

Research Paper

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Turkmenistan: Power, Politics and Petro-Authoritarianism



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Executive Summary

Turkmenistan has established a reputation as one of the twenty-first century's most repressive regimes. The former Soviet republic was led by 'founding father' Saparmyrat Nyýazow from 1985 until his death in 2006. Hopes in the West that his successor, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, might introduce meaningful political, economic and social reforms have been disappointed.

At the same time, Turkmenistan contains some of the world's largest natural gas fields and has increasingly become recognized as an important global energy player. It is one of a handful of producer countries to have significant volumes of gas available for export, as well as an active interest in diversifying export routes, and is now China's largest foreign supplier of natural gas by a considerable margin. In practical terms, however, it faces considerable challenges in every direction in getting its gas to market. Given the competing resource agendas of a host of countries with an interest in the future of the region's gas supply lines – Russia, Iran, China, Azerbaijan and Turkey, among others – developments in Turkmenistan's foreign relations, and the outcome of the country's planned long-distance pipeline projects promising new connections to external markets, will be keenly watched.

As in some other resource-rich countries, the leadership of Turkmenistan is able to maintain its rule through the centralization and control of revenues from hydrocarbons exports, which it uses to finance pervasive security services and patronage networks. The sustainability of this brand of petroauthoritarianism is made all the easier by Turkmenistan's relatively small population and by the state's monopolization of the natural resource base.

This paper argues that power structures and domestic and foreign policy-making in Turkmenistan are primarily aimed at regime self-preservation. While President Berdimuhamedow and his small elite circle might possess the agency to transform the country's domestic and foreign politics, they have no incentive to do so as long as they are able to meet societal aspirations and control dissent.

Falling global energy prices, the slump in the Russian rouble and a slowdown in China's economy have not yet prompted Turkmenistan's leadership to review its long-standing policy of refusing to grant buyers equity stakes in upstream fields. Only in the event of a dramatic economic downturn might it reconsider its current stance of limiting production-sharing agreements for foreign firms to offshore oil and gas blocks.

Although in recent years the government has whittled away steadily at the extensive state subsidy system put in place in 1993, this has not resulted in any significant popular unrest. Voluntary reforms are not going to take place, and large-scale popular unrest is unlikely without systemic changes in society. Key questions addressed in this paper are why authoritarian, presidential rule is so deeply entrenched and why the country has experienced a near-total absence of liberalization, in either form or substance, since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Continuity of rule: still awaiting regime transition

The established system of power in Turkmenistan has shown remarkable continuity. After nine years under Berdimuhamedow's leadership, the country remains unreformed. The ruling tenets of independent Turkmenistan's founding father and former president, Saparmyrat Nyýazow, are unchanged, even if the current president has adopted a number of measures aimed at reversing some of his predecessor's most destructive policies and has also invested considerable sums in the country's infrastructure. The succession process underscored both the durability of the system and its ability to perpetuate itself, even in the event of the death of a long-reigning autocrat. This apparent primacy of structural factors is not culturally or historically determined, however, but premised on simple, vested interests.

The country is unlikely to see similar people's uprisings to those of the Arab Spring, much less the sort of revolution witnessed in Batista's Cuba or the Shah's Iran. Turkmenistan is a rentier state that uses its resource wealth to counter dissent and lower pressures for democratization. An acute shortage of skilled personnel, a small intellectual elite and frequent elite purges, the degradation of the educational system, an underdeveloped industrial base and extensive informal elite networks combine to obstruct the push for liberalization. Opposition groups – in the country and in exile – are weak and lack international backing. Not least, an underdeveloped civil society and lack of networking capabilities make it difficult to channel opposition into collective protest.

Domestic politics

Personnel policy is a key area of potential change. As in the Nyýazow era, personnel reshuffles still occur regularly, but mid-level officials, in particular, are retaining their positions for longer, potentially allowing them to cultivate their own power bases. In the long term, the creation of a 'middle layer' of civil servants could undermine the president's ability to streamline elite groups and keep power firmly under centralized control. Only the executive branch exercises any real power, despite constitutional stipulations regarding the formal roles of the executive, legislative and judicial branches. Despite greater electoral choice, elections and referendums at both the local and the national level in independent Turkmenistan have retained many of the features of their Soviet-era precedents, such as full participation and near-unanimous support for the winner.

Regional loyalties still hold sway, despite efforts at nation-building. Initiatives to integrate the country around the figure of the leader and to promote national cohesion are intended to dampen potential sources of opposition or internal schisms, whether of a regional, tribal or inter-ethnic nature. Consolidation has been somewhat undermined, however, by the predominance of members of the president's Ahalteke tribe in governing institutions and business networks, creating the perception of its status as *primus inter pares*. The state maintains a *de facto* policy of promoting only those media and performing arts productions that feature 'national' culture. Despite the introduction of English language as a compulsory subject in schools, the downgrading of Russian as the *lingua franca* is gradually transforming Turkmenistan into a monolingual society, which is likely to make it easier for the authorities to maintain the country's insularity.

Society and the economy

The *raison d'être* of Turkmenistan's leadership is self-preservation. This is widely equated with the prevention of dissent, with the result that the activities of the citizenry are micro-managed and civil liberties curtailed. Nine years of Berdimuhamedow's rule have not brought notable improvements in the sphere of human rights. Nor has civil society changed significantly, and the vast majority of public associations still either support the government or receive direct government support. Virtually all media are owned by the government, censored and stripped of objective content. The country has one of the world's lowest official internet penetration rates, and service is unreliable and slow. But while the leadership has the capacity to clamp down effectively on unregistered non-governmental organizations, cracks have appeared in the firewall surrounding Turkmenistan's cyberspace that will prove harder to plug, owing to the advent of smartphones, social networking and citizen journalism. As a consequence, new media technologies are likely to pose ever greater challenges to the leadership's authoritarian stance.

The closed nature of polity and society in Turkmenistan has made it difficult to definitively ascertain the presence or absence of Islamist groups, giving rise to speculation. However, the pervasive nature of folk Islam, the Soviet-era repression of religion and the leadership's attempts to co-opt Islam as a fundamental component of its overarching nation-building campaign have acted as barriers to a rapid growth of Islamist ideology. Within the economy, bribe-taking is the norm. Gas dollars are used by the elite to pay off the patronage networks that, in turn, strive to perpetuate the status quo in order to protect their own vested interests. Other than a vague breakdown by sector, virtually no information is available to the public on the budget and government spending, much less on spending from extra-budgetary funds. No government agency publishes information on hydrocarbons revenues. Corruption and the general lack of transparency in the regulatory system have created a difficult climate for foreign investment, and decisions to allow it are still politically driven and negotiated on a case-by-case basis with the highest leadership echelons. Foreign companies remain vulnerable to political interference and the arbitrary expropriation of assets.

Berdimuhamedow's regime has invested heavily in infrastructure and increased spending on healthcare and education. However, many of the projects undertaken have tended to be of a showcase nature, while less has been spent on improving basic amenities in the rural regions. The number of students in higher education has grown dramatically in recent years, however, almost reaching the levels of the late Soviet period, thereby affirming the leadership's recognition of the need for more technical professionals.

Foreign relations

Central to Turkmenistan's foreign policy is the doctrine of 'permanent neutrality', a concept that has allowed the country to strengthen its independence by developing transit routes and markets for hydrocarbons exports with a variety of states, while staying relatively aloof from the geopolitical ambitions of its unpredictable neighbours. The amorphous nature of Turkmenistan's neutrality has allowed the country's leadership to 'spin' the concept to suit seemingly contradictory circumstances, particularly with regard to strategic cooperation with the United States in Afghanistan. Increasingly

sophisticated public relations initiatives have led to assertions among some observers that Turkmenistan under Berdimuhamedow has ended its isolation to become a cooperative regional player, but there is little evidence to support this view.

Turkmenistan's primary aim is to limit interference from external actors and the potential imposition of foreign ideologies, while still increasing its scope for foreign trade and the diversification of its gas export routes. Despite a marked increase in state diplomacy under Berdimuhamedow, Turkmenistan has taken few genuine steps to engage with the international community. As under the previous regime, the current leadership has displayed a decided reluctance to participate in international organizations or conduct foreign relations that could impinge on its ability to act independently or could subject it to international scrutiny. However, in a notable change from the Nyýazow era, in recent years Berdimuhamedow's aspirations to position Turkmenistan as a trade hub in the wider region have led to closer contact with all of the country's Central Asian neighbours owing to a significant increase in transport and energy projects.

Energy politics: Turkmenistan at the forefront of the Eurasian scene

Shortly after Russian demand for Turkmen hydrocarbons dropped precipitously in 2009, the Trans-Asia Gas Pipeline came online to carry gas flows to China. Paradoxically, the resultant windfall has thus far acted as a disincentive for Berdimuhamedow's government to liberalize its policy of denying upstream access to major energy companies. As a result, the country has yet to capitalize fully on its position as a 'gas giant' by entering into new partnerships that would allow it to develop its potential and further diversify its customer base. While exports to China should continue to provide a reliable stream of revenues, the slump in world energy prices and the cessation of gas exports to Russia and possibly to Iran mean that Turkmenistan still needs to hedge its bets. Furthermore, China will always seek to maintain a diversified portfolio of gas suppliers, and major changes in Turkmen–Chinese energy relations could ensue if Beijing were to demand a reduction in price or to embark on its own shale gas revolution.

China has adopted an integrated approach to energy projects in Turkmenistan that has allowed its firms to explore, produce and guarantee transport and a market while creating spin-off projects within the country and beyond. Not least, China's state-driven policy – and the symbiotic relationship between its oil and gas companies and its policy-makers – has enabled Beijing to finance projects upfront and offer Aşgabat a 'package deal' in a way that Western companies cannot do. In no area does the clash of core values with regard to energy diversification strategy between Turkmenistan and the West manifest itself as strongly as in the development of a Trans-Caspian Pipeline (TCP) to carry gas from the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea to the South Caucasus and onwards via the Southern Gas Corridor to Turkey and Europe. Security and other risks continue to impede the long-stalled Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) pipeline project.

In theory, Turkmenistan could export gas to Turkey, Europe and the Indian subcontinent via its southern route to Iran. While the announcement of a framework agreement in April 2015 between the E3/EU+3 and Iran on the latter's nuclear programme could herald Iran's opening (and boost prospects for Europe to diversify its supply with Iranian gas), in practice Iran has no real interest in re-exporting Turkmen gas, given its own huge reserves located in its southern regions. Consequently, in the long term Turkmenistan is more likely to view Iran as a competitor for the

same gas markets than as a trade facilitator, as witnessed by Iran's stated interest in building a rival to TAPI that would deliver gas to the Indian subcontinent.

Principles for engagement

Western policy-makers continue to focus on the 'isolate vs engage' debate with regard to Turkmenistan. Yet the reality is that the scope for Western governments and organizations to use diplomatic, economic or defence incentives has been minimal, given the long-standing strategy of the Turkmen authorities to limit any form of leverage that could be employed by external actors. Consequently, Turkmenistan has historically shunned efforts by Western governments to make human rights reform and compliance with the recommendations of international bodies a prerequisite for cooperation, and sustained external pressure has proved ineffective. Nevertheless, some Western governments have continued to find ways to work with the Turkmen authorities on specific projects to encourage improvements, often in conjunction with the UN and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Attempts by Western countries to promote democracy or to reach out to civil society engender suspicion on the part of Turkmenistan's regime. Moreover, in part owing to the protracted wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Western powers have lost credibility in the eyes of many Turkmen and other Central Asians, and the promotion of a democracy agenda has led to charges of double standards. Not least, many Turkmen tend to regard democracy as an empty ideological framework.

Efforts to foster development therefore need to be made in relatively apolitical areas, such as agriculture, healthcare and education. Change should be sought at the level of informal institutions and attitudes. Useful approaches by Western governments and international organizations should include efforts to:

- Encourage the Turkmen authorities to increase transparency and accountability with regard to hydrocarbons revenues by making relevant documents publicly available. Specifically, the financial assets of the State Agency for the Management and Use of Hydrocarbon Resources should be disclosed and its unfettered ability to engage in off-budget spending should be addressed; where possible, improvements should be linked to further cooperation. The publication of the governing principles for the operation of foreign-exchange funds and the Stabilization Fund should also be encouraged.
- Bring to the attention of Western investors any legal regulations or propositions from the government of Turkmenistan likely to facilitate corruption.
- Promote transparency in the health system and exert pressure on authorities to report to relevant bodies accurate and comprehensive health-related data, in particular on drug use and communicable diseases. Cease the practice of reporting as fact health data that have been manipulated by the government of Turkmenistan – a phenomenon that has been reported by Médecins Sans Frontières.

- Raise concerns about human rights and religious freedom during bilateral meetings with the government of Turkmenistan and explore ways in which Turkmenistan can implement laws and practices to comply with international human rights standards. Encourage Western embassies and the field offices of international organizations to maintain active contact with human rights activists and ensure review of Turkmenistan's record in appropriate international forums. Monitor and document violations of human rights in Turkmenistan; on occasion the raising of individual cases has brought results.
- Encourage Turkmen authorities to provide information 'on the ground' in their reports to UN committees and affiliated human rights bodies, rather than just submitting excerpts from legislation.
- Retain the designation by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom of Turkmenistan as a 'country of particular concern'. Encourage the government of Turkmenistan to end the ban on unregistered religious activity and lift the restrictions on religious education and material.
- Continue to press for greater access by the International Committee of the Red Cross to Turkmenistan's prisons and prison colonies.
- Discourage the compulsory participation of schoolchildren, students, teachers and other civil servants in state-sponsored events, such as ceremonies and greetings for high-ranking visitors, and in annual harvesting.
- Seek permission for experienced Western journalists to work for designated periods alongside local editors in Turkmen newsrooms to provide practical guidelines and 'hands-on' advice, rather than simply offering media training courses whose basic tenets local journalists find difficult to implement.
- Support international broadcasters, such as Radio Liberty, the BBC, the Voice of America and Deutsche Welle, to maintain and possibly increase funding for Turkmen- and Russian language broadcasts to Turkmenistan, given their value as one of the few sources of alternative information for the population.
- Attempt to work with the Turkmen authorities to promote people-to-people linkages. Recommend joint educational and cultural projects, including the establishment of joint schools along the lines of the former Turkish-Turkmen lycées. Develop educational possibilities outside the country for students and specialists from Turkmenistan by increasing funding for exchange programmes. Embassies should facilitate the issuance of visas and scholarships for specialists – particularly in the fields of public health and education – who are intending to study or train in Western countries.
- Offer regularly to resume the US Peace Corps programme, which operated in the country from 1993 until 2012, and which was closed owing to increased government wariness.

- Recommend that Turkmen authorities should be invited to cooperate with countries such as Israel that practise efficient water usage, to renovate and upgrade existing irrigation systems. Turkmenistan has by far the highest rate of water consumption per capita in the world (5,300 cubic metres per person per year, or around three-and-a-half times the consumption rate in the United States), which has caused it to be labelled ‘the globe’s biggest water waster’.¹

Post-Soviet Turkmenistan has been marked by the striking continuity of its political and social systems, despite the personalized nature of its authoritarian rule. After Nyýazow’s death in December 2006, the State Security Council appeared to guide the elite pact that appointed Berdimuhamedow as acting president effortlessly and quickly, giving little sign of internal disagreements. Even the chief propagandists responsible for promoting Nyýazow’s cult of personality managed to move seamlessly from perpetuating the cult of one Turkmen president to perpetuating the cult of another. If a transition from Turkmenistan’s authoritarian regime were to take place, it would be more likely to result in a new brand of authoritarianism, akin to the neopatrimonial forms currently in evidence in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, rather than in a form of democracy.

In a landmark article, Barbara Geddes, a pioneer on theories of democratization, has written that ‘one of the few stylized facts to emerge from studies of regime transition is that democracy is more likely in more developed countries’.² Pressure for democratic reform and liberalization is likely to arise in Turkmenistan only if and when a collection of social and systemic changes are in place that are fuelled by economic development, including higher levels of education, occupational specialization and urbanization, and a concomitant increase in the number of intellectual elites. In the long term, albeit very gradually, modern communications technologies could spawn a new set of societal aspirations. In the near term, however, petro-authoritarianism in Turkmenistan is likely to continue to be fuelled by a combination of the country’s large natural gas reserves, its small population and steady global demand for natural gas.

¹ Central Asian States are World’s Leading Water Wasters’, Eurasianet, 7 October 2014, www.eurasianet.org/node/70336; World Bank, World Development Indicators, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=2&country=TKM&series=&period=>.

² Barbara Geddes, ‘What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 2, 1999, pp. 115–44, at p. 117.

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Cover image: Turkmenistan's commanders-in-chief salute during a military parade during celebrations marking Turkmenistan's Independence Day, in Ashgabat on 27 October 2012. The energy-rich state holds the world's fourth-largest gas reserves.

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