

## **WILL TURKMENISTAN CONTINUE TO OPEN UP TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD?**

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On March 10 and 11, the President of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, made a state visit to Uzbekistan. He signed many agreements there on cooperation with his Uzbek counterpart, Islam Karimov, including a common declaration and an protocol in exchange for the ratification of the 'friendship agreement' concluded in Ashgabat, the Turkmen capital, on October 18, 2007<sup>1</sup>. Numerous other accords were negotiated in the domains of agriculture, the economic infrastructures of the border zones, telecommunications and diplomatic cooperation. This diplomatic rapprochement carried out by the two neighbouring republics of Central Asia attests to the changes already made since the unexpected death of President of Turkmenistan Saparmurat Niazov on December 21, 2006. Ever since his accession to power, the new president has promised many reforms of the domestic and foreign policies of the country, reforms that are indispensable to guarantee the stability of the state and of the region.

The personality cult of the regime of President Niazov in fact aroused great fear over arrangements for of the presidential succession. The many purges and quick rotations of leaders left an inexperienced government at the head of a country strategically situated at the borders of Iran and Afghanistan which has major reserves of petroleum and gas. Moreover, the Turkmen example offered a precedent for a region still entirely dominated by despotic regimes operating in a family or clan manner. A little more than a year after these events, we will see in the lines that follow how the succession proceeded and what changes have already been made to the internal policy of the country. We will see above all how diplomatic relations have evolved – with the Central Asian neighbours and with the great regional actors, Russia, China and the United States.

### **1. Background context: Turkmenistan under the reign of Saparmurat Niazov**

Saparmurat Niazov, who officially added to his name the title of Turkmenbashi, or 'chief of the Turkments,' reigned over Turkmenistan from 1985 to 2006. Alongside the Kazakh Nursultan Nazarbayev and the Uzbek Islam Karimov, he was indeed one of the three former

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<sup>1</sup> 'New Era Dawns on Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan Relations,' *News Central Asia*, 19/10/2007  
<http://www.newscentralasia.net/Regional-News/180.html>

First Regional Secretaries of the Communist Party to have held onto power in their republics after the implosion of the USSR in 1991. Already opposed to the reforms introduced by *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* by Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s, Sapa murât Niazov turned Turkmenistan into one of the most closed countries in the world from the moment of its independence. He installed a repressive regime there based on the prohibition of all opposition and on frequent purges within the government and public institutions. Moreover, the dogma of ‘perpetual neutrality’ led to an extreme isolation of the country, going so far as to forbid any travel abroad or to monitor them very closely via the security services.

The power of Saparmurat Niazov was also based on a frenzied cult of personality. In addition to his title of Turkmenbashi, he claimed to be a prophet. His poems and his book, the *Ruhmana* – a compilation of Muslim works, Turkmen myths and Marxist vulgate, the ‘second holy book after the Quran’ – were imposed as the sole manuals for teaching literacy. He also conducted a destructive policy towards the educational system, limiting public education to nine years, and towards the system of health and non-Turkmen culture. At the beginning of the new millennium, some allusions to the divine origin of the President began to be published in the newspapers, turning him into a descendant of Alexander the Great and of Mohammed.<sup>2</sup> Finally, one can hardly count the statues in gold which were erected everywhere in the country or the presidential portraits on posters in the cities.

## **2. Political change since the death of the Turkmenbashi**

In case the head of state dies in office, the Turkmen Constitution provided for interim rule by the President of the Majlis (the Parliament), Ovezgeldy Ataev. However, from the day of Saparmurat Niazov’s death, Ataev was removed from office, charged and interrogated by the services of the Ministry of National Security<sup>3</sup>. The next day, the Prosecutor General of Turkmenistan declared that he was found guilty of having pushed his future daughter-in-law to suicide. While the motives for removing Ovezgeldy Ataev from office and sentencing him were thus officially criminal, there is no doubt he was the first victim of a purge under the new regime. According to many indications, he was sentenced in February 2007 to 4 or 5 years in prison by the Supreme Court.<sup>4</sup> The traditional opaqueness of the Turkmen judicial system and the secrecy which was guarded around this affair do not allow us to know anything for certain about the fate reserved for the former president of Parliament.

The post of interim President was conferred on the Vice President of the Cabinet of Ministers, the former Minister of Health, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov. At the end of the month of December 2006, six candidates presented themselves for the Presidential election arranged to provide for the succession ‘in due form.’<sup>5</sup> No candidate from the Opposition in exile was authorised to take part, and the interim President was elected with nearly 90% of the votes on February 11, 2007<sup>6</sup>. While saying that he would ensure continuity of power, he promised

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<sup>2</sup> Sébastien Peyrouse, *Turkménistan. Un destin au Carrefour des Empires*, La documentation française, Belin publishing house, Paris, 2007, p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> Hélène Rousselot, « Turkménistan : un dentiste pour Président », *Regard sur l’Est*, 15/02/2007 [http://www.regard-est.com/home/breve\\_contenu.php?id=710&PHPSESSID=eaa](http://www.regard-est.com/home/breve_contenu.php?id=710&PHPSESSID=eaa)

<sup>4</sup> Baki Ezizov, ‘Former chairman of the Turkmen parliament sentenced to five years behind the bars,’ *Ferghana.ru*, 06/03/2007 <http://enews.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=1859>

<sup>5</sup> Besides Gubranguli Berdymoukhammedov, the candidates were the Deputy Minister of Hydrocarbons and Mineral Resources Ichanguli Nuryev, Mayor of Abadan, Orazmyrad Garadjaev, Mayor of Turkmenbashi Achyrniaz Pomanov, the deputy director of the region of Dashoguz, Amanaiz Atadjykov, and the director of a district in the region of Lebap, Mukhammetnazar Gurbanov. Loc. cit. Hélène Rousselot

<sup>6</sup> C.J. Chivers, ‘Turkmenistan Hails Leader and New Era After Election,’ *The New York Times*, 15/02/2007

to carry out a liberalisation of the country, to reestablish the educational system and the pension regime, to reopen railway links with Russia and to offer free access to the Internet.<sup>7</sup> However, these promises did not prevent the regime from maintaining its absolute authority over the country and keeping in prison many political prisoners from the Niazov era.

### **3. Turkmenistan's international relations**

Ever since the death of President Niazov, regional and the Western powers have tried to get a foothold in Turkmenistan and to influence its new President - to get him to abandon the policy of 'perpetual neutrality.' Russia, China, the United States, Turkey, Iran and the European Union have all hoped to gain access to Turkmenistan's underground fossil fuel reserves.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the position of Turkmenistan to the North of Afghanistan makes it a strategic prize for the countries engaged in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Finally, the accession of a new regime in Ashgabat also opened the prospect of reestablishing relations with its direct neighbours, which seriously deteriorated during the reign of President Niazov.

#### ***a. Relations with the countries of Central Asia and Russia***

The relations of Turkmenistan with the other states of Central Asia were difficult ever since independence in 1991, notably with Uzbekistan, with which it shares 1,621 kilometres of border.<sup>9</sup> The two most authoritarian regimes of Central Asia multiplied their disputes over where the borderline should be drawn, over the management of water resources and over sharing oil pipelines, gas pipelines and electricity lines built on the two territories in the Soviet period. Furthermore, the bad treatment administered to the Uzbek national minority in Turkmenistan also caused tensions, culminating in the expulsion of the Uzbek Ambassador to Ashgabat in 2002, the year of the failed assassination attempt against Saparmurat Niazov, who accused, among others, Tashkent. The two countries already delineated a timid rapprochement in 2005, following Uzbekistan's break with the United States. However, today they seem to be on the path to real normalisation of their relations, symbolised by the reciprocal state visits of October 18 and March 10.

At the same time, in the name of the principle of 'perpetual neutrality,' President Niazov always refused to enter into the economic and political alliances concluded between the countries of the Community of Independent States (CIS), in particular the Treaty of Collective Security. Neither did he adhere to the Customs Union Treaty which unites Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus. In 1999, he withdrew from the agreement on the free circulation of CIS citizens prior to abandoning Turkmenistan's status as member of the organisation in 2005 to adopt the less constraining status of associate member.<sup>10</sup> The new regime now is expected to reestablish very good relations with Moscow, on whom it depends exclusively for export of its gas resources. It has now confirmed a contract given to Gazprom in September 2006 for the delivery of 50 billion cubic metres of gas per year over 3 years at a

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/15/world/asia/15turkmenistan.html?scp=5&sq=Berdymukhammadov&st=nyt>

<sup>7</sup> Several public terminals of Internet access were opened in Ashgabat, but the prohibitive access rates still prevent the immense majority of inhabitants of the capital from accessing it.

Human Rights Watch, 'Human Reform in Turkmenistan. Rhetoric or Reality,' 11/2007, p.22  
<http://hrw.org/backgrounders/eca/turkmenistan1107/turkmenistan1107web.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Also read on this subject : Renaud François, 'Turkmenistan: One year after-Niazov,' ESISC, 21/01/2007

<http://www.esisc.org/documents/pdf/fr/turkmenistan-347.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit., Sébastien Peyrouse, p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.164.

price of 100 dollars per cubic metre.<sup>11</sup> On December 20, 2007, the regime gave its official approval to the signing of a definitive contract with Russian President Vladimir Putin over the implementation of the pre-Caspian gas pipeline.<sup>12</sup>

This apparent improvement should not make us forget the persistence of many regional problems, of which the leading one is sharing and transit of gas resources. Though they are developing projects for joint operation, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan still have disputes over the ownership of gas fields. Finally, President Berdimuhamedov has tried to break his dependence on the Russian gas networks by searching for new outlets for Turkmen hydrocarbons in Iran, China and the West.

### ***b. Looking to China***

In the month of April 2006, Beijing and Ashgabat signed an accord for the sale of 30 billion cubic metres of gas between 2009 and 2039 at a price to be determined based on world prices.<sup>13</sup> Although many international observers remain skeptical about the capability of Turkmenistan to honour its various international commitments to supply gas, this accord is symbolic of the Chinese desire to penetrate Central Asia and of the Turkmen need to diversify its paths of export. In July 2007, a joint declaration formulated by President Berdimuhamedov and his Chinese counterpart, Hu Jintao, confirmed the commitment of the two countries to complete as quickly as possible their work on the *Energy Silk Route Pipeline*, which is expected to link the Turkmen gas field of Dauletabad to Urumqui, capital of the Autonomous Region of Xinjiang, in the Northwest of China. The political accord also was accompanied by a contract for joint operation of the gas fields of the Amu-Darya basin concluded between the Chinese company *China National Petroleum Corp* and the Turkmen governmental agency.<sup>14</sup> This accord also involves the opening of multifaceted negotiations with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, which will extend the gas pipeline along 6,000 kilometres.

### ***c. Return of the West to the Turkmen stage***

Following the death of Turkmenbashi, American Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had an official letter of condolences sent the Turkmen state,<sup>15</sup> writing that ‘it was time to turn a new page’ in relations between the two countries.<sup>16</sup> Some officials from the Department of State also publicly declared that the advent of a new regime in Ashgabat represented ‘an opportunity for improvement in bilateral relations.’<sup>17</sup> We should remember that Washington energetically supports the project of a trans-Caspian gas pipeline which would make it possible to take Turkmen gas to the West via Azerbaijan and Georgia. This solution, which would avoid Russian and Iranian territory, is thus opposed to the pre-Caspian gas pipeline by which the gas would transit via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, where it would enter the Russian network. Though this project received impetus from the new government,<sup>18</sup> the many

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<sup>11</sup> Loc.cit., Hélène Rousselot

<sup>12</sup> Op.cit., Renaud François

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Blank, ‘Turkmenistan completes China’s Triple Play in Energy,’ *China Brief*, Volume 6, Issue 10, 10/05/2008. The Jamestown Foundation  
[http://jamestown.org/china\\_brief/article.php?articleid=2373189](http://jamestown.org/china_brief/article.php?articleid=2373189)

<sup>14</sup> « Chine/Turkmenistan: Chine invites itself into the grand game for access to Turkmen gas,’ ESISC, 18/07/02007.  
[www.ESISC.org](http://www.ESISC.org)

<sup>15</sup> Stephen J. Blank, *Turkmenistan and Central Asia after Niyazov*, Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, 28/09/2007

<sup>16</sup> C.J. Chivers, ‘Turkmenistan Holds Carefully Managed Election,’ *The New York Times*, 11/02/2007  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/11/world/asia/11cnd-turk.html?ex=1328850000&en=a5faf7fd9f4b5a75&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>

<sup>17</sup> Op cit., Stephen J. Blank,

<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB791.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Cf. supra

contradictory accords and the diplomatic activism shown by Washington and Beijing nonetheless leave the final outcome still uncertain at the present hour.

The arrival in power of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov also allowed a resumption in the country of the activities of the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe. Though it has been a member of the OSCE since 1993, Turkmenistan had refused to participate in the 'Moscow mechanism,' initiated by the organisation to improve the situation of human rights within its members. A convention adopted in Moscow in 1991 and amended in Rome in 1993 provided that a Member State can, with the support of nine other States, ask that a rapporteur be sent to another Member State where human rights were subjected to 'a serious threat.'<sup>19</sup> Turkmenistan refused to receive such a rapporteur sent by the OSCE following the repression that came after an assassination attempt directed against President Niazov in November 2002.<sup>20</sup>

Ashgabat is thus today present again in numerous programmes of the international organisation, in particular in the domains of protection of the environment and the struggle against crime. On March 5, the delegation of the OSCE in Turkmenistan thus organised a seminar on the struggle against money laundering and the financing of terrorism.<sup>21</sup> Initiated with the support of the World Bank, the Office of the United Nations on Drugs and Crime and the International Monetary Fund, the seminar concentrated on the training of government agents to effectively combat these problems. One of the first objectives is the creation of a financial intelligence service which might collect, analyse and transmit information. Such a mechanism is in effect an essential element of prevention against money laundering and the financing of terrorism. Let us recall that it was in December 2007 that Turkmenistan became an observer member of the Eurasian Group Against Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism(EAG) established on October 6, 2004 in Moscow.

#### **4. One year later, hopes remain moderate**

Many reforms were put in motion since December 2006, pushed by fears of political destabilisation that appeared after the death of Saparmurat Niazov. Although the succession proceeded within the regime established by the deceased President, the new directors have known how to respond to international hopes by announcing change. Nonetheless, the situation of human rights in the country remains execrable. The number of political prisoners has not diminished and the institutions remain authoritarian. An enormous path thus remains to be traveled towards true democratisation of the country even if it is in the programme of President Berdimuhamedov. Furthermore, many observers see in him just a 'straw man,' put in place by dignitaries of the regime looking above all to 'get a share of the pie' of the hydrocarbons.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, we have seen that the Turkmen President has modified his foreign policy and reestablished the contacts broken off during the era of his predecessor. By deepening the dialogue with his Uzbek neighbour, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov has opened the way to ending tensions that are potentially destabilising for the region. The alliance which seems to be shaping up between the two regimes could nonetheless manifest itself in the wish to reinforce the already excessively authoritarian power of the two regimes. Though it has

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<sup>19</sup> OSCE, Moscow mechanism, Moscow 1991 (Par. 10 & 12) as amended by Rome 1993 (Chapter IV, par. 5)

<http://www.osce.org/odihr/13498.html>

<sup>20</sup> Op.cit, Human Rights Watch.

<sup>21</sup> OSCE, partners help Turkmenistan fight money laundering, financing of terrorism, OSCE centre in Ashgabat, 05/03/2008

<http://www.osce.org/item/30001.html>

<sup>22</sup> Loc. cit. H el ene Rousselot

officially kept the dogma of 'perpetual neutrality,' Turkmenistan has finally drawn much closer to the major international actors, and above all to Moscow. The need for diversification of the export routes has, however, led to the opening of an in-depth dialogue with China and the West which may favour the pursuit of its opening up internationally. Contrary to certain appearances, the Turkmen government may thus relaunch the givens in Central Asia, where Russia nonetheless seems to have made an inevitable return these past several years.

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