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# Turkmenistan: a strategic country with a mysterious reality

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Are you familiar with Turkmenistan and its leaders? If you ask your family and friends this question, it will most likely be met with a frown, indicative of their uncertainty about its location, cultural heritage or even the extent of its wealth, despite being as large as our Iberian neighbour and the world's third biggest gas reserve.

For those who speak so avidly about Turkmenistan, do not speak about the richness of the Margu civilisation or the Silk Road for hours on end, but will happily discuss the escapades of the first President of the country, Saparmourat Turklenbasy le Grand (1991-2006). In under a decade, his eccentricity became known across the world and contributed to the profit of construction industries, which successfully reconstructed the capital that had been built as a garrison city for the Tsar soldiers and destroyed during the earthquake in October 1948<sup>1</sup>, and adapting it to his Stalino-Palladian taste.

Niyazov's architectural and "literary" work greatly contributed to the regime and its leader's recent popularity, but also to the entertainment of presenters and entertainers in Great Britain and the United States. His flamboyant language had even attracted the attention of computer game producers (e.g. *Tropico 3*<sup>2</sup>), which Niyazov was fond of playing into the night in his Archabil palace.

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1. 110,000 people are said to have lost their lives in the evenings of 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> October.

2. In this game of strategy created in 2009, the avatar of the Head of the Turkmen state can be found saying: "I do not want to see my portrait nor statues of myself in the streets, but it is what the people want."

This popularity and totalitarian regime had even captured the imagination of cartoon writers and artists. The Tashkite Republic and its leader, depicted by Smolderen and Bertail (*Ghostmoney*, Dargaud, 2008/2009<sup>3</sup>), were inspired by this corner of Central Asia with its strategic Amourdarya boundaries and the Kopet dag mountain range that separates the country from its turbulent Iranian and Afghan neighbours.

Today, even our most famous contemporary novelists are interested in Turkmenistan; Olivier Rolin in his last book, *Bakou derniers jours*<sup>4</sup>, speaks of his travels to the country of Roukhnama (*Spirituality*<sup>5</sup>), of an “Islamic-Disneyland heaven” and a capital that looks like a gigantic theme park. The academic, Jean-Christophe Rufin gave his latest heroine the part of laying the table at Quai d’Orsay where the President of the Turkmen Parliament and his wife were received<sup>6</sup>. The creative freedom of the writer is, nevertheless, far from the reality. In addition, the Mejlis (National Assembly) has been chaired by a woman, Mrs. Akja T. Nourberdiyeva<sup>7</sup> since December 2006. The partners of those in power, however, do not participate in any of the official events in the country or abroad. Although President Niyazov’s Russian spouse appeared in public from time to time, the same cannot be said about his predecessor’s wife. The Turkmen media has never mentioned her name or those of their children, which is extremely unusual in a country where the interest surrounding the Head of State is so strong! However, when the so-called “hero” dies, another member of the President’s family comes into the spotlight through propaganda<sup>8</sup>. This was the case for President Niyazov’s parents and his

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3. In volume 2, p. 32, the emblem of the Ministry of Culture and the presidential palace can be seen. President Aziamov’s motto (*Halk, Watan, Tashkitbaysy*) is none other than S. Niyazov’s: “one nation, one people, one leader.”

4. Paris, Seuil, 2010, p. 100-124.

5. Published in two volumes in 2001, and later in 2004, this “political philosophy” book has become central to the academic and administrative life in the country. Taught from primary schools through to higher education, essential in order to pass one’s driving licence and sent into space by a Russian rocket to orbit the planet for 150 years, the *Roukhnama* shaped the lives of Turkmenistan until the death of its author. Although it is still present in school curriculums, it no longer controls the seasons; September is no longer named *Roukhnama* in the same way as Saturday is no longer called the day of Spirituality.

6. *Katiba*, Paris, Flammarion, 2010, p. 16.

7. Only 18 women currently chair the parliament. Appointed following the death of President S. Niyazov on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 2006, she was reelected as Head of the unicameral Chamber on 9<sup>th</sup> of January 2009. 16.8% of the deputies elected on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2008 were women.

8. President Niyazov’s father was killed in the Caucasus during the Second World War. His mother and two brothers were victims of the 1948 earthquake.

two brothers, or, more recently, in 2009, when a secondary school in Ashgabat was named after President Berdymouhamedov's grandfather who was made an example for its teachers.

This devotion to one's elders contributes to the regime's "hyper-presidentialisation", with the country being run like that of Khanates, but this also adds to its lack of transparency.

Everything is a secret in Turkmenistan, from the list of the thousands of prisoners that Amnesty International, Forum 18 or Human Rights Watch struggle to identify, to the list of the members of government, although it is difficult to keep it up to date with the constant coming and going of ministers and vice-ministers. The disappearance of President Niyazov has not changed this practice that has existed for over a decade. This time, with the exception of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rashid Meredov, those who held a portfolio and were appointed in 2007 after the election of President Berdymouhamedov, changed their title at least once.

Observers and cooperation actors are thus confronted with the regime's constant political-administrative instability, of which only the supreme leader has a hold. By renewing allegiances, it aims to revive the elite, as none of the vice-presidents of the Cabinet of Ministers are over 50 years of age. However, what could prove to be more of a problem in the long run is that the regime is turning in on itself, building its power around its clan – the Tekkes of the Wilaya d'Ahal – and all those linked by marriage to the President and his wife. Within the state system, it would appear that many members of the government are or were linked to his family (e.g. the Secretary-General of the President's administration, the Minister of Home Affairs and Education, the Vice-President of the Cabinet of Ministers in charge of cultural affairs, etc.) and more than two-thirds of them are from the *Wilayah*, situated in the middle of the country. This reshuffling of power excludes the Mary Tekke, Ersaris and even the Yomouts, from ethnicisation and management positions, who were traditionally very influential in the hydrocarbon industry.

For anyone outside the inner circle of power, the situation seems politically incomprehensible. The recent publications by Sébastien Reyrouse<sup>9</sup> and Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer<sup>10</sup> have enabled many to familiarise themselves with the Berdymouhamedov regime and what it tries to hide. There are gaps in these books, but this is only natural in a country where no foreign humanitarian NGO is allowed to work<sup>11</sup> and

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9. *Turkménistan : Un destin au carrefours des empires*, Paris, Belin, 2007, 183 p.

10. *Turkménistan*, Paris, Non Lieu, 2009, 237 p.

11. In 2010, without a new administrative arrangement with the Ministry of Health, MSF-Holland decided to step down.

which refuses to give visas to foreign researchers and journalists. Only a handful of Turkish journalists (*Zaman*) and Turkmen “stringers” have gained authorisation as correspondents of international press agencies (e.g. AFP, Reuter). Any other “curious person” must use ploys, illegal informers or obtain a 5-day transit visa at a costly price. The lack of transparency from the political sphere can also be said for all economic and social areas. Moreover, it is impossible to obtain reliable information of any sort from Turkmenistan, a fact that hinders foreign investment, but also appropriate decisions concerning domestic development. How can there be planning when the central and provincial leaders do not even know the size of the population under their governance? Until the 2012 census is carried out, the mayor of the capital will continue to estimate that he has a population of a million people to govern, which could easily turn out to be an overestimation of approximately 40%.

What is even worse is that the authorities refuse to admit to truths about the entire population, for example, the staggering rate of unemployment among young people and minority groups, the rise of HIV or even the fact that Turkmenistan has become a transit zone for drugs (heroin and opium) produced in Afghanistan, transported from the border, but also through Iranian Baluchistan or even Tajikistan via Uzbekistan.

All public policies are mishandled due to a denial of the most basic truths, a lengthy decision-making process and a lack of transparency. Government representatives who are as tormented as they are badly trained are putting policies into place. Emigration of Soviet elites and from the republics of the USSR has highlighted these failures. The absence of vast investment in education and health policies, and especially human resources in these areas, has clouded the future. Life expectancy of Turkmens is only 59 for men and 67 for women.

In account of the wealth of the country, the worrying social indicators are only the result of a less than optimum distribution of budgetary resources. The country spends absurd amounts of money on its prestige or controversial projects, such as the lake *Altyn Asyr*, (*Golden Century*), which began in July 2009, at the price of 5 billion dollars, with the aim of irrigating the dessert region of the centre of the country, an ambition reminiscent of the extravagant construction of the *Karakorum* canal, ordered by N. Khrouchtchev. These ostentatious, ecologically and economically damaging risks (the touristic area of *Avza* on the Caspian coast, the *Ashgabat Olympic Park*, etc.), and socially unimportant initiatives tarnish the reformatory credibility of a political regime, which was strengthened after the death of a Satrap, who governed the first years of independence with an iron hand. Maintaining the totalitarian regime that prevented fundamental reforms from developing should have been possible

considering the strong economic growth of the last three years (2010: +6.1%, 2009: 10.5%, 2008: 11.5%). The era of a “new new renaissance”, which has developed with President Berdymouhamedov’s rise to power, certainly represents a change in the worst political strays of his predecessor. The country has opened itself up to the world while reinstating its “continual neutrality”. It has introduced its first modest reforms (e.g. the extension of compulsory education, monetary adjustment, the “de-Niyazovisation” of institutions, etc.), but these must be multiplied in order to achieve greater social and political justice, careful and efficient exploitation of the significant gas resources and to securely protect itself against peripheral threats (e.g. Islamic extremism, drug trafficking, etc.).