

Changes in the Political Elite in Post-Soviet Turkmenistan

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ABSTRACT

The article analyses the transformation of the Turkmen elite under the two last presidents, Saparmurat Niyazow and Gurbanguli Berdimuhamedow. Although the roots of the current elites are of the pre-Soviet origin, it is the Soviet legacy, strong leadership principle and the personal character of the leader, as well as the of Moscow control over Turkmen clans and politics, that have been determining the character of the Turkmen elite and, consequently, the political regime in Turkmenistan. While the first president Turkmenbashi was the main founder of Turkmenistan political cultural with its cronyism and corruption, the second president Berdimuhamedow has significantly fortified the clan loyalties, since his family ties and regional affiliation has been extremely firm.

Keywords • Post-Soviet Turkmenistan • Political Elite • Political Culture
• Saparmurat Niyazow • Gurbanguli Berdimukhammedov • Central Asia

Introduction

Research into political elites in Central Asia has recently begun to attract widespread attention in academic circles.¹ Authors have heretofore put

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¹ Edward Schatz, *Modern Clan Politics: The Power of "Blood". Kazakhstan and Beyond* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2004); Sally Cummings, *Kazakhstan: Power and Elite* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005); Kathleen Collins, *The Logic of Clan Politics in Central Asia: Its Impact on Regime Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

their primary focus on the more accessible countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Turkmenistan has so far remained outside the mainstream, the exception being the work of authors such as American historian Adrienne Edgar or Shohrat Kadyrov, the Turkmen sociologist and demographer, currently living in exile in Norway.² A solid empirical basis has been lacking upon which to anchor research into Turkmen political elites. The research that does exist is based largely upon incomplete biographies of key people, indirect observation, analogies, and unofficial sources and interviews. The closed character of the country and the nature of the regime also stand in the way of direct, on-location access to information, not to mention information which would be of a comprehensive character. Interviews with leaders of the Turkmen opposition living abroad are also problematic, since the information they provide is highly subjective.³

This paper will attempt to build upon previous research into the Turkmen political elites⁴ and to round out the information it provides by focusing on important occurrences within Turkmen elites in recent years,

² Adrienne Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), Shohrat, Kadyrov, "Central Asia. The Ethnology of Political Management: Yesterday, Today & Tomorrow," A special report for the conference *Turkmenistan: Not An Orange Revolution but Regional?*, Oslo, June 6, 2005; Shohrat Kadyrov, "Vneshnee upravleniie etnicheskim obshchestvom v sovetskom Turkmenistane i ego perspektivy [External Governing of Ethnical Society in Soviet Turkmenistan]," Turkmenistan Workshop, St Antony's College Oxford and The Oxford Society for Central Asia (TOSCA), June 18-19, 2004, www.sant.ox.ac.uk/areastudies/lecturesarchive/Turkmenistan/KadyrovPaper.doc (August 3, 2005); Shohrat Kadyrov, "Natsiia" plemen. *Etnicheskiie istoky, transformaciia, perspektivy gosudarstvennosti v Turkmenistane* [The "Nation" of the Tribes. Ethnical Resources, Transformation, Perspectives of Statehood in Turkmenistan] (Moscow: RAN, 2003); Shohrat Kadyrov, *Rossiisko-turkmenskii istoricheskii slovar'. chast' I*. [Russian-Turkmen Historical Dictionary. Volume I] (Bergen: Biblioteka al'manakha Turkmeny, 2001); Shohrat Kadyrov, "Turkmenistan. Institut prezidentstva v klanovom postkoloniial'nom obshchestve [Turkmenistan. Institute of the President in the Post-colonial Clannish Society]," *Vestnik Evrazii - Acta Eurasica*, No. 1 (2001), <<http://turkmeny.hi.ru/analyt/a4.html>> (September 8, 2005); Shohrat Kadyrov, *Elitnye klany. Shtrikhi k portretam* [Elite Clans: Details of the Image] (Moscow: MMIX, 2009).

³ The most obvious case of this concerns the former Deputy Prime Minister, Boris Shikhmuradov, who until 2001 was one of the most influential people around Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşı. The gundogar.org website he founded attempts to trivialize the extent of the role he played in the Turkmen regime, something he has been criticized for right up to the present by some opposition leaders.

⁴ Slavomír Horák, *Hybrid tradice a modernity - neformální struktury ve středoasijských zemích (případ Turkmenistánu)* [A Hybrid of Tradition and Modernity - Informal Structures in Central Asian Countries (The Case of Turkmenistan)] (Prague - Brno: Historický ústav AV ČR, Slovanské Historické Studie, 2006), pp. 199-225; see also the corresponding chapter in Slavomír Horák - Jan Šír, *Dismantling Totalitarianism? Turkmenistan under Berdimuhamedow*, Silk Road Papers (Washington - Stockholm: The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute - Silk Road Studies Program, March 2009), pp. 13-16, 26-32, see updating article Slavomír Horák, "Turkmen Elite Reshuffles," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* 12 (June 17, 2009), pp. 6-8.

particularly after the rise of Gurbanguli Berdimuhamedow. A key assumption of the paper is that the country's political culture is a continuation of both the Soviet and pre-Soviet eras. In addition, attention is given to the personality of the presidents. These factors combine traditional Turkmen tribal relationships, Soviet party models and a post-Soviet, markedly centralized system based upon a cult of personality in determining the nature of political elites.

The Historical Basis of Central Asian Post-Soviet Elites

Changes in the political regime came well in advance of changes in the behaviour of society. Change in individual social groups in the country (ethnicities, subethnic groups, family structures, political elites, etc.) has been motivated by the political climate. In spite of the fact that contemporary Turkmen society is based to a certain extent upon the traditional social division between tribes and family clans, the character of the elite and its transformation over the last 100 years, especially during the post-Soviet period, has been so marked that present-day elites have lost many of their more traditional characteristics.

The traditional Turkmen elite were based upon nomadic and settled elements of society. The nomadic or semi-nomadic societies of the Karakorum were dominant, while the settled population was concentrated around the Merv oasis and, to a lesser extent, in Choresm.⁵ At the head of the traditional hierarchical structure of the clans stood the chieftain (khan), whose powers were limited by the council of elders and whose function was called upon primarily during times of danger. Only the most authoritative individuals held the position of chief for a more extended period of time.⁶ The clan was further structured vertically within the clan itself (identification with one's own clan, knowledge of one's ancestors, etc.) and horizontally in the form of relations with other clans (normally, however, within a particular tribe). There was, at the same time, a relatively strict insistence on "purity", in particular social structure. Violation of the rules demotes the member within the hierarchy of the kinship unit. Aside from familial and patron-client relationships, territorial identification also played a certain role but only as a supplementary element based on the movement of a particular clan within a particular territory which might potentially change over time.

⁵ For Turkmenistan, e.g., Paul Geiss, "Turkmen Tribalism," *Central Asian Survey*, 18 (1999), pp. 347-357; Mehmet Saray, *The Turkmens in the Age of Imperialism. A Study of the Turkmen People and Their Incorporation into the Russian Empire* (Ankara: Turkish Historical Society, 1989).

⁶ An example would be the 19th century Nurberdy Khan at Ahalteke, or Koushut Khan in Merv. M. N. Tikhomirov, *Prisoedineniie Merva k Rusii Or Rossii?* [Annexation of Merv to Russia] (Moscow: Izd. Vostochnoi literatury, 1960), p. 32.

In Tsarist Russia, the role played by the Ahalteke tribe was gradually enlarged when the center of the so-called trans-Caspian region - Ashkhabad - was located in its territory. The Ahalteke were thus logically preferred as local administrators and subject to much greater Russification than other city elites partially living under Bukhara or Khiva administration.⁷

The Ahalteke continued to hold this position even after the 1917 revolution, which brought rapid change to the nomadic tribes.⁸ With the disappearance of their “traditional” world came the sedentarization of the formerly nomadic tribes. Significant changes were also made to the power structure of the region. For the first time in their history, the Turkmen tribes, which had always been fragmented and diverse, were to live as a single nationally-determined unit in Soviet Turkmenistan beginning in 1924. The pre-revolutionary elites were mostly liquidated, either as the result of fleeing abroad or by repression (the dekulakization of villages and disappearance of traditional farming elites). Resistance by the old elites continued to into the 1930s, in a movement led by the so-called Basmachis and in Turkmenistan, were primarily under the chieftain Junaid Khan.⁹ If, however, we look at the tribal/regional affiliation of the opposition Basmachis, most of them were from the former Bukhara and Khiva areas.

The establishment of new institutions of power (state institutions such as the government or parliament, party system, as well as economic units like kolkhozes) took place against a background of attempts by the Soviet central leadership to maintain the maximum possible parity between individual tribes.¹⁰ The new institutions either eliminated the traditional structures (tribal leaders, the gathering of tribal elders, etc.) or incorporated them, often as informal units in cadre politics. Keeping in mind the inertia present in societal development, it is logical that even after radical changes to the formal institutions of power, tribal rivalries continued to manifest themselves, albeit somewhat dampened by the external center in Moscow.¹¹ The battle between elites took place quite literally “under the banner of the October Revolution”.

⁷ Kadyrov, *Natsiia Plemen* [The Nation of the Tribes], pp. 145-146.

⁸ Sergei Demidov, *Postsovetskii Turkmenistan* [Post-Soviet Turkmenistan] (Moscow: Natalis 2002), p. 45.

⁹ Jan Wanner, “Politicko-vojenská nestabilita sovětské moci v muslimských oblastech I-II. [The political-military instability of Soviet power in Muslim regions I-II],” in *Armáda jako nástroj státní integrace SSSR (1923-1941)* [The army as tool of state integration in the USSR (1923-1941)] (Prague: Historický ústav AV ČR, 1997), pp. 101-184.

¹⁰ Edgar, *Tribal Nation*, p. 268.

¹¹ Shohrat Kadyrov, “Vneshnee upravleniie etnicheskim obshchestvom v sovetskom Turkmenistane i ego perspektivy [External Administration of the Ethnic Society in Soviet Turkmenistan and its Perspectives],” 2005.

The Soviet period created a kind of hybrid system uniting elements of the “traditional” social structure and the “modern” power hierarchy and institutions. A local/regional identity began to develop in societies whose way of life had always been nomadic. This resulted from sedentarization process in Central Asia, particularly during the 1920s and 1930s. Agricultural and water management reform in 1925-26 and the Great Terror of the 1930s played a lesser role in eliminating large landholders in Turkmenistan than within the settled population of Central Asia but did bring about a mixing of traditional clan and tribal structures. At the same time, the first generation of Soviet Turkmen leaders (including First Secretaries of the Communist Party Gaigysyz Atabaiev and Nedirbai Artikov) were subject to repression. When this period drew to a close at the end of the 1930s, new power structures began to arise which were removed from the traditional concepts of tribes and clans. Although some of the elites were able to retain their traditional identities, many more promoted new cadres based upon nationality and language knowledge (Turkmen, Russified Turkmen) or party affiliation. In this new hybrid system, traditional elements of society such as tribal identity and respect for the tribal hierarchy represented only one precondition for elite promotion, even if in some cases it was of fundamental importance. Restrictions imposed by Moscow also concerned the “Slavonic” Second Secretaries of the Communist Party in these republics who performed the de facto function of First Secretary during the 1920s and 1930s, in reality stood at the head of the republic.

Starting in the 1940s, the power of the Second Secretaries began to wane as the First Secretaries built firmer, more powerful ties within the republics. Particularly since the mid 1960s during the time of Brezhnev, when the First Secretary remained in office for a long period, the role of the Second Secretary became much more formal.¹² When conflict arose between the two leading figures of the republic, the central powers tended to recall “their” Second Secretary. In addition, strong personalities able to limit the rise of informal networks between the local elites were not normally sent to the Central Asian republics after the Second World War. The processes noted above were accompanied by a practical

¹² The long ruling 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 did not reflect the important regional relationships of the past. This is a fundamental mistake repeated by many authors who view 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 Fergana 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 Gdljan, and Nikolai V. Ivanov, *Kremlevskoe Delo* [The Kremlin Affair] (Rostov na Donu, 1994), p. 114 et seq.

weakening of the role played by formal institutions at the expense of informal ties existing within the patron-client system.

Ties between local cadres and Moscow, however, led to the establishment of a second source of loyalty for the local elites. Under these circumstances, local players came to the foreground who were, strongly Russified and whose ties to the traditional structures (auls, tribes, clans) were weak, although their relationship to their original region was mutually dependent.¹³ The influence of the center in Moscow on the appointment of these First Secretaries led the new elites to seek support for their appointment within the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on at least the same level as in the local environment. Moscow had already begun trying to balance tribal/clan relations in the diverse new national republics during the period of their formation by appointing so-called compromise figures or figures from non-dominant groups. For internal support, the candidate had to create his own informal structures made up of members of his own social group. Towards the end of the Soviet period, hybrid systems of political elites were created on the one hand by the Soviet party structure and, on the other, on the basis of membership in traditional structures whose influence was important to the position of the First Secretary. The Secretary's function therefore demanded good relations both with Moscow and members of his own family.

A major focus in Turkmenistan in the 1940s and 1950s was the battle between Ahalteke hegemony and regional groupings. From 1951-1985, non-Ahalteke groups had a formal majority represented by the First Secretary.¹⁴ The last of these in particular, because of his character and relatively long period in power, significantly molded the political environment in the spirit of the Brezhnev era of stagnation. Here the important role was played by the personality of Gapurov, whom many today (especially from Ahalteke) consider to have been illiterate (in both the political and cultural sense).¹⁵ His name is associated with the entrance of many incapable cadres to the party leadership apparatus, the

¹³ The original region was the source of new cadres in the capital as well as the means of their material and mental support. Kadyrov, *Shtrikhi k portretam* [Elite Clans: Details of the Image], p. 35-36.

¹⁴ Suvhan Babaiev (1951-1957), Balysh Ovezov (Yomut, 1958-1969), Muhamednazar Gapurov (1969-1985, Lebap, from eastern Turkmenistan). For more details see Kadyrov, *Natsiia plemen* [The Nation of the Tribes], pp. 126-137.

¹⁵ Muhammednazar Gapurov (1922-1999) went to teacher's 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 the 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.

security apparatus and the intellectual environment of Soviet Turkmenistan.¹⁶ The political environment and the corruption associated with this period was hardly different from that of neighbouring Central Asian republics.¹⁷ It is understandable that the post-Soviet elite, including Niyazow, educated during the Gapurov era, would preserve and allow the continued unobstructed growth of the political culture founded upon cronyism, corruption and (to a lesser extent under Niyazow) clan loyalties.

The Ahalteke at that time was made up of several influential families which, during the Soviet period, had been in the middle levels of the power apparatus. The Ahalteke, however, had no access to the highest levels because these had been reserved for representatives of other regions depending upon the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan. Important families included, those related to Khanamov-Nurklychev (during the Soviet period, they were involved in the cotton sector, public procurement, trade and consumer goods),¹⁸ the Sikhmuradovs (diplomacy, ideology, origin in Baharden)¹⁹ and many others. All of those named come primarily from Aşgabat, with the second and third generations also often having origins in the Ahal region. These people made up an intelligentsia that was often urban in nature and heavily Russified.

Gorbachev's perestroika substantially impacted the evolution of the Turkmen elite and determined the character of the government during the post-Soviet era. It was under just such a circumstance that the policy appeared of appointing a member of the "opposition group" to a high function within the existing government. In the case of Turkmenistan, this involved the long-awaited return of the Ahalteke to power. At the same time, however, this person was not to be an unknown who would be subject to control by Moscow. The then-First Secretary of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan Saparmyrat Niyazow was the ideal

¹⁶ An interesting publication regarding changes in cadres in the Soviet apparatus is I. K. Kadyrov, and A. K. Saparov, *Osushchestvlenie Kompartii Turkmenistana kadrovoi politiki* [Implementation of Cadre Policy by the Communist Party of Turkmenistan] (Ashkhabad, 1982).

¹⁷ An example would be the well known "pripisky" culture of data falsification in agriculture - see, e.g., Nikolai Kharin, *Vegetation Degradation in Central Asia under the Impact of Human Activities* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), pp. 73-76. Saparmyrat Niyazow's appearance before the 6th Plenary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan is interesting in this regard. Saparmyrat Niyazov, "Partiinuiu i gosudarstvennuiu distsiplinu na uroven' sovremennykh trebovaniy [Party and State Discipline on the Level of Contemporary Requirements]," *Turkmenskaia iskra*, October 21, 1986.

¹⁸ Vitaliy Ponomarev, "Besedy s Abdy Kulievym, chast' 2 [Conversations with Abdy Kulievym. Part 2]," *Tsentr Memorial*, 2001, <<http://www.memo.ru/hr/politpr/asia/turkmenistan/kuliev2.htm>> (August 23, 2005).

¹⁹ Kadyrov, *Natsiia Plemen* [The Nation of the Tribes], pp. 356-357.

candidate from this standpoint. Although he had formally been part of the Ahalteke, he did not possess a significant client network in Turkmenistan itself. Furthermore, his wife was Russian and before being appointed he had undergone ideological training at the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

An emphasis on informal relationships within the elites as opposed to formal institutions became a marked feature after the fall of the USSR. The Moscow element was now missing and the old/new cadres in Central Asia, appointed during the Soviet era, no longer felt any pressure in giving preference to the people approved by Soviet center. As a result, newly created institutions of power (government, parliament) took root much more slowly in Central Asia. In contrast, because of the absence of external controls, patron-client, clan, family and other informal ties became more firmly entrenched (a process sometimes labelled re-traditionalization). At the same time, the loss of support from the center in Moscow, one of the two pillars of power, meant that the First Secretary had to maintain his own power, normally by liquidating his opponents, whether they be in the ranks of the liberal (often Russian-speaking) intelligentsia, members of the clan or of other informal groupings. These factors contributed greatly to the formation of authoritarian regimes in the region.

Elites Under Türkmenbashi

The purge of the countries which took place with the rise of Saparmyrat Niyazow, to First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan in 1986, led to renewed dominance by the Ahalteke. The main factors determining the political culture and the distribution of power in the country came to depend, however, on the personality and origin of President Niyazow (renamed as Türkmenbashi in 1993). His weak position within the traditional Turkmen (and Ahalteke in particular) elite and family structure - the president was an orphan who had no moral obligation to elevate his own relatives and cronies - made possible a pronounced centralization of power around his person, thereby strengthening authoritarian tendencies in the country. During the early years of independence, Türkmenbashi kept an eye on Moscow, perhaps out of fear that the once-powerful Soviet empire would arise again.²⁰ The president also announced a “return to the traditional institutions of power”, but nevertheless accorded them only a formal role in the new political process with little real power.²¹

²⁰ Interview by author with Avdy Kuliev, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan (1990-1992), October 16, 1999.

²¹ These were pseudo-traditional institutions such as the Council of Elders (or the Halk Maslahaty, the supreme constitutional assembly overseeing the executive, legislative and

People of non-Turkmen origin were entrusted with much more power and influence by the new president than local elites. Despite external emphasis on Turkmenness, they external actors became his base of power. This portion of the elite consisted of people formerly connected to the presidential apparatus as advisors. They included Viktor Khramov, the former Director for Ideology of the Central Committee of The Communist Party of the Turkmen SSR.²² Everything written about the president in Turkmenistan and his policies were edited by Khramov. He was also active as a businessman - he had a share in Turkmenistan's energy trade and was the owner of several prosperous florists, clothiers and other businesses.²³ The president's financial affairs were administered directly in Aşgabat by Alexandr Zhadan and Vladimír Umnov. The circle of influential non-Turkmen included important foreign business people capable of establishing good relations with the president who, after a certain period of time, proved able to markedly influence his decision-making (normally for their own profit). These people included, among others, Yoseph Maiman, who was an energy advisor, Ahmed Chalyk, the longtime Vice-Minister of the Textile Industry and owner of the construction company Chalyk Holdings, responsible for construction of many new buildings in Aşgabat.²⁴ Other companies included the Turkish Polimeks (owned by Erol Tabanca), Erku (Ilhan Ipekchi) and the French Bouygues.²⁵ Turks also occupied places in the Turkmenistan state administration (Ugur Halil, for example, was ambassador to the United States in the 1990s).

In contradiction to other Central Asian presidents, whose families were directly tied to particular regional and clan groupings, the family of Türkmenbashi was scattered around the world and to some extent, at least, worked to maintain Türkmenbashi's financial empire. While his

judicial powers). For more on the issue, see Jan Šír, "Halk Maslahaty in the Context of the Constitutional Evolution of Post-Soviet Turkmenistan," *Perspectives on European Politics & Society* 6, 2 (2005), pp. 321-330; Jan Šír, *Návrat k Tradicím? Hledání moderních institucí v postsovětském Turkmenistánu* [Back to Tradition? Searching for Modern Institutional Design in Post-Soviet Turkmenistan] (Prague - Brno: Historický ústav AV ČR, Slovanské Historické Studie, 2006), pp. 225-238.

²² For more on the regime's ideology, see Slavomír Horák, "The Ideology of Turkmenbashi Regime," *Perspectives on European Politics & Society* 6, 2 (2005), pp. 305-320.

²³ Aydin Begench, "Who is Ruling Turkmenistan?" *Turkmenskaia iskra*, May 21, 2008, <<http://www.tm-iskra.org/20/08/Hramov-V-2-eng.html>> (May 23, 2008). See also: "Turkmen residents instructed to be healthy," *Chronicle of Turkmenistan*, November 26, 2009, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1223>> (November 30, 2009).

²⁴ A. Esenov, "Turetskii biznesmen Akhmet Chalyk: 'Seryi Kardinal' Turkmenskoi Politiki [Turkish Businessman Akhmet Chalyk. 'The Shadow Cardinal of Turkmen Politics?]," *Centrasia.ru*, September 28, 2003, <<http://www.centrasia.ru/news2.php4?st=1064699520>> (March 8, 2010); Chalyk's holdings include GAP Güneydoğu Tekstil, Çalık Enerji, GAP İnşaat, Çalıkbank и GAP Pazarlama.

²⁵ For their practices, see the documentary film *The Shadow of the Holy Book*, released in 2007.

son Murad, who was clearly involved in business with Turkmenistan in a wide variety of areas, his daughter Irina, who lived with her husband in Paris and Moscow, as was true for his wife, who lived in Moscow for an extended time, had any ambitions inside Turkmenistan.²⁶

Due to the concentration of power in the hands of the president and his advisors, no significant renewal of the traditional, or rather pseudo-traditional, elites took place in Turkmenistan as it had in other Central Asian countries. Although groups formed on the basis of tribal/regional relationships, these groups were not strong enough to threaten the basis of the personality-cult of President Türkmenbashi. The old Soviet families took a substantial part in consolidating the Ahalteke in Aşgabat back in the first half of the 1990s and held a de facto monopoly on power in the capital, while other regions tended to have insignificant representation.²⁷ In spite of this, people without Ahalteke ties occupied relatively important functions, institutions included the KGB up until 2002 (later the Ministry of National Safety) under Muhammet Nazarow.²⁸ The president's chief apparatchik was Rejep Saparow (originally from Dashoguz), who was only eliminated during the struggle between elites in 2005.²⁹ The head of the presidential guard, Akmurat Rejepow, a member of the Ersary tribe from Charjew in the Lebap region, must also be considered one of the most powerful men in the country. He was backed by the former First Secretary, Muhammatnazar Gapurov, who was from the same area and thus theoretically a member of the

²⁶ "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". United Turkmen Opposition, <http://www.erkin.net> February 29, 2002, accessed from *Informatsiionyi biulleten Instituta stran SNG*, <<http://www.zatulin.ru/institute/sbornik/047/03.shtml>> (October 7, 2010).

²⁷ Until approximately 1997, a series of purges took place among hakims (governors) of individual velayats, eliminating potentially influential elites in the regions. Influential state officials from other regions were also removed from their posts, being sent to their own region to work in a secondary position (an example is Pajzygel'dy Meredov from Mary, Minister of Agriculture until 1994).

²⁸ Nazarow came from the Lebap region, from the town of Kharjou (today Turkmenabat), from the same region as Muhammetnazar Gapurov, Niyazov's predecessor in the post of First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan.

²⁹ According to some sources, then-Vice-Premier Jolly Gurbanmuradov (who was sentenced that same year) and Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov stood behind an attempt to forcibly remove one of the administrators of the president's wealth. This theory was also put forward by Vitalii Khliupin in the essay "Chelovek bez litsa. Berdimuhamedow v Turkmenii nadolgo [Man without Face. Berdimuhamedow is going to be in Turkmenistan for a long time]," *Nomad*, December 27, 2006, <<http://www.nomad.su/?a=3-200612270614>> (January 10, 2007). Saparow died in prison in 2007.

clique in power during the Brezhnev era, and with which Türkmenbashi fought for almost the entire time he was in a position of leadership.³⁰

The increased presence of Ahalteke in state administration led to a battle within the regional elite. The result of which was a long series of reports to the president about other members of Ahalteke, which usually led to purges in the state apparatus.³¹ Those affected in the very beginning were normally sent into exile (to ambassadorial posts, honorary retirement etc.) but in later years usually lost their freedom for a long period of time. During the course of the roughly 15-year Türkmenbashi period in independent Turkmenistan, these old cadres, as well as the majority of Russian speakers, were forced to leave politics. The “Ahalization” of the Turkmen political elite and the battle between its members, however, meant the elimination or emigration of a substantial portion of the Ahalteke elite, thereby substantially narrowing their power base.

Toward the end of the Türkmenbashi regime, the highest Turkmen elite was comprised of a small circle of close individuals who, for one reason or another, had not been purged. If we look at the composition of this circle, it becomes obvious that the dominance of Ahalteke played no role under these circumstances. It included the presidential guard, which under General Akmyrat Rejepow, became the strongest power structure in the country. Rejepow’s people controlled the work of other security agencies. Other invulnerable ministers were Agageldi Mämmetgeldiyew (Defence Minister, Ahal, but from the Tejen district in south Turkmenistan), Geldimuhammet Aşyrmuhammedow (Ministry of National Security, Balkan region), and Akmämmet Rahmanow (Minister of the Interior, Ahalteke), as well as the Prosecutor General, Muhammetguly Ogşukow (Baharly region of Ahal welaýat). The future leader of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguli Berdimuhamedow from Ahalteke, held the position of Health Minister and was said to have provided personal medical assistance to President Türkmenbashi. As is obvious, regional origin was only one criterion for holding onto power at this level. Others included members in key state security units, irreplaceable to the president and the ability to plot against others without being included in the cadre purges.

³⁰ Rejepow himself, however, was not considered to be of pure Ersara blood, which was also true of Niyazov vis-à-vis the Ahalteke and allowed him to endure. “Vladyka pustyni [The Leader of the Desert],” *Planeta*, February 2007, <<http://www.planeta.by/article/174>> (October 7, 2010).

³¹ Between 1992 and 2006, there were several waves of purges, including the removal of the clan chief Khan Ahmed, the then-Premier. M. Shamayev, “Gde byl zhildom - tam zhdet stoit. Turkmenbashy metodichno unichtozhalet vsekh, kogo schitalet umnee sebia [Turkmenbashy methodically destroys everyone considered to be more capable than him],” *Gundogar*, September 24, 2002.

Elites under Berdimuhamedow

It was precisely the close, homogeneous nature of the elite which, after the death of Türkmenbashi, provided protection against internal disputes with unforeseeable consequences. It was this group of people which was able to arrive at a fairly rapid consensus concerning the new leader, with the requirement for an Ahalteke origin being probably beyond discussion.³² The transition from one personality-based regime to another was also clearly motivated by this internal elite, with foreigners in the state apparatus playing a much lesser role. Foreigners were focused on preserving their own positions rather than taking part in the internal affairs of the Turkmen elite.

These people chose from their midst the long-serving Minister of Health, Gurbanguli Berdimuhamedow, who because of his function as the president's personal dentist, was presumably one of the first to learn of his death. The other "December 21 Men" did not, for the most part, have this advantage.³³ His youthful visage and the fact that he had led a non-military department would also make him popular with the public, although public opinion did not have any significant role during the transfer of power.³⁴ Berdimuhamedow likely also maintained good relationships with some members of the innermost circle of the elite, most likely with Rejepow and Mämmetgeldiyew. He was also apparently able to construct coalitions and compromise within the main power circle in the country immediately after coming to power in December 2006.

At the beginning it seemed that he would be a compromise candidate and therefore weak and easily manipulated by the "siloviks" headed by Akmyrat Rejepow. Early signs seemed to indicate that Turkmenistan would follow a course which was more oligarchic than personality-based. However, President Berdimuhamedow began to consolidate his personal power almost immediately after his selection. He had to get his hands on highly compromising materials which he could then use later against other members of the elite. His extensive legal powers enabled this compromise and "weak" candidate to establish his own power base and create a personal regime in the spirit of the local political culture founded upon the absolute dominance of a single leader.

³² This ruled out the "eminence grise," Akmyrat Rejepow, who had no power base either in the center or in his own region.

³³ An exception was the Minister of the Interior, Rahmanow, who was from the Ahal velayat. It was necessary to find a compromise candidate from the highest ranks of the Turkmen elite, but not someone who would acquire substantial dominance over other members of the inner core of the elite. I am not including Muhammetgul Ogshukow, the Prosecutor General in 2006-2009, who is also from Western Ahal, but not from within the president's closest circle.

³⁴ The fact that Berdimuhamedow had apparently been responsible for pushing Uzbeks from border areas into the desert, the "reform" of health care, etc., were not brought up. See *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, November 19, 2002, and January 4, 2003.

As for the cadres, the first step was to liquidate the potential competition, in particular his “patrons” in order to survive. From this viewpoint Berdimuhamedow acted pragmatically in starting with General Akmämmet Rahmanow, the Minister of the Interior.³⁵ Rahmanow enjoyed extensive support within Aşgabat and was also a professional within the police apparatus and the security structures with detailed knowledge of compromising materials concerning Berdimuhamedow and other members of the elite.³⁶ After that came Akmurat Rejepow, Berdimuhamedow’s patron and the most powerful figure in the coup at the end of 2006. There is reason to think that until several months after the death of Türkmenbashi, he functioned as a shadow president. Other figures from the former inner circle were gradually eliminated between 2007 and 2009.³⁷ Although some of them were of Ahalteke origin, they were not close relatives and did not come from the same district.³⁸

Berdimuhamedow’s growing power was reflected in his ever more significant position ideologically in Turkmenistan. Already by 2007, all references to the first president of Turkmenistan had been eliminated from the Turkmen ideology, leading to the building of a cult around the personality of President Berdimuhamedow in 2009. In addition to several changes to official posters of the president, other features of the personality cult began to be constructed, as well. The media presented Berdimuhamedow using epithets such as “The Creator of the Great Renaissance in Turkmenistan”, “author of a number of initiatives with global impact”, “Defender of a Healthy Way of Life”, etc. Following the example of his predecessor, Berdimuhamedow’s ancestors were also revered;³⁹ the president also has his own museum and a mosque in Mary was named after him.

³⁵ *Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan*, April 10, 2007.

³⁶ His biography is available at <http://www.centrasia.ru>. One might also speculate that he was the biggest opponent of Rejepow still in power. “Kapkan dlia generála Redzhepova [A Trap for General Rejepow?],” *Planeta*, May 2007, <<http://www.planeta.by/article/211>> (March 8, 2010).

³⁷ This concerned first of all the minister of national security, Geldimuhamet Aşyrmuhammedow, 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 Ogşukow, Prosecutor General from spring 2006, was removed from office in March 2008 (*Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan*, March 4, 2008). Baýram Alolow, chief commander of the Border Guard, and Agageldi Mämmetgeldiyew, Minister of Defence and Secretary of the State Security Council were finally sacked as part of the cadre changes in January 2009.

³⁸ This was the case with Mämmetgeldiyew, who had been a medical colleague of Berdymukhammedov and was “only” retired. Kadyrov, *Elitnye klany*, p. 35.

³⁹ Most revered was his grandfather, a village teacher, after whom the school in the village of Yzgant (Geok Depe district) was renamed (*Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan*, September 4, 2009). His biography was published at the same time. *Pedagog, voïn, grazhdanin. Zhizn’-podvig Berdymukhameda Annaeva* [The Pedagogue, the Soldier, the Citizen. Life-heroism of

The circumstances noted above also led to changes in the process of forming the power base in the country, with a greater emphasis laid on the regional origin of important ministers. President Berdimuhamedow, in contrast to his predecessor, was much more involved in the traditional family and tribal structures. He behaved in accordance with the law of group morality, and was beholden to “his own people”, who had “their own man” at the head of state. Responsibility to his own social group in this case meant an “obligation” to provide the group protection and means of subsistence⁴⁰ and so it was logical that the share of people hailing from the Western Ahal region west of Aşgabat would rise.

Today, the people in charge of security ministries (the Ministry of National Security, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of the Interior) are almost exclusively tied to the president; through origin, career or family. Family ties provide for a more stable position than just territorial ties. Ata Serdarow, a cousin of the president, has managed to hold onto the position of Minister of Health. Gurbanmyrat Hangulyýew, a brother-in-law, has been the Minister of Transport since 2008. Ýaýlym Berdyýew, another relative of the president, was appointed to the position of Minister of Defence and head of the State Security Council in January 2009. Changes in the cadres also, however, impacted the immediate clan of Berdimuhamedow. One such change in 2007 saw the Minister of the Interior and brother-in-law of the president, Hojamyrat Annagurbanow removed from office. The powerful secretary of the president’s apparatus and former fellow student of the president, Yusup Işangullyýew, lost his position in March 2009.⁴¹

The next most represented region is the Mary velayat, where the president also has relatives. Included in his family line from this area is the Vice-Premier for Culture and Media, Maysa Ýazmuhammedowa, a cousin of the president. She and Myratgeldi Akmammedow, another denizen of Mary, and Vice-Premier for Agriculture are “regulated” by executives from the Ahal region (Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Water Management).

Energy, as a key sector in the Turkmen economy used to be in the hands of the elites from the Balkan velayat even under Türkmenbashi, i.e., under the control of the Yomud tribe. The control of incomes in these sectors lay in Aşgabat but technical matters were in the hands of people from western Turkmenistan. Most significantly, these included

Berdymukhamed Annaev] (Ashgabat: Glavnoe arkhivnoe upravlenie při Kabinete Ministrov Turkenistana, 2009).

⁴⁰ According to the definition of Kadyrov, *Natsiia plemen*, p. 166.

⁴¹ Kadyrov, *Elitnye klany*, p. 138-141. Işangullyew became the director of the local hospital in v Berzengi. Nothing is known about the fate of Hojamyrat Annagurbanow, who was paradoxically removed from his function for engaging in cronyism and favouring his relatives (*Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan*, October 9, 2007).

Taçberdi Tagyýew (Vice-Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers in charge of mineral resources until August 2009) and Garýagdi Taşlyýew (head of the national oil company Turkmennebit until January 2009). There was a shift of functions in favour of dominance by the Ahalteke (Minister of Oil and Gas, Vice-Premier for Energy). But the Balkan Yomuds continued to maintain their influence over particular companies (Turkmennebit, Turkmengaz and, until October 2009, the Ministry of Oil and Gas, as well). The watershed moment arrived in 2009 in terms of energy sector positions - cadres were rotated in January, May and October of that year.⁴²

These changes were also partly reflected in developments on the international scene. This was particularly true for the May purge, which was likely in reaction to the shutoff of gas from Gazprom one month earlier as a consequence of an alleged explosion in the pipeline, and for the October reshuffle of cadres connected to questionable data concerning Turkmen gas supplies.⁴³ Similar purges in the sector and relocation of cadres continued to take place in January of 2010, when Bayramgeldy Nedirow was appointed Minister for Oil and Gas Supplies, a position he had already held. At the symbolic level, the change in control over the energy sector was confirmed by moving the headquarters of Turkmennebit (Turkmenneft'), the national oil company, from Balkanabatu (the former Nebit Dag) in western Turkmenistan to Aşgabat in January 2009. This is testimony to the fact that energy policy is being decided by people in positions outside the appropriate bureaucracies, whose role is technical rather than political. In reality, the energy sector in Turkmenistan is under the overall dominance of the Ahalteke and, particularly, of Berdimuhamedow and his family.⁴⁴

Other people with no or little clan, territorial or career affiliation to the president are constantly sacked or reshuffled in order to prevent their attaining political power. A regular series of purges took place in pursuit of this goal, which President Berdimuhamedow carried out in the same fashion as had his predecessor. Ministers and other important persons in the state apparatus are appointed for trial periods which might conclude with further changes. High-level functionaries who served

⁴² *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 13, 2009.

⁴³ The results of the foreign audit of gas reserves were met with skepticism by the foreign mass-media. Arkadii Dubnov, "Truboprokol [The Pipe Fiasco]," *Vremia.ru*, October 13, 2009, <<http://www.vremya.ru/2009/188/5/239444.html>> (March 8, 2010).

⁴⁴ Berdymukhammedov's son-in-law Dowlet Atabayew became responsible for the oil and gas sector instead of Tagyýew, who was finally replaced in 2009. Atabayew worked as a commercial attaché at the embassy of Turkmenistan in Paris. In January 2008 he was appointed chief representative of the State Agency for Management and Exploitation of Hydrocarbon Resources by the President of Turkmenistan in London. Maksat Alikperov, "Turkmen Gas as a family business," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, February 3, 2010, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1276>> (March 10, 2010).

Türkmenbashi at various ministries were also replaced. Among the other changes they brought, these purges affected regional bodies, courts, etc. Further purges were carried out on remaining non-Turkmen cadres. The purges, however, normally were not carried out on the monstrous scale of those that had taken place under Türkmenbashi. The power system is centralized and controlled by the unilateral decisions of the president. Therefore, regular rotation of the cadres did not initiate any real instability in the functioning of the state apparatus.

In addition to the Turkmen elites, Berdimuhamedow was forced to protect the positions of non-Turkmen in his inner circle. Similar to what had happened under Türkmenbashi, three Russian advisors - Alexandr Zhadan, Vladimir Umnov and Viktor Khramov - remained in the apparatus of the president, in spite of the fact that there was speculation about their disappearance in 2007. Viktor Khramov remains responsible for creating the ideological framework for the Berdimuhamedow era and issuing publications concerning the new president.⁴⁵

The commercial elites which had surrounded President Türkmenbashi have also, for the most part, maintained their influence under the new president. These are primarily representatives of construction companies - especially the Turkish Polimex and French Bouygues. The most interesting development concerned the holding company of Ahmed Chalyk, who is responsible not only for a series of buildings in the country but is also the owner of a number of textile concerns and other businesses. After a brief decline in influence after Türkmenbashi's death, Chalyk, using his connections within the Turkish government and the economic might of Turkmenistan itself, was able to restore his prior authority. 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.⁴⁶ These companies are chiefly focused on construction in Turkmenistan. Apart from Aşgabat, the focus is on key projects of President Berdimuhamedow, like the tourist destination of Awaza under

⁴⁵ Viktor Khramov and Maiia Mollaýewa (eds.), *Prezident Turkmenistana Berdymukhammadov Gurbanguly Mialikgulievich. Kratkaia biografiia* [Berdymukhammadov Gurbanguly Mialikgulievich. the President of Turkmenistan. Short Biography] (Ashgabat: Turkmenskaia gosudarstvennaia izdatel'skaia sluzhba, 2007). Also published in the daily *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan* from July 26 to August 4, 2007, and from August 7 to August 9, 2008.

⁴⁶ Alan Peskov, "A New friend of Turkmens," *Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, May 27, 2009, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/print.php?id=1042>> (March 8, 2010). See also Maksat Alikperov, "Berdymukhamedov could not resist the financial charm of Chalyk," *Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, January 6, 2010, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1252>> (March 8, 2010).

construction on the coast of the Caspian Sea, not far from the port of Türkmenbashi (the former Krasnovodsk).⁴⁷

There are many reasons for protecting the positions of these people. These people have obvious ties with other influential persons in economic and political life. With regard to the Russian language cadres in the presidential apparatus, their knowledge of everyday administration, is something which might not be available to the local cadres selected by Berdimuhamedow. As for the commercial elites, it is very likely that there is a transfer of income going on to the accounts of the president and his family.⁴⁸

Conclusion

In the years since 1991, the Turkmen elite has taken on its own specific characteristics based, on the Soviet heritage, as well as pre-Soviet social governing structures which had often paradoxically been retained under the Soviet regime, and post-Soviet developments, especially the background of the Turkmen presidents. These specifics may be categorized into the following areas which are certain to have a continuing impact on Turkmen politics for decades to come. At the same time it must be noted that none of these factors is dominant; rather, all are mutually interconnected.

Emphasizing Traditional Regional and Tribal Affiliations

As has already been noted several times, the rise of Türkmenbashi markedly increased the power of the Ahalteke. This has led to the permanent elimination of non-Ahalteke from key positions throughout the era of Türkmenbashi and Berdimuhamedow. At the same time, frequent purges radically narrowed the power base of the opposition, leading to the quiet usurpation of power after the death of Türkmenbashi. The Ahalteke powerbase narrowed further after the rise Berdimuhamedow, when he began to favour people from the Western Ahal velayat (Geokdepe, Ahal, Baharly, Büzmeýin, etc.), which is also

⁴⁷ The project includes construction of dozens of hotels and is designed to compete with destinations like Dubai. From the project presentation at the website <<http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/awaza>> (last accessed September 5, 2010). Hotels remain incomplete but are put into partial service during formal openings with presidential participation. People from throughout Turkmenistan are then forced to spend their vacations in local hotels to create the impression that development of the tourist zone has been successful. "Forced Vacation," *Chronicle of Turkmenistan*, December 7, 2009, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1230>> (March 8, 2010); "The Turks are building whilst Turkmen are completing construction works," *Chronicle of Turkmenistan*, December 13, 2009, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1233>> (March 8, 2010).

⁴⁸ Maksim Pender, "G. Berdymukhamedova pobuzhdaiut prodolzhat' bashistskuiu politiku [G. Berdimuhamedow is encouraged to continue the Bashi politics]," *Turkmenskaia iskra*, June 16, 2008, <<http://www.tm-iskra.org/20/08/sliv-guly.html>> (June 19, 2008).

where his family originates. In this regard, the government of Berdimuhamedow resembles those of other countries in Central Asia.⁴⁹ The dominance of the Ahalteke is not, however, absolute and is not a unique necessity for the rise of a cadre. The utility of members is also due to personal loyalty, as well as the decisions of the president. The Turkmenization of cadres in the state apparatus is also continuing, leading the “visible ethnic purity” of cadres. It was for this reason that the great majority of non-Turkmen were removed from power. The only exceptions are those possessing extensive and possibly compromising knowledge about both post-Soviet presidents which makes them difficult to remove. A certain number of specialists remain at mid- and lower levels of power, which are necessary for the functioning of the bureaucracy.

Strengthening of the Leadership Principle

The president as the central figure in Turkmen politics means he becomes Turkmen No. 1, or in a narrower sense, Ahalteke No. 1. The complete lack of controls on his power leads to its further accumulation and the liquidation of any potential competitor which, over time, may once again increase the ideological magnetism of the president and lead to his canonization. A consequence of this is the frequent purges and movement of cadres from one location to another, normally without any justification. Any new president who wishes to hold on to his position under such circumstances must prevent the rise of competitors who might attempt to overthrow the leader. Turkmenistan political culture is founded upon the ability to permanently head off any move toward a more liberal system. This is, of course, not only characteristic of Turkmen political culture; the attempt to preserve one’s political position is characteristic of many politicians and leaders everywhere.

Soviet Political Culture

Next, Soviet political culture in its regional variant with an emphasis on ties to the center, forms another characteristic feature of post-Soviet Turkmenistan (and all post-Soviet republics in general). The “party apparatus”, strongly hierarchical structure of the Soviets, correlates with the vertical hierarchy of traditional society, the role of the leader, the clan or corruption factor and cadre issues. The stagnation under Brezhnev helped establish the position of the First Secretary and, later, the

⁴⁹ An analogy in Central Asia is Tajikistan (favour shown to the Dangara, the native city of the Tajik 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 Chemolgan, birthplace of President Nazarbaev). The Uzbek elite is much more heterogeneous in these terms because of the less personality-oriented regime and many more pretenders to elite positions.

president. The elimination of Soviet higher power as a determining factor in the republic's cadre politics also contributed (in combination with the factors noted above) to an uncontrolled cadre policy of both Turkmen presidents.⁵⁰ At the same time, support for corruption and toadyism permits a powerful position to be obtained (at least for a limited period of time). Niyazow as well as Berdimuhamedow are glowing examples of prior obeisance toward higher powers, something which became the focus of criticism and derision afterwards. In the beginning, Niyazow was loyal to his predecessor Gapurov, but as soon as he assumed his position, he removed Gapurov from all his positions.⁵¹ Niyazow remained loyal to the Soviet power center, but around 1993 began to understand that he no longer needed to fear a return of the Soviet Union. This was evidenced in his unpredictable foreign policy toward Russia, the criticism of Russian and Soviet colonialism in his historiography and his actions toward the Russian minority in Turkmenistan itself. Berdimuhamedow was forced to maintain loyalty toward Niyazow, who could have removed him from his position at any time with much worse consequences than during the Soviet period. After his rise to power, however, Türkmenbashi's name essentially disappeared from the Turkmen media.

The Soviet era and the implementation of Marxist politics in its local Turkmen incarnation also led (often in combination with the character of the leader) to the conservation of pre-existing ideological elements which were merely transformed into other frameworks, placing a greater emphasis on post-Soviet development in Turkmenistan. The ideology of the "Golden Age of Turkmenistan" and the "Era of the Turkmen Renaissance" actually represents a continuation of the Soviet ideological concept of the "Golden Tomorrow". This combination of Soviet and post-Soviet ideology is all the more understandable in light of the fact that those who created these ideologies have been active since the Soviet era. Changing the positions occupied by the chief ideologues, however, may transform the "Soviet heritage" of Turkmen ideology into new forms.

⁵⁰ This syndrome is typical not only for post-Soviet Turkmenistan, it is a frequent characteristic of political culture in postcolonial societies in which power is assumed by a single party with a substantial majority of adherents in a country of limited numbers. Similar instances in which the casting off of political controls from above have taken place in some European countries - for example, in the role played by Vladimir Meciar in Slovakia up to 1998.

⁵¹ Gapurov's funeral was characteristic of this approach, in that it could not take place in the spirit of the Muslim and Turkmen traditions. It's possible that Gapurov was murdered at the behest of Türkmenbashi the moment he became a threat to the presidency. Avdy Kuliev, "O Gapurove, Muhamednazare [About Muhamednazar Gapurov]," *Erkin Turkmenistan - Svobodnyi Turkmenistan. Informatsiionno-analiticheskii biulleten* 7 (April 2001), pp. 36-38.

Turkmen political culture thus forced Berdimuhamedow to reinforce the authoritarian system in the interests of maintaining his own position, even if at the beginning it looked as if there might be a shift in the political culture. Berdimuhamedow well understood, however, that any weakening of power would bring a rapid end to his career in Turkmenistan. In addition, it is open to debate whether the changes promised during the pre-election campaign at the beginning of 2007 were ever intended seriously.

For the future, the issue remains whether the rise of a weaker personality at the helm of Turkmenistan might lead to changes in the political culture, or whether the political culture in its current incarnation might give rise to a new leader. Turkmenistan was lucky at the end of 2006 to have a narrow elite base, so the preconditions for internal conflicts within the elite were low. Nevertheless, it is uncertain whether this narrow base will continue into the future. Any expansion could lead to political instability accompanied by armed conflict between individual power groups. At present, however, it appears that the personality-oriented regime of President Berdimuhamedow is stable, both because of his age and the position he holds in the local power structure.