

# Turkmenistan

by Annette Bohr

*Capital:* Ashgabat  
*Population:* 6.5 million  
*GDP/capita:* US\$5,326  
*Ethnic Groups:* Turkmen (85.0%), Uzbek (5.0%),  
Russian (4.0%), other (6.0%)

*The economic and social data on this page were taken from the following sources:*

**GDP/capita, Population:** *Transition Report 2006: Finance in Transition* (London, UK: European Bank for Re-construction and Development, 2006).

**Ethnic Groups:** *CIA World Fact Book 2007* (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, 2007).

## Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

	1999	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Electoral Process	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Civil Society	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Independent Media	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Governance*	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	7.00	n/a	n/a	n/a
National Democratic Governance	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	7.00	7.00	7.00
Local Democratic Governance	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	7.00	7.00	7.00
Judicial Framework and Independence	6.75	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Corruption	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.50	6.75	6.75
Democracy Score	6.75	6.83	6.83	6.83	6.88	6.93	6.96	6.96

\* With the 2005 edition, Freedom House introduced separate analysis and ratings for national democratic governance and local democratic governance to provide readers with more detailed and nuanced analysis of these two important subjects.

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author of this report. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author. The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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On December 21, 2006, the 66-year-old president of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov, known as “Leader of the Turkmen,” died of cardiac failure, bringing to a close a long and critical chapter in the history of independent Turkmenistan. Appointed as first secretary of the Central Committee of the Turkmen Communist Party on December 21, 1985, Niyazov ruled Turkmenistan with an iron fist for 21 years to the day. In a smoothly orchestrated succession, within hours of the announcement of Niyazov’s death an extraordinary session of the Security Council and the Cabinet of Ministers appointed the 49-year-old deputy prime minister and minister of health and medical industries, Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov, as acting head of state. A mini-constitutional coup was executed by the political elite in power at the time of Niyazov’s death in order to secure the placement in power of the candidate of their choice: While the Constitution clearly stated that the parliamentary chairman was to fill in as president until a new leader was elected, the current chairman, Ovezgeldy Ataev, was removed on the same day and charged with criminal activity by the Office of the Prosecutor General. On December 26, an emergency session of Turkmenistan’s highest ruling body, the People’s Council, rubber-stamped the laws and constitutional amendments formalizing the arrangements for a smooth transfer of power, thereby ensuring stability in the short term.

Despite the momentous changes that took place in Turkmenistan in the final days of 2006, the year was a relatively uneventful one overall, marking the continuation of practices set in motion during Niyazov’s lengthy authoritarian rule. In 2006, the state promotion of the *Ruhnama* (a two-volume national code of spiritual conduct, ostensibly written by Niyazov) continued, as did regular purges of the upper and middle echelons of government. Turkmenistan’s longtime prosecutor general, Gurbanbibi Atajanova, who was notorious for having denounced dozens of Turkmen officials during her nine-year tenure, was removed from office on charges of corruption, and all five of the country’s regional governors were sacked for falsifying data on the winter wheat and cotton crops, precipitating reports of bread shortages and panic buying. Elections were held to village councils and to district and city councils in June and December, respectively, although the outcome of the vote had been determined beforehand through the usual preelection vetting process. Media restrictions remained firmly in place as the authorities banned local journalists from all contact with foreigners unless specifically permitted, and a correspondent for the U.S.-funded radio station Radio Liberty was reportedly beaten to death while in custody.

**National Democratic Governance.** In 2006, Turkmenistan was a police state in which the activities of its citizens were carefully monitored by hypertrophied security agencies and the president's private militia, whose members received favorable treatment relative to the rest of the population. President Niyazov continued to undertake regular purges of the upper and middle echelons of his government as a means of diminishing the power bases of political elites and, hence, their potential ability to become his rivals. In April, Prosecutor General Atajanova, who had gained notoriety during her nine-year tenure as a leading figure in Turkmenistan's repressive state apparatus, publicly confessed to corruption and was relieved of her duties and stripped of her state awards. A major tool used to buttress Niyazov's lavish personality cult and to create a pseudo-state ideology was the *Rubnama (Book of the Soul)*, which had been accorded the de facto status of a holy book on a par with the Koran.

Although the Constitution of Turkmenistan stipulated the formal existence of executive, legislative, and judicial branches, in practice only the executive branch exercised any real power. The presence of a fourth branch of power, the People's Council, which was granted the status of the country's supreme representative body, had displaced even the formal legislative authority of the country's Parliament. The Democratic Party of Turkmenistan, which declared President Niyazov its "eternal" chairman only four days before his death, on December 17, 2006, remained the only legally registered party. At an emergency session of the People's Council, which convened on December 26, 2006, the Law on Presidential Elections was passed and a date set for the presidential election. The Constitution was amended to allow the interim head of state to stand in the election and to designate the chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers (or a deputy prime minister, in the event that the president and the prime minister were the same person) as the acting head of state if the president were unable to execute his duties. The latter constitutional amendment sought to legitimize the appointment of Deputy Prime Minister Berdymukhammedov as interim president, a role that expressly belonged to the chairman of the Parliament under the old Constitution. In a smooth procedure that did not reveal any latent power struggles, 12 candidates for president were nominated, although only 6 received the requisite number of votes. Only Acting President Berdymukhammedov received the unanimous support of the People's Council, which was an excellent indicator that his victory in the February 2007 election was a foregone conclusion. *Turkmenistan's rating for national democratic governance remains unchanged at 7.00.*

**Electoral Process.** Electoral officials in Turkmenistan engaged widely in irregular procedures, such as stuffing ballot boxes and making door-to-door home visits during which voters were urged to cast their ballots. Pressure was exerted on all civil servants to vote, and failure to do so could lead to reprisals. On July 23, 2006, elections were held to the village and town councils, which represented the lowest level of government. Despite multiple candidacies and the use of transparent ballot boxes, there was minimal preelection campaigning, and all candidates still

represented Niyazov's Democratic Party of Turkmenistan. On December 3, 2006, elections to 40-member district and city people's councils were held for the first time since independence. Candidates were reported to have undergone the usual dual screening process by local governmental officials and officials from the Ministry of National Security. Although President Niyazov proposed on several occasions from 2001 that presidential elections be held before 2010, his proposals were invariably met with publicly staged protests by members of the People's Council, who pleaded with him to stay in office until the end of his lifetime. Consequently, the Law on Presidential Elections was passed only at the extraordinary session of the People's Council held five days after Niyazov's death, on December 26, 2006, at which time the presidential election was scheduled for February 11, 2007. At the end of 2006, no opposition parties or movements were officially registered in Turkmenistan. Unrelenting harassment by the authorities had driven the relatively small Turkmen opposition either underground or into exile. Following an announcement in late 2006 by leading members of Turkmenistan's opposition that they had agreed on a single candidate to run in Turkmenistan's upcoming presidential elections, Turkmen security agencies warned that leaders of the opposition-in-exile would be arrested on arrival at any airport in Turkmenistan should they attempt to return. *Turkmenistan's rating for electoral process remains unchanged at 7.00. The election in 2006 of city and district people's councils, while a positive development, is unlikely to result in a significant devolution of power or authority to local governments.*

**Civil Society.** Although civil society never thrived in Turkmenistan, steady repression by government authorities since 2002, in particular, forced those independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that had managed to gain a foothold in the newly independent state to dissolve, redesignate themselves as commercial enterprises, or merge with pro-government public associations. By August 2006, the number of registered and unregistered NGOs had dwindled to fewer than 90, and even many apolitical groups, such as the National Chess Committee and the National Artisans Association, were denied state registration. The few NGOs allowed to operate in Turkmenistan were generally government-sponsored, such as the veterans and youth associations and the women's union, which was dedicated to the memory of President Niyazov's mother. Many minority religious groups remained unregistered. More important, registration had not brought the promised benefits, as registered and unregistered groups alike continued to be subject to police raids, detentions, fines, and other forms of harassment. Especially outside the capital city of Ashgabat, minority religious groups were prohibited from meeting, throwing into question the very purpose of the registration process. In December 2006, the religious freedom watchdog Forum 18 News Service reported that harassment of religious communities in Turkmenistan had eased somewhat over the past year, although no further religious communities were registered and state control of religion remained complete. *Turkmenistan's rating for civil society remains unchanged at 7.00.*

**Independent Media.** Claiming that only North Korea was a greater violator of press freedom, in 2006 the Paris-based NGO Reporters Without Borders ranked Turkmenistan 167<sup>th</sup> out of 168 nations in its annual worldwide Press Freedom Index. All media in Turkmenistan were controlled by the state and were devoid of independent information. Although satellite dishes were in widespread use in the capital city, cable television was banned throughout the country. The country's sole Internet provider, Turkmen Telecom, strictly controlled all access to the Internet. Blocked access to a growing number of Web sites critical of government policy coupled with high fees successfully restricted the use of the Internet to a small number of companies and international organizations. Calling it "one of the world's least connected countries," in 2006 Reporters Without Borders claimed that less than 1 percent of Turkmenistan's population was online. There were no Internet cafés in the country, and public access to the Web was limited to a handful of resource centers run by U.S.-funded organizations in Ashgabat and other major cities in the country. In March 2006, the sole remaining accredited foreign correspondent in Ashgabat, who worked for the Russian news agency ITAR-TASS, lost her accreditation as a result of covering the controversial pension reform. In May 2006, the authorities banned local journalists from all contact with foreigners unless specifically permitted. Local journalists were subject to arrest and violence. In September 2006, a correspondent for the Turkmen Service of the U.S.-sponsored Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Ogulsapar Muradova, died in prison following her conviction in August on charges of illegally possessing ammunition. Although Turkmen officials maintained that she had died of natural causes, Muradova was widely believed to have suffered fatal blows to the head while in custody. *Turkmenistan's rating for independent media remains unchanged at 7.00.*

**Local Democratic Governance.** In 2006, executive power in Turkmenistan's five *velayats* (regions) and in the city of Ashgabat was still vested in the *hakims* (governors), who were appointed by the president to execute his instructions (elections to the 80-member *velayat*-level people's councils, which will be empowered to elect regional governors, were scheduled for December 2007). On December 3, 2006, elections were held to the largely decorative 40-member district and city people's councils (*halk maslakhaty*) for the first time in the history of independent Turkmenistan. Perhaps more significant than the creation of new local people's councils under an October 2005 constitutional amendment was the transfer of the right to appoint regional, district, and city *hakims* from the president to the respective councils, which were henceforth to elect governors from among their memberships in an open ballot, by a simple majority vote, as was already the practice for village councils. While Turkmen officials claimed that the creation of district, city, and regional people's councils was a major step toward devolving authority from the center to local organs of government, in large part by allowing local *hakims* to be elected by the councils rather than appointed by the president, local media reported in December 2006 that the president approved the nominations for governors that had been put forth by the councils, thereby greatly diminishing any decentralizing

effect. Drastic cuts in the important spheres of education, social security, and health care—including the closure of rural district hospitals—further undermined local government and had serious repercussions for the rural population in particular. Tribal identities remained strong in Turkmenistan and continued to play an important role in Turkmen society and informal local politics. *Turkmenistan's rating for local democratic governance remains unchanged at 7.00.*

**Judicial Framework and Independence.** The Office of the Prosecutor General dominated a legal system in which judges and lawyers played a marginal role. Although formally independent, the court system had no impact on the observance of human rights but rather acted as an important instrument of repression for the regime. Convictions were based on confessions that were sometimes extracted by forcible means, including the use of torture. In October 2006, the International Trade Committee of the European Parliament voted to stop consideration of an interim trade agreement until Turkmenistan took specific steps to improve human rights, including realigning the educational system with international standards, releasing all political prisoners, and abolishing government restrictions on travel abroad. In the same month, under an annual amnesty mandated by a 1999 law and presidential decree, the government released an estimated 10,056 inmates, bringing the number of amnestied persons since 1999 to some 250,000. In November 2006, new rules were introduced governing foreign travel for Turkmen citizens, rendering the unofficial “blacklist” obsolete. Citizens wishing to leave Turkmenistan, either temporarily or permanently, were henceforth required to show border guards and customs officials a document obtained from their local police department giving them official permission to travel abroad. Ethnic minorities—and Turkmenistan’s ethnic Uzbek population in particular—were affected by discriminatory practices denying them access to most higher education and jobs in the public sector. *Turkmenistan's rating for judicial framework and independence remains unchanged at 7.00.*

**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. Given their brief tenure in office owing to regular reshuffling, governors have been inclined to give low priority to solving the problems of their respective regions, preferring instead to use their short time in power to amass personal economic benefits. During October and November 2006, President Niyazov publicly removed the governors of all five of Turkmenistan’s regions for falsifying data on the winter wheat and cotton crops and other “shortcomings.” All five governors had reported complete fulfillment of the winter wheat sowing campaign, although in reality less than half of the targeted wheat was sown in total. While the sacking of governors was a common occurrence in Niyazov’s Turkmenistan, the virtually simultaneous firing of all five regional *hakims* was without precedent. In recent years, 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 labor in various sectors of the economy have all indicated that the state has been having difficulty funding its huge public sector, despite official reports of record foreign trade surpluses. Although President Niyazov sought to pin the blame for budget shortfalls on his subordinates by accusing them of mass embezzlement, a more likely explanation was the continued diversion by Niyazov of ever larger sums from gas, oil, and cotton revenues to a special presidential fund, which was located in European (primarily German) and other bank accounts. During 2006, the German Deutsche Bank came under pressure from exiled opposition groups over its holding of the accounts controlled by Niyazov, including allegations of violations of European Union (EU) banking standards on transparency. *Turkmenistan's rating for corruption remains unchanged at 6.75.*

**Outlook for 2007.** Despite predictions that Niyazov's sudden death would lead to internal power struggles and possible chaos given the absence of an heir apparent, the transfer of power to Deputy Prime Minister Berdymukhammedov—who had survived innumerable purges since his appointment as health minister in 1997—was swift and orderly, indicating that a succession strategy had been worked out by Niyazov's inner circle in advance. The power brokers behind the agreement to appoint Berdymukhammedov as Niyazov's successor were most likely leading figures in the country's security agencies, who formed the most influential political force in the country at the time of Niyazov's death. First and foremost among them was Akmurad Rejepov, head of the president's personal militia and the only official who had managed to retain his place in Niyazov's inner circle in recent years.

Since any serious liberalization of the political system or society could ultimately pave the way for the regime's downfall, thereby depriving it of its crucial control over gas and cotton export revenues, the new government is likely to implement only limited reforms while cutting short any attempt to create political pluralism. However, despite Berdymukhammedov's initial assertions that he will "remain committed to the political course of Saparmurat Turkmenbashi," he subsequently indicated a willingness to reverse some of Niyazov's most retrograde policies, thereby currying both domestic and international support. For example, in announcing his principal policy goals in the run-up to the February 2007 election, Berdymukhammedov pledged to extend the length of primary and higher education, broaden access to the Internet, and review agricultural policy and recent pension reforms.

While the ramifications of Niyazov's death will take time to emerge, very substantial reform is unlikely to occur as long as those who have a stake in preserving the system Niyazov created remain in power.

# MAIN REPORT

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## National Democratic Governance

1999	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	7.00	7.00	7.00

Although the Constitution of Turkmenistan stipulated the formal existence of executive, legislative, and judicial branches, in practice only the executive branch exercised any real power. The Parliament (Majlis) was transformed into a presidential appendage, and presidential decree was the usual mode of legislation. The law required all political parties to be registered with the Ministry of Justice (renamed the Ministry of Fairness in September 2003), thereby allowing the government to deny official status to groups that were critical of its policies. In December 1991, the Communist Party of Turkmenistan renamed itself the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (DPT) and confirmed Niyazov as chairman, leaving the old Communist power structure essentially intact. On December 17, 2006, only four days before his death, President Niyazov was declared the “eternal” chairman of the DPT. Other than the DPT and the pro-government National Revival Movement, no parties or movements were legally registered in the country. The Constitution proscribed the formation of parties with a religious or nationalist orientation (Article 28). However, since the government prevented all parties other than the DPT from registering and functioning, this ban was of little relevance.

During his reorganization of political structures in 1992, President Niyazov created the People’s Council (*Halk Maslakhaty*) to recall the Turkmen “national tradition” of holding tribal assemblies in order to solve society’s most pressing problems. According to a constitutional amendment and constitutional Law on the People’s Council, which were passed by that same body in August 2003, the council was elevated to the status of a “permanently functioning supreme representative body of popular authority.” The 2,507-member People’s Council consisted of the president, the members of Parliament, the chairman of the Supreme Court, the prosecutor general, the members of the Council of Ministers, the governors (*hakims*) of the five regions (*velayats*), and the *hakim* of the city of Ashgabat; people’s representatives elected from each district (*etrap*); the chairpersons of officially recognized parties, the youth association, trade unions, and the women’s union; the chairpersons of public organizations; representatives of the Council of Elders, which brought together nominated elders from all regions of Turkmenistan under the chairmanship of the president; the *hakims* of districts and cities; and the heads of the municipal councils of the towns and villages that were the administrative centers of the districts. The August 2003 law ascribed to the People’s Council a number of legislative powers, including the passing of constitutional laws, thereby



officially displacing the Parliament as the country's primary legislative body. In reality, proposals put forward by the president at sessions of the People's Council were invariably adopted unanimously by that body, which acted to officially validate his policies.

The eighteenth convocation of the People's Council, which convened in emergency session five days after President Niyazov's death, on December 26, 2006, formalized arrangements for the transfer of power. The Law on Presidential Elections was passed, and the date for the presidential election was set. The Constitution was amended to allow the interim head of state to stand in the election and to designate the chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers (or a deputy prime minister, in the event that the president and prime minister were the same person) as acting head of state if the president were unable to execute his duties. The latter constitutional amendment sought to legitimize the appointment of Deputy Prime Minister Berdymukhammedov as interim president, a role that expressly belonged to the chairman of the Parliament under the old Constitution. In a smooth procedure that did not reveal any latent power struggles, two candidates for president were nominated from each of the country's five regions and the city of Ashgabat, although only six ultimately received the requisite number of votes (two-thirds of the membership of the People's Council). Aside from Acting President Berdymukhammedov, all candidates were lesser-known bureaucrats lacking political weight. In a scenario reminiscent of Niyazov's rule, only Berdymukhammedov received the unanimous support of the People's Council, which was an excellent indicator that his victory in the February 2007 election was a foregone conclusion.

Turkmenistan was a police state in which the activities of its citizens were carefully monitored by hypertrophied internal security agencies and the president's private militia, whose members received favorable treatment relative to the rest of the population, such as higher salaries and privileged accommodation. The Ministry of National Security (MNB) had the responsibilities held by the Committee for State Security during the Soviet period—namely, to ensure that the regime remained in power through tight control of society and by discouraging dissent. President Niyazov frequently appointed former MNB employees as deputies to leading government officials; thus, most regional governors were said to have experienced MNB personnel as their deputies.<sup>1</sup> All state and private enterprises were reported to have their own “curators” from the MNB who made regular, unannounced visits.<sup>2</sup> The Ministry of Internal Affairs directed the criminal police, who worked closely with the MNB on matters of national security. Both ministries abused the rights of individuals and enforced the government's policy of repressing political opposition.

Since the coup attempt in November 2002—when oppositionists led by Boris Shikhmuradov, a former long-serving foreign minister, sought forcibly to remove the president from power—Niyazov appeared to have relied less on the MNB while devolving greater powers to his own security service, the Presidential Guard. Consisting of some 2,000 to 3,000 former security agents whose loyalty to the president had been tested over time, the Presidential Guard was not subordinated

to any security service and carried out a wide range of functions on the personal orders of the president. Both the Presidential Guard and the MNB operated with impunity.

Officials in Niyazov's regime were appointed based on their complete loyalty and subservience to the president rather than on a system of merits. Niyazov regularly purged the upper and middle echelons of his government as a means of diminishing the power bases of political elites and, hence, their potential ability to become his rivals.<sup>3</sup> From 2000, Niyazov's regular reshuffling of ministers and other high-level public sector officials greatly accelerated in both intensity and scope, possibly reflecting an increasing inability to trust his officials as well as a growing sense of vulnerability.

By 2006, some 60 deputy prime ministers had been dismissed in the 15-year history of independent Turkmenistan, generally on charges of corruption. In April 2006, President Niyazov warned the chairman of the central bank that four of the former incumbents of his office were serving terms in jail, while another had become an outlaw. That same month, the prosecutor general, Gurbanbibi Atajanova, publicly confessed on state television to charges of corruption, begging tearfully not to be sent to prison. During her nine-year tenure as prosecutor general, Atajanova had gained notoriety as a leading figure in Turkmenistan's repressive state apparatus (earning herself the nickname "Iron Lady"), in particular for her role in prosecuting Niyazov's opponents in the wake of the attempted coup in November 2002.

A major tool used to buttress Niyazov's lavish personality cult and to create a pseudo-state ideology was the *Rubnama* (*Book of the Soul*), a national code of spiritual conduct ostensibly written by Niyazov. Published in two volumes, the *Rubnama* embodied Niyazov's personal reflections on Turkmen history and traditions as well as moral directives and was accorded the de facto status of a holy book on a par with the Koran. Imams were required to display the *Rubnama* in mosques and to quote from it in sermons, and the country's citizens were required to study and memorize its passages. Passages from the *Rubnama* were inscribed alongside verses from the Koran on the marble walls of Central Asia's largest mosque, which was officially inaugurated in October 2004 in Niyazov's hometown of Gipchak, outside of Ashgabat. By 2006 the *Rubnama* had been published in more than 20 languages, including Zulu, as well as in a special Braille edition. Citizens were required to pass a written examination on the *Rubnama*—already a fundamental part of primary and secondary school curriculums—in order to gain a place at a higher educational establishment, qualify for government employment, or even receive a driver's license. Furthermore, public sector employees were required to pass regular examinations on the country's spiritual code as a prerequisite for continued employment. In March 2006, Niyazov declared that anyone who read the book three times would have better intellect and go "straight to heaven."<sup>4</sup>

## Electoral Process

1999	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

No opposition parties or movements were officially registered in Turkmenistan. Unrelenting harassment by the authorities had driven the relatively small Turkmen opposition either underground or into exile. In September 2003, following a two-day meeting in Prague, the Czech Republic, several members of Turkmenistan's opposition parties and movements issued a communiqué announcing their decision to form the Union of Democratic Forces of Turkmenistan (UDFT). The UDFT comprised four main groups: the Republican Party of Turkmenistan, the Watan (Fatherland) Social Political Movement, the United Democratic Opposition of Turkmenistan, and the Revival Social Political Movement. Despite the issuing of another joint statement by the Republican Party and Watan in May 2006, appealing for citizens of Turkmenistan to unite and resist Niyazov's regime, the opposition-in-exile remained small, weak, poor, and prone to internal division.

In late 2006, in the immediate aftermath of President Niyazov's death, leading members of Turkmenistan's opposition publicly announced their intention to agree on a single candidate to run in Turkmenistan's upcoming presidential elections. Meeting in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev on December 25, the opposition-in-exile nominated former deputy prime minister and Turkmen central bank chairman Khudaiberdy Orazov as their presidential candidate. Turkmen security agencies immediately warned that opposition leaders would be arrested on arrival at any airport in Turkmenistan should they attempt to return.<sup>5</sup>

Independent Turkmenistan held its first direct presidential election in June 1992 under a new Constitution, although Niyazov had been popularly elected to the presidency by direct ballot only 20 months earlier, in October 1990. According to official results, voter participation in 1992 was 99.8 percent, with 99 percent of all votes cast in favor of Niyazov. In January 1994, a nationwide referendum overwhelmingly prolonged Niyazov's presidential mandate until 2002, exempting him from another popular election in 1997, as required by the Constitution. Following months of speculation on the introduction of a "life presidency," the Parliament approved amendments to the Constitution at the end of December 1999 that removed the maximum two-term provision, thereby enabling Niyazov to retain his presidential post until his death. Turkmenistan therefore became the first country in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to formally abandon both regularly scheduled presidential elections and popular referendums designed to extend the incumbent president's term in office.

Although President Niyazov proposed on several occasions from 2001 that presidential elections be held before 2010, his proposals were invariably met with publicly staged protests by members of the People's Council, who pleaded with him to stay in office until the end of his life. Consequently, the Law on Presidential

Elections was passed only at the extraordinary session of the People's Council held five days after Niyazov's death, on December 26, 2006, at which time presidential elections were scheduled for February 11, 2007.

The majority of the seats in the People's Council were distributed among parliamentary deputies and other governmental officials, with the result that the Turkmen population elected only a minority of its deputies. The most recent elections to the People's Council were held in April 2003 amid a near total absence of information about the candidates or their platforms. Electoral officials claimed a 99.8 percent voter turnout.

The first parliamentary elections in independent Turkmenistan took place in December 1994, when 49 candidates stood unopposed for the 50-member unicameral legislature (2 candidates contested the remaining seat). Parliamentary elections were again held in December 1999, with a declared participation of 98.9 percent of the country's electorate. Although 104 candidates stood for the 50 parliamentary seats, nearly all were members of Niyazov's ruling DPT and served the state in some official capacity. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) declined to send a monitoring mission on the grounds that "the legislative framework is inadequate for even a minimally democratic election." In line with previous elections, the country's third parliamentary elections on December 19, 2004, were widely regarded as a purely ceremonial exercise. Although 131 candidates vied for 50 seats, all had been approved by governmental authorities prior to the elections. Candidates initially were selected by district authorities and then vetted by regional authorities before being referred to the presidential administration for final approval. All candidates were members of Turkmenistan's sole registered political party, the DPT.

During Turkmenistan's 14-year history of independent rule, electoral officials declared near 100 percent voter turnout rates for all elections and referendums. To achieve such spectacularly high participation rates, electoral officials engaged widely in irregular procedures, such as stuffing ballot boxes and making door-to-door home visits during which voters were urged to cast their ballots. Pressure was exerted on all civil servants to vote, and failure to do so could lead to reprisals.<sup>6</sup> Despite these undemocratic tactics to encourage voting, unprecedented voter apathy resulted in a record low turnout of only 76.88 percent for the December 2004 parliamentary elections. Authorities attributed the low participation rate to unusually cold weather conditions. The next elections to the Parliament were scheduled for December 2008.

In October 2005, the People's Council amended the Constitution to provide for the holding of direct elections to district, city, and regional councils (*halk maslakhaty*) from 2006 to 2007. On December 3, 2006, elections to 40-member district and city people's councils were held for the first time since independence, with 6,142 candidates vying for 2,640 seats. As is standard practice in Turkmenistan, electoral officials accompanied by policemen made door-to-door visits urging voters to go to the polls, and voter turnout was officially reported at 96.9 percent. Candidates underwent the usual dual screening process by local governmental

officials and officials from the MNB, according to the Institute for War & Peace Reporting.<sup>7</sup>

Turkmen officials claimed that the creation of district, city, and regional people's councils was intended to decentralize governmental powers and responsibilities, in large part by allowing local governors to be elected by the councils rather than appointed by the president, as was the practice hitherto. However, as was reported by local media in December 2006, the president approved the nominations for governors that had been put forth by the councils,<sup>8</sup> thereby greatly diminishing any decentralizing effect.

On July 23, 2006, 5,320 deputies from a field of 12,200 contenders were elected to the village and town councils (*gengesbes*), which represented the lowest level of government. Despite multiple candidacies and the use of transparent ballot boxes for the first time in Turkmenistan, there was minimal preelection campaigning, and all candidates still represented Niyazov's DPT.

Elections to regional people's councils, which will consist of 80 members, are scheduled for December 2007. Additionally, the elections of people's representatives to the national-level *Halk Maslahaty* (one from each of the country's 60 districts) will be held in December 2008.<sup>9</sup>

#### Civil Society

1999	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

Although civil society never thrived in Turkmenistan, steady repression by government authorities since 2002 in particular forced those independent NGOs that had managed to gain a foothold in the newly independent state to dissolve, redesignate themselves as commercial enterprises, or merge with pro-government public associations. According to Counterpart Consortium, a U.S. NGO supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development, in 2000 there were approximately 200 to 300 registered and unregistered NGOs in Turkmenistan.<sup>10</sup> By August 2006, that number had dwindled to fewer than 90.<sup>11</sup> The vast majority either supported the government or received funding from the government. According to the Institute for War & Peace Reporting, even many apolitical groups, such as the National Chess Committee and the National Artisans Association, had been denied state registration.<sup>12</sup> There were no independent trade unions, and the successor to the Soviet-era Federation of Trade Unions remained linked to the government. Other government-organized NGOs included the veterans association, the youth association, the journalists union, and the Humanitarian Association of World Turkmen. The women's union, which was dedicated to the memory of President Niyazov's mother, was the only officially registered women's NGO.

Civil society in Turkmenistan was paralyzed by fallout from an attempted coup on November 25, 2002, when former foreign minister Boris Shikhmuradov and

his fellow oppositionists staged an effort to forcibly remove Niyazov from power as his motorcade was traveling through Ashgabat. Turkmen authorities immediately publicized the attack as a failed assassination plot, although the opposition declared that Shikhmuradov's aim was to capture Niyazov and force him to renounce power rather than to assassinate him.<sup>13</sup> Niyazov used the attempted coup to his advantage by incarcerating some of his major opponents, including Shikhmuradov, and implementing a series of new measures that curbed civil liberties even further. A new wave of repression and witch hunts was initiated in the aftermath of the armed endeavor, resulting in the arrest of at least 200 individuals with purported connections to the opposition, of whom approximately 60 were ultimately convicted for their alleged role in the coup attempt. Independent civil society activists became frequent targets of detention and harassment, while Turkmenistan's government-sponsored NGOs were used as part of a propaganda campaign to demonstrate support for the president. Mass meetings were held and rallies staged, with participants calling for the "people's enemies" to be put to death.

Civil society activists were repressed further in November 2003 when an unprecedented presidential decree was signed into law requiring all NGOs to register or reregister with the Ministry of Fairness or face fines, corrective labor, and possible prison sentences with the confiscation of property. As a result, many independent NGOs ceased to exist or reregistered under the safer label of "commercial enterprise." In early 2004, the Dashoguz Ecological Club and the Ecological Club Catena—two of Turkmenistan's oldest-operating NGOs—were stripped of their legal registration.<sup>14</sup> In a move apparently designed to assuage international criticism of Turkmenistan's human rights practices, the government published new legislation in November 2004 abolishing criminal penalties for activities undertaken by unregistered NGOs, thereby reversing the November 2003 legislation. However, as of 2006, the decriminalization of unregistered NGO activity had yet to have a significant practical impact on civil society, given the generally draconian restrictions on civic activism.

As with political parties and public associations, all religious congregations were required to register with the Ministry of Fairness to gain legal status. Before 2004, the only religions that had managed to register successfully were Sunni Islam and Russian Orthodox Christianity, although they were still subject to tight government controls. In March 2004, President Niyazov issued a decree pledging to register all religious groups regardless of creed or number. The law was amended accordingly to reduce the number of adult citizens needed to register a religious community with the Ministry of Fairness from 500 to 5. As a result of these changes, four minority religious groups managed to gain registration in 2004: Seventh-day Adventists, Baha'is, Baptists, and Hare Krishnas. In 2005, five more Protestant churches were granted registration (the Greater Grace Church, the Church of Christ, the New Apostolic Church, and the Full Gospel Pentecostal Church in Ashgabat; and the Light of the East Pentecostal Church in Dashoguz).<sup>15</sup> Despite this minimal progress, many minority religious groups remained unregistered, such as the Catholic, Lutheran, Jehovah's Witness, Armenian Apostolic, and Jewish communities. More

important, registration did not bring the promised benefits, as registered and unregistered groups alike continued to experience police raids, detentions, fines, and other forms of harassment. Especially outside Ashgabat, some minority religious groups were prohibited from meeting, throwing into question the very purpose of the registration process.<sup>16</sup>

Turkmen authorities eliminated criminal penalties for members of unregistered religious groups in May 2004. (In November 2003, Turkmenistan had tightened its Law on Religion and adopted amendments to the criminal code that imposed penalties of up to one year's imprisonment for unregistered religious activity, which had hitherto been considered an administrative offense.) The amended law stated that congregations that were not registered with the Ministry of Fairness were prohibited from proselytizing, gathering publicly, and disseminating religious materials, and violators were subject to penalties under the administrative code. In practice, however, state agencies continued to treat unregistered religious activity as a criminal offense, and some believers were given long prison sentences or sent into internal exile.<sup>17</sup>

In December 2006, the religious freedom watchdog Forum 18 News Service reported that harassment of religious communities in Turkmenistan had eased somewhat over the past year, although no further religious communities were registered and state control of religion remained complete.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, by the end of 2006, an application lodged for state registration by the Armenian Apostolic Church in February 2006—exactly one year after the authorities destroyed the last surviving prerevolutionary Armenian Apostolic church in Turkmenistan—had yet to be processed by the Ministry of Fairness.<sup>19</sup>

#### Independent Media

1999	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

Claiming that only North Korea was a greater violator of press freedom, in 2006 the Paris-based NGO Reporters Without Borders ranked Turkmenistan 167th out of 168 nations in its annual worldwide Press Freedom Index.<sup>20</sup> All media in Turkmenistan were controlled by the state and were devoid of independent information. President Niyazov was the formal founder of the country's 10 registered newspapers and 5 registered journals and personally appointed all editors, who were answerable to him. There was a single information agency (TDH), which had a monopoly on the information provided to Turkmenistan's mass media. Despite the blatant lack of press freedom, in October 2006 a massive book-shaped building called the House of Free Creativity was completed to house the country's press.

The three state television channels and two state radio stations functioned strictly as mouthpieces for government propaganda. A fourth television channel,



the multilingual satellite television service TV-4 Turkmenistan, broadcast programs in Turkmen and in six foreign languages: English, Chinese, Russian, French, Arabic, and Persian. TV-4, which was created in 2004 at an estimated cost of US\$12 million, was a major propaganda effort undertaken to improve Turkmenistan's international image.

Foreign journalists were rarely allowed to enter the country, and those who did gain entry were closely monitored by the State Service for the Registration of Foreigners. In 2005, a correspondent for the Russian news agency ITAR-TASS was arrested, accused of espionage, and given a 15-year prison sentence before ultimately being deported to Russia.<sup>21</sup> In March 2006, the sole remaining accredited foreign correspondent in Ashgabat, who also worked for ITAR-TASS, lost her accreditation as a result of covering the controversial pension reform.<sup>22</sup>

In May 2006, the authorities banned local journalists from all contact with foreigners unless specifically permitted.<sup>23</sup> Local journalists were subject to arrest and violence. In September 2006, a correspondent for the Turkmen Service of the U.S.-sponsored Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Ogulsapar Muradova, died in prison following her conviction in August on charges of illegally possessing ammunition. Although Turkmen officials maintained that she had died of natural causes, Muradova was widely believed to have suffered fatal blows to the head while in custody. Her death precipitated protests from a number of international human rights bodies, the OSCE, the U.S. State Department, and the French Foreign Ministry.

Cable television—which had provided access to Russian channels and acted as the country's main source of alternative information—was banned in July 2002 after Russian television broadcast footage of poverty in Turkmenistan. During the same month, Turkmenistan's Ministry of Communications halted the import of Russian newspapers and magazines, citing high airmail delivery rates. In July 2004, Turkmen authorities suspended the transmission of Russia's Radio Mayak, which was highly popular in Turkmenistan and acted as one of the last independent media sources in the country aside from a few foreign broadcasts on shortwave radio directed at Turkmen listeners. Satellite dishes were still tolerated and in widespread use in the capital city but were prohibitively expensive for the vast majority of the population.

In April 2005, the government took further steps to limit freedom of information and obstruct communication with the outside world by prohibiting the importation and circulation of all foreign print media, including those produced in neighboring countries.<sup>24</sup> In the same month, Turkmenistan refused to extend the licenses of international shipping firms and express couriers, arguing that the state postal service was less costly and more reliable.<sup>25</sup> Inhabitants of Turkmenistan received no information from government media on the regime changes that occurred in 2003–2005 in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan or on the seizure of government buildings by insurgents and the subsequent shootings of unarmed civilians by government troops in the Uzbek city of Andijan in May 2005, with the result that much of the country's (particularly rural) population remained ignorant of the momentous changes occurring in other post-Soviet states.



All access to the Internet was strictly controlled by the country's sole Internet provider, Turkmen Telecom. Blocked access to a growing number of Web sites critical of government policy as well as high fees had successfully restricted use of the Internet to a small number of companies and international organizations. In 2006, Reporters Without Borders claimed that less than 1 percent of Turkmenistan's population was online. Calling it "one of the world's least connected countries," that organization cited Turkmenistan as 1 of 13 states in the world considered to be "enemies of the Internet."<sup>26</sup> At the end of 2006, there were no Internet cafés in the country, and public access to the Web was restricted to a handful of resource centers run by U.S.-funded organizations in Ashgabat and other major cities. However, school directors and educational authorities reportedly discouraged students and other members of the public from visiting the centers, where warnings were visibly displayed prohibiting the use of Web sites banned by the Turkmen Ministry of Communications (primarily opposition Web sites and Russian sites systematically publishing information critical of Turkmenistan).<sup>27</sup>

#### Local Democratic Governance

1999	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	7.00	7.00	7.00

In 2006, executive power in Turkmenistan's five *velayats* (regions) and in the city of Ashgabat was still vested in the *hakims* (governors), who were appointed by the president to execute his instructions (elections to 80-member *velayat*-level people's councils, which will be empowered to elect regional governors, were scheduled for December 2007). On December 3, 2006, elections were held to the largely decorative 40-member district and city people's councils (*halk maslakhaty*) for the first time in the post-Soviet era. In the villages, the 1992 Constitution had provided for the replacement of local soviets by councils (*gengeshes*), whose members were directly elected for five-year terms. The 625 *gengeshes* were administered by *archins*, who were elected from among their respective memberships for three-year terms.

Perhaps more significant than the creation of new local people's councils under an October 2005 constitutional amendment was the transfer of the right to appoint regional, district, and city *hakims* from the president to the respective councils, which were henceforth to elect governors from among their memberships in an open ballot, by a simple majority vote, as was already the practice for village councils. Although in a less totalitarian state this transfer of power might have been hailed as a major step toward the devolution of authority from the center to local organs of government, in Niyazov's Turkmenistan all candidates for election to official posts were carefully vetted in a preelection screening process designed to weed out any potentially disloyal deputies.

Although the president was no longer to directly appoint regional governors, it was unclear whether or not he retained the right to dismiss them, since according

to the new phrasing of the relevant constitutional article (Article 79), “the *hakims* are representatives of the president of Turkmenistan, the head of state, in the regions, and are accountable to him.”<sup>28</sup> (The new people’s councils, by contrast, were accountable to the people.) If the president did indeed retain the power to dismiss the elected governors, then the new reform of local government would be rendered virtually meaningless. Moreover, the president was empowered to approve the nominations for governors that are put forth by the councils, thereby greatly diminishing any decentralizing effect.

In Turkmenistan, councils were charged with collecting taxes and deciding matters of local concern as well as acting as the guardians of local customs and moral standards.<sup>29</sup> In a practice that detrimentally affected the development of small and medium-size businesses, local authorities required both state enterprises and private firms to make regular payments toward the maintenance and improvement of cities and towns. However, private businesses were reported to bear the brunt of the costs for improvement projects, such as landscaping, asphaltting, and the erection of signs.<sup>30</sup>

Tribal identities remained strong in Turkmenistan and continued to play an important role in Turkmen society and informal local politics. The largest tribes were the Tekke in south-central Turkmenistan (Ahal Tekke and Mary Tekke), the Ersary near the region of the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan border, the Yomud in western and northeastern Turkmenistan, and the Saryks in the southernmost corner of the country. Unlike in parts of Africa, for example, where both formal and informal tribal associations have played a significant role in political mobilization and local governance, in Turkmenistan tribalism manifested itself primarily in social practices, such as the maintenance of preferential networks, endogamy, and the persistence of dialects. Virtually all Turkmen had at least a minimal knowledge of their own tribal affiliation, which was still a relatively reliable indicator of birthplace.

However, the exit of the Russian nomenklatura following the collapse of the USSR led to a gradual resurgence of traditionally minded regional elites vying for their economic interests, which in turn prompted Niyazov to rely more and more on a policy of divide and rule with regard to tribal/regional politics. Although a sense of national identity was being promoted at the state level, *hakims* were often, although not always, members of the tribe that was dominant in their respective regions. A disproportionate number of influential positions in central and regional government tended to go to members of Niyazov’s own tribe, the Ahal Tekke.

Since 2000, the government was engaged in the systematic dismantling of key areas of the public sector, effectively undermining local government in the important spheres of education, health care, and social security, with serious repercussions for the rural population in particular. The majority of children in Turkmenistan no longer had adequate access to education. In many rural schools, it was estimated that one-half of classroom time was allocated to the study of Niyazov’s quasi-spiritual guide, the *Ruhnama*, and other writings devoted to furthering his personality cult. In addition, students needed to demonstrate knowledge of the *Ruhnama* in order to be admitted to higher educational

establishments. Over 12,000 teachers had been made redundant through a 2000 presidential decree, including those with degrees from foreign universities, which were no longer recognized.<sup>31</sup> Class sizes had increased and facilities had deteriorated as state funds earmarked for education diminished.<sup>32</sup> The number of student places in institutes of higher education had been reduced by nearly 75 percent, and primary and secondary education had been reduced from 11 to 9 years (a circumstance that complicated the entry of Turkmen students into foreign universities). Only those who had completed two years of work experience after leaving school were allowed to go on to higher education, and the term of higher education had been reduced to just two years. There were no graduate courses. All correspondence and evening courses had been liquidated. The steady dismantling of the education system put in doubt the ability of the next generation of Turkmen to compete successfully in the global market.

In addition to the education sector, health care services in Turkmenistan had been systematically undermined. In March 2004, 15,000 skilled health care workers (including doctors, nurses, midwives, and medical attendants) were dismissed and, in some cases, replaced by untrained military conscripts. In addition, the March “reforms” introduced fees for specialist services that had previously been free of charge, making treatment unaffordable for many patients.<sup>33</sup> In what could portend a public health catastrophe, in February 2005 President Niyazov announced a plan to close all hospitals outside Ashgabat, claiming that regional hospitals were “not needed.” Under Niyazov’s proposals, citizens in the country’s regions were to visit medical diagnostic centers—which required payment for services—to obtain prescriptions and general advice, while those in need of hospitalization or specialist care were to be compelled to travel to Ashgabat.<sup>34</sup> Hospital closures would affect those in remote rural regions first and foremost, since both distance and the cost of travel would deprive many of the possibility of receiving both emergency and specialist medical treatment. The restrictions on movement within the country made it difficult for outside experts to determine how many hospitals had been closed since Niyazov’s announcement.<sup>35</sup> However, by late 2006 all rural district hospitals were reported to have closed, although hospitals in district centers, which offered some specialist care, continued to operate.<sup>36</sup>

#### Judicial Framework and Independence

1999	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
6.75	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

On May 18, 1992, Turkmenistan’s Parliament adopted a new Constitution—the first Central Asian state to enact such a document after the dissolution of the USSR. The Constitution guaranteed in theory the protection of basic rights and liberties, equality under the law, and the separation of religion and state. Amendments had been made to the Constitution since its original adoption, including eliminating

the two-term limit for the president, prohibiting citizens from Turkmenistan from holding dual citizenship, and redefining the status and function of the People's Council. In 2005, the Constitution was amended to provide for the election of regional, city, and district people's councils and their governors. In late 2006, the Constitution was amended to enable a deputy prime minister to act as president in the event that the latter could not perform his duties, thereby legitimizing *post factum* the appointment of Deputy Prime Minister Berdymukhammedov to the post of interim president following Niyazov's death in late December.<sup>37</sup>

Unchanged since the Soviet era, the court system in Turkmenistan consisted of a Supreme Court, 6 regional courts (including 1 for the city of Ashgabat), and, at the lowest level, 61 district and city courts. In addition, the Supreme Economic Court heard all commercial disputes and cases involving conflicts between state enterprises and ministries. Because all military courts were abolished in 1997, criminal offenses committed by military personnel were tried in civilian courts under the authority of the Office of the Prosecutor General. Although formally independent, the court system had no impact on the observance of human rights but rather acted as an important instrument of repression for the regime.

The president appointed all judges for five-year terms without legislative review. The Office of the Prosecutor General dominated a legal system in which judges and lawyers played a marginal role. As in the former Soviet Union, convictions were based on confessions that were sometimes extracted by forcible means, including the use of torture and psychotropic substances.

Despite its accession to a number of international human rights agreements, which theoretically took precedence over state law, Turkmenistan had perhaps the poorest human rights record of any former Soviet republic. In addition to the OSCE, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the U.S. Congress, and the UN General Assembly had all adopted separate resolutions condemning Niyazov's regime for its human rights violations. In October 2006, the International Trade Committee of the European Parliament voted to stop consideration of an interim trade agreement until Turkmenistan took specific steps to improve human rights, including realigning the educational system with international standards, releasing all political prisoners, and abolishing government restrictions on travel abroad.<sup>38</sup>

Arbitrary arrest and detention remained a widespread practice in Turkmenistan, despite laws prohibiting it. Prison riots were a relatively common occurrence, apparently provoked by inhumane conditions. The Turkmen government admitted to chronic overcrowding in cells, which led to prisoners being stifled to death in extreme summer heat. Food and water remained in short supply and prisoners were not generally provided with medical aid. Poor sanitary conditions precipitated outbreaks of cholera, tuberculosis, and other infectious diseases. Human rights organizations reported that inmates were routinely beaten and tortured. Turkmen authorities refused to grant the International Committee of the Red Cross unaccompanied access to prisons, despite a visit from the vice president of that body in June 2005 for the purpose of attempting to hash out an agreement.<sup>39</sup> In October

2006, under an annual amnesty mandated by a 1999 law and presidential decree, the government released an estimated 10,056 inmates, bringing the number of amnestied persons since 1999 to some 250,000.<sup>40</sup> Although individuals convicted of serious crimes were theoretically ineligible for amnesty, those who could pay bribes—excluding political prisoners—were generally freed, regardless of the type of crime for which they were imprisoned. Although the annual amnesties served temporarily to relieve overcrowding, prisons quickly filled up again owing to the overall high number of arrests.

In 1999, Turkmenistan became the first country in the Commonwealth of Independent States to embark upon the establishment of a visa regime inside the territory of the former USSR, by withdrawing from the so-called Bishkek accord, which had established visa-free travel for citizens of the CIS. It also required its own citizens to obtain exit visas, often at considerable expense, to travel to foreign states, including neighboring CIS countries. Although the requirement for Turkmen citizens to obtain exit visas was temporarily suspended amid much publicity in January 2002, it was restored in March 2003 in the wake of the November 2002 attempted coup. However, in January 2004 the exit visa regime for citizens of Turkmenistan was again abolished, although in its stead the government implemented a number of unofficial measures to prevent free travel, such as the drawing up of an extensive “blacklist” of citizens who were prohibited from leaving the country, the arbitrary confiscation of passports, and the closure of border checkpoints. According to the opposition Web site Gundogar.org, in November 2006 new rules were introduced governing foreign travel for Turkmen citizens, rendering the “blacklist” obsolete. Citizens wishing to leave Turkmenistan, either temporarily or permanently, were henceforth required to show border guards and customs officials a document obtained from their local police department giving them official permission to travel abroad. Such documents were reportedly not issued to, *inter alia*, applicants with criminal records, knowledge of state secrets, or contacts with international organizations such as the UN or OSCE.<sup>41</sup> Impediments also existed to travel within Turkmenistan, owing to frequent roadblocks, checkpoints, and document checks throughout the country, and invariably upon entering or exiting cities by automobile.

In line with other post-Soviet states, Turkmenistan accorded a *de facto* higher status to its titular population, ethnic Turkmen, and legitimized the adoption of policies and practices that promoted their specific interests. (According to 2003 statistics, ethnic Turkmen constituted 85 percent of Turkmenistan’s population, ethnic Uzbeks 5 percent, ethnic Russians 4 percent, and other ethnic minorities the remaining 6 percent.)<sup>42</sup> In 2000, Turkmen was introduced as the language of instruction in all the country’s schools, including in regions where ethnic Uzbeks or Kazakhs were preponderant. Higher education and jobs in the public sector were effectively closed to non-Turkmen. Senior state officials needed to demonstrate ethnic purity by tracing their Turkmen ancestry back several generations. Members of ethnic minorities were not allowed to apply for positions in the judicial system, in law enforcement and security agencies, or in financial and military organizations.

Job applicants were required to fill out a personal information form, a practice that enabled employers to deny jobs to non-Turkmen as well as to those with foreign qualifications or criminal records. In addition to fluency in Turkmen, knowledge of the *Ruhnama* was a requirement for work in the public sector, which remained the main supplier of jobs.<sup>43</sup>

These discriminatory practices particularly affected ethnic Uzbeks. From 2002, several thousand people, primarily ethnic Uzbeks, were forcibly relocated from the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan border areas to desert regions in northwestern Turkmenistan. This policy presumably served the dual purpose of reducing irredentist sentiment among Uzbeks in Turkmenistan and increasing population density in scarcely populated regions of the country. Like Russian and Kazakh schools, schools with Uzbek as the primary language of instruction were gradually forced to switch over to Turkmen. Moreover, by the end of 2004 virtually all ethnic Uzbeks in high- and middle-level administrative positions in Dashoguz *velayat*, located on the Uzbek-Turkmen border, had been removed from their positions. Even in areas of Turkmenistan where ethnic Uzbeks constituted the majority of the population, they no longer served as district governors, farm chairmen, or school principals.

#### Corruption

1999	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
6.00	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.50	6.75	6.75

In its Corruption Perceptions Index for 2006, Transparency International ranked Turkmenistan as one of the most corrupt countries in the world, giving it a score of 2.2 (with 10 “highly clean” and 0 “highly corrupt”). Only two other Eastern European/Central Asian countries ranked in its index were perceived as more corrupt than Turkmenistan: Belarus and Uzbekistan (both of which received scores of 2.1).<sup>44</sup>

Rather than by the rule of law, the actual dispensation of power in Turkmenistan is determined by the vast machinery of patronage that has created local constituencies and regional alliances. Political elites have traditionally built up local power bases by allocating key posts and opportunities to their loyalists. These informal networks, which have survived the demise of the Soviet system, are frequently referred to as “clans,” although they are based on patron-client relationships, often with links to extended families, rather than on actual blood ties. The existence of patronage networks as the basis of power has inevitably given rise to a political culture of bribery, nepotism, and embezzlement. Significantly, senior officials in the central government as well as regional governors have direct access to state revenues, which they use to buy the loyalty of subordinates.

Turkmenistan has continued to act as an important transshipment point for illicit drugs from Afghanistan to Western Europe. According to a report on counternarcotics policy in Central Asia published by the Central Asia-Caucasus

Institute in Washington, D.C., some 25 to 30 percent of Afghan drugs are trafficked through Turkmenistan.<sup>45</sup> Turkmen authorities have rebuffed initiatives on cooperation to combat drug trafficking and since 2000 have refused to provide any data on drug seizures to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.<sup>46</sup> The narcotics trade has been a significant source of income to a number of government officials, including employees of the security agencies and the border service.<sup>47</sup>

Although the overall turnover rate of officials in Niyazov's Turkmenistan was extremely high, senior regional officials in particular tended to remain in their positions for very short periods, generally for less than a year. Given their brief tenure in office, *hakims* were inclined to give low priority to solving the problems of their respective regions, preferring instead to use their short time in power to amass personal economic benefits. At the end of November 2006, President Niyazov publicly removed the governors of three of Turkmenistan's five regions (Lebap, Dashoguz, and Mary) for falsifying data on the winter wheat and cotton crops. Only a month earlier, at the end of October, the governors of Turkmenistan's remaining two regions (Ahal and Balkan) had been removed for similar "shortcomings." All five governors had reported complete fulfillment of the winter wheat sowing campaign, although in reality less than half of the targeted wheat was sown in total. While the sacking of governors was a common occurrence in Turkmenistan, the virtually simultaneous firing of all five regional *hakims* was without precedent. Niyazov's announcement in November that "there will not be enough bread for everyone in 2007" as a result of the agricultural crisis contributed to the panic buying and bread shortages already in evidence in many parts of the country.<sup>48</sup>

During the final years of Niyazov's rule, drastic cuts in pensions,<sup>49</sup> massive redundancies in government jobs, the introduction of fees for medical services, and the use of military conscripts as a source of free labor in various sectors of the economy all indicated that the state was having difficulty funding its huge public sector, despite official reports of record foreign trade surpluses. Although President Niyazov sought to pin the blame for budget shortfalls on his subordinates by accusing them of mass embezzlement, a more likely explanation was the continued diversion by Niyazov of ever larger sums from gas, oil, and cotton revenues to a special presidential fund, which was located in European (primarily German) and other bank accounts. The Foreign Exchange Reserve Fund, which did not form part of the state budget and was under Niyazov's personal control, was estimated to be worth US\$2 billion to US\$3 billion, with export revenues providing its main source of inflow.<sup>50</sup> In June 2006, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development warned that funds in the Turkmen central bank—on whose behalf the German Deutsche Bank managed the accounts, were in fact controlled by Niyazov, under the "discretionary control of the president without proper regulation and transparency." Even before Niyazov's death at the end of December 2006, Deutsche Bank had come under pressure from exiled opposition groups over its holding of the accounts controlled by Niyazov, including allegations of violations of EU banking standards on transparency.<sup>51</sup>



A significant portion of the Foreign Exchange Reserve Fund was used to subsidize prestige construction projects commissioned by the president. By late 2006, an estimated US\$3 billion had been spent since independence on such projects, including a palace of congresses and arts, an independence park, two stadiums, a national museum, a series of luxury hotels, a horse-racing center, a national theater of music and drama, a new library and exhibition center, a children's attraction park, an aquarium, a zoo, a funicular railway, and Central Asia's largest Olympic-standard indoor water sports complex. The construction of Central Asia's largest mosque, located in Niyazov's hometown of Gipchak, was estimated to have cost US\$86 million. Some of Niyazov's more extravagant projects included the construction of a gigantic artificial lake in the Karakum Desert, with a planned capacity of twice that of Central Asia's entire reservoir, and a nearly 11-kilometer artificial river and water park crossing the desert capital of Ashgabat. In May 2006, work was completed on a US\$21.5 million palace made of ice in Ashgabat, despite the fact that temperatures regularly reached above 40 degrees Celsius. At the end of 2006, Acting President Berdymukhammedov stated that the new Turkmen government would complete the construction projects begun under Niyazov and undertake new ones that "will improve the quality of life" of Turkmenistan's citizens.

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<sup>1</sup> "Politicheskaiia zhatva-kruglyi god," [Political Harvest—All Year Round], Gundogar.org, 6 December 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Annette Bohr, "Independent Turkmenistan: From Post-Communism to Sultanism," in Sally N. Cummings, *Oil, Transition and Security in Central Asia* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), page 11.

<sup>4</sup> "Read *Rubnama* Three Times Aloud, Be 'Blessed,' Have 'Better Intellect,'" 19 March 2006, *Weekly News Brief on Turkmenistan*, 17–23 March 2006, Turkmenistan Project, available at [www.eurasianet.org/turkmenistan.project/index.php?page=weekly&clang=eng](http://www.eurasianet.org/turkmenistan.project/index.php?page=weekly&clang=eng).

<sup>5</sup> "Turkmen Opposition Seeks Single Presidential Candidate," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 25 December 2006, cited in *Weekly News Brief on Turkmenistan*, 23 December 2006–4 January 2007, Turkmenistan Project, available at [www.eurasianet.org/turkmenistan.project/index.php?page=weekly&clang=eng](http://www.eurasianet.org/turkmenistan.project/index.php?page=weekly&clang=eng).



- <sup>6</sup> “Turkmen Election a Mockery,” *Reporting Central Asia*, Institute for War & Peace Reporting, 15 December 2004, [www.iwpr.net/?s=f&o=162094](http://www.iwpr.net/?s=f&o=162094).
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