



OSCE Centre in Ashgabad

Press release

OSCE Chairman expresses condolences to Turkmen people over death of leader, offers Organization's help on democratic reforms

BRUSSELS, 21 December 2006 - The OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht, expressed condolences to the people of Turkmenistan today after the death of their president, and said the OSCE stood ready to help with the ensuing transition and to advance democratic reforms.

Turkmenistan's state television reported President Saparmurat Niyazov had died early on Thursday of a heart attack at the age of 66. He had ruled Turkmenistan since 1985.

"I extend my condolences to the people of Turkmenistan," said Minister De Gucht, who visited President Niyazov in Ashgabad in March and urged him to strengthen political and democratic reforms.

"This will undoubtedly be a difficult period. The people of Turkmenistan may well feel uncertain after two decades ruled by one man," said the Chairman-in-Office. "The OSCE stands ready to help with any transition, to advance democratic reforms and to ensure stability in the country and across the strategically vital region of Central Asia."

The OSCE and Minister De Gucht have expressed concern about human rights in Turkmenistan, and called for moves to strengthen democracy and rule of law and to improve education.

Created in January 1999, the OSCE Centre in Ashgabad has since worked to help the authorities to uphold Turkmenistan's OSCE commitments, to promote confidence- and security-building measures and to develop the country's democracy, market economy and civil society.

"We hope Turkmenistan will become an even more important player in the OSCE," said Minister De Gucht. "The OSCE prides itself on being fast-moving, flexible and working on all facets of security. We are ready to help in all areas where the OSCE is active, whether it is military-political security, environmental and economic matters or human rights."

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Turkmenistan's 'iron ruler' dies

Turkmenistan's authoritarian president Saparmurat Niyazov, who ruled the Central Asian country for 21 years, has died aged 66, state TV has reported.

Mr Niyazov, who named cities and airports after himself in a personality cult, left no designated successor.

Turkmenistan, which has large gas reserves, now faces an uncertain future with rival groups and outside powers scrambling for influence, analysts say.

Mr Niyazov died at 0110 local time (2010 GMT Wednesday) of a heart attack.

Last month, the president publicly acknowledged he had heart disease.

His funeral is set to take place on 24 December in the capital, Ashgabat.

BBC correspondents quote witnesses as saying the capital has been quiet since the news broke, with many people staying at home, shocked and unsure of what may happen next.

Deputy Prime Minister Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov has been named head of the commission handling the funeral, state television said.

SAPARMURAT NIYAZOV

Became head of Communist Party in Turkmenistan in 1985

Styled himself Turkmenbashi, Father of the Turkmen
Built up a cult of personality, with cities, airports and months named after him

Introduced bizarre laws, banning young men from wearing beards and listening to car radios

Poverty remained rife in the energy-rich country

According to Turkmen law, the president is succeeded by the head of the legislative body, the People's Assembly. But this post was held by Mr Niyazov himself.

Turkmenistan has called an emergency meeting of its highest representative body for 26 December to decide on Mr Niyazov's succession, the government said.

Mr Berdymukhamedov has also been named acting head of state until then, according to government sources.

The cabinet of ministers and the National Security Council in Turkmenistan have held emergency sessions to discuss the situation.

Uncertainty

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has called for power in Turkmenistan to be

transferred "in the framework of the law" to ensure stability in the region.



"We hope that a new leadership will act to benefit co-operation with Russia and to benefit the region as a whole," he said.

The president of neighbouring Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, said he was saddened at the news of Mr Niyazov's "unfortunate" death.

Mr Karzai said Mr Niyazov "played a key role in strengthening bilateral relations" between the two countries.

Many in the region fear it is less the bizarre style of his rule and more the lack of political institutions that could prove to be the real legacy of Mr Niyazov, says the BBC's Natalia Antelava in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

Education, healthcare and society generally are regarded as having crumbled under his rule.

"President Niyazov was in effect the state and what he decreed on any subject, from politics, to culture to science, was absolute law," says Michael Hall, Central Asia project director for the International Crisis Group.

A mostly Muslim nation, Turkmenistan boasts the world's fifth largest natural gas reserves as well as substantial oil resources.

Cult of personality

Mr Niyazov became Communist Party chief of what was then a Soviet republic in 1985 and was elected first president of independent Turkmenistan in 1991.

In 1999, he was made president-for-life by the country's rubber-stamp parliament.

During his reign, Mr Niyazov established a cult of personality in which he was styled as Turkmenbashi, or Leader of all Turkmen.

He renamed months and days in the calendar after himself and his family, and ordered statues of himself to be erected throughout the desert nation.

Cities, an airport and a meteorite were given his name.

Mr Niyazov was intolerant of criticism and allowed no political opposition or free media in the nation of five million people.

His laws became increasingly personal. It was forbidden to listen to car radios or smoke in public, or for young men to wear beards.

An alleged assassination attempt in 2002 was used to crush his few remaining opponents.

All candidates in the December 2004 parliamentary elections, at which there were no foreign observers, were his supporters.

What is your reaction to the news about Niyazov's death? Send us your comments using the form below:

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Dec. 22, 2006[E-mail](#) | [Home](#)

Turkmenbashi, "Father of All Turkmen," Dies

// Death of Turkmenistan's Leader Causes Government Upheaval

Turkmenistan's President-for-life Saparmurat Niyazov, better known by his preferred nickname of Turkmenbashi, died early Thursday morning of cardiac arrest in the Turkmen capital of Ashgabat. In violation of the country's constitution, Niyazov's inner circle named a deputy prime minister as his temporary replacement and imprisoned the speaker of parliament. A period of mourning was declared across the country, the New Year's holidays were cancelled, and the army was put on full alert. Niyazov's death may signal the beginning of a geopolitical power struggle among the country's neighbors, who covet Turkmenistan's vast reserves of natural gas.

The sudden demise of Turkmenbashi, the "Father of All Turkmen," was announced yesterday morning. According to Turkmenistan's state news services, Saparmurat Niyazov died of cardiac arrest on Thursday at 01:10 AM Ashgabat time. "The news of the death of Saparmurat Niyazov was a blow to the Turkmen people. Every family feels personal grief at this loss," said the local television station. In the wake of the president's death, Turkmenistan's newspapers held up their morning printing run until evening on Thursday in order to coincide with the beginning of the official period of mourning.

Opponents of Turkmenbashi's regime greeted his death with exultation. Opposition leaders living in exile hurried to announce that they were prepared to return home as soon as possible. "According to the constitution, presidential elections should be held within the next two months," said Khudaiberdy Orazov, the leader of the Turkmen opposition party Vatan and a former deputy prime minister who is now living in Sweden. "Right now we have grounds to assume that everything will be done according to the constitution. We will return and take part in the elections."

Meanwhile, however, events yesterday in Ashgabat demonstrated that the opposition's celebrations are potentially premature: immediately after the death of the president-for-life, something just short of a coup took place in Turkmenistan. According to the constitution, if the president becomes incapable of fulfilling his duties, the speaker of the parliament takes over until new presidential elections can be held. Before yesterday, that post was held by Ovezgeldy Ataev, and the Turkmen media had already reported that Ataev would be temporarily stepping into Niyazov's shoes. The further evolution of events, however, caught everyone off guard. Without even bothering to officially strip the speaker of his diplomatic immunity, the country's prosecutor general launched a criminal investigation against him, and less than two hours later he was put under arrest. The majority of Turkmenistan's senior government officials were informed of the events only later that morning, at a hastily convened session of the federal security council,

At the meeting, the security council decided to name deputy prime minister Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov as acting president. Berdymuhammedov, who is also the country's minister of health and medical industry, was additionally entrusted with the honor of heading the commission that will organize Saparmurat Niyazov's funeral.

The unexpectedly sharp twist in the succession order has given some members of the Turkmen opposition cause to speculate that Turkmenbashi's death may not have been by entirely natural means. "The speed with which the Turkmen authorities found a way out of a difficult situation, with the lightning arrest of the speaker of parliament and the naming of the deputy prime minister as the president's temporary successor, is worrying," said Bayram Shikhmuradov, one of the leaders of the Republican Party of Turkmenistan, who also happens to be the son of Turkmenistan's repressed former Foreign Affairs Minister Boris Shikhmuradov. According to the younger Shikhmuradov, the impression is that, if nothing else, Saparmurat Niyazov's death at least did not come as a complete surprise to the president's inner circle. "They were ready for it, and they quickly put their plan into action," he concluded.

He expressed doubts that any opposition figures would be able to return to Turkmenistan any time soon. "All of that will depend on the actions of the current government. The majority of the opposition leaders do not have Turkmen passports, meaning that they will need visas, which they are not likely to receive." Thus, the opposition is in no position to attempt to influence the outcome of the struggle for power.

The most crucial phase of the battle to decide who will inherit the president's seat still lies ahead. An emergency session of the most senior decision-making body in the government, the people's council, is scheduled for next Tuesday. This council will set the date of the presidential elections. Under Turkmen law, the current temporary president, Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov, cannot run in the elections. According to opposition leaders, however, Berdymuhammedov, who formerly served as Saparmurat Niyazov's personal physician, is a weak-willed man who wields little influence. It was precisely this lack of character that allowed him to retain the post of deputy prime minister longer than anyone else, a fact that has also even birthed rumors that he is Turkmenbashi's illegitimate son.

No one seriously entertains the idea that the title of Turkmenbashi will pass to Niyazov's son Murat. "Murat can become his father's successor only if they put him in the spot. But even then he wouldn't be able to hang onto it," believes Bayram Shikhmuradov. "Also, he has recently been living in Vienna and working as a businessman, and in general he disapproves of his father's cult of personality."

Observers are inclined to believe that the presidential elections will take place until the total control of powerful Turkmen officials. The most influential among them is Akmurad Rejepov, the head of Saparmurat Niyazov's cadre of bodyguards. "He controls the entire army. Under him, the army guarded not only Turkmenbashi but also important government buildings and sites, and they accompanied the president on any trip he took," explained Shikhmuradov. "Moreover, General Rejepov succeeded in putting his people in key posts within the security services. The Ministry of Defense and the Internal Affairs Ministry are headed not by military men and police but by former members of Niyazov's security staff."

At the moment all available measures are being taken in Turkmenistan to make sure that no one succeeds in influencing the internal political situation from outside the country. According to the Turkmen media, the army is on high alert, border security has been beefed up, and the border with Uzbekistan is closed completely.

Vladimir Solovyov and Mikhail Zygar

Prospects of Turkmen opposition dim

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ISTANBUL - TDN with wire dispatches

Political exiles from Turkmenistan threatened to "overthrow whoever succeeds Saparmurat Niyazov" if democratic reforms are not introduced. But their influence is very limited inside the country, told an expert to the TDN.

Political exiles appealed to the European Union, the US and the former Soviet republics, including Russia, to support democratic presidential elections supervised by international observers, reported Agence France-Presse.

"If this regime does not listen to the international community and let Turkmenistan develop democratically, the opposition will intensify its work and ensure its overthrow," warned Khudaiberdy Orazov, formerly head of Turkmenistan's central bank, speaking in the Ukrainian capital, Kiev.

Orazov said the opposition's plans could be along the lines of previous peaceful regime changes in three other former Soviet republics: Ukraine, Georgia and **Kyrgyzstan**.

The three main overseas opposition groups would put up a single jointly chosen candidate for the presidential election, said Turkmenistan's former ambassador to Turkey, Nurmukammed Khanamov, now based in Austria. The system continues:

Meanwhile, Gökçen Ogan from the Eurasia Strategical Studies Center (ASAM), based in Ankara, evaluated the prospects of the Turkmen opposition to the Turkish Daily News. Ogan mentioned two main groups: One based in Russia, and the other in Scandinavia. "There is not much chance for these to be active in Turkmenistan politics in the short term," she said, as it is nearly impossible for them to enter the country. "Turkmenbashi might be dead, but the system doesn't look as if it is going to change in the short term," she added.

The opposition, based abroad, has also serious problems in deciding on a candidate. "The United Turkmen Opposition decided on a candidate: Nurberdi Nurmemmedov. His prospect of being registered as a candidate was high, but he is nowhere to be found since Dec. 23," Ogan told the TDN. "Meanwhile, the candidate of the Vatan (Homeland) Movement is Hudaverdi Oradov."

Constitutionally, these figures have the right to run in the presidential election, scheduled for Feb. 11. "Thus, there are going to be probably 11 more candidates, alongside the six who have been chosen by the People's Assembly," Ogan noted.

"One major disadvantage of the exiled opposition is that they are mostly figures who have been accused of corruption. The people do not trust them. And for such people, to enter defiantly into Turkmenistan and then improve their credibility in such a short time is very hard," she said. "The establishment chooses stability, and countries like Russia and the US are no different." Caretaker president:

Deputy Prime Minister Gurbanguly Berdymukammedov was appointed caretaker president by the State Security Council in the hours after the death last Thursday of Niyazov, who ruled the country as uncontested leader for 21 years.

On Tuesday, a meeting of the People's Council, the highest legal body in the country, unanimously approved Berdymukammedov as the main candidate in elections set for February 11 and selected five other candidates.

"It looks like Berdymukammedov will become president. Another question is if he's going to be a puppet or if he is a more independent player," said Dosym Satpayev, an analyst at the Risk Assessment Group think-tank, based in neighbouring Kazakhstan.

"Those who stayed in their posts alive and unharmed in Ashgabat will divide up the cake of power between themselves and will not allow anyone else to have any of it," Arkady Dubnov, a **Central Asia** expert, wrote in Russia's Vremya Novostei newspaper, according to AFP.

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Turkmenistan

A bad father of the Turkmen

Jan 4th 2007 | ALMATY

From The Economist print edition

President Niyazov is dead, but his country lives under his shadow

FEW people will mourn the death of Turkmenistan's President Saparmurat Niyazov, the 66-year-old dictator who called himself Turkmenbashi, or "Father of the Turkmen".

In a region dominated by autocratic leaders, he stood out like one of the grotesque gilded statues of himself that disfigure the capital, Ashgabat. His fondness for huge diamond-studded rings and changing his hair colour made him the butt of jokes. Inevitably, the giant portraits of Turkmenbashi had to be replaced whenever he adopted a new hair-dye.

Mr Niyazov was not just an eccentric. He wrecked his country, particularly the health and education systems, even though he presided over the world's fifth-largest reserve of natural gas. He imposed a Stalinist reign of fear in which anyone suspected of disagreeing with him was sent to a psychiatric ward or prison.

It is unclear whether Turkmenbashi's death from a heart attack on December 21st will improve the lot of his 5m countrymen any time soon. Despite hints of liberalisation, Mr Niyazov's coterie appears to retain a firm grip on power, and will doubtless continue to trade on his personality cult for some time.

The deputy prime minister, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, rumoured to be a close relative of Mr Niyazov, has been named acting president. Under the constitution, the job was supposed to pass to the speaker of parliament, but he was reported arrested soon after Mr Niyazov's death. The way appears clear for Mr Berdymukhammedov, who has promised better access to the internet and more school years, to become leader in an election on February 11th. Political opponents, mostly in exile, seem unable to pose a challenge.

The big question is whether the vacuum left by Mr Niyazov will allow Islamic extremism to spill over from neighbouring Iran and Afghanistan. The main powers in the region—Russia, the United States and China—are also watching closely. Russia has long had the upper hand. Most of Turkmenistan's gas is exported through the Russian pipeline system. Gazprom, the Russian state giant, buys gas at relatively low prices, and then distributes it in Russia or sells it at a profit elsewhere in Europe.



The United States, however, may now hope that the new rulers will seek to diversify, and adopt a project to build a gas pipeline beneath the Caspian Sea. An alternative southward route through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India, once favoured by Mr Niyazov, has so far proved elusive.

Mr Niyazov became Turkmenistan's Communist boss in 1985 and remained in power after the break-up of the Soviet Union. The country kept afloat thanks to the export of natural gas, even though much of the bounty was squandered on dubious projects, such as a huge artificial lake in the desert. A London-based campaigning group, Global Witness, said Mr Niyazov siphoned away much of the country's gas revenues into offshore bank accounts.

Turkmenbashi also impoverished the minds of his countrymen. All children were required to spend hours learning the *Ruhnama*, "The Book of Spirit", his eccentric musings on Turkmen history and culture. Russian-language teaching was phased out, music and ballet schools were closed and almost all teachers from ethnic minorities were rooted out. Foreign degrees were no longer recognised. In the end the Father of the Turkmen bequeaths his children a dreadful legacy.



Unlamented

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Global Strategic Analysis

TURKMENISTAN: Acting president announces policy change

Thursday, January 4 2007

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Acting President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov today announced a series of reforms, some of which aim to reverse the crippling policies of the late President Saparmurat Niyazov. These include the educational system, which Berdymukhammedov promised to bring in line with international standards. Under Niyazov, school education was cut from ten years to nine, while higher education training was reduced from five years to four. Berdymukhammedov's seeming determination to improve the quality of education will gain him votes in the February 11 election. However, the essence of his proposal so far is merely to revert to basic Soviet-era standards. It will take much longer to formulate and implement meaningful reform in education or any other sector. Berdymukhammedov has also pledged to drop restrictions on the Internet, even though this measure will be largely symbolic in a country where access to and knowledge of modern technologies remain extremely scarce. At the same time, Berdymukhammedov has promised to keep such social subsidies as free domestic gas, and respect Turkmenistan's international obligations, including its energy contracts. **Berdymukhammedov, who has embraced a populist platform, is now almost certain to win the election next month. However, substantive changes will take time, strategic thinking and consistency in implementation to reverse the legacy of 21 years of Niyazov's despotic rule.**

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Global Strategic Analysis

TURKMENISTAN:Consensus candidate set to win presidency

Friday, January 5 2007

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EVENT: Acting President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov yesterday announced a series of reforms, which embrace a populist agenda and position him as a front-runner in next month's presidential election.

SIGNIFICANCE: Opposition figures -- divided, exiled, lacking resources and enjoying little popular support -- have missed the narrow opportunity they had for creating conditions favourable to a more open and participatory transfer of power following the death of President Saparmurat Niyazov. Berdymukhammedov is now set to become president, although he is weaker and more vulnerable than it might appear.

ANALYSIS: On December 26, six days after the death of President Saparmurat Niyazov, Turkmenistan's supreme legislative body, the Halk Maslahaty (People's Council), unanimously confirmed 49-year-old Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov as acting president. It then nominated him for the presidency and decided to allow five candidates to stand against him in the election scheduled for February 11.

'Managed' election. As acting president, Berdymukhammedov was previously constitutionally barred from contesting the presidential election. However, the constitution has been amended in order not to obstruct his candidacy. The other five candidates are likely to be 'straw men' put up to give an impression of democratic process. The election will almost certainly be conducted in such a way as to ensure Berdymukhammedov's overwhelming victory. Its outcome will then be used to suppress further any expression of discontent.

Mystery candidate. Little is known about Berdymukhammedov. Born in 1957 in Babarap, a village in the Ashgabat region, he later qualified as a dentist. At the age of 40, he was appointed health minister, and in 2001, promoted to deputy prime minister. His political longevity marks him as a staunch Niyazov loyalist and, therefore, probably of unremarkable talents. Although he has been described as being of Niyazov's generation, he is some 17 years younger than his predecessor.

Weak clans. The 2,500-member Halk Maslahaty and the Mejlis (parliament) are supine bodies of Niyazov-approved figures, convened only to rubber stamp decisions made elsewhere in the formal political structure or confirm agreements hammered out informally among the political elites. Their votes almost invariably reflect the requirements of the currently dominant political faction. However, they are unreliable indicators of whether the strength of the ruling faction is waxing or waning relative to others.

Much real power in Turkmenistan lies in the hands of informal networks, or 'clans', based loosely on kinship and common regional or political antecedence. Control of government ministries and economic power often derive from clan influence. However, years of cult-like one-man rule, endless rounds of dismissals from government service and exile abroad have left the clans relatively weak and disjointed: none has the charismatic strong leadership or depth of political influence characteristic of clan politics in many other parts of Central Asia (see CENTRAL ASIA: Rising Islamism reshapes state relations - August 28, 2006).

Weak opposition. Niyazov undermined the influence of exiled members of the opposition on the domestic political scene by purging their relatives and allies from senior government positions, and excluding them from business activities. While several members of the opposition -- individually and collectively -- have expressed their intention to return to Turkmenistan, such plans are becoming daily more hazardous, as none of the domestic elites will welcome additional rivals in the tussle for economic and political spoils (see TURKMENISTAN: Niyazov's death sparks power struggle - December 21, 2006).

Power ministries. The most important locus of interim power lies with the so-called power ministries --

notably, the National Security Committee (KNB, successor to the KGB), and the defence and interior ministries. Yet even they have been weakened by regular purges. They are now likely to be kingmakers rather than kings, with the KNB navigating between competing interest groups in an attempt to forge a stable solution. The current settlement may not be permanent, although the longer it holds, the more it can be expected to last, as new appointees establish themselves and marginalise challengers.

Berdymukhammedov's rapid rise to prominence suggests that he had been identified as a potential successor by the power ministries -- particularly the KNB -- prior to Niyazov's demise, though he himself may not have known this for certain. The fact that he does not hail from one of the power ministries suggests he may be a compromise candidate.

Future governance. Fears, even within the highest echelons of the state, that Niyazov's death would spark political chaos and possible violence have so far proved unfounded. The Turkmen Security Council's pronouncement that Niyazov's policies would be continued was an immediate reaction and an attempt to stifle debate. The first phase of the post-Niyazov succession is now over and appears to have gone according to the preordained plan of the power ministries. The nature of the transition has set the tone for the future governance of the country, and it does not bode well for democratic development.

Socio-economic situation. The new leadership faces massive social and economic problems. Despite high gas prices, Turkmenistan's economy, bedevilled by Niyazov's misguided economic plans, has long struggled to stay afloat. Much hard currency has been squandered on pretentious construction projects and channelled into the pockets of the country's elites. Meanwhile, agriculture and non-energy industrial production have slumped, while unemployment has soared, with some estimates putting it as high as 40%. Living standards have fallen dramatically, and per capita income is currently less than 30 dollars per month (see CENTRAL ASIA: Lagging welfare reform affects stability - May 24, 2006). Grain shortages are common and are expected again this year.

Relations with Russia. To shore up its fragility, the new regime is likely to look abroad for support. Russia will be its preferred partner:

- Moscow has a history of supporting autocracies in Central Asia (see UZBEKISTAN: Stalemate forces alignment with Russia - May 22, 2006).
- More significantly, the bulk of Turkmenistan's gas exports -- and therefore most of its hard currency earnings -- rely on the former Soviet pipeline network, now controlled by Russian state gas monopoly Gazprom. Neither side will want this link to falter, as it is lucrative to both.
- Continuing good ties with Russia will help the new Turkmen regime marginalise opposition movements, which are currently tolerated by the Kremlin as a potential lever of influence.

It is unlikely that a Turkmen president unsympathetic to Russia's strategic economic and military interests in the country would survive. There is a high probability that the new regime will return Turkmenistan to full membership of the CIS and its various structures, especially the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (see CIS: Security structures take precedence over the CIS - December 29, 2006).

Relations with the West. Western countries are unlikely to respond quickly enough to influence the early phases of transition. However, as the new regime beds down, the new rulers themselves may seek to build relations with the West -- both to prop up their political positions and head off political opponents. Western support is likely to be sought by disenfranchised Turkmen clans to create alternative income streams and regain political influence.

Importantly, the elites cannot predictably benefit under a totalitarian ruler, which enhances the prospects for a state more open to Western investment. It became known today that the overseas investment arm of India's state-run Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC), ONGC Videsh, is expected to sign a deal with Denmark's Maersk and Germany's Wintershall to buy a 33% stake in two offshore Caspian Sea blocks in Turkmenistan. ONGC is currently awaiting the approval of the Turkmen government. Yet investment will only be welcome on terms that do not erode elite interests.

CONCLUSION: In the run up to the election, the KNB is likely to stifle any dissent and broker behind-the-scenes agreements to address any outstanding grievances among the domestic political elites. Berdymukhammedov's succession seems assured, but unless he successfully addresses pressing economic and social crises, he will be under constant threat of replacement.

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