

# The Evolution of Authoritarianism in Turkmenistan

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In a corner of the world largely ignored by the international community because of geography and political developments, a peculiar state has come into existence. Turkmenistan, independent since 1991, is a nation forced to maneuver through a minefield of political and economic dilemmas deeply rooted in the struggle between traditionalism, modernization, and decolonization. The fall of the Soviet Union left Turkmenistan in perhaps one of the worst economic situations among the constituent republics, due to seventy years of neglect and exploitation by Moscow. Turkmenistan's political elite has guided this fledgling nation since it became an independent state. But the question is, toward what?

The reforms instituted in Turkmenistan since 1991 have been less far reaching than those in other former Soviet republics. The president, Saparmurad Niyazov, has been labeled everything from Brezhnevian and neo-Stalinist to a "despotic sultan" by the Western media. Niyazov disregards such accusations and charges that Westerners are preaching from the pedestal of developed democracy. According to him, "Establishing in Turkmenistan a just society, a democratic secular state functioning in accordance with the law, is a complicated and historic process which will take a certain period of time."<sup>1</sup> His evolutionary approach to reforms focuses on the need for stability on both political and economic fronts to promote a smooth transition, free from the hardships of "shock therapy" that have created unrest in other parts of the former Soviet Union. This deliberate policy of restraining reform has often been used as a justification for repressive actions that hark back to the days of the pre-Gorbachev USSR. Still, it appears that Niyazov's regime has considerable legitimacy in the eyes of the Turkmen people. Currently, Niyazov is creating an authoritarian state, dependent on his personal will, which encompasses most facets of Turkmen life. Niyazov was able to survive the fall of the Soviet Union because he was able to utilize democratic speech and make cosmetic structural changes while transforming the focus of rule from an imposed authoritarian regime to a domestic variety.

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The context of political change in the former Soviet sphere is critically important when analyzing the situation in Turkmenistan. The political implications of democratization, especially after the dissolution of the USSR, created many new “democrats” whose major motivation for ideological change was their own pending legitimacy crisis. As democratization came to embody the hopes of people around the world, many political elites picked up the mantra of democracy. Soon, almost all of them were “reformers” and “survivors” who were getting elected to the same positions they held under their respective authoritarian regimes. Niyazov is certainly the epitome of such a “survivor.” Newly invigorated with a strong dose of realism, these survivors have used pragmatic means to convert their political liabilities into assets. Niyazov has certainly capitalized on the fall of the Soviet Union to consolidate his personal power over Turkmenistan by claiming to initiate an evolutionary process of democratization that will “build in Turkmenistan . . . a secular democratic society functioning according to the rule of law” while preserving economic and social stability.<sup>2</sup>

To understand the transitions that have taken place in Turkmenistan since the fall of the Soviet Union, historical and situational contexts must be taken into account. Most important, one must understand the country and its people. Questions about concerning Niyazov’s regime and its eventual destination, but the answers require a larger framework that divides the transition into three phases: first, historical context and an appraisal of the Turkmen Communist Party (TKP) at the time of the collapse of the Soviet empire; second, the TKP’s reaction to the fall of the Soviet Union and the ideology it began to propagate; third, the practical application of ideology through policy. Evaluation of this latter reveals trends in the transition period that point toward an increasingly rigid and vertical authoritarian regime.

Western perceptions of Turkmenistan, as well as the rest of the former Soviet Central Asian republics, have been clouded by the euphoria induced by the fall of the Soviet sphere and by socially ingrained prejudices with a much longer history. *Realpolitik* was put aside for a time and liberal democracy was thought to be triumphant over totalitarian communism. Anatoly Khazanov perceptively wrote in *After the USSR*:

This conceptual extension was mistaken. The current developments in many post-communist countries prove that their communist past has left a very particular legacy which hinders their divorce from totalitarianism. What was certainly not sufficiently taken into account was that authoritarian capitalism is markedly different from totalitarian communism.<sup>3</sup>

The former Soviet republics have no heritage of democracy, multiparty politics, pluralism, and, or, especially in Central Asia, a civil society. Because the realities of the situation were obscured by euphoria, it was assumed that the transition to democracy would be quick and, as Khazanov said, “automatic.”<sup>4</sup> While the West was busy in self-congratulation, a voice of reason spoke to the people, cotton farmers and *apparatchiks* alike, calling for what people in chaos ultimately dream of: stability.

Beyond the initial Western misconceptions of what the fall of the Communist

system meant, the forces of tribalism, Islam, and Pan-Turkism were also ill understood. These concepts are discussed in detail below, but it is important to remember that they were considered threats in 1991, by the West, by indigenous political elites, and by other groups such as the Slavic minorities residing in the Central Asian republics. These miscalculations were the foundation for many of the original academic works concerning the future of Soviet Central Asia. The perversion of those concepts must now be seen as a part of history. Writers on post-Soviet Central Asian politics must no longer ponder, for instance, how Iran will make religion a primary political motivator by spreading fanatical Islam to the Russian border. Conversely, the realities of the Central Asian predicament should be studied to understand that a Persian-based Islamic movement and the conditions in Turkmenistan, not to mention much of Central Asia, are not compatible.

### Context of Change

#### History

A historical perspective is of paramount importance to questions concerning political culture. It is necessary to point out that the political entity of Turkmenistan was a creation of the Soviet system. An independent Turkmenistan had never been seen until 26 October 1991. Because of this fact, many scholars were drawn to the conclusion that the modern political entity of Turkmenistan could be linked directly to the period before Russian domination. An example of this can be seen in one of the opening paragraphs of Annet Bohr's essay on Turkmenistan: "At present, Turkmenistan in many respects still constitutes more of a tribal confederation than a modern nation."<sup>5</sup> Although this statement, as a fact of history, is true, it neglects the developments that occurred under 110 years of Russian and Soviet rule. A balanced historical outline of Turkmenistan must be present before any analysis of the present political, cultural, or economic situations can occur.

The lands of the Turkmen have been a crossroads in history. Invasion was a frequent occurrence that brought the Oghuz Turks, Persian Sultans, the armies of Genghis Khan, Tamerlane, and finally, Russia. Islam came to the region in the form of Sufiism and the Sunni sect that were brought by the Arab conquest. By the late eighth century A.D., the conquest was largely complete but, over subsequent centuries Islamic traditions and other Arab cultural aspects slowly began to permeate Central Asian societies. Invariably, the Islamic way of life was more fitting to a sedentary lifestyle, but, the nomadic Turkmen nonetheless picked up pieces of the belief system. As the Central Asian historian Geoffrey Wheeler points out:

The year 999 is a historical landmark of considerable importance, for from that time onwards until the coming of the Russians, with two relatively brief intervals following the invasions by the Karakitays (1125–1210) and the Mongols, Central Asia remained under Turkic Muslim rulers.<sup>6</sup>

When the Mongol Horde invaded what is now Turkmenistan, the Silk Road town of Merv (now called Mary) was destroyed and most of its population slaughtered. The Mongols were eventually assimilated into Central Asia's sedentary culture.

The period between the Mongol conquest and Russian invasion is dominated by the balance of power competitions surrounding the Turkmen. This period saw the khanates of Khiva, Bukhara, and Kokand fight each other almost constantly, but much of the Turkmen's land was outside of this contest. The Amu-Darya region, which was settled, became the battleground for the warring khanates of Bukhara and Khiva. Persia was also a threat to the Turkmen, but to a large degree the Turkmen and their lands had little value in the eyes of the regional powers. The Turkmen became known as fierce nomadic slavers who lived on the bare minimum.

The Great Game changed all of this. The Turkmen became involved during the Anglo-Russian struggle to carve out an empire in Central Asia. The Russian conquest was particularly brutal on the Turkmen because they posed the only resistance to Russian encroachment. A series of battles at the fortress of Goek Tepe decided the fate of the Turkmen. After a defeat in 1879, the Russians finally took Goek Tepe in 1881 and proceeded to slaughter the fleeing Turkmen, many of whom were non-combatants.<sup>7</sup> The Russian in charge of the Goek Tepe slaughter, General Mikhail Skobelev, later wrote, "I hold it as principle that the duration of peace is in direct proportion to the slaughter you inflict upon the enemy. The harder you hit them, the longer they remain quiet."<sup>8</sup> His words seem to have been prescient.

After the initial Russian conquest, the once fierce and proud Turkmen were relatively subdued, but small-scale guerrilla resistance lingered until 1936. Little effort was made to assimilate or integrate the Turkmen into the Russian empire. A new rail line was built that connected the eastern khanates with the Caspian. During the Russian civil war, the *Basmachi* (bandit) movement, which aimed to rid Central Asia of Russian influence and force out Russian settlers, gained support from the Muslim community until its eventual defeat in 1922. The movement even captured Khiva in 1918 before being driven into the desert by the Red Army.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, indigenous support for the Communists was limited. As M. Nazif Shahrani notes, "In Turkestan, the establishment of Bolshevik revolutionary governments as the successor state to the tsarist colonial empire was entirely a Russian affair."<sup>10</sup> By 1924, Stalin's nationality policy created the Turkmenistan Soviet Socialist Republic on the grounds of ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and economic unity. As Martha Brill Olcott notes, "Stalin's map-making skills were sufficient to ensure that no Soviet republic would have an easy transition to nation-statehood."<sup>11</sup> The Soviet strategy of "divide and conquer" was meant to undermine Pan-Islamic and Pan-Turkic sentiments among Central Asians.

Collectivization began in 1929 and was particularly severe toward the nomadic Turkmen. The herds were forcibly collectivized, but many Turkmen resisted and paid for it with their lives. Soviet propaganda also began the first of many antireligious campaigns in 1928. The Soviet era did bring some industrialization, mainly in the 1930s, concentrated in the energy and textile sectors.<sup>12</sup> The central planners in Moscow had relegated Turkmenistan, and most of Central Asia, to the status of raw material exporter. Cotton monoculture was also forced upon the Turkmen, further limiting the amount of land available for cereal and foodstuff production.<sup>13</sup> Contrary to Western sovietologists, Shahrani claims the Soviet development model was a complete success *because* its desired objectives were

strengthening political control, economic exploitation and dependency, and the weakening of cultural and ideological forces.<sup>14</sup>

The limited capital investment in Turkmenistan, so vital for industrialization, created an imperial backwater. As Anatoly Khazanov points out, “Modernization was pursued in this region with a minimal participation by the native population, and none of its processes—industrialization, the demographic revolution, the revolution in education and occupational mobility—was fully implemented there.”<sup>15</sup> The urban population has hovered around 47 percent since the 1960s. Moreover, the urban population was mainly made up of relocated Slavic and Armenian workers or managers. This intentional marginalization of Turkmen in urban areas made them a minority in their own cities and relegated them to agricultural work. Andrei G. Nedvetsky points out, “In the 1970s and 1980s the [Turkmen] share of industrial workers in Turkmenistan diminished from 19 percent to 14 percent, while the [Turkmen] share of agrarian workers increased from 38 percent to 42 percent.”<sup>16</sup> These statistics are proof that the division of labor propagated by the Soviet system denied natives opportunities found in urban society while giving vital jobs to immigrants from other republics.

Another aspect of some importance relates to the creation of a highly Russified intelligentsia and political elite. During the early 1930s, the Turkmen intelligentsia was most active in demanding political autonomy and a new language policy. But, as early as 1926, Turkmen made up less than a third of their national intelligentsia.<sup>17</sup> The Soviets began a purge of Turkmen elements of the intelligentsia in 1934, which virtually eliminated what little influence or voice they had. Soon after the disappearance of the Turkmen parts of the intelligentsia, the Soviet authorities moved on to purge the party, decimating its ranks.<sup>18</sup> With a docile, predominantly Russian, intelligentsia and only the most Russified of the Communist Party still functioning, the potential for almost any resistance, beyond truly grassroots ones, was suppressed.

Along with the many hardships of Soviet rule came a few benefits. Literacy, probably the greatest achievement of the Soviet era, was promoted very successfully. Compulsory education for all children eradicated the dependence on religious schools and created subsequent generations that were more aware than their predecessors. The Turkmen also benefited from the Soviet health care system. Although infant mortality was the highest of any republic, the rate dropped significantly from the pre-Soviet days.<sup>19</sup>

Progress under Khrushchev and Brezhnev was slow. The most notable happening was the Uzbek cotton scandal. Although it did not affect the Turkmen as seriously as the Uzbeks, a major purge was instigated in order to rid the party of corrupt officials and destroy the patronage system that the cotton monoculture had created. By the time of perestroika and glasnost, Turkmenistan was considered the most backward and conservative republic in the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup> Still, the new freedoms of the era spawned little dissent. As Bohr notes, “Despite the absence of informal organizations with a large following and mass demonstrations in the republic, the collective national consciousness grew significantly from 1987 onwards, as evidenced by increasing demands for an improvement in the

status of the native language, for reexamination of Turkmen history without ideological constraints, and for the halt to environmental damage and its concomitant health risks.”<sup>21</sup> The exploitative economic relationship between the center and Turkmenistan was also a point of contention. High unemployment was blamed on Moscow’s investment policy which only strengthened Turkmenistan’s dependency on raw cotton and gas exports. Local processing plants were demanded, and a call for price reforms was made that would change the irrational state procurement prices for cotton and gas.<sup>22</sup> The center tried to accommodate these wishes but events overtook them.

Independence came to Turkmenistan on 26 October 1991. In the midst of the union’s disintegration, Turkmenistan had no choice but to go it alone. Earlier that year, the Turkmen went to the polls Soviet style (close to 100 percent turnout and 98 percent for preservation) to vote for keeping the union intact.<sup>23</sup> But in October 1991, in a new referendum on the future of the USSR, 94 percent of the population voted for independence.<sup>24</sup> The political leadership, regardless of their own wishes, were forced to ride the wave.

Turkmenistan at the end of Gorbachev’s rule was still largely dependent on the center. Turkmenistan, like most of the other Central Asian republics, was ill prepared for independence. The nations had no control over their economies, their currencies, or even their borders. As Boris Z. Rumer points out, “The industries that Moscow had moved to Central Asia were able to exist only by the grace of financial subsidies from the center.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the disintegration of the highly interdependent Soviet economic system would take years, if not decades, to untangle. Politically, the Turkmen Communist Party would be left out in the cold. This highly Russified group of elites had weak connections with the majority of the rural population. Olcott draws the logical conclusion that “given their backgrounds, it is not surprising that none of these leaders saw independence as particularly desirable until it became a political *fait accompli*.”<sup>26</sup> In short, the political ramifications that would result from the fall of the USSR created conservative support for preservation of the Soviet style of governance among Central Asian leaders.

Although the situation looked grim for the Communist *apparatchiks*, the Turkmen Communist Party still had several important advantages. First, the effects of perestroika did not penetrate deep into Turkmen society. Olcott goes on:

Gorbachev’s reforms prompted the same cultural and religious revival in Central Asia as occurred elsewhere. But Communist Party elites in these five republics were better able to insulate themselves from the fallout. They became patrons of their national arts, benefactors who helped transform state-owned buildings, mosques and religious institutions, and champions of the shift from Russian to their own national languages in public life.<sup>27</sup>

Second, a culturally ingrained deference to authority and a rural-based population that was naturally conservative and easily manipulated by the government proved to be key advantages for the Communist Party. As Andrei Nedvetsky wrote, “Society is asleep.”<sup>28</sup> The concept of the *Tore*, an ancient social contract between the people and leaders emphasizing equality, justice, and kindness, was still ingrained in most Turkmen. Furthermore, “The role of the Turkmen intelli-

gentsia has been limited by its small size and its difficulty in articulating the interests of Turkmen society, mobilizing the population, and effecting democratic change.”<sup>29</sup> Finally, the state monopolization of mass media allowed the ruling elite to effectively communicate the threats of unrestricted political reform. As Michael Ochs perceptively notes, “Turkmenistan’s population has been able to watch television reporting since 1988 of bloody ethnic conflicts in various Soviet, and then formerly Soviet, republics, and undoubtedly is grateful to have been spared such disasters.”<sup>30</sup>

Enter Saparmurad Niyazov, the most important man in Turkmen politics since 1985. An orphan from a “worker’s family,” he has come to monopolize the political scene in Turkmenistan. Labeled by the *Wall Street Journal* as “the most upwardly mobile despot,”<sup>31</sup> Niyazov began as a power plant engineer who was schooled in Leningrad. He was installed by Gorbachev as first secretary of the Communist Party in Ashgabat in 1985 to replace Muhammad Gapusov on the heels of a cotton-related corruption scandal. Niyazov was able to avoid much of the pressure brought about by perestroika because people held Moscow responsible for the republic’s woes. By capitalizing on the situation set in motion by Gorbachev’s reforms, Niyazov began consolidating power and reinventing himself as a founding father and a nationalist. Still, Niyazov was a conservative leader who gingerly followed in the footsteps of more radical leaders from Russia and the Baltic republics. Meanwhile, Niyazov also suppressed opposition movements at a time when movements in other republics were establishing themselves.<sup>32</sup> During the 1991 coup attempt, Niyazov was particularly silent on the matter. Says Annette Bohr:

Members of Turkmenistan’s small opposition, however, maintain that the failure of the republican leadership to denounce the State Committee on the State of Emergency (GKChP) constituted a tacit approval of the junta’s actions. They buttress their argument by pointing out that the government had not only ordered the republican media to publish all the GKChP’s directives . . . but even managed to have portraits of Gorbachev removed from the buildings of the republic’s oblast and raion Party committees.<sup>33</sup>

Niyazov’s history up to 1991 clearly proved that the new president of Turkmenistan was a survivor who would use any means at his disposal to retain his position of power.

### Opposition Movements

The opposition movement present in Turkmenistan at independence was one of the weakest in any of the Soviet republics. The effects of glasnost on Turkmenistan described above were limited when compared to dissent in other republics. Andrei Nedvetsky asserts, “The Turkmen opposition resembles, by many parameters, the Soviet dissidents of the Brezhnev era.”<sup>34</sup> The most popular party to form was established in 1989 and named *Agzybirlik* (Unity). Although several other groups formed around student or regional lines, *Agzybirlik* was clearly the strongest opposition to continued Communist Party rule. Before the collapse of the USSR, when the Communist *apparatchiks* also criticized the

exploitative nature of the center's relationship with Turkmenistan, Niyazov even went as far as to have a few meetings with *Agzybirlik* leaders. When the opposition began to call for a Turkmen cultural revival and political reform, authorities began a process of systematic suppression that led to the eventual banning of the party in January 1990.<sup>35</sup> Members were denied work opportunities, harassed by authorities and even jailed. *Agzybirlik* was still able to hold regular meetings and have some media exposure until mid-1990. After that point, all opposition movements were denied access to the media and were subsequently repressed.

In 1990, democratic activists formed the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan. The party was forced to work secretly from its inception. In October 1991, a party congress was held in Moscow that prepared the party for an overt entrance into Turkmen politics. The required documents concerning party registration were prepared and submitted, but the documents were returned without a reply.<sup>36</sup> In April 1991, the party was forced to rename itself as the Party of Democratic Development because the TKP had assumed its previous name, the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (DPT). From its inception as a state, authorities in Turkmenistan repressed any party opposing continued Communist Party (later the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan) rule.

### Perceived Threats

It is also important to examine the alleged threats on which the TKP based much of its original strategy. Once again, it is important to note that these threats were not necessarily the product of reason. Many had roots in Soviet propaganda, fear of what the lifting of institutionally imposed repression would bring, and finally, opportunistic public relations campaigns conducted by the authorities. By publicizing existing threats or introducing new ones, the Communist Party leadership was able to consolidate its position by claiming to be the only body able to stave off the ostensibly impending chaos. Furthermore, if the party successfully dealt with these threats, a high degree of support and, more important, legitimacy could be expected from a grateful population.

Anarchy was the primary threat to which all others were linked. Turkmen authorities pointed to war, ethnic or tribal conflict, economic collapse, and the dark specter of Islamic fundamentalism as the major catalysts to anarchy. It is particularly interesting to note the use of the media in the transition period. Beginning in 1988, Turkmen could view the flames of instability engulfing their neighbors, such as the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, the economic chaos of uncontrolled markets in Russia and the other republics, or most recently, the Tajik civil war.<sup>37</sup> The Turkmen leadership was highly effective in presenting what seemed to be legitimate threats to stability and acting to liquidate them.

One of the easiest threats to recognize was that of ethnic strife. In 1989, Turkmenistan was 72 percent Turkmen, 9 percent Russian, 9 percent Uzbek, and 2.5 percent Kazakh with the remaining 7.5 percent consisting of over 100 different nationalities.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the non-Turkmen minority was a vital component of Turkmenistan's industry. Ethnic solidarity was called for to stem the threat of minority out-migration that would result in the collapse of the economy. The



threat of ethnic tensions could also allow aggressive neighbors to provoke conflicts such as the Nagorno-Karabakh territorial dispute.

A second threat to stability is the potential for inter-tribal conflict. Turkmenistan's three main tribes are the Tekke, Yomuts and Ersary, with the Tekke being numerically superior. The Turkmen tribes have a long history of intertribal warfare. Although the tribes were originally nomadic, the Soviet-imposed settlement created areas of concentration in which social and economic opportunities for a member of a different tribe would be limited. Tribal competition and conflict on the national level were considered potentially major destabilizing factors.<sup>39</sup>

Islamic fundamentalism was perceived to be a danger not only by the political elite but by international actors such as Russia and the United States. With a long history of antireligious indoctrination, the former Communists in positions of power continued to target Islam, but they were faced with a dilemma. Although Islam was considered a threat, it could not be directly attacked because of the growing trend of religiosity in the region. The risk of a fundamentalist Islamic movement disrupting peace and stability was publicized and used to rally continued support for government involvement.

Finally, the most ominous threat to stability was economic. Although the need for economic reforms is universally recognized, the "shock therapy" method of structural and price reforms introduced in the Russian Federation was seen as bringing about not only economic, but social chaos. Turkmenistan was portrayed as a nation with great economic potential, but it was highly dependent on the Soviet economic system and minority labor and management for domestic production. Thus, it was believed that the economy would grind to a halt if there was a mass exodus of ethnic minorities. Furthermore, the Turkmen economy depended on the cotton monoculture and gas exports, with weak economic diversification outside these two sectors. The economy was not nearly strong enough to support the 1991 standard of living without strong support from the center. Privatization and rapid inflation would clearly create chaos in every stratum of society. From this context, the independent state of Turkmenistan was born.

### **The Reaction to Independence**

This section deals with the TKP's reaction to independence and the collapse of its ideological foundations. This phase is broken into two parts: the ideological transition from debunked communism to evolutionary democratization; and an outline of the 1992 Constitution and the newly created state structures.

The need for a new ideology was apparent to all members of the Turkmen Communist Party after the collapse of the Soviet system. The dual goals of creating a liberal democracy and a market economy were linked to the fall of the Communist world in 1991. These two phrases had an almost magical meaning associated with the perceived advantages of Western democracy embodied in freedom and prosperity. Unfortunately, the road to these goals has proved to be a difficult and winding one. When the former Communist Party renamed itself the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan in December 1991, party institutions with their bureaucracy and hierarchy all survived to some degree. In fact, according to

Ochs, the “Party structure resembles Communist Party structure, with ‘primary cells’ in factories, enterprises and institutes.”<sup>40</sup> The nature of the Communist Party did not deviate from its Marxist-Leninist roots as a vanguard party responsible for achieving an ideological goal in the name of the disassociated masses. Niyazov describes the ideological shift by saying, “The collapse of Communist ideology changed our understanding of the party’s role in the life of the state.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, the role of the party might have changed, but it was still seen as the only viable vehicle for the implementation of policy, whatever the policy was. The mandate of the new DPT was to bring liberal democracy and a market economy to the land, but no mention of a timetable was made. The result was a policy claiming liberal democracy and a market economy as its long-term goals, while maximizing political and economic stability through a gradualistic approach to reform. In Niyazov’s own words:

We should determine the rhythm and pace of our reform ourselves on the basis of local conditions, not according to the demands of some sort of classic, democratic formulas or preconceptions worked out in some prosperous Western country.<sup>42</sup>

The roots of the evolutionary reform model undoubtedly stem from the human desire for stability. By tapping into the natural tendencies of the largely rural and conservative Turkmen people, the political elite hoped to create a system that would bring about necessary reforms with minimal disruption. By creating a reform model that would span years, leaders would be able to lessen the hardships of economic reform by distributing it over time. The absence of repeated shocks to the system would also make the political scene, and therefore the position of existing leaders, much more stable.

The East Asian model of authoritarian modernization has been the most noticeable example of the evolutionary reform method. It comes as no surprise that the South Korean, Taiwanese, and Singapore reform strategies attracted the interest of conservative leaders of both Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.<sup>43</sup> Philip Hanson has suggested that, using the existing, authoritarian structures left over from the totalitarian Communist system,

it is possible that a political regime of this kind may be the only way to push through marketization of a traditional economy where there is no very strongly developed civil society and no way other than the authoritarian of squashing the vested interests that are threatened by marketization.<sup>44</sup>

An added bonus of this reform model is that the leaders have a good chance of staying in power over a long period, whereas more radical reformers, in Russia for instance, were constantly coming in and out of power. Co-opting the authoritarian modernization and evolutionary reform models, with a nationalist spin, offered a solution that could fill the ideological vacuum created by the failure of Marxism-Leninism.

The new DPT had little trouble selling this policy to the Turkmen people. The nature of the ideology, with its inherently repressive elements, was not hidden:

We did not smash the former power structures all at once, which could have created a power vacuum and led to disturbances. We chose the path of steady, grad-

ual transformation. . . . Moreover, our government has resolutely suppressed attempts to pursue destructive notions on the crest of the wave of pseudo-reform and *Glasnost*.<sup>45</sup>

Niyazov has made hundreds of statements along these lines. Martha Brill Olcott notes that “the available public opinion research shows that the primary concerns are breakdown of public order, the decline in power of the purse, and general uncertainty about the future; the nature of political leadership does not seem to be something that they feel empowered to debate.”<sup>46</sup> By mortgaging out the prospect of future prosperity to the people and sustaining the standard of living with heavy subsidization, the Democratic Party gained much needed

legitimacy that allowed it to maneuver freely in the dangerous transition period.

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***“Sustaining the irrational economic environment caused by heavy state subsidization has weakened the Turkmen economy.”***

#### **The 1992 Constitution**

As a theoretical base for dealing with the threats, the party institutionalized power relationships by creating the May 1992 constitution. In that document, the basic rights of citizens, such as equal protec-

tion, freedom from discrimination (based on nationality, political affiliation, social status, language, or sex), and due process, are safeguarded. But the constitution fails to guarantee effective enforcement. The enforcement of many rights, such as freedom of assembly and association, and protections against extralegal detention and property seizure is subject to pre-independence laws. When a closer look is taken, although the constitution claims to be the “supreme law of the land,” many of its sections can be subordinated by legislated law. Therefore, the *Mejlis*, or legislature, and the president, by decree, have arbitrary power to infringe on constitutionally guaranteed rights. According to Lawrence Held, the USAID NET project director in Turkmenistan from 1994 to 1996, “The situation on the ground does not reflect what is written in the 1992 constitution.”<sup>47</sup>

The government structure is that of a presidential republic based on a system of checks and balances among three branches. The executive branch has enormous power that, in practice, allows Niyazov to control the legislative and judicial branches. The president appoints all *hakims* or provincial governors and judges. With the consent of the *Mejlis*, the president also appoints the chairman of the Supreme Court and the general prosecutor. The president has the power to dissolve parliament “if the *Mejlis* is unable to form the governing organs of the *Mejlis*,”<sup>48</sup> or if it votes no confidence in the government twice within eighteen months. Still, his decrees are binding throughout the country at all times. The president heads the Council of Ministers, whose members are chosen by him without parliamentary supervision; the Council of Defense and National

Security, comprising the fifteen top-ranking government officials, and the *Halk Maslakhaty*, or People's Council.

The Council of Elders and the Halk Maslakhaty are two unique structures in the Turkmen government. The Council of Elders is a body invented by Niyazov that harks back to the nomadic roots of the Turkmen people. It institutionalized the tradition of respect for authority and elders.<sup>49</sup> The Halk Maslakhaty is the highest organ of the government. Its membership encompasses all of the government from members of the Mejlis and cabinet ministers to hakims and local officials. The president is responsible to this body, but because he directly appoints many of its members or has sufficient constitutional power to influence nominations, it is a rubber stamp congress. Ochs states, "In practice, the Halk Maslakhaty gives the president a public forum to present the basic guidelines of domestic and foreign policy, assess the performance of officials, and gain the approval of the country's nominally supreme body for his policy initiatives."<sup>50</sup> The Halk Maslakhaty can ratify treaties, adopt constitutional amendments, declare war, and begin something akin to an impeachment process if the president violates the constitution or law. But the reality is that "the People's Council masks the authoritarian nature of Niyazov's rule with a structure intended to hark back to the tribal assemblies of Turkmenistan's past."<sup>51</sup>

The Mejlis, or legislature, is a unicameral body of fifty members serving a five-year term. The assembly is derived from the Supreme Soviet, which was first elected in 1989. The Mejlis, unlike its Soviet predecessor, is a full-time, professional body, with no quotas reserving seats for workers and so on.<sup>52</sup> The Mejlis has the power to pass laws, amend the constitution and approve the budget but its actions are dictated largely by the executive. The deputies elected in 1994, for instance, were all nominated by Niyazov and ran unopposed. Although it is a step up from Soviet days, the Mejlis is still a docile tool from which some semblance of legitimacy can be squeezed.

The judicial branch is clearly the weakest branch in the government. The constitution incorporated the existing local courts and created the Supreme Court and Supreme Economic Court. The president has the power to nominate judges to five-year terms. Judges can be dismissed only if there is "a decision of a court, on grounds prescribed by law."<sup>53</sup> The escape clauses that are tacked onto most provisions in the Turkmen constitution allow the government to circumvent the constitution without difficulty. Open trials, for instance, are mandated except for "instances stipulated by law."<sup>54</sup>

The overall weakness of the constitution has created a system prone to a vertical authoritarian rule. During Niyazov's presidency, the legislative and judicial branches have been subordinate organs of the executive. It is important to note that these organs, especially the Mejlis, have worked from presidentially set objectives. In reality, the constitution has been used to legitimize the one-party rule of the former Communist Party. The process of state building initiated by the creation of the constitution has been derailed by the authoritarian tendencies of the political elite who were unwilling to give up any real power.

### The Practical Application of Power

Political ideology and models are especially prone to distortion when the realities of a situation are confronted. As the discrepancy between theory and application in Turkmenistan widened, the Niyazov regime began to lose support from the Western world but not necessarily at home. Was the consolidation of one-party and then one-man rule in Turkmenistan after 1992 the natural will of the nation or the beginning of dictatorial rule? Understanding the dynamics of political change in a closed system is an art form that has yet to be mastered by the Western intelligentsia. Still, certain traits can be found that offer insight into the possible direction of a closed regime.

This section is the story of how the ideal of a presidential republic was converted to a virtual dictatorship. It can be broken down into two parts: First, the successful response to most of the perceived threats of 1991 further consolidated the power of the Democratic Party. The primary remaining threat to continued DPT rule, the general failure of economic reform to satisfy the demands of an increasingly impatient public, is also examined in this section. Finally, the rise of Saparmurad Niyazov from head of the Democratic Party to *de facto* dictator with the subsequent repression of the political culture is explored.

As mentioned above, the original concern of the Turkmen government after independence was to contend with the perceived threats. But, much like Stalin's use of war scares in the 1920s, the Niyazov regime used these so-called threats to strengthen its grip on power. By dealing with the threats the authorities could also consolidate power, gain legitimacy with the people, and eliminate further threats to stability and continued DPT rule. Strict party or presidential control became the key to retaining power in this phase. The pragmatic responses to these threats were aided by the fact that many of them were weak to nonexistent.

The specter of Islam, for instance, was not nearly as strong as had been first feared. A close look clearly showed that, "the basic tribal and clan structures of these [formerly nomadic] societies were only marginally affected by Islam."<sup>55</sup> Although new Central Asian leaders had to pay lip service to religion, the structures for depoliticizing religion, which the Soviets had created, were used to incorporate religion easily by keeping it part of official life. The Council of Religious Affairs allows the highest religious authority in the nation, the Kazi, to appoint all Islamic clerics. While the Kazi supposedly represents the interest of religion, the platform is often used to preach restraint. Parties based on religion were strictly banned by the constitution. Although many Turkmen claim to be Muslims, including Niyazov, some of the legacies of Soviet rule, such as the consumption of pork and alcohol, have endured the transition period. Islam has been neutralized by the authoritarian government by means of preexisting organizational structures that were built expressly to curtail the power of Islam.<sup>56</sup> The government changed these organizations into a more proactive part of the religious sphere by distributing government-translated Korans, holding Islamic study sessions and building or repairing mosques. Although the Kazi and his subordinate clerics are controlled by the authorities, the incorporation of Islam into the government structure has been seen by the local populace as progressive. By inter-

twining a government-sponsored cultural revival with the growth of Islam, nationalism has come to encompass Islam.<sup>57</sup>

One of the more complex threats facing the leaders after independence was that of national minorities in the republic. By instigating a national cultural revival, the government preempted the inevitable wave of nationalism associated with decolonization. The indispensability of national minorities for the smooth running of the economy necessitates strong government action to halt a mass exodus of skilled and technical personnel. Because the level of Turkmen involvement in the nonagricultural sectors of the economy was so limited in 1991, Turkmenistan was especially vulnerable. The resolution of this problem was to assure national minorities equal protection under the law, and in the case of Russians, dual citizenship. The Kayak and Uzbek populations that were left in Turkmenistan, intended by Stalin to be a hindrance to any national movement, were also given concessions. In a miraculous display of cooperation, bilateral treaties with Kazakstan and Uzbekistan were signed that facilitated the subsidization of specialized education by the home nation for the minorities left on the other side of the border.<sup>58</sup> The language laws that were supposed to make Turkmen the official language of the government and the workplace were suspended for a period of time to allow other nationalities, if not many of the old political elites, to properly prepare for the transition. Even with one of the most progressive nationalities policies, Turkmenistan still loses a great number of vital skilled and technical workers to out-migration every year.<sup>59</sup>

Tribal competition, which has been so prevalent in Turkmen history, has not been much of a threat since independence. As Michael Ochs points out, "Tribal consciousness, after 70 years of Soviet rule, migration, urbanization and economic development, has been diluted."<sup>60</sup> Tribal considerations are taken into account when making government appointments, by assigning a provincial governor to his homeland for instance, but Niyazov constantly warns of what tribal competition could lead to. Furthermore, "When there is a threat of competition from other ethnic groups, the tendency to look for support among kinsmen plays a unifying role."<sup>61</sup> As long as the perception of some threat to the nation is maintained by the government, Turkmen will rally around nationalistic and not tribal sentiment. By stressing the weakness of the state in the transition period, the Niyazov regime has repeatedly justified suppression of basic freedoms that the state deems "destabilizing."

Possibly because the weakness of the Turkmen economy was a real and complex problem, the government response to reform and the general weakening of the economic situation was much less clear. Still, as Ochs notes, the DPT had a plan:

The regime's apparent "Macro" game plan has been to hold the lid down on any domestic political liberalization or economic reform while working to increase revenues from the sale of natural resources on the world market. This income, in turn, would allow the government to continue large scale subsidization of basic goods and services provided to a small population, and either substantially alleviate, or possibly even avoid, the discontent and political upheaval that have roiled other former Soviet republics, and cost numerous political leaders their lives.<sup>62</sup>

The lack of any substantive economic reform characterizes the Niyazov policy of risk avoidance. With great hopes for the quick exploitation of Turkmenistan's enormous oil and gas reserves, the government decided to postpone politically threatening economic reforms. Presently, no real, coherent economic reform plan exists. Even with such a seemingly bright future, the economic slowdown associated with the fall of the Soviet economic system, not necessarily the political one, poses the greatest threat to continued Democratic Party rule.

"Ten Years of Prosperity, Unity and Peace," the policy implemented in December 1992, although very broad and contradictory, is the best example of the government's overall plan. In this policy, Niyazov began the "free utilities" program under which gas, electricity, water, and salt are free of charge. Price subsidies were kept in favor of continued stability, and the methods of privatization and agricultural reform were outlined. The role of agriculture was to change from the intense production of cotton for export to the more logical program of growing foodstuffs for the local population. In nonagricultural sectors of the economy, real privatization is circumvented through a system of leasing government-owned means of production.<sup>63</sup> The economy has remained largely unchanged by these reforms.

The idea of relying on cotton and gas exports to keep the economy stable is based largely on misconceptions. The low quality of cotton, coupled with terrible inefficiency, reduced the potential profits of selling cotton on the world market. Although Turkmenistan is endowed with a huge amount of natural gas, its geopolitical situation makes the export of this commodity difficult. Before Turkmenistan's gas can be sold, it must pass through Russian pipelines. Russia, with its own natural gas to sell, has restricted the volume transported and market access. Thus, Turkmenistan is dependent on Russia, and this advantage is pressed home by the former colonizer. Presently, Turkmen gas brings less than the world price in markets that are unable to pay in hard currency. The result is a highly unstable economic system in which 70 percent of government revenues depend on the export of two commodities.

Sustaining the irrational economic environment caused by heavy state subsidization has weakened the Turkmen economy. Shortages of consumer goods continued to deny many Turkmen the perceived benefits of independence and, more important, DPT rule. Skyrocketing inflation seriously eroded living standards. By 12 July 1995, economic motivators were strong enough to spawn an unprecedented protest in the capital. In 1996, the desperate need for a more comprehensive plan to reform the economy was finally accepted by the authorities. Niyazov put forth a plan, which has been seen only in ambiguous speeches and statements, calling for more radical reforms under which 15 percent of enterprises from all sectors would be privatized in a program based on vouchers. Financial responsibility would be shifted completely to enterprises (allowing unprofitable ones to go bankrupt). The subsidization program and social safety net would be maintained, but no mention is made of where the revenues to cover these expenditures would be collected.<sup>64</sup>

The complex issues of economic reform were not properly addressed by the Niyazov regime. The resulting economic slowdown and eroding living standards came to overcome the other, largely fabricated, threats. Public discontent was

threatening to manifest itself in demonstrations and open dissent. Until the July 1995 protests, demonstrations were controlled strictly by the authorities. Dissent was repressed severely by the government. The July protest “attacked Niyazov for turning the populace into beggars while building palaces for himself and for trampling on the human rights of Turkmenistan’s citizens of all nationalities.”<sup>65</sup> The protesters, numbering around 1,000, were dispersed by security forces within an hour. Later, law enforcement officials described the protest as fomented by alcoholics, drug addicts, and other hooligans.<sup>66</sup>

The demonstration provided the Turkmen government with more incentive to repress the opposition movement. Since independence, Turkmenistan has been essentially a one-party state.

Some attempts have been made by Niyazov to split the Democratic Party, but the divisions would have been only cosmetic. As Radio Liberty reporter Christopher Panico asserts, “Niyazov’s party wants to create a docile opposition, similar to the ‘bloc’ parties that existed in the former German Democratic Republic,

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***“The common practice after a riot or other show of public discontent has been to purge the officials responsible for that district and blame the troubles on the corruption and incompetence of that person.”***

and, at the same time, to prevent the rise of a truly democratic society.”<sup>67</sup> What little opposition existed in 1991 was quickly marginalized and then repressed by the former Communist Party. Most dissidents fled the country for Moscow or Prague soon after independence. The CSCE reported in 1994 that it was impossible to meet with dissidents in Turkmenistan, who are often denied their constitutionally guaranteed rights, tried on false criminal charges, or forced into mental hospitals for their political beliefs.<sup>68</sup>

Abdy Kuliev, the former foreign minister, heads an umbrella organization for Turkmen opposition groups. His Moscow operations have been disrupted by Turkmen embassy staff and even the Russian authorities.<sup>69</sup> Presently, the opposition movement is weak, fragmented, and geographically dispersed. The dissident political elite and intelligentsia have been unable to successfully manipulate politics in Turkmenistan. Needless to say, no registered parties, except for the DPT, exist in Turkmenistan. When government officials are asked why no other parties exist, the common reply is that “the people don’t want it.” Finally, the state monopoly of all the news media severely hampers exposure for the opposition movements. Although some newspapers are produced in Moscow, it is illegal to possess them in Turkmenistan.<sup>70</sup>

Elections in Turkmenistan have not changed much since the Soviet era; high turnouts and unanimity of results are common. One candidate, nominated by the party, runs for each position. Elections, and voting in general, are used as means of showing public support. People realize that elections are nothing more than prearranged exercises in propaganda. Before the 1994 elections for instance,



newspapers printed voting instructions that clearly marked the *da* box.<sup>71</sup> Referenda have been used in the same way to claim legitimacy and, for some unknown reason, circumvent the uncontested regularly scheduled elections.

The growing rigidity of the authoritarian regime and the focus of all power on Niyazov have alarmed some observers. Niyazov has begun to rule Turkmenistan by decrees called normative acts.<sup>72</sup> Using these acts, Niyazov is able to circumvent the Mejlis, but since he has personally nominated every member of that body and directs their legislative activities, the only real effect has been to weaken the concept of rule by law in favor of personal rule. The consolidation of power under one man has been facilitated by a growing personality cult that has been bestowing on Niyazov a multitude of honors and renaming canals, roads, ships, a city, and even some children after him. Along with this, the title of *Turkmenbashi*, or “leader of the Turkmen people,” has been given to Niyazov. Portraits of him are plastered all over the country, along with slogans like “*Halk Watan Turkmenbashi*” (a derivation of an old fascist slogan, “People, State, Turkmenbashi”). Although the president does not condone these actions, he points out that it is a wonderful unifying force for the Turkmen people.<sup>73</sup> It is said that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Saparmurad Niyazov is certainly no exception. The palaces that have been sprouting up in the deserts of Turkmenistan can attest to that.

Second, the constant reshuffling of top positions within the Turkmen government has been peculiar. The common practice after a riot or other show of public discontent has been to purge the officials responsible for that district and blame the troubles on the corruption and incompetence of that person. The Turkmen government’s position holds that “there are many bad and corrupt officials in the government that need to be weeded out. This is a process that will take some time; they have never done something like this [reforming into a responsible government] before.”<sup>74</sup> The systematic nature of these purges seems to imply that their purpose is to destroy any political rivals within the DPT. Lawrence Held charges that “Niyazov has not let anyone stay in power for too long. He does not want anyone to obtain a power base from which to threaten him.”<sup>75</sup> The hakim of Mary, for example, has been replaced numerous times because of corruption charges or incompetence. When a hakim or other official is deposed, the action and its reasons are public knowledge.<sup>76</sup>

The practical application of the Turkmen evolutionary model for reform highlights its own failure. The realities of the political system in Turkmenistan point to an elaborate authoritarian system not very different from the Soviet model. The vertical authoritarian regime that has been consolidated goes back to the regimes of Ceausescu and Stalin, but with a softer side. The ever-smiling, teddy bear-like figure of Niyazov has concentrated “in his person all the key institutions of modern governance, as well as positions reflecting the Turkmen’s historically developed symbols of authority, effectively combining state power and national legitimacy.”<sup>77</sup>

### Conclusion

The regime of Saparmurad Niyazov has successfully ridden the treacherous third wave of democratization, which toppled many of his hard-line allies, without suc-

cumbing to democracy.<sup>78</sup> Turkmenistan has been a bastion of stability in the region, but this has come at a price. The political reality in Turkmenistan is much the same as it was before the fall of the Soviet Union except in a few areas. In the process of state building after independence, Turkmen nationalism was successfully ingrained in the population's mind. Second, the more pluralistic rule of the Soviet system was replaced by a virtual one-man dictatorship. Niyazov has successfully marginalized any opposition, both in and out of his party, and accumulated all the key institutions of modern governance.

The future of this poor state is uncertain. As a representative of the Turkmen government said, the only threat to the continued rule of Niyazov is "time."<sup>79</sup> In more realistic terms, further economic slowdowns might be the catalyst for political change. The Turkmen people can be mollified by promises of great riches, derived from oil and gas exports, only for so long. As they watch their former Communist neighbors benefit from substantive economic and political change, the Turkmen people may call for a more rapid and less repressive approach to reform. But to expect activism on the part of most Turkmen is optimistic. Deference to authority is deeply ingrained in the Turkmen consciousness. If Niyazov does seriously breach the social contract embodied in the *Töre*, there might be a possibility for political change. Mehmet Saray makes an important political statement when he says, "If a monarch, administration or country is not standing on these three principles, that country or monarchy can easily decline."<sup>80</sup> But most likely, Niyazov will remain in power for a very long time. He is both a savvy pragmatist and a survivor who has eliminated almost all opposition. But the regime, like any authoritarian regime, is becoming more rigid and distant from the people. Once the political situation liberalizes, Turkmenistan will be forced to begin the treacherous process of structural reform, which the evolutionary model of reform has as yet been unable to accomplish, or even begin.

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