an April report by Global Witness pointed to massive corruption in the Turkmen-Ukraine gas trade.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Turkmenistan is not an electoral democracy. President Saparmurat Niyazov enjoyed virtually absolute power over all branches and levels of government. While the extent to which Niyazov's successor, Gurbanguly

Berdymukhammedov, would be able to consolidate his own power remained unclear by the end of 2006, the legacy of absolute presidential power is likely to prove difficult to overcome. In recent years, the government underwent a rapid turnover of personnel as Niyazov dismissed many officials whom he suspected could challenge his authority.

The country has two parliamentary bodies, neither of which enjoys genuine independence from the executive branch: the unicameral Mejlis (National Assembly), composed of 50 members elected by popular vote for five-year terms, and the approximately 2,500-member Halk Maslahaty (People's Council), composed of various elected and appointed members, which was officially made the country's supreme legislative body in 2003.

None of the country's legislative elections have been free or fair. Only one political party, the DPT, has been officially registered. Opposition parties have been banned, and their leading members face harassment and detention or have fled abroad.

Niyazov established an extensive cult of personality, including erecting monuments to his leadership throughout the country. In 1994, he renamed himself Turkmenbashi, or "leader of the Turkmen." He enacted bizarre decrees, including ordering the renaming of the days of the week and months of the year after himself and his mother. As part of a stated attempt to fend off foreign influences in the country, he banned opera and ballet performances. In 2006, he gave ministers six months to learn English and continued the practice of sponsoring vast construction projects of little evident value to the populace.

In one of his first statements, acting President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov pledged to "continue the policy of Samarurat Niyazov," although he also promised on December 26 to hold a planned presidential election "on a democratic basis" in February 2007. No resolution to the evident contradiction emerged by year's end. On December 28, 2006, the Central Election Commission announced the registration of six candidates for the presidency, but all were members of the DPT and part of the power structure Niyazov established. Of the six, five were little-known figures, suggesting that their participation was intended to lend a democratic veneer to Berdymukhammedov's eventual ascent from acting to actual president.

Corruption is widespread, with public officials often forced to bribe their way into their positions. The authorities have used anticorruption campaigns as a way to remove potential rivals. Turkmenistan was ranked 142 out of 163 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2006 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of speech and the press is severely restricted by the government, which controls all radio and television broadcasts and print media. Reports of dissenting political views are banned, as are even mild forms of criticism of the president. Subscriptions to foreign newspapers and magazines are forbidden, and foreign journalists have few opportunities to visit

Turkmenistan. In 2004, the government shut down broadcasts of Russia's Radio Mayak, the last foreign media outlet to reach Turkmenistan. The state-owned Turkmen Telekom is the only authorized internet service provider in the country.

Few international correspondents work in Turkmenistan, and many have been expelled from the country. In 2005, journalist Viktor Panov of the Russian news agency RIA-Novosti was deported from Turkmenistan to Russia on espionage charges. In 2006, Radio Liberty correspondent Ogulsapar Muradova, who had been arrested in the course of a dubious spy scandal, died in custody under suspicious circumstances, prompting international condemnation and protests. Two human rights activists who had been arrested along with Muradova received six- and seven-year prison terms in a 10-minute trial.

The government restricts freedom of religion, and independent religious groups continue to face persecution. A 2003 law on religion criminalized the practice of religious groups not officially registered and prescribed up to one year of corrective labor against violators. In May 2004, Niyazov decreed that practicing an unregistered religion would no longer be a criminal offense, although it remains illegal, with violators subject to fines. Seventh-day Adventist, Baha'i, Hare Krishna, Baptist, and several Protestant communities have subsequently achieved formal registration, but other groups have experienced difficulties in attempting to register. Furthermore, members of independent religious congregations—including those legally registered by the government—continue to face pressure from the authorities.

The government controls access to Islamic education and restricts the number of mosques throughout the country. The authorities coerce Christian and Muslim houses of worship to display a copy of the *Rukhnama*, a quasi-spiritual guide allegedly authored by Niyazov.

The government places significant restrictions on academic freedom, with schools increasingly being used to indoctrinate, rather than educate, students. The *Rukhnama* is required reading throughout the school system and has largely replaced many other traditional school subjects. Textbooks must meet the government's strict ideological requirements. In 2004, Niyazov issued an order invalidating most higher education degrees received outside the country since 1993, dismissing holders of such degrees from state jobs. Analysts viewed this decree as part of a broader effort to eliminate foreign influences from Turkmen society. Bribes are commonly required for admission to various schools and institutes. In early 2005, Niyazov announced a decision to close most libraries in the country on the grounds that most books that Turkmen citizens need—many allegedly written by the president himself—should already be present in homes, schools, and workplaces.

The state security services regularly monitor the activities of citizens and foreign nationals, limiting open and free private discussion. Security officers use such surveillance techniques as wiretapping, the interception of mail, and

the recruitment of informers. After the November 2002 assassination attempt, Niyazov reportedly directed law enforcement bodies to carefully monitor people's conversations in public places and called on people to assist the police by informing on their fellow citizens. In February 2004, Niyazov ordered the government to intensify video surveillance, including at all strategic economic facilities, public buildings, and government offices.

While the constitution guarantees peaceful assembly and association, these rights are severely restricted in practice. Public demonstrations against state policies are extremely rare. After changes in pension law in January 2006 reportedly stripped 100,000 retirees of their pensions and reduced payments to another 200,000, opposition sources provided scattered reports of protests, but these could not be confirmed.

A 2003 law on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) effectively criminalized the activities of unregistered organizations and imposed penalties that included heavy fines, the confiscation of property, and imprisonment. In an apparent reversal, a new law was adopted the following year abolishing criminal penalties for unregistered NGOs. However, most observers suspected that the law was designed primarily to counter international criticism of the country's poor human rights record, rather than to genuinely improve the environment for Turkmenistan's civil society sector.

The government-controlled Colleagues Union is the only central trade union permitted. There are no legal guarantees for workers to form or join unions or to strike, although the constitution does not specifically prohibit these rights. Strikes in Turkmenistan are extremely rare.

The judicial system is subservient to the president, who appoints and removes judges without legislative review. The authorities frequently deny rights of due process, including public trials and access to defense attorneys. Police abuse and torture of suspects and prisoners, often to obtain confessions, is reportedly widespread. Those arrested and sentenced for complicity in the assassination attempt against Niyazov suffered ill-treatment or torture, had no access to legal counsel of their own choosing, and were convicted in closed trials; many of their friends and relatives were targeted for harassment and intimidation. The trial of Radio Liberty correspondent Ogulsapar Muradova, who subsequently died in custody, and two human rights activists in 2006 highlighted a variety of abuses and flaws in the judicial system.

In early 2003, the government broadened the definition of treason to cover a wide range of activities, including attempting to undermine the public's faith in the president's policies and failing to inform the authorities of a wide range of crimes. Prisons suffer from overcrowding and inadequate nutrition and medical care, and international organizations are not permitted to visit prisons.

Turkmenistan remains a smuggling corridor for drugs from neighboring Afghanistan, with numerous reports suggesting the involvement of high-level

officials in the narcotics trade and a growing problem of drug addiction within Turkmenistan.

Employment and educational opportunities for ethnic minorities are limited by the government's policy of promoting Turkmen national identity and its discrimination against those who are not ethnic Turkmen. Following the 2002 assassination attempt against Niyazov, which Turkmenistan openly accused Uzbekistan of supporting, the Turkmen authorities took a harder line against ethnic Uzbeks in Turkmenistan. The government reportedly ordered the forced relocation of part of the Uzbek population living along the Uzbekistan border and their replacement with ethnic Turkmen. In March 2004, the country's former chief mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, an ethnic Uzbek, was sentenced to 22 years in prison on charges of treason; he had been removed from his post in January 2003 and was succeeded by an ethnic Turkmen. The authorities have ordered the closure of a variety of Russian-language institutions, including schools, throughout the country.

Freedom of movement, particularly overseas, is severely restricted. In 2004, Niyazov formally abolished the country's exit-visa requirement—which had been eliminated in January 2002 but reintroduced the following year—to stave off trade restrictions by the United States. However, travel abroad remains extremely difficult for most Turkmen citizens and often requires the payment of bribes to government officials. In addition, the government is believed to maintain a lengthy blacklist of people—possibly thousands—who are not permitted to travel outside the country, including those suspected of opposition to the authorities. The State Service for the Registration of Foreign Citizens monitors foreign visitors, whose activities are strictly regulated.

A continuing Soviet-style command economy and widespread corruption diminish equality of opportunity. The government sets extremely high production targets for farmers, who must then sell their crops at very low prices set by the state monopoly grain purchaser. Profits from the country's extensive energy exports rarely reach the general population, most of whom live in poverty. Employees working in the dominant public sector are tested on their knowledge of the *Rukhnama* as a condition of their employment. In January 2005, Niyazov announced a ban on the practice of child labor. However, there are concerns that the practice is so widespread and central to the country's economy, particularly during the annual fall cotton harvest, that the ban will not be enforced.

According to the Vienna-based International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, the Turkmen government has engaged in "widespread violations of property rights" as part of a dramatic urban reconstruction project in Ashgabat that was launched in 2001. Hundreds of residents have reportedly been forced to vacate their homes on extremely short notice and have received little or no financial compensation or equivalent accommodation from the authorities.

The government restricts various personal social freedoms, including the wearing of long hair or beards by men. Traditional social and religious norms and a lack of employment prospects limit professional opportunities for women, and anecdotal reports suggest that domestic violence is common.