



CEPS Commentary/21 December 2006

## Turkmenistan's Uncertain Future

Neil J. Melvin

The sudden death of Saparmurat Niyazov after 21 years of misrule in Turkmenistan represents a challenge for the international community. Under Niyazov, Turkmenistan emerged as one of the world's major gas suppliers. In recent years Ashgabad has been strongly courted by Russia and China in order to ensure access to Turkmenistan's vast natural gas reserves. The EU and the US have also shown increasing interest in the country's energy resources as a means to diversify from dependence on Russia. Given the importance of Turkmenistan as an energy supplier, ensuring stability following Niyazov's death is a priority. At the same time, the leadership transition in Turkmenistan represents a real opportunity to move beyond the strong-man model of political rule that is prevalent in central Asia and to promote a more pluralistic political order in the country. Such a change would have a much needed positive impact inside Turkmenistan but could also be a stimulus for reform within Central Asia as a whole.

Niyazov's legacy is not an easy one. Niyazov came to power in Turkmenistan in 1985 when he was appointed first party secretary of the republican communist party as part of Mikhail Gorbachev's effort to promote a new generation of leaders in Soviet central Asia. In 1991 he became president following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Niyazov soon began to remodel the country around his personal vision of independent Turkmenistan. He was appointed Turkmenbashi, Father of the Turkmen, and he introduced measures to isolate the population from the rest of the world under the pretext of ensuring Turkmenistan's 'neutral' status. The vast wealth brought to the country from its hydrocarbon resources allowed Turkmenbashi to launch massive projects, including rebuilding the capital and the construction of numerous monuments glorifying the president and his family. Massive public spending in the capital failed to mask, however, the chronic poverty and collapse of the education system in the rest of the country.

Niyazov built up a political order based on repression and fear. In his final years, the president's rule became ever more autocratic and characterised by the idiosyncrasies often associated with absolute dictators. Power in Turkmenistan came to rest on the president's ability to wield the security forces and his personal ideology for the country – encapsulated in the *Ruhnama*, the spiritual guide for the Turkmen written by Niyazov. By the time of Niyazov's death, virtually all significant political figures had been eliminated – with many dismissed during televised meetings of the cabinet.

While Turkmenistan has deteriorated internally, the country's importance as an energy supplier has increased dramatically. Moscow, in particular, has made strenuous efforts to secure favourably priced Turkmen gas for Gazprom in order to ensure cheap energy for the Russian domestic market. In April 2006, Beijing and Ashgabad concluded an agreement to build a pipeline to supply Turkmen natural gas to the energy-hungry

Chinese economy. Prior to his death, Niyazov had been in discussions with the US about the possibility of pipelines across the Caspian sea, as well as through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India. During a visit to Ashgabad in November by German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Niyazov invited Germany to participate in the construction of new natural gas pipeline to bring gas from a recently discovered "super-giant" field to Europe.

With Niyazov gone, Turkmenistan faces an uncertain future. There is no immediately obvious heir, while Niyazov's personal style of rule has undermined the political institutions that could help to steer the country toward a peaceful political transition.

Despite Niyazov's stress on Turkmen national identity, tribal and local loyalties continue to exert a strong pull in the country and are likely to be an important consideration in the political succession. Members of the opposition, most of who are in exile, have indicated the hope that they can return to the country, while attention is also likely to return to key political prisoners, such as the former foreign minister Boris Shikmuradov. Leading figures in the Turkmen government – notably vice prime minister and minister of health Berdymukhamedov (who has been made acting president), minister of defence Mamedgel'diev or even foreign minister Meredov have all been mentioned as possible successors. With so much at stake, external interest in the future of Turkmenistan will be high with Moscow and Beijing keen to ensure that existing agreements remain in force and that the country's new leadership is friendly towards them.

Against this background of uncertainty, the international community needs to move quickly and be united in calling for a transparent and democratic political transition in the country. Orderly elections conducted in accordance with the international standards to which Turkmenistan has committed itself as a participating state of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and under the observation of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, are a first step. But the international community must go beyond the elections to work with the new leadership to build rule of law and genuine political pluralism in the country.

The European Union has signalled that it will use the forthcoming EU German presidency to develop a strategic approach to the states of central Asia. Working with the new authorities in Ashgabad to promote serious reform ought to be a part of this strategy. The recently appointed EU special representative for central Asia should take the lead in developing an immediate dialogue with the interim administration in Ashgabad focused on ensuring democratic elections, releasing political prisoners and opening up the country.

The EU and the US, in partnership with the OSCE and the UN, should signal their commitment to the development of a substantial long-term partnership with Turkmenistan to strengthen the country's economic, social and political systems, subject to steady progress on human rights, rule of law, freedom of the media and political pluralism. Russia and China ought to share the international commitment to building a stable and open Turkmenistan, and thereby safeguard Turkmenistan's role as a predictable and reliable energy supplier.

Turkmenistan is not alone in Central Asia in experiencing authoritarian rule. Neighbouring Uzbekistan is one of the most repressive regimes in the world. As other countries in the region, notably Kazakhstan, look to forge a new relationship with the west, progress in Turkmenistan would help to isolate further the failing regimes of central Asia's worst autocrats.

*Neil Melvin is Senior Visiting Fellow at CEPS. An edited version of this commentary was first published in the [Financial Times](#)*