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## TRANSITIONS ONLINE: Turkmenistan: **What Hope for Religious Freedom?**

by Felix Corley

4 January 2007

*Imposition of an invented state religion in Turkmenistan resembles North Korea's "self-reliance" far more than it does Stalin's personality cult. From Forum 18.*

In the wake of the death of Turkmenistan's veteran dictator, President Saparmurat Niyazov, on 21 December, observers and victims of his anti-religious freedom policy have told Forum 18 News Service that although it was the late president who personally instituted the policy, it has wide support among the country's leaders. Such observers fear the policy could continue. "The transition leaders have already praised Niyazov and his policies and vowed to continue them," one Protestant who had to flee Turkmenistan to escape persecution told Forum 18 on 21 December. "If the government is only going to continue the same policy I don't think there will be many chances, including in the area of democracy and religious freedom."

Most observers are holding off from immediate predictions as to whether Turkmenistan will continue its autocratic, isolationist course. "The whole country is in mourning," one analyst told Forum 18 from the capital Ashgabat on 21 December. "I believe it is too early to predict what will happen. A junta will come to power, but in a milder form. I don't think believers will face serious pressure – officials will all be engaged in intrigues about power and gas."

Forum 18 reached Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov by telephone on 21 December, but he declined to speak about the country's future course. Officials at the Registration Department of the Justice Ministry also declined to comment, as did the official who answered the phone of Murad Karriyev, deputy head of the government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs.

Although harassment of religious communities has eased in the past year or so, between 1997 and 2003 no religious communities apart from some state-approved Muslim and Russian Orthodox communities were allowed to function. Police raids and harsh punishments on those conducting religious activity without state permission were the norm. But the structure of state control – including complete control of Islam from the inside and control on all other faiths from outside – remains.

The exiled Protestant believes the anti-religious policy came from the president. "He instituted this policy because he was afraid of any movement in society."

The Protestant said that religious believers in Turkmenistan want the authorities to provide all the rights to religious freedom set out in the country's constitution and in international agreements. "We want the government to guarantee that registration will not be used as a restriction on religious freedom," the Protestant insisted, echoing long-standing complaints from religious leaders within Turkmenistan about the government's insistence that religious communities must register and thereby submit themselves to burdensome and intrusive state scrutiny.

"I don't know if any improvement is now likely, though we hope for the good," the Protestant added, saying it was too early to consider returning to Turkmenistan while the threat of being punished for peaceful religious activity remains.

Like the exiled Protestant, exiled human rights activist Farid Tukhbatullin, who heads the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, agrees that the anti-religious policy was instituted on the "personal instruction" of President Niyazov. "This does not mean though that his subordinates were merely implementing his will," Tukhbatullin told Forum 18 on 21 December. "Almost all of them shared his views on this entirely. And if the current authorities continue in the same way, then the anti-religious policy will carry on."

Tukhbatullin saw a small hope in the possibility that the future president – whoever he may be – will have to soften the government's policies to consolidate power both domestically and internationally. "However, the overwhelming

majority of officials of the police and the Ministry of State Security secret police have a vested interest in preserving the current situation, under which they enjoy unlimited rights."

Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 that, throughout 2006, their members across Turkmenistan have been detained for up to 48 hours – especially while talking to others about their faith on the street or at people's doors – and meetings in private homes have been raided.

Following previous long-standing practices against religious minorities, local imam I. Janmedov joined police officers and an official of the local administration during a 15 May raid on a Jehovah's Witness meeting in a private flat in the northern town of Konye-Urgench. After being taken to the local police station, all the Jehovah's Witnesses were allegedly interrogated, insulted, and threatened before being released. Religious literature confiscated from them was not returned. In late June, R. Nasyrov, a Jehovah's Witness from Turkmenabad (formerly Charjou), was forcibly held for five days at a drug-treatment center in Atamurad (formerly Kerki) in southern Turkmenistan, where he became seriously ill.

In early June, military conscription officers from the northern Lebap region forcibly took Jehovah's Witness Serdar Satlykov to the detention center for those refusing to perform compulsory military service, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. After refusing pressure from the head of a military unit to accept military service, Satlykov reportedly was taken to the deputy defense minister, Kurban Muhammednazarov, who then ordered that he be held in a psychiatric unit. Satlykov – who refuses military service on grounds of his faith – was detained there from 6 to 20 June before being freed. He has not been harassed since his release. Fellow Jehovah's Witness Aga Soyegov was held in a psychiatric hospital in late 2005 to try to pressure him to accept compulsory military service.

Even the Russian Orthodox Church – one of only two legal faiths between 1997 and 2003 – faces restrictions on its activity. The Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights reported in October that final construction work on the women's convent next to St. Nicholas' Church in Ashgabat had come to a halt in late 2005, after President Niyazov warned the Orthodox clergy in a private conversation that if they carried on with the building work he would order the demolition of all the country's Orthodox churches.

Other places of worship – such as those of the majority religious community Islam, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the Armenian Apostolic Church have been demolished.

"The walls of the future convent were put up with the funds of parishioners and by their own efforts," the Initiative for Human Rights quoted Russian Orthodox parishioner Svetlana M. as declaring. "Unfortunately the powers that be don't understand that the prayers pronounced within the walls of a convent – just as those in mosques – call for peace and harmony."

Unclear at present is whether the new government will continue with the cult of personality around Niyazov that was imposed during his lifetime. Niyazov's two-volume *Ruhnama* (Book of the Soul) has become compulsory reading in schools and other institutions and has been imposed on religious communities. Quotations from it have even – in an action that is for devout Muslims blasphemous – been carved around the interior of the dome of a vast new mosque built in Niyazov's home village of Kipchak near Ashgabat, where he is now buried.

Turkmenistan's cult of the leader's personality and state imposition of an invented religion is far closer to North Korea's Juche, or self-reliance, than it is to Stalin's personality cult. North Korea's Juche is – in a similar way to Turkmenistan's *Ruhnama* – synonymous with the cult of the deceased North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung, or Kimilsungism.

"Although religion here is separate from the state, imams and ordinary believers appealed to the government and the local authorities to be allowed to quote from the *Ruhnama* in mosques," one *Ruhnama* teacher – who preferred not to be identified – insisted to Forum 18 back in October. "This was the initiative of imams and believers, who wanted to do so out of respect for the president." The teacher alleged that imams only read parts of the work connected with religion. He said mosques hold *Ruhnama* days each Saturday, but said he did not know if communities of other faiths do the same. "For Christians and others it's their affair – they have their own rituals."

The teacher denied that the presence of copies of the *Ruhnama* in mosques on a par with the Koran was an insult to Muslims' faith. "If you want to read the *Ruhnama* you can – you're free to do so or not." He also denied that Muslims are offended by quotations from the *Ruhnama* at the Kipchak mosque. "People are calm about this," he told Forum 18. "They come to the mosque to worship Allah – it doesn't matter if the quotation is from the Koran or the *Ruhnama*, as the *Ruhnama* also speaks of Allah."

The teacher explained that each local administration across the country has an official or officials who "help" local Muslims and other faiths. He was unable to explain to Forum 18 why communities wanted such help. He claimed initially that "ordinary believers" choose their imams, but when pressed explained that the leading imams in each region and district are named by the local authorities in agreement with the Gengeshi for Religious Affairs. He said the government had issued an instruction that the hundred or so regional and district imams should not ask believers for money as they are already paid by the state, a subsidy no other faith gets.

The teacher made no comment on the cases of mosques destroyed for, apparently in some cases, failure to honor Niyazov's books of alleged "spiritual writings."

He said he did not know the background to the removal by Niyazov of successive chief muftis, and declined to discuss the case of Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, removed as chief mufti in 2003 and sentenced in 2004 to 22 years' imprisonment on charges the government has persistently refused to make public. Despite rumors that he had been freed in the October 2006 prisoner amnesty, it is believed Nasrullah is still being held.

The teacher defended the government's controls on the number of pilgrims going on the haj to Mecca, currently set at 188 annually. He said lists of applicants are held by the religious affairs officials in each local administration, adding that he is 3,000th on the list. Turkmenistan still imposes the strictest controls in Central Asia on haj pilgrims.

In early November 2006, the Turkmen government announced that, as in previous years, only 188 pilgrims would be permitted – only enough to fit on one aircraft of the state-run Turkmenistan Airlines – far below the quota allocated to Turkmenistan by the Saudi authorities.

The teacher claimed that local imams – who are also part of the local administration – play no role in evaluating whether religious minorities are allowed to register religious communities in their area. "In the case of non-Muslim communities, they merely pass on the applications to the local administration before it goes to the justice ministry in Ashgabat. Usually religious people don't say no to others who believe in God," he claimed, but could not then explain why imams have taken part in recent years on raids on religious minority communities and threatened them at interrogations at local administrations.

The teacher also claimed that local authorities cannot refuse to allow a religious community to function, if the Justice Ministry has given it registration.

While many ordinary residents of Turkmenistan fear potential instability in the wake of Niyazov's death, religious believers have told Forum 18 they hope their ability to practice their faith freely will improve. But they remain cautious, as the new leaders have so far indicated they will continue the current course.

Before Niyazov's death, many within religious communities doubted whether limited access to state registration – trumpeted by the regime as a "liberalization" – made any real improvement to their situation in practice. Unregistered religious activity remains – against international human rights standards – illegal. Despite regime claims of the abolition of exit visas, an exit ban against those the state dislikes is still in place.

In June 2006, a Baptist, Aleksandr Frolov, was deported, apparently solely for his religious activity. This was despite that the deportation separated him from his wife and their two young children.

Turkmenistan has not been able to explain to Forum 18 News Service why requests by Asma Jahangir, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief, to visit the country have gone unmet.

*This article originally appeared on Forum 18 News Service. Forum 18 is an Oslo-based group that monitors religious freedom in the former Soviet Union.*

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## TRANSITIONS ONLINE: Turkmenistan: **Demise of a Model Tyrant**

by Marina Koziova

4 January 2007

*Will the death of one of the world's most bizarre dictators open the way to democracy or throw Central Asia into chaos?*

TASHKENT, Uzbekistan | When Turkmenistan's president, Saparmurat Niyazov, died of cardiac arrest at the age of 66 on 21 December, many wondered if the demise of this ruthless dictator would bring his impoverished people a step closer to democracy. But the real question is if his death will lead to instability and chaos instead.

With a population of just 5 million people, Turkmenistan sits atop massive natural gas reserves and is strategically located: bordering the Caspian Sea, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Iran, and Uzbekistan.

Niyazov, known as Turkmenbashi, or father of all Turkmen, came to power in 1985 as first secretary of the Turkmen Communist Party when Turkmenistan was still a part of the Soviet Union. In 1991, he became the first president of independent Turkmenistan. He was proclaimed president for life several years ago by the People's Council. Presiding over a closed and repressive regime, and brutally suppressing any sign of dissent, he was a model tyrant. During his years in office, scores were arrested, tortured, sentenced to long prison terms, and sometimes killed.

Niyazov flung Turkmenistan back into the Dark Ages: theaters, libraries, and newspapers were closed and access to education, travel, and medical services curtailed. He ordered that all hospitals outside the capital Ashgabat be closed; thousands of health workers were dismissed and replaced with military conscripts. He deprived one-third of the country's elderly of their pensions and dramatically cut pensions for the rest. The unemployment rate shot to 60 percent and over half of the population now lives below the poverty line.

At the same time, Global Witness, a London-based human rights watchdog, maintains that overseas funds under Niyazov's control amount to billions of dollars, of which over 2 billion are allegedly with Deutsche Bank in Frankfurt, Germany.

Much of Turkmenistan's revenue was squandered on Niyazov's glorification: hundreds of statues of the president and his family were built, including a gold-leafed giant likeness in the capital that revolves with the sun.

### A DEATH FORETOLD?

The inner workings of Niyazov's secretive regime are difficult to decipher, but one prominent opposition politician does not believe that the president's death came as a surprise. Sapar Yklymov, co-chairman of the Republican Party of Turkmenistan and a former deputy agriculture minister who now lives in Sweden, said that the governors of all five provinces and the commander of the border troops had been replaced shortly before Niyazov's death, some of them with powerful security officials.

Niyazov's death was followed by a brief power struggle within the top echelons of the regime. Under the constitution, the speaker of parliament, Ovezgeldy Atayev, should have taken over as acting president pending elections. But shortly after Niyazov's death he was charged with abuse of power and human rights violations and became the subject of a criminal investigation. His place as interim leader was taken by Gurbanguli Berdimukhamedov, the deputy prime minister.

But if Berdimukhamedov and other officials saw the great leader's death as an opportunity to advance their own interests, many Turkmen are simply glad to see an end to Niyazov's brutal and erratic rule.

"Because of a campaign of terror Niyazov unleashed in Turkmenistan in recent years, a great many people considered him their enemy, and many of them, in a fit of temper, might want him to be punished in revenge," the

human rights officer of the Republican Party of Turkmenistan, Bairam Shikhmuradov, said. Shikhmuradov is the son of former Foreign Minister Boris Shikhmuradov, who was sentenced to life imprisonment in connection with assassination attempts against Niyazov in 2002.

Bairam Shikhmuradov now lives in Moscow and knows nothing about how his father is doing – or even if he's still alive. He is confident about Turkmenistan's future, however. "It cannot be worse in Turkmenistan than it was under Niyazov, and the new authorities will not be as cruel as Niyazov was."

Sapar Yklymov's brother, Aman, was arrested after Sapar was accused of being involved in the same assassination attempt against Niyazov. He was reportedly tortured throughout the time he spent in jail and eventually died in custody in March 2003.

#### THE POLITICS OF ENERGY

Turkmenistan's confirmed reserves of natural gas amount to some 2 trillion cubic meters. The country annually produces some 60 billion cubic meters of natural gas, a quarter of which is used for domestic consumption. The current main importers of Turkmen gas are Russia, Ukraine, and Iran, and Turkmenistan's gas plays a key role in Russian president Vladimir Putin's policy of using energy as a tool of political influence in other countries.

But under Niyazov's rule, the republic became an unreliable energy supplier. Gas supplies to Russia were frequently cut off during price disputes, and the country recently signed an agreement with China that provides for China to buy 30 billion cubic meters of Turkmen gas each year for 30 years, starting in 2009, through a new pipeline. (Planning for the pipeline was supposed to be completed at the end of December 2006.)

The agreement not only breaks Russia's monopoly on export routes for Turkmen gas but also threatens an earlier agreement between Turkmenistan and Russia's Gazprom because Turkmen gas production cannot cover all export commitments.

The agreement with China also raised the price of Turkmen gas bought by Russia from 65 to U.S. \$100 per 1,000 cubic meters. It also sent a message, along with other projected Turkmen pipelines across Afghanistan and across the Caspian Sea, that Russia, a key supplier of gas to Europe, could face a supply crunch in the not-so-distant future.

The complex politics of energy have fueled speculation about Russia's interest in Niyazov's death. Russia was accused by Turkmen officials of being behind the 2002 assassination attempts against Niyazov.

But not everyone thinks that Niyazov's death is a good thing for the buyers of Turkmen gas. Dosym Satpayev, director of the Assessment Risks Group, a non-commercial research organization based in Almaty, Kazakhstan, believes that Niyazov suited many because of his "relative predictability." "Other countries have gotten used to Niyazov despite his willfulness," Satpayev said. "His death could frighten those who had already signed contracts with him."

The Turkmen government was quick to reassure its partners. "Turkmenistan will honor all commitments under international and bilateral contracts," it said in a statement read on national television.

#### INSTABILITY OR HALFWAY DEMOCRACY?

Will the tyrant's death open space for democracy or lead to unrest?

"Unfortunately, instability and civil war are possible and may be provoked by conflict among members of today's Turkmen elite," said the Republican Party's Shikhmuradov. "If officials fight each other, this battle may provoke conflict in society. In our country, family and clan ties are very close and a fight between high-ranking officials would lead to a fight between tribes."

The People's Council, Turkmenistan's highest legislative council, has now picked six candidates, including Berdymukhamedov, for the presidential poll to be held on 11 February. None represents the opposition.

But Parahat Yklymov, another brother to Sapar Yklymov who also lives in Sweden, believes that Berdymukhamedov will be just "a figurehead" while real power will rest with Akmurad Redzhepov, the head of presidential security. Sapar Yklymov predicts that Berdymukhamedov will become president but will not be able to keep power. "He is a temporary figure," he said.

Instability could ensue if Russia, Ukraine, China, Iran, and the United States began competing for access to Turkmen gas. "Russia and Ukraine will not be able to buy gas at a low price if political reforms and democratic changes take place in Turkmenistan, and the gas will be sold to China and Europe," Sapar Yklymov said.

Farhad Ilyasov, a Moscow-based sociologist, said, "A period of instability is more probable than a civil war. Democratization will not happen, though some indulgence [toward proponents of democracy] is probable."

But here lies a danger for the country, and perhaps the region: while well-established authoritarianism and democracy alike tend to produce stability, mixed systems – what Ilyasov calls "indulgence" – tend to be highly volatile, according to the Political Instability Task Force, a U.S. government-sponsored research project. Turkmenistan may be moving in precisely that direction.

**Marina Kozlova** is a journalist based in Tashkent.

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## TRANSITIONS ONLINE: After Niyazov: Turkmenistan's Test

by BBC Monitoring

22 December 2006

*Russian pundits ponder which way the country will turn after the death of its all-powerful ruler.*

Saparmyrat Niyazov's was a tyrant and a despot, and his legacy is by and large negative, but the Turkmen leader's death has opened up a chance for an improvement in relations with Russia.

These were the views expressed by experts and politicians interviewed in Russian Mayak radio's "Panorama" programme on 21 December.

### SCYTHE: PRINCIPLE

Aleksey Malashenko, professor at the Moscow Carnegie Centre, described the internal stability imposed on Turkmenistan under Niyazov's rule as the "peace of the cemetery".

"You know, I think the legacy he left is negative more than anything else. Undoubtedly there is stability and peace. But in some ways it recalls the peace of the cemetery."

He said Turkmenistan lacks a "normal modern political elite" because the Turkmenbasy had followed the "scythe principle".

"As soon as someone started to prosper and raise his head, everything was immediately cut down. So I think that the construction of a civil society, the construction of some sort of normally functioning state structures will have to start from zero."

Malashenko predicted that the policy of reliance on an "enormous quantity" of gas and the ability to sell it "left right and centre" will not be sustainable.

He said that "his death leaves many more problems than we realize". "And I have the feeling that these problems will come to the surface in the very near future - in a matter of days and weeks."

### ORIENTAL DESPOT

Asked by presenter Ilmira Malikova whether a comparison between Niyazov and Stalin was accurate, Malashenko replied that Stalin had been a "more substantial figure" and the label that better suited the Turkmenbasy was "oriental despot".

He said it would be interesting whether his legacy would be viewed in Turkmenistan in exclusively positive terms, or whether "something that could be termed de-turkmenbasyization" was going to begin.

"Will they say what he really did? Will they talk of his mistakes and his ruthlessness? That will be a very important litmus test, by the way, indicating what we can expect from the new ruling elite, from the people who are coming to power now. I think that the process will undoubtedly start, and perhaps even sooner than we realize. And from that point of view we can return to your question about comparisons. What is now taking place after his death will be like the 1950s after the death of Stalin, and to some extent also the mid-1960s after Khrushchev was removed from power."

### TOTALITARIANISM WITH ECONOMIC PROGRESS

In the view of Azhdar Kurtov, expert at the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies, also speaking in the studio, "there are nevertheless spheres where it is equally evident that these years of Niyazov's rule led to progress".

"Never had so many roads and so many new factories been built in Turkmenistan. In the context of a monopoly in the sphere of the extraction and transportation of gas, the economy was gradually diversified. A considerable proportion of extracted oil was processed at the country's own refineries."

"But, at the same time, his personality must be assessed above all in terms of the fact that he was undoubtedly a despot, undoubtedly it was a despotic regime, undoubtedly he caused considerable harm to a very large number of people in Turkmenistan. Many of them simply lost their lives as a consequence of repressions. And given that Turkmenistan is the only totalitarian state in post-Soviet space, all these circumstances are directly linked to the personality of Nyyazow himself. If another person had been in his place, perhaps the situation would have developed differently."

#### LACK OF POLITICAL ELITE

Boris Syhmyradow, a leader of the Republican Party of Turkmenistan, speaking by telephone, said Nyyazow's policies were motivated by the need to shore up the "tyranny and despotism" he had himself created.

"Once he had embarked on the path of tyranny and despotism, there was no going back for Nyyazow. All that happened afterwards was the regime trying to survive. He couldn't not shut off the country because otherwise his power would not have been sustained."

Syhmyradow said he believed that after the mid-1990s Nyyazow "spoilt" all the positive things he had achieved at the "dawn of independence".

Asked whether Turkmenistan was ready for renewal, Syhmyradow said: "There is no opposition there, there is no political elite in the sense in which the term is normally employed. Nyyazow himself, with his own hands, did his utmost to ensure that in his entourage, in the leadership of the state and government, there are no people capable of taking independent decisions or people with an independent view."

"So when it comes to links with the republic, they were extremely limited and unfortunately the Republican Party of Turkmenistan was forced to operate mainly abroad. We had contacts and links, we still have activists, but these people have been regularly subject to mortal danger, so unfortunately I cannot say that we had something there."

#### SON NOT GROOMED FOR OFFICE

Kurtov denied Nyyazow's son was a likely successor: "In Turkmenistan, there is a son - Myrat. But he is not noted as a politician in Turkmenistan. His father did not prepare him as a successor. It may have been a mistake, but it is a quite evident fact."

He added that "foreign political forces" could now take advantage of the situation to "promote their protégés to the post of Turkmen leader".

#### TURKMENISTAN TO LOOK TO MOSCOW

Deputy speaker of the State Duma from the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who joined the discussion via an audio link, predicted that "a supporter of Nyyazow" would become leader "and everything will continue - the policy of neutrality and the policy of relations that have formed hitherto with Russia, Iran and Afghanistan".

Zhirinovskiy said there was no opportunity for Islamic fundamentalists to gain a foothold, but there was now a chance of an improvement in relations with Russia.

He predicted Turkmenistan might even become an active member of the CIS again, renouncing its neutrality at some point in the future.

"The present Turkmen political elite realizes that the Iran option is unsuitable - it would be pretty much the end of them all since in the past they were all Communists and atheists. The American-Afghan option is also unsuitable - they can see what is going on in Afghanistan. So they will all look to Moscow."

He said the fact that Turkmenistan's oil and gas was piped to Europe via Russia was also a factor pointing to a strengthening of relations with Russia, and ruled out the possibility of an "orange revolution" in the wake of



Nyyazow's death.

Zhirinovskiy said Russian officers were already a trusted presence in Turkmen state organizations.

"Nyyazow's personal guard is drawn from the Russian special forces. There are plenty of our Russians there. Many of our officers are working for Turkmen state bodies, and they have behaved with propriety. They are not suspected of anything. They are tried and tested. It is realized that it is better with the Russians."

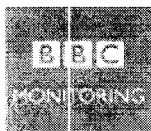
#### CONSTITUTION BREACHED

At the end of the programme, Syhmyradow accused the Turkmen authorities of breaching the constitution by arresting the speaker of parliament to whom power was supposed to have passed on the president's death.

"So they have already demonstrated that they do not intend to change their methods and everything points to the fact that everything will continue as before."

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Source: Radio Mayak, Moscow, in Russian 1215 gmt 21 December 2006



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