



CRS Report for Congress

Turkmenistan's Political Succession: Developments and Implications

Jim Nichol

Specialist in Russian and Eurasian Affairs
Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division

Summary

This report discusses the political succession in Turkmenistan following the death of long-time authoritarian leader Saparamurad Niyazov in December 2006. Implications for Turkmenistan and U.S. interests in Central Asia are examined. This report may be updated. Related products include CRS Report RL33458, *Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests*, by Jim Nichol.

Introduction

Turkmenistan has made little or no progress in democratization since gaining its independence in 1991, according to the U.S. State Department. Saparamurad Niyazov ruled Turkmenistan since 1989, first as head of the Soviet Union's Turkmen Communist Party, then as president of independent Turkmenistan. The country's May 1992 constitution granted Niyazov overwhelming powers to rule by decree as head of state and government. In December 1999, constitutional amendments made Niyazov president for life. According to several assessments, he was among the world's most authoritarian rulers, and his regime was highly corrupt and responsible for serious human rights abuses. The regime increasingly restricted contacts by citizens with the outside world. Sizeable natural gas exports provided major revenue but poverty reportedly was still widespread.¹

According to the Bush Administration, the United States has "strategic and economic interests" in Turkmenistan and "must remain engaged" with the country to gain its "critical cooperation" in reducing threats to regional stability, including terrorism and illegal trafficking in drugs, weapons of mass destruction, and persons. Turkmenistan borders countries of security concern such as Afghanistan and Iran and the country "serves as a valuable assistance corridor to Afghanistan." Although the United States has

¹ U.S. Department of State. *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2005*, March 2006; Freedom House. *Freedom in the World 2006*, September 2006; Transparency International. *Corruption Perceptions Index 2006*, November 2006.

limited its assistance somewhat to Turkmenistan because of its failure to reform, some U.S. aid has been used to help Turkmenistan “achieve political stability, independence, and integration into the global economy” and to promote security cooperation “in the interests of both countries.”² Turkmenistan supported U.S.-led coalition overflights for Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan, land shipments of supplies for OEF, and subsequent reconstruction efforts. However, U.S.-Turkmen ties were strained at times, particularly after Turkmen authorities alleged that U.S. officials (and those of Russia, Uzbekistan, and Turkey) might have been involved in an alleged 2002 coup attempt. Turkmenistan also objected to criticism from the United States and others in the international community about human rights abuses and the failure to democratize.

Niyazov’s Death and the Political Succession

Days after Turkmenistan’s ruling Democratic Party voted to make its head, President Niyazov, its “eternal” party leader, he died on December 21, 2006, at age 66, ostensibly from a heart attack. The morning of Niyazov’s death, the State Security Council³ and cabinet ministers named deputy prime minister and health minister Gurbanguly Malikgulyyewic Berdimuhammedow the acting president. It was also announced that the speaker of the Mejlis (legislature) — who constitutionally should have become the acting president — had been arrested on vague charges. In an address to the nation, Berdimuhammedow urged citizens to remain calm and announced that Turkmen domestic and foreign policies would not change. To help ensure peace, air flights and train traffic into the country were halted and internet links severed, tightening the country’s international isolation. Defense and security forces reportedly were deployed and citizens who were viewed as dissidents were warned not to cause trouble.⁴

The Khalk Maslakhaty (KhM or People’s Council, a supreme legislative-executive-regional conclave) convened on December 26 and changed the constitution to make legitimate Berdimuhammedow’s position as acting president. Having long refused ostensible requests from the late Niyazov to plan a future presidential election, the KhM quickly approved an electoral law and announced that the next presidential election would be held on February 11, 2007. Among other provisions, the law states that only citizens born in Turkmenistan between the age of 40 to 70, who have resided in country for the past 15 years, and who are officials or members of selected NGOs are eligible to run. The 15-year residency requirement appeared designed to block expatriate politicians from eligibility, and the minimum age was lowered from before to make Berdimuhammedow eligible to run. The KhM designated six candidates for the presidential election, one from each region, all of whom were government officials: Deputy Minister of the Oil and Gas Industry and Mineral Resources Ishanguly Nuriyev; First Deputy Head of the Dashoguz regional administration Amanyaz Atajikov; Abadan Mayor Orazmurad Garajayev;

² U.S. Department of State. *Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations, FY2007*; and *U.S. Government Assistance to and Cooperative Activities with Eurasia: FY2005 Annual Report*.

³ A presidential advisory body formed by Niyazov after the 2002 coup attempt to discuss national security threats. It is variously reported to be composed of deputy prime ministers, heads of the presidential security service and of the defense, foreign, police, and intelligence agencies, the prosecutor-general, and heads of regions.

⁴ *Turkmenistan: Post-Dictatorship Blues*, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Dec. 22, 2006.

Turkmenbashi Mayor Ashirniyaz Pomanov; Head of the Karabekaul district administration Muhammetnazar Gurbanov; and Berdimuhammedow. The ruling Democratic Party endorsed Berdimuhammedow as its candidate, thereby seemingly anointing him as Niyazov's heir-apparent.

The United Democratic Opposition of Turkmenistan (UDOT), a bloc of expatriate parties and groups, met soon after Niyazov's death and proposed Hudayberdi Orazow as their candidate in the upcoming election. Although this candidacy was ignored by Turkmen officials, UDOT urged Turkmen citizens to write-in Orazow as their choice for president.

Beginning his campaign, Berdimuhammedow asserted that the upcoming election would help mark the "undeviating ... democratization of society, the broadening of openness and the enlistment of people's efforts in the administration of the State." At the same time, he appeared to acknowledge that at least some of the late Niyazov's policies were not popular. He announced that he would restore secondary education to ten years of study and higher education to five years, boost educational and medical exchange programs, provide access to the internet "to all Turkmen," and revise Niyazov's cuts to pensions. While promising not to raise taxes, Berdimuhammedow pledged to continue several popular subsidy programs, including the provision of free natural gas, electricity, salt, and water, and low-priced bread, housing, and public transport. Perhaps an admission of widespread unemployment, he stated that job creation would be a priority and pledged to support small and medium-sized business development. He also mentioned a commitment to "free labor," in a country where citizens allegedly are pressured to help in the harvest.

Berdimuhammedow is widely expected to easily win election. Some observers suggest that the late Niyazov's lingering cult of personality would have ensured an overwhelming and enthusiastic popular vote for Berdimuhammedow as the heir apparent — in a free and fair race — even without any moves by Berdimuhammedow's supporters to restrict the field of candidates and otherwise control the electoral process.

Implications for Turkmenistan

Widespread poverty and unemployment, a recent wheat harvest shortfall, and governmental weakness and corruption raise concerns about stability. In the weeks before Niyazov's death, there were anecdotal reports of bread shortages, but apparently the interim leaders moved quickly to rectify this source of popular discontent. Berdimuhammedow appeared to acknowledge widespread agricultural problems when he ordered a working group to draw up a long-term reform strategy and asserted that "it is necessary to make the sector viable and profitable both for farmers and the state," in order to maximize harvests. In security matters, Berdimuhammedow also appeared to admit that there were readiness problems when he pledged on January 5 that "we will take every step to strengthen material and technical provision of our national army and other law-enforcement bodies.... [I]t is very important ... not [to] have any kind of shortage. Instead, they should be provided with sufficient food and ammunition."⁵ The challenge of corruption was underscored by a report issued in early 2006 by the NGO Global

⁵ *ITAR-TASS*, Jan. 5, 2007; *BBC*, Jan. 6, 2007.

Witness, which alleged that the late Niyazov personally controlled a vast portion of the wealth generated from natural gas exports. The NGO raised concerns that organized crime groups were involved in these exports and urged the international community to be wary of trading with Turkmenistan.⁶

Some observers have argued that the Turkmen government's actions since Niyazov's death may be harbingers of liberalization. They point out that for the first time in Turkmenistan's history, citizens will be offered alternative choices in a presidential election, even if only government officials are running. The political campaign has provided some possible signs of a slightly more open climate for political opinion. All the candidates, while pledging to continue the late "Great Leader's" policies, nonetheless speak of reforms they would implement if elected, perhaps indicative of widespread popular grievances. Gurbanov pledged greater financial support for Hajj travelers (most Turkmen belong to the Sunni branch of Islam). Pomanov promised greater aid for agriculture and support for youth and sports activities. Atajikov stated that he would "once and for all give private land ownership to farmers."⁷ These observers also suggest that Berdimuhammedow's initial policy announcements may indicate a progressive political orientation that may result in a less isolationist and authoritarian country. Such pronouncements include a pledge at a campaign stop on January 5 that if elected, "I will do my best to turn Turkmenistan into ... a democratic country where people enjoy freedom and every condition to work and to rest, and where justice, peace and friendship dominate."⁸

Other observers discount such perceptions of liberalization. Berdimuhammedow's pledge to continue Niyazov's policies may not bode well for human rights reforms, they argue. They also point out that Berdimuhammedow officiated over such policies as the near-destruction of medical care, despite his own credentials as a dentist. Ominous human rights developments in recent days include the arrest and disappearance of environmentalist Andrey Zatoka on December 17 and oppositionist Nurberdi Nurmamedow on December 23, just after the latter reportedly had been suggested as a presidential candidate by his supporters. These observers also caution that since Berdimuhammedow and other officials continue to endorse the Rukhnama (a spiritual guide allegedly written by Niyazov), religious rights may continue to suffer. Turkmen media shifted almost seamlessly from exhaustive coverage of Niyazov to reporting on Berdimuhammedow, perhaps raising the specter of a new "cult of personality," these observers warn. Few analysts, however, think that Berdimuhammedow or his replacement will be able to or want to re-create the late Niyazov's idiosyncratic regime.⁹

Some observers have criticized the succession process as a "palace coup," since Berdimuhammedow and his supporters orchestrated post hoc changes to the constitution to give putative legitimacy to his takeover as acting president and his candidacy in the

⁶ Global Witness. *It's a Gas: Funny Business in the Turkmen-Ukraine Gas Trade*, April 2006.

⁷ *ITAR-TASS*, Jan. 9, 2007; *RFE/RL Newslines*, Jan. 10, 2007.

⁸ "Acting Leader Pledges to Build 'Democratic' Turkmenistan," *BBC*, Jan. 6, 2007.

⁹ Felix Corley, "What Hope for Religious Freedom?" *Forum 18 News Service*, Dec. 21, 2006.

presidential election.¹⁰ A few observers suggest that Berdimuhammedow may be only a figurehead, or is ruling in tandem with the head of Niyazov's presidential guard, Akmurat Rejepov. They argue that constitutional changes and other actions have indicated that the State Security Council headed by Rejepov is now the dominant force, eclipsing the legislature and presidency.¹¹

Implications for U.S. Policy

The Administration appears to have cautiously considered that Berdimuhammedow's Turkmenistan might prove to be less isolationist and authoritarian, that human rights might improve, and the country might seek to boost trade ties with the outside world, including by building energy export pipelines. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher headed the U.S. delegation to the December 24 funeral to signal this U.S. interest in "a new beginning" to U.S.-Turkmen relations and to offer U.S. assistance in reforms "if they're ready." He called for "a smooth and peaceful transition of power, but stated that the United States would not "lay down a blueprint" of reforms for Turkmenistan to follow."¹² He admitted that he did not have great expectations that the prospective presidential election would be free and fair, but praised Berdimuhammedow's proposals to reform education, expand exchange programs, and expand access to the internet as contributing eventually to a more open society. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on December 28 voiced similar hopes of revitalized bilateral relations and U.S. interest in "advanc[ing] a stable, democratic, and prosperous future for Turkmenistan."¹³

Boucher stated that the United States "would like to see Turkmenistan be able to develop its resources, its oil and gas reserves in a market fashion that gets them a market price for their energy.... that's where the idea of multiple pipelines, multiple outlets, [and] multiple options is really a question of how to secure the sovereignty and independence of the nation."¹⁴ Some observers have warned that instability in Turkmenistan could disrupt its sizeable gas exports to Russia, and since these supplies permit Russia to export more of its own gas to Europe, such disruptions could have a ripple effect in Europe.¹⁵

¹⁰ The Turkmen Ministry of Foreign Affairs denounced such criticism in Russian media as "not corresponding to reality" and as "provocative." The Ministry also stressed that "the situation all over Turkmenistan is calm and stable. Facilities and organizations are functioning normally and the people are provided with food products, medicines and other necessary services. Wages, pensions and allowances are being paid in time, and social services are being provided properly." CEP20061229950018

¹¹ Slavomir Horak, "Turkmenistan's Succession: Welcome to Berdymuhammedow's World," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, Jan. 10, 2007.

¹² On December 21, 2006, the U.S. Embassy in Turkmenistan expressed condolences and stated that the "United States hopes for a peaceful, smooth, constitutional succession."

¹³ U.S. Department of State. *Interview of Assistant Secretary ... Boucher by Najia Badykova of VOA-Russia*, January 5, 2007; U.S. Embassy, Ashkhabad. *Interview of Assistant Secretary ... Boucher with Dimitri Kirsinov of ITAR-TASS*, Jan. 5, 2007; *Secretary of State ... Sends Her Condolences on President Niyazov's Death*, Dec. 28, 2006.

¹⁴ Interview by Najia Badykova of VOA-Russia.

¹⁵ Golnaz Esfandiari, "Turkmenistan: Could Niyazov's Death Lead To Political Struggle," (continued...)

Such a risk, as well as the possible opportunities of a Turkmenistan more oriented toward the world economy, might contribute to a greater EU focus on Turkmenistan as part of an energy diversification strategy. Turkmenistan's Minister of Oil, Gas and Mineral Resources Gurbanmyrat Atayew on December 28 reassured foreign gas customers that the country was fulfilling its commitments on natural gas exports "without delay and in full volume." Berdimuhammedow on January 5, 2007, indicated an interest in enhancing Turkmenistan's sovereignty by diversifying its energy export routes, including by building proposed trans-Caspian and Turkmen-Pakistan pipelines.

Some observers have criticized the Administration for not pushing harder on the interim Turkmen government to include opposition candidates in the election, and for not moving to find and freeze any possible personal assets of Niyazov in the United States. They also have urged the Administration to insist on progress in democratization and respecting human rights as conditions for closer relations.¹⁶ Underlining these concerns, U.S. analyst Martha Olcott has warned that Berdimuhammedow may be insincere in promising reforms. She argues that his aim may be to get Western governments to pay less heed to exiled opposition politicians and to gain support "for a very nondemocratic constitution modified in a very nondemocratic way, and to validate an election in which the electoral process was flawed from the beginning."¹⁷

These critics also warn that Turkmenistan's participation in the Global War on Terrorism might change. Niyazov had supported U.S.-led coalition operations in Afghanistan against the Taliban and al Qaeda. A more pro-Russian leadership may join Russia in calling for ending U.S. and allied access to bases in Central Asia. Niyazov also had appeared successful in preventing Islamic extremists from infiltrating from neighboring Iran and Afghanistan or otherwise gaining adherents. However, political instability in Turkmenistan could increase the threat of Islamic terrorism, according to some observers.¹⁸

Congress has raised concerns about Turkmenistan's poor record of democratization and respect for human rights in hearings and other legislative action. The 110th Congress possibly might consider whether to boost or change the focus of U.S. assistance if the Berdimuhammedow government pursues reforms. Alternatively, sanctions or other forms of disapproval might be debated if the Berdimuhammedow government's human rights and democratization efforts remain inadequate. Other concerns may include the continuation of U.S.-Turkmen anti-terrorism assistance, the possible extension of humanitarian aid to address purported Turkmen food shortages and other urgent quality-of-life needs, and the possible impact of Turkmenistan's regime change on Western energy security.

¹⁵ (...continued)

Instability?" *RFE/RL*, Dec. 21, 2006; Jeremy Bransten, "Turkmenistan: Energy Analyst Discusses Impact Of Niyazov's Death," *RFE/RL*, Dec. 21, 2006.

¹⁶ Kate Watters, *A New Era for Turkmenistan?* International Relations Center, Jan. 9, 2007.

¹⁷ Ilan Greenberg, "Turkmen Leader Proposes Vast Change to Lift Isolation," *New York Times*, Jan. 5, 2007, p. A9.

¹⁸ "A Bad Father of the Turkmen," *Economist*, Jan. 6, 2007.