



## Turkmenistan



Last update:	8 April 2009
Author:	
Population:	4,940,916 (July 2010 est.)
Prime minister:	Is the Head of State – President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov
President:	Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov (since February 2007)
Governemental type:	Republic; authoritarian presidential rule, with little power outside the executive branch
Ruling coalition:	One ruling party – Democratic Party
Last election:	Legislative December 14, 2008
Next election:	Presidential 2012
Sister parties:	None

After the independence of Turkmenistan of the Soviet Union in 1991 Saparmurat Niyazov became president. At that time Turkmenistan did not have a real government or a national identity. Niyazov filled that void, he built a nation and a culture based on him. His influence spilled over into every sphere of Turkmen life. He called himself Serdar Turkmenbashi, Great Leader of all Turkmen. He was an authoritarian president: he was head of state, head of government and commander in chief of the armed forces. However, on 21 December 2006 Turkmenbashi suddenly died of a heart attack. After his death Kurbanguly Berdimukhammov assumed the presidency. He was a deputy prime minister and he had also been minister of health and Niyazov personal dentist.

### INTRODUCTION

The People's Council of Turkmenistan called for Presidential elections on 11 February 2007. This presidential election was the first to be contested by more than one candidate, however several conditions made it impossible for opposition candidates to participate. On 14 February it was announced that Berdimukhammov won the elections with 89,23 percent of the votes. Observers of the OSCE described the elections as neither free nor fair.

The opposition parties also did not take part during the parliamentary elections of 19 December 2004, only the candidates of the governmental Democratic Party of Turkmenistan were allowed to participate. Making this election purely ceremonial. Though the voter turnout was a surprise, instead of the normal 99 percent turnout it was only 76,88 percent. There were no international monitors present during these elections, however informal reports stated that there was a widespread indifference towards the elections.

### ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL SITUATION

#### President

Kurbanguly Berdimukhammedov was born in 1957 in a small village in what was then the Soviet republic of Turkmenistan. He studied dentistry at the state medical institute and later worked as a dentist and an academic.

Berdimukhammedov, a former deputy prime minister, became acting president when Niyazov died in December 2006. Berdimukhammedov once was Niyazov's personal dentist, he became minister of health in 1997 and deputy



premier in 2001. One of his tasks was to implement Niyazov's health service reforms which are widely seen as having brought about its near collapse. He has promised to continue the policies of his predecessor but also to introduce reforms, including unlimited access to the internet, better education and higher pensions. Soon after coming to power, he restored pensions to more than 100,000 elderly citizens, reversing President Niyazov's decisions to withdraw them the previous year.

#### Parliamentary elections 2008

On 14 December parliamentary elections were held in Turkmenistan. Some 287 candidates ran for 125 seats in the country's reconfigured parliament. According to the Central Commission for Elections and Referendums of Turkmenistan (CEC) the final data showed that the constituencies elected 123 deputies of new convocation throughout the country. Two or more contenders ran for one seat in all 125 election constituencies. A candidate who got over 50 per cent of the votes was recognized elected. Election commission No 84 in the Lebap regional constituency made a decision in accordance with Article 37 of the law "On election of deputies to the Mejlis of Turkmenistan" to hold a re-run between two candidates who won the highest amount of the votes at the constituency. The re-run was held on 28 December 2008 and 8 February of 2009. The final composition of the 125-seat parliament was set in February 2009.

Most of the candidates represented the ruling Democratic Party – the only one registered in Turkmenistan – and there were a handful of state-approved candidates. Critics said the election, in which supposedly 93.8 per cent of the electorate voted, was far from fair. OSCE did not send a full monitoring mission, saying that a genuine contest was impossible. The presence of foreign media was limited, as many journalists were unable to get permission to cover the vote. The Turkmen opposition mostly lives in exile and has shown little interest in the election. According to government figures, almost 2.6 million citizens cast ballots in the elections. But opposition websites contend that the official voting figures are exaggerated. The opposition suggested the actual turnout ratio was closer to 30 percent of registered voters. This was the first parliamentary election since the death of Niyazov in December 2006. Constitutional changes that led to the elections were introduced last September.

#### Presidential elections

##### Background to the elections

On 21 December 2006 Niyazov passed away. That same day, the cabinet of ministers and the National Security Council (NSC) held joint emergency sessions, where the deputy premier of the cabinet of ministers, Kurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, was appointed the acting head of the state and commander in chief of the armed forces of Turkmenistan. He was appointed to act as head of state for up to two months, the period of time within which a new president must be elected. The chairperson of the Mejlis, Ovezgeldy Ataev, was barred from exercising his constitutional right to assume the duties of acting head of state as the general prosecutor's office filed a criminal case against him. His dismissal was formalised in the course of an extraordinary session of the Mejlis on 22 December, where a special law was adopted in this regard. On 26 December, he was also relieved of his position as the deputy chairperson of the PCT by a resolution of the PCT.

In line with its constitutional obligations, PCT determined that presidential elections would be conducted on 11 February 2007. During this meeting the PCT approved a constitutional law to amend the constitution, also it approved a New Presidential Election law (PEL). Furthermore, it amended the composition of the Central Election Commission (CEC). Moreover, it nominated and approved candidates for the president of Turkmenistan and finally it set the date for the next convocation of the PCT for 14 February 2007 to announce the election outcome.

The new PEL includes a series of provisions that comply with the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document, such as a five year term of office of the president and multiple candidacies. However, according to the OSCE it is clear that there is room for substantial improvement in order to fully meet the 1990 OSCE commitments. In particular in the areas of the right of Turkmen citizens to stand as candidates and the rights of such candidates. This concern stems from the fact that, in accordance with the constitution, nomination of candidates is possible only by members of the PCT. Also, potential candidates have to have served as state officials and candidates registered subsequently by the CEC can be withdrawn at any time by the PCT.

The presidential election system comprises a first round of voting whereby one of the candidates needs to get the votes of at least half of the voters who participated in the vote. In case no candidate meets this requirement, a



second round of voting is conducted within two weeks of the first round. The second round is contested by the two candidates who received the highest numbers of votes in the first round. And the winner is the candidate who received the highest number of votes. If only two candidates contested the first round and none fulfilled the above mentioned legal requirement, a repeat election is to be conducted within two months. However, the failed candidates cannot contest the repeat election.

The presidential election is administered by a four level election administration comprising the CEC, six Regional Election Commissions (RECs) including the election commission for the city of Ashgabat, 65 District Election Commissions (DECs) and some 1,600 Polling Station Election Commissions (PECs). The CEC is appointed by the PCT. The RECs are appointed by the CEC. The DECs are appointed by the respective REC upon nomination of the people's councils of the towns and communes. And the PECs are appointed by the respective DECs upon nominations of the corresponding people's councils.

The February 2007 presidential election in Turkmenistan was the first to be contested by more than one candidate. Under the law, candidates should enjoy equal treatment during the campaign. Six candidates, including the acting President, were elected by the PCT, out of a total of eleven PCT nominations. Subsequently, all six were registered by the CEC. All candidates were from the DPT. No individuals who identify themselves as political opposition were nominated as candidates. The conditions for running for president made it impossible for opposition candidates to participate. For example, the condition that candidates must have held state office and been resident in Turkmenistan for at least the past 15 years make running for president very difficult, since most opposition leaders are in exile and barred even from entering the country. Also, there was no woman candidate.

The candidates were, Kurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, acting head of the state. Second, Ishanguly Nuryev, deputy petroleum industry and mineral resources minister. Third, Amanyz Atadzhykov, parliament deputy and first deputy governor of the Dashoguz region. Fourth, Mukhammetnazar Gurbanov, head of the Karabekaul district. Fifth, Orazmyrad Garadzhayev, head of Abadan city. And finally, Ashirniyaz Pomanov, governor of Turkmenbashi city.

#### The election results

On 14 February CEC chairman Murat Karryev announced the victory of Berdymukhammedov. Karryev stated that Berdymukhammedov won with 89,23 percent of the votes. This announcement was immediately followed by the inauguration ceremony at a session of the PCT.

Candidate	Percentage of votes
Kurbanguly Berdymukhammedov	89,23
Amanyz Atadzhykov	3,21
Ishanguly Nuryev	2,38
Mukhammetnazar Gurbanov	2,35
Orazmyrad Garadzhayev	1,52
Ashirniyaz Pomanov	1,31

The Turkmen election officials claimed a 98,65 percent turnout for the elections of 11 February. However, this claim was at odds with reports from for example Radio Free Europe correspondents. These correspondents reported sparse attendance at several voting centres, both in the capital, Ashgabat, and in the eastern Labap Province. In the weeks prior to the vote, Turkmen government officials announced that foreign journalists would be welcome to observe the balloting, but virtually no foreign journalist seeking to cover the election received a visa to do so.

A delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE was in Turkmenistan for the presidential election. They were there as unofficial observers. But one deputy among the group, Jose Soares from Portugal, said on election day that the elections "were absolutely not free and fair." However, the fact that an election was held at all is significant. It would have come as little surprise to the international community if the Turkmen government had simply appointed a successor for Niyazov without holding a multi-candidate election. Michael Hall, the International Crisis Group's Central Asian project director, claimed that the reason for holding the election is to show legitimacy, before the Turkmen population and before the international community.



#### Background to the previous elections

On 19 December 2004 Turkmenistan held parliamentary elections, however the elections were pure ceremonial. Although 130 candidates competed for 50 seats, only candidates approved by the government were allowed to stand. All of whom were ethnic Turkmen and members of Niyazov's ruling DPT. No representatives of ethnic minorities were among the candidates. Candidates were initially selected by district authorities before being vetted by regional authorities, after which each candidate was referred to the presidential administration for final approval. Of the 131 candidates, there were 109 men and 22 women.

The Turkmen authorities did not invite international observers including observers from other CIS countries to monitor the parliamentary elections, asserting that national officials were capable of monitoring the event without outside help. The elections were thus monitored by some 200 national observers and employees from Turkmenistan's National Institute of Democracy and Human Rights, which is directly subordinated to the president. Also monitoring were individuals from other organizations that had nominated candidates, such as the youth association and women's union.

The parliamentary elections consisted of two rounds and are being held in the 50 electoral districts. In the first round, parliamentarians were elected in 43 electoral districts. The Turkmen law on elections stipulates that a run-off must be organized if no one gains over 50 percent in a voting district where three or more candidates are registered. Runoff ballots were therefore held on 9 January 2005 for the two leading candidates in the remaining seven districts.

The election candidates could be divided in five groups: a) governors of different levels (54,8 percent of the total number of candidates); b) middle level specialists (15,5 percent); c) local administration officials (9,6 percent); d) secretaries and members of the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan and the Youth organization named after Makhtumkuli (4,4 percent); e) Mejlis deputies of the previous convocation (15,5 percent).

#### The election results

The only surprising factor of the parliamentary elections was the voter turnout. It was 76,88 percent, contrary to the 99,6 percent for the parliamentary elections in 1999. Russia's Kommersant Daily assessed it as almost a revolution for Turkmenistan. Independent observers said actual turnout might even have been much lower.

Since there were no official independent election monitors finding information about the background of the elections is difficult. However, informal reports tell that the residents in the capital, Ashkabad, said they saw few people going to vote. The reports said there was widespread indifference to a poll in which there were no opposition parties and every single candidate had sworn lifelong loyalty to President Niyazov.

Candidates	Share of votes	Seats
Governors of different levels	50%	50
Mid-level specialists	4%	2
Local administrative officials	14%	7
Secretaries and members of the DPT	8%	2
Mejlis deputies of the previous convocation	24%	12

#### Women in the Turkmen society

There are no legal restrictions on the participation of women or minorities in the political process. Nevertheless, they are underrepresented in government and politics. Currently there are 8 women and 42 men in the Mejlis. Furthermore, there are 2 female ministers in the government, contrary to 19 male ministers. However, no women serve as provincial governors. Turkmenistan is not ranked in the Gender Development Index.

According to article 18 of the Turkmen constitution men and women have equal rights and Turkmenistan adopted and ratified several international human rights instruments like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (EAFDAW). However, in May 2007 the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women raised concerns at Turkmenistan's lack of awareness of the urgent need to stem violence against women, to pass specific legislation, including on domestic violence and to introduce measures to



address trafficking in women. Among other issues, it urged Turkmenistan to criminalize domestic violence, bring to justice the perpetrators, ensure that the victims have access to appropriate redress and ensure that shelters are set up. The Committee also recommended that the government provide an enabling environment for women's and human rights organizations.

#### Minorities in the Turkmen society

Minorities are represented in the government, although preference is given to ethnic Turkmen. The Mejlis predominantly consists of ethnic Turkmen, with no more than a few ethnic Russians and Uzbeks. Turkmen comprise approximately 77 percent of the population of about 5.5 million; Uzbeks, 9 percent; Russians, 7 percent and Kazakhs, 7 percent. There are smaller numbers of Armenians, Azeri's and many other ethnic groups.

Since independence, the country has not experienced ethnic turmoil. As part of its nation-building efforts, the government has attempted to foster Turkmen national pride, in part through its language policy. The constitution designates Turkmen as the official language, and it is a mandatory subject in school. Russian remains in common usage in government and commerce. However, the president has criticized the widespread use of Russian. In many senses, language has become a mechanism for exclusion in recent years. Non-ethnic Turkmen employees at government ministries reportedly were given until December 1999 to learn Turkmen. Non-Turkmen feared that the designation of Turkmen as the official language would place their children at a disadvantage educationally and economically. They complained that some avenues for promotion and job advancement were no longer open to them. Only a handful of non Turkmen occupy high-echelon jobs in the ministries, and there have been reports that managerial positions are closed to non-Turkmen.

#### Turkmen politics

Containing strong elements of personal leadership, despotism, and constitutional subversion, Turkmenistan is the only remaining neo-Stalinist regime in the world, along with North Korea. Turkmenistan is a single-party state, governed by an authoritarian president who is head of state, head of government and commander in chief of the armed forces. The president is elected for a five-year term by the people. There is no vice president or prime minister. A group of officials, each holding the title of deputy chairman of the cabinet of ministers and holding responsibilities in a defined area, constitutes the next level of executive authority. The president appoints the cabinet of ministers. According to the constitution the chairman of the Mejlis, the parliament, assumes the presidency upon the death or permanent incapacitation of the president and then calls elections.

Under the 1992 constitution, there are two parliamentary bodies, a unicameral People's Council of Turkmenistan (PCT) or Halk Maslahaty and a unicameral parliament or Mejlis. The PCT is the highest representative body and the supreme legislative body, made up of 2,507 delegates, some of whom are elected by popular vote and some of whom are appointed. Members include cabinet ministers, regional, district, and city governors parliamentary deputies, people's representatives, the chairmen of the supreme court and the economic court and the general prosecutor. Members meet at least annually and are responsible for adopting constitutional amendments, treaties and referenda. The PCT is chaired by the president. The Mejlis is the legislative body consisting of 50 seats. Members are elected for a five-year term by popular vote. Its authority is limited, its decisions generally reflect the policies of the president.

In 2003, a new law was adopted, reducing the powers of the Mejlis and making the PCT the supreme legislative organ. The PCT can now legally dissolve the Mejlis, and the president is now able to participate in the Mejlis as its supreme leader. Also, the Mejlis can no longer adopt or amend the constitution or announce referendums or its elections. Since the president is both the chairman for life of the PCT and the supreme leader of the Mejlis, the 2003 law has the effect of making him the sole authority of both the executive and legislative branches of government. The legal system is based on civil law with a constitution as the fulcrum of legal authority. At the judicial level, there is a supreme court consisting of judges appointed by the president.

After independence in 1991, the Communist Party of Turkmenistan changed its name to the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (DPT) but remained the sole party in government. The DPT has been the country's only legal party and all of the seats in parliament are occupied by DPT members. Saparmurat Niyazov had been head of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan since 1985, and president since October 1990 when the post was created. Niyazov ran, unopposed, in the 1990 and 1992 presidential elections which he won with reported 98.3 and 99.5 percent of the



votes cast respectively. On 28 December 1999, the PCT took the decision to make Niyazov President for life. This decision was confirmed on the same day by the adoption of a separate constitutional law. The Constitution was not consequently amended.

There have been a few attempts to set up parties in opposition or as alternatives to the DPT, none of which has proved successful. In September 1989, intellectuals registered a popular front, the Agzybirlik, with stated objectives similar to those of the popular movements that emerged elsewhere during the 1990's. However, it was banned as early as January 1990. Another attempt for setting up organized political opposition occurred in August 1996, when representatives of unregistered parties reportedly met with a view to form a social democratic party. In a separate development, the President announced in late 1993, that a second party could be permitted to register, the Peasants' Justice Party. However, this intention never materialized. Moreover, after becoming a president for life, Niyazov was reported to have announced that creation of opposition parties would not be contemplated before 2010. On a number of other occasions, after dismissals or defections from Turkmenistan, former high level state officials have declared themselves as opposition.

A new constitution was adopted in September 2008. It promoted multi-party politics and the market economy. The measure was passed unanimously by the People's Council. The People's Council will be abolished and parliament will almost double in size after elections in December. The reform step comes at a time when the strictly-ruled Central Asian country wants to tighten its ties with the West, by showing it is on its way to democratisation, and open up to investment. It comes two years after the death of autocratic leader Niyazov, whose tight grip on power resulted in two decades of almost complete isolation of the country. Current President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov stated that the old constitution needed to be updated as it did not fit with Turkmenistan's "progress". The new constitution will introduce the formation of multiple political parties in a state that currently merely has one – the Democratic Party of the president, and the right for citizens to own private property. Observers and exiles, however, claim that the reform is superficial as the president remains free to rule by decree. Berdimukhamedov is gradually bringing Turkmenistan out of the political isolation imposed by his predecessor. It is clear that the country is opening up to the outside world: Turkmenistan has begun to cooperate more closely with international organizations, to participate in various projects, and to develop new ties, both bilateral and multi-lateral, with various countries. In short, it is becoming a significant player in Central Asia.

## IMPORTANT POLITICAL ISSUES

### Serdar Turkmenbashi

Born on 19 February 1940, Saparmurat Niyazov lived his early years in the capital of Ashgabat. His father was killed during World War II and in 1948 the rest of his family died in the great earthquake that destroyed much of Ashgabat. Niyazov graduated from the Leningrad Polytechnic Institute in 1966 with a degree in power engineering and began work at the Bezmeinskaya Power Station near Ashgabat. He joined the Communist Party in 1962. Rising quickly through the ranks, Niyazov became first secretary of the Turkmen Communist Party in 1985. As a Communist party-boss, Niyazov was in a unique position when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Niyazov became president and soon after changed his name to Serdar Turkmenbashi, or Great Leader of all Turkmen.

When Soviet rule collapsed in 1991, Turkmenistan was left on its own, with no real government and no national identity. Turkmenbashi filled that void, he built a nation and a culture based on him. His influence spilled over into every sphere of Turkmen life. Even the months and days of the week were named after himself and his family. When he gave up smoking after major heart surgery in 1997, he ordered all his ministers to do the same and banned smoking in public places. He later declared a ban on young men wearing beards and long hair. Opera, ballet, listening to car radios and the playing of recorded music on television and at public events was forbidden. His book, the Rukhnama, a collection of his thoughts on Turkmen identity, history and destiny, was put on the curriculum of schools and universities. There are many statues of himself and his mother throughout the country including a gold-plated statue atop Ashgabat's largest building, the Neutrality Arch. The statue rotates so that it will always face the sun and shine light onto the capital city.

Although Niyazov continued to exercise widespread power throughout the country, cracks in his regime became more visible 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 25 November, 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. On 21 December 2006 Niyazov died after a cardiac arrest.

#### Clan systems

In Turkmenistan, the main clans are the Yomud (in the western and northern parts of the country), the Teke (around the state capital of Ashgabat) and the Goklan (situated west of Ashgabat). Many foundations of Central Asian life are rooted in clans, or groupings formed on principles of kinship and shared regional origin. Although clan influence tends to wane as authoritarianism grows stronger. Niyazov represented the Teke clan whose members still hold many posts under fellow Teke Berdymukhammedov.

#### Corruption

The existence of patronage networks as the basis of power in Turkmenistan has inevitably given rise to a political culture of bribery, nepotism, and embezzlement. Niyazov regularly purged the upper echelons of his government to diminish the power bases of political elites and rid it of potential rivals. Before 2000, dismissed officials as a rule were not imprisoned or sent into exile. In recent years, however, the fast pace at which government officials are regularly replaced, coupled with an increased fear of arbitrary reprisal, has meant that newly appointed officials attempt to acquire perks and exploit the privileges of their offices in record time. As a consequence, corruption, particularly embezzlement and bribe taking, has been steadily on the rise. Drastic cuts in pensions, massive redundancies in government jobs, the introduction of fees for medical services and the use of military conscripts as a source of free labour in various sectors of the economy have all indicated that the state has been having difficulty funding its huge public sector.

Turkmenistan is ranked 162 on the Corruption Transparency Index of 2007. And the Corruptions Perceptions Index (CPI) score is 2.0. Of all the Central Asian countries only Uzbekistan is ranked lower, at 172. Kazakhstan is the highest ranked Central Asian country, at 150.

#### Economy

Following independence in 1991, Turkmenistan experienced several years of economic decline caused by the break-up of traditional economic ties, poor harvests, and problems related to energy exports such as economic mismanagement, payment, and transportation. The economy was hit hard in 1997 when non-payments by the CIS countries forced a suspension of virtually all natural gas exports. By 1998, however, the economy began to recover and with the resumption of natural gas exports to Ukraine and Russia in 1999–2000, recovery accelerated. Thanks to rising export revenues from natural gas and oil and oil products, the current account has been in surplus since 2000.

Turkmenistan is one of the few countries in the world that has not introduced current account convertibility. The parallel market exchange rate is four to five times the official rate, which severely dampens the prospects for accelerated private sector growth in Turkmenistan. A significant share of Turkmenistan's foreign exchange earnings from energy exports is directed towards infrastructure and national prestige projects, some of which appear to have little economic return. At the same time, the limited capacity of the existing natural gas pipelines and lack of alternative natural gas export routes is already beginning to constrain the country's natural gas export potential and makes exports vulnerable to disruptions.

The picture portrayed by social indicators is also mixed. Absolute poverty, based on the .15 per capita per day poverty line, is less than one percent. But at the same time, 45 to 50 percent of the population was estimated to consume below the subsistence minimum in 2003 and 30 percent of the population has a level of consumption below half the national average. The official joblessness rate is zero, as the state guarantees employment for every Turkmen citizen. However, surveys indicate that unemployment is growing, especially among youth.

#### Human rights

##### Dissidents

The government abuses psychiatry to suppress dissents. President Niazov had Stalin style purges of the government, identifying new enemies and corrupt bureaucrats among high-ranking officials. In July 2006 about 30 convicted high-ranking officials were transferred to a special prison in Ovadandepo created for political prisoners in



2003. Thousands of people, including religious minorities, perceived dissidents and their relatives are on blacklists banning them from leaving the country. Serious concerns remain about torture and ill-treatment in custody and about prison conditions.

#### Education

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.

#### Freedom of religion

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 labour against violators. The law effectively applied to all religions other than Sunni Islam and Russian Orthodoxy, the only two faiths that had successfully achieved registration at the time. Under mounting international pressure, the government lifted some of its restrictions against religious organizations in 2004. In May 2004, Niyazov decreed that practicing an unregistered religion would no longer be a criminal offence, although it remains illegal with violators subject to fines. While Seventh Day Adventist, Baha'i, Hare Krishna, Baptist, and several Protestant communities have subsequently achieved formal registration, 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.

#### Media

All state media in Turkmenistan are devoted primarily to extolling the activities and achievements of the President and are devoid of independent information. In 2006, Reporters Without Borders ranked Turkmenistan 167th out of 169 nations, immediately above North Korea and Eritrea, in its annual worldwide Press Freedom Index. Foreign journalists are rarely allowed to enter the country, and those who do gain entry are closely monitored by the State Service for the Registration of Foreigners. Currently in Ashgabat there is only one accredited foreign correspondent, who works for the Russian news agency ITAR-TASS. Although satellite dishes are in widespread use in the capital city, cable television is banned throughout the country. The country's sole Internet provider, Turkmen Telecom, strictly controls all access to the Internet. The monitoring of e-mail by the state, blocked access to a growing number of Web sites critical of government policy, and high fees have successfully restricted use of the Internet to a small number of organizations and individuals. In April 2005, the government took further steps to limit freedom of information and obstruct communication with the outside world by prohibiting the import and circulation of all foreign print media, including those produced in neighbouring countries. As a result, much of the population, particularly in rural regions, has remained ignorant of the momentous changes occurring in other post-Soviet states.

#### Monitoring by state security

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.

#### International relations

Turkmenistan's neutral foreign policy is enshrined in its constitution. Niyazov had declared that Turkmenistan's open door or permanent neutrality policy precludes joining political or military alliances and entails good relations with the East and the West, though priority will be placed on relations with Central Asian and other Islamic states. Turkmenistan joined the Non-Aligned Movement in 1995. And in 1995 the United Nations General Assembly recognized Turkmenistan's status as a neutral state.

While reasserting the policy of neutrality of his predecessor, Berdymukhammedov has signalled a desire to end Turkmenistan's self-isolation and to repair ties with its Central Asian neighbours. He has also indicated that he is



willing to engage more actively with Russia and reach out to the West.

Turkmenistan is a member of United Nations (UN), International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Islamic Development Bank.

#### Relation with Russia

Turkmenistan is among the few countries whose sovereignty Russia has always respected. Turkmen–Russian relations have rested strictly on business. At the end of his life, Niyazov seemed to show amazing reciprocity towards Russia by letting Gazprom contract virtually all Turkmen gas until 2028 and ridding Ukraine, Russia's main rival, of all possible illusions. Turkmenistan is very important, if not essential, to Russia's foreign policy. The Central Asian country supplies natural gas to Russian energy monopoly Gazprom, which Gazprom then resells at a profit to its European customers and which Russia uses to wield political influence over other countries. Meanwhile, Niyazov's insistence on boycotting all Russian–led regional groupings, like Commonwealth of Independent States, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Eurasian Economic Community, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and his discriminatory policy toward Turkmenistan's 160,000 ethnic Russians led to a cooling of political relations between Ashgabat and Moscow.

When Berdymukhammedov came into power he invited Vladimir Putin and Nursultan Nazarbayev for a summit on energy cooperation on 12 May. He announced to the cabinet that the summit was designed "to open a new chapter in the relations of friendship and cooperation that have been existing for centuries among neighbours that are ready to take advantage of new historical conditions and make those relations even more efficient."

#### Relation with Central Asia countries

In the past Turkmenistan had an uneasy relationship with its neighbours, preferring to avoid regional co–operation. There is potential for serious regional disputes over water supplies, environmental issues, drugs trafficking and organised crime. The relations with Uzbekistan worsened after the Turkmen government accused Uzbekistan of harbouring the opposition leader Shikhmuradov in the residence of the Uzbek ambassador in Turkmenistan during the aftermath of the attack on President Niyazov in 2002. There was a first sign of a gentle thaw in relations on 19 November 2004 when Presidents Niyazov and Karimov met in Bukhara.

By contrast, Berdymukhammedov has clearly indicated that he is willing to engage neighbouring countries. The presidents of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, the prime ministers of Russia and Azerbaijan, and the speaker of the Uzbek parliament were among the many foreign guests who attended his inauguration on February 14. A number of senior Russian and Kazakh government officials recently visited the Turkmen capital and Berdymukhammedov has extended his Uzbek counterpart an invitation to visit Ashgabat.

#### Relation with

US The United States and Turkmenistan disagree about the country's path toward democratic and economic reform. US criticism of the government of Turkmenistan's crackdown against perceived sources of political opposition after the November 2002 motorcade attack led to a marked downturn in bilateral relations between the US and Turkmenistan. However, currently the government of Turkmenistan is interested in engaging with the US in several areas, including security and energy issues.

In 2005 an estimated .3 million budgeted by all US government agencies for assistance programs in Turkmenistan. The US government assists NGO's who work on democratisation and public health. Also the US assists with market reforms and security. The fact that the historic trade and smuggling routes between the North Caucasus, Southwest Asia, and Afghanistan cross Turkmenistan makes the country especially interesting for the US.

#### Relation with the EU

The death of Niyazov was regarded by the EU as an opening for new relations between the EU and Turkmenistan. The fact that Berdymukhammedov announced that several reforms would take place, for example regarding education and internet access, contributed to a more positive attitude of EU towards Turkmenistan. Also contributing was the statement made by Berdymukhammedov that Turkmenistan would continue observing all its international obligations and further pursue a policy of pushing its energy resources to the world market.



In May 1998 the EU signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Turkmenistan, however it is still under ratification by Member States and the European Parliament. In 2004 and 2005, the EU resumed its Joint Committee meetings with under the framework of the 1989 Trade and Cooperation Agreement. Ad-hoc human rights discussions have also been commenced, reflecting the EU's desire to expand its bilateral dialogue with the Turkmen government

In 2005, the EU was the largest source of imports to Turkmenistan, €451 million. In terms of the export of Turkmen goods, the EU was the third largest trading partner, €367. Turkmenistan received €4 million under the Indicative Programme between 2005 and 2006. The emphasis of EU assistance has been upon supporting economic reform and sustainable rural development in the country.

## OPPOSITION MOVEMENTS

### Agzybirlik (Unity)

A small opposition group called Agzybirlik, originally registered in 1989, consists of intellectuals who describe the party program as oriented toward forming a multiparty democratic system according to the Turkish model. Agzybirlik has devoted itself to issues connected with national sovereignty and the replacement of the communist political legacy. After being banned in January 1990, members of Agzybirlik founded a second group called the Party for Democratic Development (PDD), which focused on reforms and political issues. That party's increasing criticism of authoritarianism in the post independence government led to its being banned in 1991. The original Agzybirlik group and PDD jointly publish a newspaper in Moscow called Daynach (Support), distribution of which is prohibited in Turkmenistan. In 1991 these two opposition groups joined with others in a coalition called Gengesh (Conference), aimed at effecting democratic reforms in the republic.

### People's Democratic Movement of Turkmenistan and Gündogar

Boris Shikmuradov is the former minister of foreign affairs of Turkmenistan and leader of the exiled People's Democratic Movement of Turkmenistan. He has lived in exile since November 2001. On 26 December 2002 he was arrested and charged with the attempted assassination of Niyazov. Shikmuradov was subsequently sentenced to life in prison and was forced to confess to the charges on state television. Shikmuradov claimed he had been in the country to plan and lead a civil disobedience movement.

In 2001 Shikmuradov founded Gündogar, one of the most popular internet resources about Turkmenistan. The website averages over five thousand hits per day, for its news and analytic articles as well as its linked news sites.

### Social political movement Watan (Fatherland)

This opposition movement is lead by Khudayberdy Orazov, who is also the founder of the movement. He has lived in exile for several years. The movement has a website on which all the news on the developments in Turkmenistan is posted. For the recent presidential elections the opposition leaders agreed to put forward Orazov as their candidate. Orazov is not only critical of the Turkmen government but also of Russia and the West, who in his opinion do not pressure the Niyazov regime for more reforms.

### Union of Democratic Forces of Turkmenistan

The Union of Democratic Forces of Turkmenistan (UDFT), was established by major political groups of organised Turkmen opposition in October 2003. These opposition movements are Watan Social Political Movement, the United Democratic Opposition of Turkmenistan and the Republican Party of Turkmenistan. They were being driven by the determination to free the country from dictatorship. Also, they believed that the time had come to consolidate the Turkmen democratic opposition. Furthermore, they wanted to introduce a democratic political system in Turkmenistan.

### The Republican Party of Turkmenistan (in exile)

Opposition politician Nurmuhammed Hanamov was minister of economic planning and later ambassador to Israel and Turkey under the dictator Niyazov. In 2002 he fled to Austria. From there he leads the Republican Party of Turkmenistan and observes from afar the political events in his homeland. The party has a website on which it states its values, policy statements and news reports on the situation in Turkmenistan.



## GOVERNMENTAL PARTIES AND MOVEMENTS

In the mid-1990s, Niyazov described opposition groups as lacking both popular support and political programs offering constructive alternatives to existing policy. He has cited these reasons for disqualifying groups from eligibility to register as opposition parties. Insofar as such groups have the potential to promote ethnic or other tensions in society, they may be viewed as illegal, hence subject to being banned under the constitution.

This left room for only one party, namely the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (DPT). This is the governmental party of former President Niyazov and current President Berdymukhamdov. The party was established after the Communist Party of Turkmenistan was renamed the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan in December 1991. Niyazov was confirmed as its chairman. According to its program, the Democratic Party serves as a mother party that dominates political activity. Party propaganda aims at explaining the need for preserving stability, civil peace, and interethnic accord. Party publications boast that its primary organizations operate in every enterprise, organization, and institution, and that its membership includes over 165,000 people, whereas critics claim that most citizens hardly are aware of the party's existence. On 6 August 2007 Berdymukhamdov was elected chairman, he was also elected to be head of the Galkynysh (Revival) movement. The Galkynysh movement works as a forum for all registered institutions and associations. The main goal of this movement is to promote and control the activities of the associations.

Turkmenistan is a one-party system even after the implementation of the new constitution in 2008. It is still not possible to form and legally register a political party, or even a nongovernmental organization, even though the constitutional amendments included an article giving citizens the right to found political parties and public organizations whose activities do not violate other provisions of the constitution. One hopes that people will take the first steps towards founding such parties and organizations in the near future.