

# THE ELITE IN POST-SOVIET AND POST-NIYAZOW TURKMENISTAN: DOES POLITICAL CULTURE FORM A LEADER?

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**Abstract:** This article analyses the transformation of the Turkmenistani elite, focusing on the period after the 2006 death of the first president, Saparmyrat Niyazow (“Turkmenbashy”). I argue that the process of elite formation in highly centralized systems, such as that in Turkmenistan, is determined by the character of the first leader, who has a long-lasting impact on the local political culture. The uniqueness of Turkmenbashy and the political culture he founded were based on his solitude and isolation both from the domestic and outside worlds. Even if such a situation is hardly likely to occur again in the future, his legacy is transferrable to subsequent generations of leadership in the country. Turkmenbashy’s successor, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, has followed political tradition as a successful way of holding onto the reins of power, notwithstanding some minor changes due to the new leader’s different roots in the traditional structures of Turkmen society.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkmenistan has been considered one of the most bizarre regimes in the post-Soviet area and one of the closest to the totalitarian ideal.<sup>1</sup> In attempting to understand the character of the Turkmen regime after 1991, scholars usually pay attention to the legacy of the pre-Soviet period and the Soviet regime.<sup>2</sup> The transformation of tribal Turkmen society into a regional-based kinship backed by the Russian and then Soviet authorities has contributed considerably to the current regime's character. This article argues, however, that, aside from this Soviet continuity, the local political culture and the personality of the leader should be considered an important element of regime formation. The interaction between these two factors, namely political culture and the president's personality, suggests the neopatrimonial logic at work in contemporary Turkmenistan. I contend that a leader's character works to shape the political culture, especially when that leader is a "founding father" of a newly independent country.<sup>3</sup> Successors to the first leader are generally expected to behave in similar fashion to their predecessors, often with only slight changes in style due to differences in social background.

This article thus focuses on recent developments in the Turkmen elite structure, particularly post December 2006, i.e., under the second president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow.<sup>4</sup> The first section discusses the formation of Turkmen elites in the pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods, while the second focuses on the continuities and discontinuities of elite formation after 2006. The analysis of the political elite in Turkmenistan lacks a solid empirical basis. The isolated character of the regime stands in the way of field research and direct access to information. Consequently, Turkmenistan has, with some exceptions, remained outside mainstream research on Central Asia.<sup>5</sup> All research on the elite has to be

<sup>1</sup> The text is a revised and updated version of the author's article on Turkmen elites: Slavomir Horak. 2010. "The Dynamics of Turkmen post-Soviet Elites," *China Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 8:3 (November): 27-46. The research was made possible thanks to grant No. MSM0021620841 provided by the Czech Republic Ministry of Education.

<sup>2</sup> Shohrat Kadyrov. 2011. *Mnogolikii Turkmenchilik*, Moscow: Oriental Institute; Shohrat Kadyrov. 2003. "Natsiia" plemen: *Etnicheskie Istoky, Transformatsiia, Perspektivy Gosudarstvennosti v Turkmenistane*, Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences. For more on Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, see Eric McGlinchey. 2011. *Chaos, Violence, Dynasty: Politics and Islam in Central Asia*, Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 19-28.

<sup>3</sup> In Central Asia, the strength or weakness of the presidents' character has determined the character of regimes during the 1990s and 2000s. The more moderate Kyrgyz regime was made possible by the relatively mild character of President Akaev, while the harsh character of President Karimov, with his realistic and pragmatic approach to politics, as well as his means of oppressing challengers, has impacted the character of the Uzbek regime.

<sup>4</sup> Names relating to the Soviet period are transcribed using the Turkmen alphabet, which is based on Cyrillic. The names of actors during the post-Soviet period are transcribed using the Turkmen language and based upon the Latin alphabet.

<sup>5</sup> Adrienne Edgar. 2004. *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Shohrat Kadyrov. 2003. "Natsiia" plemen; Shohrat Kadyrov. 2001.

based upon incomplete biographies of key leaders, indirect observations, analogies, unofficial sources and interviews, as well as the subjective statements and extrapolations by Turkmen living abroad who draw on their previous experience to describe the current situation. Conducting research on the elite in Turkmenistan as a key element of the regime is extremely difficult, always incomplete, and even speculative, but it remains the only way we have of understanding current Turkmen politics.

### Soviet and Post-Soviet Elite Formation

After the establishment of Tsarist dominance over Turkmen tribes at the end of the nineteenth century, the role played by the Ahalteke tribe gradually expanded, as the center of the trans-Caspian area—Ashkhabad—was located on its territory. The Ahalteke were subject to much greater Russification than other Turkmen populations, especially those living under the Uzbek-dominated Bukhara or Khiva administration.<sup>6</sup> The Ahalteke continued to remain dominant even after the October Revolution had transformed nomadic or semi-nomadic society into settled communities.<sup>7</sup> The prerevolutionary elites were mostly liquidated during the civil war and the 1920s and new institutions of power (state institutions, the party apparatus, kolkhozes etc.) were established. At the same time, the central Soviet leadership maintained maximum possible parity between tribes.<sup>8</sup> The Soviet period created a kind of hybrid system amalgamating elements of the “traditional” tribal social structures—assembled according to regional ties—and the “modern” power hierarchy. New structures and institutions began to arise at the end of the 1930s, as the last representatives of pre-Soviet leaders had been replaced by new cadres whose loyalties were based upon Soviet-formatted nationality and linguistic knowledge (Russian, and Russified Turkmen) or party affiliation, whereas tribal identity constituted only one precondition for social promotion.

Starting in the 1940s, but especially since the 1960s, “local” first secretaries with more developed ties within the republics accrued greater power, whereas the role of the “Russian-speaking” second secretaries, sent to the periphery republics from the center, became much more formal.<sup>9</sup>

“Turkmenistan. Institut Prezidentstva v klanovom postkolonial’nom obshchestve,” *Acta Eurasica* 1, 2001 at: <http://turkmeny.h1.ru/analyt/a4.html>; Shohrat Kadyrov. 2009. *Elitnye klany. Shtriki k Portretam*. Moscow: MMIX. Sebastien Peyrouse. 2011. *Turkmenistan. Strategies of Power, Dilemmas of Development*, New York and London: M. E. Sharpe.

<sup>6</sup> Kadyrov, “Natsiia” *Plemen*, 145-146.

<sup>7</sup> Sergei Demidov. 2012. *Postsovetskii Turkmenistan*, Moscow: Natalis, 45.

<sup>8</sup> Edgar, *Tribal Nation*, p. 268.

<sup>9</sup> The long-term first secretary of the Communist Party of the Uzbekistan SSR, Sharaf Rashidov, who created his own governing clan both inside Uzbekistan and in Moscow, may serve as an example of this type of politics. The clan he created was far from merely reflecting the significant regional relationships of the past. Many authors repeat this fundamental mistake

However, Moscow's influence on the appointment of the First Secretaries led the Turkmen elites to seek support from within the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union rather than within their local environment in Ashkhabad. Furthermore, the non-Ahalteke first secretaries who ruled in the Turkmen SSR from 1951 to 1985 were "strangers" in the capital.<sup>10</sup> Quite symptomatic was the role of Muhammetnazar Gapurov, whom many Ahalteke considered to have been illiterate (in both the political and cultural senses).<sup>11</sup> His name is associated with the incorporation of many under-qualified cadres into the party structure, the security apparatus, and the intellectual circles of Soviet Turkmenistan,<sup>12</sup> as well as with numerous instances of data falsification (just as in neighboring republics).<sup>13</sup> The post-Soviet Turkmen elite, including Niyazov's own, was educated during the Gapurov era, and have preserved a political culture founded upon cronyism, corruption, and clan loyalties.

Gorbachev's perestroika substantially impacted the evolution of the Turkmen elite and largely determined the character of the government during the post-Soviet era. Gorbachev tried to accomplish Andropov's plans to reform the Soviet economy and society. This required that the new republican leaders terminate the then existing leading group, minimize their involvement with local elites, and re-establish Moscow's effective control over the peripheries. Of course, these strategies were rather utopian, as the

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of viewing the current and former regimes in Uzbekistan as engaging in struggles between individual regional groups. It is worth noting, however, that many members of the Ferghana clan (theoretically hostile to Rashidov) were actually his close allies. The practices of this clan policy were outlined (unfortunately, not always in a systematic fashion) in the memoirs of one of the chief investigators, Telman Gdlian and Nikolai V. Ivanov. 1994. *Kremlevskoe delo*, Rostov na Donu: AO Kniga, 114 ff.

<sup>10</sup> Suvhan Babaiev (1951-1957), Balysh Ovezov (Yomut, 1958-1969), Muhamednazar Gapurov (1969-1985, Lebap, from eastern Turkmenistan). For more details, see Kadyrov, *Natsiia plemen*, 126-137.

<sup>11</sup> Muhammednazar Gapurov (1922-1999) went to teachers college in Khardzhiev. In 1941, however, he was sent to the front and, after being wounded and demobilized in 1943, worked as a functionary first in the area of education and later in the party in the Khardzhiev region. In 1962, he assumed a position in the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan. A year later, he was named chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Turkmen SSR. From 1969-1985, he served as first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan and in December, 1985, was removed from all functions and given an honorary retirement.

<sup>12</sup> For an interesting publication regarding changes in cadres in the Soviet apparatus, see I. K. Kadyrov and A. K. Saparov. 1982. *Osushchestvlenie Kompartiei Turkmenistana kadrovoi politiki*, Ashkhabad: Turkmenistan.

<sup>13</sup> One example is the well-known "pripisky" culture of data falsification in agriculture. See, for example, Nikolai Kharin. 2002. *Vegetation Degradation in Central Asia under the Impact of Human Activities*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 73-76. Saparmurat Niyazov's appearance before the 6<sup>th</sup> Plenary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan is interesting in this regard. Saparmurat Niyazov, "Partiinui i gosudarstvennuii disciplinu na uroven' sovremennykh trebovaniy," *Turkmenskaia iskra*, October 21, 1986.

local affiliations were impossible to break up, and the planned economy could not be revived. Cadre purges—of which the Uzbek “cotton affair” and the December 1986 riots in Almaty are the most discussed interventions—reinforced the feeling of rivalry among elite groups throughout Central Asia. In the Turkmen case, Gorbachev’s purges stimulated the long-awaited return of the Ahalteke to power. Saparmyrat Niyazow, appointed first secretary in 1985, was the ideal candidate from Moscow’s viewpoint as, albeit formally part of the Ahalteke, he had no significant patronage network in Turkmenistan itself; he was an orphan with no moral obligations to elevate his own relatives and cronies. His appointment to the office of Turkmen SSR first secretary came with strong support from the center. Moreover, weak alternatives and opposition allowed him to fix mechanisms of control to quash all potential challengers.<sup>14</sup>

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian cadres appointed during the Soviet era no longer felt pressure from above. Niyazow understood that the former center was not able to dismiss him after the crisis in 1993 between the Supreme Soviet and the Yeltsin government, and, with the absence of any alternative source of power, he was able to put in place a regime of highly centralized power. The political elite came to be based mostly on personal loyalties and patronage networks with the president, whose strong position yielded him the nickname “Turkmen No. 1.” Niyazow’s weaker position within the Turkmen and Ahalteke elite made even easier a pronounced centralization of power around his person. As he held all the formal and informal keys to power, the legacy of the Soviet repressive apparatus was used to suppress any residual alternative power centers to the regime. Consequently, President Niyazow’s megalomania and acute self-absorption became a driver of the new political culture in Turkmenistan.

Despite a kind of obsessive emphasis on Turkmenness, his highly trusted advisors included several non-Turkmen figures. Viktor Khramov, former employee of Ideological Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Turkmen SSR, became a founder of Turkmenbashy’s ideology and a powerful businessman in Ashgabat with shares in Turkmenistan’s energy trade and other prosperous sectors.<sup>15</sup> The president’s financial matters were managed by two other Russians, Alexandr Zhadan, and Vladimir Umnov. The circle of influential non-Turkmen also included other important foreign business people, who had been able to establish good relations with the president and, after a time, proved able to influence his decision-making markedly.

<sup>14</sup> Avdy Kuliev. 2006. *2 goda v pravitel'stve, 13 let v oppozitsii*, Moscow, 6-8.

<sup>15</sup> Aydin Begench, “Who is Ruling Turkmenistan?” *Turkmenskaia iskra*, May 21, 2008, <http://www.tm-iskra.org/20/08/Hramov-V-2-eng.html> (accessed May 23, 2008). See also: “Turkmenam prikazanno byt' zdorovym,” *Khronika Turkmenistana*, November 25, 2009, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/?id=2296> (accessed November 28, 2009).

In contradistinction to other Central Asian presidents, whose families were directly tied to particular regional and clan groupings, Turkmenbashi's family had no political ambitions inside Turkmenistan, although the president's son, Murad, administered the hotel business in Ashgabat and other cities as well as several other enterprises.<sup>16</sup> Patronage groups created on the basis of competing tribal and/or regional kinships were not strong enough to challenge the president's authority. However, several Ahalteke families consolidated their influence in the capital city in the first half of the 1990s at the second or third level of the power hierarchy, gradually ousting other regional elite.<sup>17</sup> The political culture and the character of the president resulted in widely expanding sycophantism, with some groups plotting against one another, and others being purged.<sup>18</sup> All these processes bolstered the position of the president, who was thus able to set groups against one another whilst rising alone above all of them.

In the 2000s, the uppermost Turkmen elite comprised a narrow group of individuals close to the president who had not been purged for one reason or other. Here, the dominance of the Ahalteke played a negligible role. The elite included, above all, General Akmyrat Rejepow, head of the Presidential Guard, who was from eastern Turkmenistan and became the strongest power figure in the country after gaining control of all the security agencies. Other invulnerable ministers were Agageldi Mämmetgeldiyew (defense minister, an Ahalteke, but from the Tejen district in south Turkmenistan), Geldimuhammet Aşyrmuhammedow (Ministry of National Security, Balkan region), and Akmämmet Rahmanow (minister of the Interior, an Ahalteke), as well as the prosecutor general, Muhammetguly Ogsukow (Baharly region of Ahal province). The future leader of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, an Ahalteke, held the position of health minister and was said to have provided personal medical assistance to President Niyazow. Although he was not a major figure in this circle, his closeness to Niyazow is evident from the long time he spent in government.

<sup>16</sup> "From a forum featuring the leader of the United Turkmen Opposition, Avdy Kuliiev, and the former Vice-Premier and Chairman of the Central Bank of Turkmenistan, Khudaiberdy Artykovich Orazov." 2002. *United Turkmen Opposition*, <http://www.erkin.net> (February 29, 2002) (accessed from Informatsiionnyi biulleten Instituta stran SNG, No. 47, March 1, 2002, <http://www.zatulin.ru/institute/sbornik/047/03.shtml>, accessed March 15, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Until approximately 1997, a series of purges took place among the *hakims* (governors) of individual *welayats* (provinces), eliminating potentially influential elites in the regions. Influential state officials from other regions were also removed from their posts, being sent at best to their own region to work in a secondary position (an example is Pajzygel'dy Meredov from Mary, Minister of Agriculture until 1994).

<sup>18</sup> Between 1992-2006, there were several waves of purges, including the removal of clan chief Khan Ahmed, the then-premier. M. Shamayev, "Gde byl zhildom – tam ZHET stoit. Turkmenbashi metodichno unichtozhalet vsekh, kogo schitalet umnee sebja," *Gundogar.org*, September 24, 2002 (accessed October 1, 2002).

During Niyazow's fifteen years in power in independent Turkmenistan, regional origin was only one factor among many enabling one to enter into the highest elite circles. Indeed, it was far from being the most prominent, as loyalty to the president became the main pre-condition for promotion up the hierarchy. Other factors included membership in key state security units, crucial to the president, as well as the ability to plot against others without getting caught up in the cadre purges. Such an atmosphere ultimately came to form the core of Turkmenistan's post-Soviet political culture.

### **The Rise of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow**

The close and homogeneous group of Turkmen elite that remained after Niyazow's death made it possible to avoid internal disputes with unforeseeable consequences. The so-called "December 21 group," i.e., the president's close advisors and security personnel present on the day that Niyazow died and who chose his successor, was able to come to a consensus over who was to be the new leader.

We have little information by which to understand the appointment of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow as the new president. His being of Ahalteke origin with Ashgabat-based networks seems to have been one criterion, which ruled out "eminence grise" Rejepow, who had no power base either in the capital city or in his own region, though he was considered a highly competent person. A measure of closeness to the first president in the last minutes of his life was also probably taken into consideration. In this case, Berdimuhamedow, who served as the president's personal physician, was presumably one of the first to learn of Turkmenbashi's death. Although he was not considered a favorite in the succession race, his long-term survival in the government, good relationships with members of the uppermost elite, particularly Rejepow and Mämmetgeldiyew, together with his Ahalteke origin weighed heavily in the leadership selection process. Muhammetgul Ogshukow, another Ahal member of the "December 21 group" and the prosecutor general in 2006-09, did not seek the highest post. Owezgeldy Ataew, the head of the supra-legislative force Halk Maslahaty was, according to the existing constitution, the legal successor of the president. He even tried to affirm his rights and, according to some sources, attempted to found a more liberal regime in the country.<sup>19</sup> However, such processes were highly undesirable for the elite and he lacked sufficient support among the decision-making circles. The presidential administration dispatched him with a lengthy jail term justified through the use of compromising material. All in all, the choice of Berdimuhamedow seems

<sup>19</sup> Maksim Pender, "Viktor Khramov – "khvost upravliaet ishakom?" *Oasis*, December 21, 2007. <http://www.ca-oasis.info/news/?c=4&id=24286> (accessed December 29, 2007).



to have been a compromise. His youthful appearance, Ahal origin, and non-military position made him attractive both for insiders in Turkmenistan as well as for outside partners, although domestic public opinion played little role during the transfer of authority.<sup>20</sup>

Once Berdimuhamedow was announced to the world as the head of the Funeral Committee, it was clear that he would become the new president and “Turkmen No. 1.”<sup>21</sup> The role of prominent non-Turkmen figures remains one of the most unknown sides of the story. Analyses seeking to tease out the significance of Turkmenbashi’s closest advisors—that is, Khramov, Zhadan, and Umnov—in the process have usually oscillated between two approaches. Both of them are speculative and give us no indication, whether direct or indirect, as to which is more probable. According to the first version, their role was marginal and they mostly observed the intra-Turkmen processes and secured their positions after the announcement of the new leader. An alternative version of events claims that these three influential persons, especially Khramov, were strongly involved in the nomination process.<sup>22</sup> Their enduring presence in the highest echelons of Turkmen political life (though Berdimuhamedow subsequently managed to exclude Umnov under unclear circumstances), as well as their being able to maintain their businesses in the country make the second option likelier.

At first, it seemed that Berdimuhamedow was to serve as a compromise candidate and therefore that he would be a weak and manipulable representative of the security services headed by Rejepow. Turkmenistan would then have followed a more oligarchic rather than personality-based course. But those who established him in power possibly underestimated his abilities and the symbolic mandate he received during the presidential elections in February 2007. Berdimuhamedow began to consolidate his personal power almost immediately after his selection, and his extensive legal powers enabled him to establish his own power base and create a personal regime in the spirit of the local political culture, involving the absolute dominance of a single leader. The gradual elimination of all challengers was thus a logical consequence of his rise to power. The members of the inner circle were not able to create a unified front against him at the beginning of his rule, and Berdimuhamedow acted pragmatically. He began by purging General Rahmanow, the minister of the Interior,<sup>23</sup> who

<sup>20</sup> The fact that Berdimuhamedow was apparently responsible for pushing Uzbeks from border areas and into the desert for the health care “reform,” was not taken into account. See *Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan*, November 19, 2002, and January 4, 2003.

<sup>21</sup> Peyrouse, *Turkmenistan*, 109.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, the Internet discussion on “Baza dannykh istinnykh vragov naroda,” *Khronika Turkmenistana*, March 2010, <http://chronon-tm.2x2forum.com/forum-f1/tema-t101-15.htm> (accessed March 31, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> *Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan*, April 10, 2007.



enjoyed wide support within some Ashgabat circles and was also a professional within the police apparatus and the security structures.<sup>24</sup> Rejepow, Berdimuhamedow's patron and probably the most powerful figure among the "December 21 group," followed soon after. Rejepow's support in Ashgabat was allegedly weak and the business of his clients provided attractive income for the president, making them a target. Other figures from the former inner circle were gradually purged by 2009.<sup>25</sup> Although some of them were of Ahalteke origin, they were not close relatives of the new president and/or did not come from the same district.<sup>26</sup>

### The Mechanism of Elite Formation under Berdimuhamedow

More akin to the other Central Asian leaders, Berdimuhamedow built his own regime on family and regional networks from the Western Ahal region. U.S. embassy cables released at the end of 2010 by Wikileaks paint stunningly unflattering portraits of him, describing him as an Ahalteke nationalist, and as scornful of the country's other regional tribal groups.<sup>27</sup> During Niyazow's years, he remained in his post for the maximum time and was not involved in any purges. He was apparently the "younger ally" of former Vice-Premier Yolly Gurbanmuradow, who was later sacked by the president. At the same time, Berdimuhamedow was able to survive and keep his share of business in Turkmenistan—entry exams to the universities (during his vice-premiership, the level of kickbacks rose sharply) and the pharmaceutical industry (imports of medicines and control over obligatory insurance).<sup>28</sup> It is still unclear who had patronage over him, that is, whether it was Niyazow himself, or Khramov, for instance.

After ousting Niyazow's former circle, Berdimuhamedow started gradually to replace old cadres with his own. People with no, or little, clan,

<sup>24</sup> His biography is available at <http://www.centrasia.ru>. One might also speculate that he was the strongest opponent of Rejepow still left in power. "Kapkan dlia generala Redzhepova," *Planeta*, May 2007, <http://www.planeta.by/article/211> (accessed March 8, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> This concerned first of all Minister of National Security Geldimuhamet Aşyrmuhamedow, who was dismissed from office in October 2007 together with several top officials at the Ministry of National Security (*Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 9, 2007). Muhammetguly Oğşukow, Prosecutor General from spring 2006, was removed from office in March 2008 (*Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, March 4, 2008). Baýram Alolow, commander-in-chief of the Border Guard, and Agageldi Mämmetgeldiyew, minister of Defense and secretary of the State Security Council were eventually dismissed as part of the cadre changes in January 2009.

<sup>26</sup> This was the case with Mämmetgeldiyew, who was a former medical colleague of Berdimuhamedow and was "only" retired from his position. Kadyrov, *Elitnye klany*, p. 35.

<sup>27</sup> "US embassy cables: Turkmenistan president 'not a very bright guy,'" *The Guardian*, December 2, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/240618> (accessed January 4, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Vitaliy Khliupin. 2006. "Chelovek bez litsa. Berdimuhamedow v Turkmenii nadolgo." *Centrasia.ru*, December 26, 2006, <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1167099660> (accessed August 24, 2012).

territorial, or career affiliation to the president were constantly sacked or reshuffled in order to prevent them from combining their power to form a center of opposition. A regular series of purges took place in pursuit of this goal, which the new president carried out in the same fashion as his predecessor. Ministers and other important figures in the state apparatus were appointed for trial periods, sometimes only to be replaced with further changes. Other purges have involved the further elimination of the non-Turkmen cadres that had remained in some mid-level positions, but they were not carried out on the huge scale seen under the Niyazow regime.

In contrast to his orphan predecessor, who had little contact with distant relatives, Berdimuhamedow is much more involved in the regional and family structures of Turkmen society. He therefore allocated positions to his "*zemlyaks*" (relatives and people from the same region), and had to seek to provide protection and income for this group.<sup>29</sup> However, the new president did not in general privilege his region of origin. For example in May 2011, blasts at the military ammunition stores in Abadan (part of the president's native Ahal province) created considerable damage there, involving several fatalities and many more injuries. The government tried to hide the real picture, at first refusing to admit the damages, and later underestimating their extent. Moreover, it increased censorship and state control over mobile communications, in a move that gave no specific advantages to the president's own region.

Instigated by the president, Ahal-based nationalism (*Ahalchilik*) has become a key feature of Turkmen politics and Ashgabat society over recent years. The exclusivity and superiority of the Ahal-dominated elite has led to uncontrolled behaviors: appropriations of non-Ahal properties and lucrative enterprises (including houses, cars, shops, and restaurants) have taken place in many areas. Non-Turkmen and non-Ahal populations are treated dismissively.<sup>30</sup> Office-holders among the security apparatus tasked with protecting the regime (the Ministry of National Security, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of the Interior) are almost exclusively tied to the president through regional origin or family bonds. Ata Serdarow, a cousin of the president and long-time colleague, managed to retain his position as health minister until 2010. Gurbanmyrat Hangulyýew, the president's brother-in-law, has been the minister of transport since 2008. Ýaýlym Berdyýew, another relative of the president, formerly a rank-and-file employee in the Ahal branch of the Ministry of National Security, was promoted to the position of minister of defense and head of the State Security Council and, in 2011 was appointed minister for national security.

<sup>29</sup> According to the definition of Kadyrov, *Natsiia plemen*, p. 166.

<sup>30</sup> Intra-regional disputes and crimes became more frequent in Ashgabat after 2007. People from other regions are attacked in Ashgabat in part because they are easily identified due to their different dialect.

His family connections and loyalty to the president seemingly make him a linchpin of presidential power.

The president's closest relatives and inner circle have also taken control over the most important industries and profitable sectors of the economy, including the gas sector. The most prominent example is Berdimuhamedow's son-in-law Dowlet Atabayew, who worked as a commercial attaché at the Turkmen Embassy in Paris. In 2008, he was appointed chief representative of the State Agency for Management and Use of Hydrocarbon Resources in London. Since 2011 Berdimuhamedow's son, Serdar, has also started to make more public appearances. A famous photo of him was published during the presidential elections in February 2012, in which the current president is symbolically surrounded by his father, son, and grandson.<sup>31</sup> Serdar has concentrated substantial parts of the Turkmen economy in his own hands and also attempted to take control of former presidential son Murad Niyazow's business empire.<sup>32</sup>

In the cadre rotations and purges since 2007, evident priority has been given to the Ahal, Baharly, and Goek Depe districts, as well as to Ashgabat residents. Persons coming from these regions hold key positions such as vice-premierships, enabling them to control important and profitable sectors of the government and economy. However, the overall composition of the government and key state institutions in 2012 shows that Turkmenistan's regions are more equally represented. Some technical posts are held by people outside the Ahal clan, and the president has tried to keep already scarce specialist personnel in place to stem the ongoing brain drain, regardless of their regional or tribal affiliation. Moreover, many Ahal-origin figures and more distant presidential relatives proved incompetent in high office, and a substantial number of them were removed from their posts notwithstanding their ties to the president. The interior minister and brother-in-law of the president, Hojamyrat Annagurbanow, was, for instance, removed from office as early as 2007, while Yusup Işangullyýew, the powerful secretary of the presidential apparatus and the president's former school classmate, lost his position in March 2009.<sup>33</sup>

Victims of Berdimuhamedow's staff shake-ups usually face a gentle diplomatic or internal exile. Ata Serdarow, for instance, who formerly held the health portfolio, was appointed as ambassador to Armenia in

<sup>31</sup> Turkmen TV, Watan Habarlary, February 12, 2012. Downloaded from <http://www.turkmens.com> (accessed February 12, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> Akmuhammed Orazmuhammedov, 2012, *Kogda semeinyi biznes vyshe interesov gosudarstva*. Gudogar.org, April 20, 2012. <http://gudogar.org/?0247051238200000000000011000000> (accessed June 21, 2012).

<sup>33</sup> Kadyrov, *Elitnyie klany*, 138-141. Işangullyew became the director of the local hospital in Berzengi. Nothing is known about the fate of Hojamyrat Annagurbanow, who was paradoxically removed from his function for engaging in cronyism and favoring his relatives. *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 9, 2007.

2010. Nokerguly Atagulyev, who used to work as the minister of trade and external economic relations, served after his removal as ambassador to Tajikistan and then for a short time to the United Arab Emirates. After the presidential elections in February 2012, he was reinstated to the higher position of vice-premier for trade and external economic relations.<sup>34</sup> This fate serves as a typical example of the way in which Berdimuhamedow's government deals with people from his circle: those removed from the government are not jailed, but moved to lower positions or diplomatic ranks. Other reshuffles of the president's relatives can be interpreted as reactions to the publication of damaging information abroad. The closure of Atabayew's office in London, for instance, followed the release of a Crude Accountability report criticizing the opaque mechanisms for gas revenue distribution in Turkmenistan.<sup>35</sup>

After Ahal, the Mary province (*welayat*), where the president also has relatives, is the second most prominent region for recruiting new elites. Included in his family line from this area is Vice-Premier for Culture and Media Maysa Ýazmuhammedowa, a cousin of the president who has long held this office. She and Myratgeldi Akmammedow, another Mary-origin vice-premier for agriculture are, however, controlled by executives from the Ahal region (Ministry of Agriculture, and Ministry of Water Management). The status of Ýazmuhammedowa, known for organizing state holidays and presidential visits around the country, was downgraded after the 2012 presidential elections, when she became the head of the Central Committee of the Women's Union.<sup>36</sup>

During Niyazow's regime, part of the energy sector was in the hands of the elite from the Balkan province. Control of incomes lay in Ashgabat's hands, but the Yomud group was in charge of technical matters and implementation. The main representatives of this group included Taçberdi Tagyýew, vice-chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers in charge of mineral sources; and Garýagdi Taşlyýew, Ministry of Oil and Gas. In 2009, however, there was a shift of functions in favor of Ahalteke dominance, and personnel in the energy sectors were rotated in January, May, and October of that year.<sup>37</sup> The Balkan Yomuds continued to maintain their influence over some plants (Tagyýew became the head

<sup>34</sup> *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, February 23, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> See Crude Accountability. 2011. *Reform in Turkmenistan: A Convenient Facade*, London: A Crude Accountability Report, April.

<sup>36</sup> She became famous for her "Turkmenization" campaigns and anti-minority measures. "Turkmenkam nado nosit' balaki. Dress-kod dlia chinovnits ot zamhakima Biagul' Charykulievoi," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, May 30, 2011, <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1306728900> (accessed May 16, 2007). "Svetlovolosykh otseiali." *Khronika Turkmenistana*, September 29, 2011, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2011/09/svetlovolosykh-otseyali/> (accessed October 2, 2011).

<sup>37</sup> *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 13, 2009.

of the Turkmenbashi refinery in February 2012) and over the national oil and gas companies, Turkmennebit, and Turkmengaz (Taşlyýew became head of Turkmennebit). But they lost a part of their symbolic autonomy. These changes partly reflected the events in the international arena. This was particularly true of the May purge, which was likely a reaction to Gazprom's turning off the gas a month earlier after an alleged explosion in the pipeline, and for the October reshuffle of cadres connected to questionable data concerning Turkmen gas supplies.<sup>38</sup> Tagyýew's removal could also have been linked to the disputes concerning Dowlet Atabayew as indicated in some Wikileaks documents.<sup>39</sup> Similar purges in the energy sector and relocations of cadres continued at the beginning of 2010, when Bayramgeldy Nedirow was appointed minister for oil and gas supplies, a position he had previously held. At the symbolic level, the change in control over the energy sector was confirmed by moving the headquarters of Turkmennebit from Balkanabat (the former Nebit Dag) in western Turkmenistan to Ashgabat. This is testimony to the fact that energy policy is being decided by Ahalteke and more particularly by Berdimuhamedow and his family, which is to say, outside the appropriate bureaucracies, whose role is now technical.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to the Turkmen elite, Berdimuhamedow continues to protect the positions of the non-Turkmen in his inner circle. Khramov and Zhadan remain in the presidential apparatus, in spite of rumors of their disappearance in 2007. Only Umnov has disappeared from elite circles, under uncertain circumstances. Khramov remains responsible for creating the ideological framework for the Berdimuhamedow era, called the "Renaissance" period, and for issuing hagiographic publications about the new president.<sup>41</sup> He also continues to manage properties in the country and apparently gas revenues are at least partly channeled through his accounts. His contacts abroad, especially in Russia, are unique in Turkmenistan and enable him to accrue further funds for the president. His cooperation with Berdimuhamedow is therefore based on a mutually advantageous relationship: Khramov handles funds for the president and his family in exchange for being able to run his business.

<sup>38</sup> The results of the foreign audit of gas reserves were met with skepticism by the foreign mass media. Arkadii Dubnov. "Truboprokol." *Vremya.ru*, October 13, 2009, <http://www.vremya.ru/2009/188/5/239444.html> (accessed March 8, 2010).

<sup>39</sup> "Turkmenistan: Former Deputy Chairman for Oil and Gas Tachberdy Tagiyev arrested," *Wikileaks*, 2012, EO 12958 DECL: 10/13/2019, 09ASHGABAT1288, October 13, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Maksat Alikperov. 2010. "Turkmen Gas as a family business." *Khronika Turkmenistana*, February 3, 2010. <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1276> (accessed March 10, 2010).

<sup>41</sup> Viktor Khramov and Maiia Mollaýewa. eds. 2007. *Prezident Turkmenistana Berdimuhamedow Gurbanguly Mialikgulievich. Kratkaia biografia*. Ashkhabad: Turkmenskaia gosudarstvennaia izdatel'skaia sluzhba. Also published in the daily *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan* from July 26 to August 4, 2007, and from August 7 to August 9, 2008.

The commercial elites from abroad that had surrounded Niyazow have also, for the most part, maintained their influence under the new president. Important examples of this foreign elite include representatives of construction holding companies—especially the Turkish firm Polimex (under the leadership of Erol Tabanca) and the French Bouygues. The most interesting development concerns the Turkish holding company owned by Ahmed Chalyk, who is in charge of building numerous official buildings in the country and is the owner of many textile plants and other businesses. After a brief decline in influence following Niyazow's death, Chalyk, using his connections in the Turkish government, was able to restore his former authority.<sup>42</sup> In 2009, he was even an integral part of Berdimuhamedow's delegations abroad and his holding company had access to the majority of joint projects between Turkmenistan and other countries.<sup>43</sup> This foreign elite has obvious ties with influential locals, and seems to cooperate with the president under mutually beneficial conditions.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

Niyazow's rule markedly increased the power of the Ahalteke group, an evolution that led to a broad elimination of non-Ahalteke from key positions throughout the first period of his presidency. At the same time, Turkmenbashi, as the sole player, was able to purge members of the elite frequently, regardless of their regional affiliation. In this political culture, all alternative centers of power were eliminated and the influential decision-making circle was further restricted. Consequently, the Turkmen elite have inherited a specific political culture based largely on the leader's personality and to a much smaller degree on regional or kinship ties. The inertia of the political culture under Niyazow was based on these principles and had a profound impact on the second president and his regime. Berdimuhamedow, as the sole leader, still controls all processes in the republic, including constant cadre rotations, based on the routines of political culture inherited from the previous period and his authority as the proclaimed and respected leader.

Berdimuhamedow, however, soon turned into a more classic—for

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<sup>42</sup> Maksat Alikperov. 2011. "Akhmet Chalyk kak lokomotiv turetskoi ekspansii v Turkmeniiu," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, June 19, <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1308551700> (accessed March 28, 2012).

<sup>43</sup> Alan Peskov. 2009. "Novyi Drug Turkmen," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, May 26, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/?id=1944> (accessed March 8, 2010). See also, Maksat Alikperov. 2010. "Berdymukhamedov ne ustoyal pered finansovym obaianiiem Chalyka," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, January 6, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/?id=2367> (accessed March 8, 2010).

<sup>44</sup> Maksim Pender. 2008. "G. Berdymukhamedova pobuzhdaiut prodolzhat' bashistskuiu politiku." *Turkmenskaia iskra*, June 16, <http://www.tm-iskra.org/20/08/sliv-guly.html> (accessed June 19, 2008).

the Central Asian region—leader,<sup>45</sup> insofar as he gave the most powerful positions in the state apparatus to people from the Western Ahal region. This “Ahalization” process was almost finished by 2012. The dominance of the Ahalteke is not, however, absolute and is not the only required condition for having a fruitful career. A certain number of Russian-speaking specialists remain at mid- and lower levels of the administrative apparatus because their knowledge is essential for the functioning of the bureaucracy. Indeed, some non-Turkmen hold the most powerful positions, operating in relations of mutual interdependence with the president due to their key roles in fostering relations with foreign investors.

Sustaining Berdimuhamedow’s clan and extending his power base in case of a future decrease in state revenues could lead to more struggles among the elite. Were the president’s tight control over the elite to weaken, this would probably also bring about the rapid decline of his career. However, the personality cult operative in Berdimuhamedow’s regime presently seems stable and manageable, especially given his relatively young age, his ability to behave as a real authoritarian leader, and the strong vertical power structure that prevents any real challenger from emerging. A political system based on one-man rule, such as Turkmenbashy’s, was made possible because of the concrete background of the president within Turkmen society and his appointment from Moscow. Founded by the first president, this authoritarian political culture will likely be maintained even if the elite composition changes slightly, at least in the current economic situation.

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<sup>45</sup> An analogy in Central Asia is Tajikistan (favor shown to Dangara, the native city of President Emomali Rahmon), Kyrgyzstan, especially under the first president Akayev (the town of Kemin and the birthplace of the president’s wife, Talas) and Kazakhstan (the role of the village of Chemolgan, birthplace of President Nazarbayev). The Uzbek elite are far more heterogeneous in these terms because of the less personality-oriented regime and a greater number of pretenders to elite positions.



