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Totalitarianism: The Case of Turkmenistan

Abstract

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, Saparmurat Niyazov, the former First Secretary of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan and self-styled “Turkmenbashi” (Father of All Turkmen), became the country’s first president, quickly fashioning Turkmenistan into one of the most repressive regimes in the world. Declared president-for-life after a dubious parliamentary election in which he selected all of the candidates, Niyazov has created a Stalinistic personality cult to glorify his image and to solidify his control over the state. His “reforms” have outlawed political dissent, marginalized ethnic and religious minorities, gutted the public health system, and enforced a campaign of public indoctrination in which the state controls all media outlets, significantly degraded public education.

Keywords

Human rights, Russia, Soviet Union, Turkmenistan, Communism, Totalitarianism

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Totalitarianism: The Case of Turkmenistan

By Hayden Gore

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, Saparmurat Niyazov, the former First Secretary of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan and self-styled “Turkmenbashi” (Father of All Turkmen), became the country’s first president, quickly fashioning Turkmenistan into one of the most repressive regimes in the world. Declared president-for-life after a dubious parliamentary election in which he selected all of the candidates, Niyazov has created a Stalinistic personality cult to glorify his image and to solidify his control over the state. His “reforms” have outlawed political dissent, marginalized ethnic and religious minorities, gutted the public health system, and enforced a campaign of public indoctrination in which the state controls all media outlets, significantly degraded public education.

A purported assassination attempt in November of 2002 served as a pretext for further political repression in the country, worsening an already dismal human rights situation and extending Niyazov’s control across all sectors of society. In 2003, the “Betrayers of the Motherland Law” deemed any opposition to the government an act of treason punishable by life imprisonment without parole. Abduction, torture, beatings, internal exile, and psychiatric internment are all common tools used by the state police.

Ethnic and religious minorities have particularly suffered under Niyazov’s policy of “Turkmenization,” in which the Turkmen ethnicity is required for public employment and non-Turkmen languages, particularly Russian, have been largely phased out of public education. Additionally, the state severely restricts religious practice. Until recently, only two religious groups, the Sunni Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church were permitted. Yet, those who worship outside of these faiths still suffer frequent intimidation, harassment, torture, and even imprisonment.

Although Turkmenistan inherited a solid public health infrastructure from the Soviet Union, Niyazov’s reforms have dismantled much of it, closing health clinics across the country, dismissing thousands of medical professionals and limiting rural communities’ access to medical care. The government has also officially banned diagnoses of certain communicable diseases, creating fears among global health experts of unreported epidemics.

Public education has similarly suffered under Niyazov, along with state-controlled media; they have both been used as primary tools for public indoctrination. Niyazov’s government has closed all libraries outside of the capital, reduced mandatory education from ten to nine years, and supplanted the national curriculum with the study of his pseudo-spiritual book about Turkmen heritage and culture, *The Ruhnama*. Meanwhile, the four state television channels, two radio stations, and several state-run newspapers dedicate themselves to the dual pursuit of propounding a Turkmen “Golden Age” and proclaiming Niyazov’s greatness.

Undoubtedly, Niyazov’s rule in Turkmenistan has allowed egregious human rights violations. The personality cult that he has created blurs the distinction between himself as an individual and the state and it has effectively personified the rule of law in his image. His complete control over society has also eliminated oppositional forces and made political change an impossibility. Unfortunately, Niyazov’s paranoid fear of criticism has led him to alter Turkmen society in ways that can only deleteriously affect the possibility for the future development of human rights in the

country. The bibliography that follows focuses on the ways in which Niyazov's regime has altered Turkmen society to the detriment of human rights; whether this legacy will continue after the leader's 2006 death remains to be seen.

Turkmenbashi Personality Cult & Political Repression

2004. *Turkmenistan: Human Rights Update, Human Rights Watch Submission to the EBRD*. New York: Backgrounders, 14 May: <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/05/14/turkme8964.htm>

Annotation: Human Rights Watch recommends the termination of all lending to Turkmenistan from the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development due to the alarming human rights environment in the country. In its submission to the EBRD, Human Rights Watch compiles a specific list of human rights violations, including the severe restrictions on civil and political rights, the harassment of ethnic minorities and religious groups, and the use of inhumane forms of punishment in contradiction to the country's commitments under international law.

2006. "Realistic Promises?" *Emerging Europe Monitor: Russia & CIS* 10 (12): 9.

Annotation: In order to solidify his personality cult and militate against discontent, President Niyazov announced that the Turkmen people will enjoy free utilities through the year 2030. Additionally, Niyazov declared his intention to double wages by 2008. These ambitious proclamations are made feasible, though not entirely possible, by the enormous oil and natural gas deposits under Turkmenistan's soil. The abundance of these coveted natural resources have perhaps buoyed Niyazov and enabled his autocratic rule. As a result, the political risk rating contained in this article is surprisingly low; however, the lack of legal structures and the absence of a natural successor could lead to political violence upon Niyazov's demise.

Andersen, Michael. 2005. "Dynasties and Dictators." *Index on Censorship* 34 (1): 141-149.

Annotation: This is a comprehensive article on the autocratic "presidents" of the Central Asian states and their connection to the Soviet past. The author, a journalist and broadcaster living and working in Kyrgyzstan, demonstrates the way in which the legacy of Soviet totalitarianism has found expression in the Central Asian republics. The current presidents, all former communist bosses, employ the old Soviet tools of state repression, electoral chicanery, and strict control of state-run media to perpetuate their rule and enrich themselves at the expense of their people's political freedom and economic development.

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. 2005. "Country Report on Human Rights Practices in Turkmenistan." Washington, D.C.: U. S. Department of State. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2005/index.htm>.

Annotation: This extensive U.S. State Department report compares the human rights principles enshrined in Turkmenistan's constitution and statutory law with their inadequate implementation on the ground, creating an interesting juxtaposition between official rhetoric and practice. The report is particularly unique in its specificity: rather than speaking in general terms about the level of state repression in Turkmenistan, the report offers a thorough compilation of individual cases and examples of abuse, often naming the victims and detailing the conditions of their treatment. As a result, the report personalizes the insecurity within the country, adding an immediacy to its findings, which is often absent from other more generalized accounts.

Decaux, Prof. Emmanuel. 2003. *OSCE Rapporteur's Report on Turkmenistan*. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. http://www.osce.org/documents/odhr/2003/03/1636_en.pdf.

Annotation: Undertaken over fears of increased repression and abuse after the November 25, 2002 assassination attempt on President Niyazov's life, the OSCE report concludes that there were serious irregularities in the investigation of the purported crime, resulting in grave violations of justice, arbitrary arrest, torture-induced confessions, and televised show trials. The report highlights the confused, often conflicting official accounts of the assassination attempt and demonstrates the way in which it has been used to eliminate potential political rivals completely disconnected from the crime. The report also includes the transcripts of the confessions made by the accused, many of which were the result of torture and forced drug use, and were widely broadcast on Turkmenistan's state-run television. The report concludes with Turkmenistan Delegation's official repudiation of the Rapportuer's investigation and conclusions.

Denber, Rachel. 2006. "Cruelty Behind a Joke." *New Statesman*. 23 July: 14.

Annotation: The bizarre, often comical nature of the Turkmenbashi personality cult belies the treachery behind Niyazov's autocratic rule. This article illustrates that when it comes to suppressing dissent—whether political, religious, or otherwise—Niyazov dispenses his own form of sadistic justice with no particular sense of humor. Among the repressive measures employed to enforce Niyazov's rule are tactics left over from the Soviet era, including torture, internal exile, and psychiatric internment. The European Union formerly took a hard line on human rights violations in Turkmenistan; however, the E.U.'s interest in the country's large natural gas reserves has softened its criticism. Ironically, a recent European delegation negotiating a trade agreement with Ashgabat arrived in the capital city days after the arrest of local human rights advocates and their families.

Greenberg, Ilan. 2003. "When a Kleptocratic, Megalomanûacal Dictator Goes Bad." *The New York Times Magazine*.

Annotation: The author, a former reporter for The Asian Wall Street Journal who lived in neighboring Kazakhstan at the time of the article, traveled to Turkmenistan to report on the dual absurdity and treachery of the Turkmenbashi personality cult. He details the curious, almost

humorous aspects of Niyazov's reign—for example, the proliferation of gaudy prestige projects, the ubiquity of self-reverential statutes—but does so with an underlying unease which points to the darker side of Niyazov's megalomania: the increasing political repression, the deteriorating public education system, and the spiraling rate of heroin addiction which the government seems unwilling or unable to control. Most impressively, he interviews Turkmen, who incredibly, given restrictions on free speech, speak candidly about their frustrations and despair over the present state of their country.

Horak, Slavomir. 2005. "The Ideology of the Turkmenbashi Regime." *Perspectives on European Politics & Society* 6 (2): 305-319.

Annotation: Since independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Saparmurat Niyazov has attempted to solidify his rule through the construction of a Turkmen nationalist ideology centered around the president's own personality cult as Turkmenbashi, the self-proclaimed "Father of All Turkmen." Horak contextualizes this ideology within the development of other authoritarian or totalitarian regimes—Kim Jong-Il, Muammar Qaddafi, and the Ayatollah Khomeini, among others. The article traces the Turkmenbashi ideology back to its inception, providing both a chronology of its emergence and a compelling description of its central tenants.

Niyazov, Saparmurat A. "Strategic Partnership in the Ideals of Peace and Humanism." *U.N. Chronicle* 41, no. 2 (2004): 62-66.

Annotation: In an oblique defense of his policies, Niyazov paints his country as a paragon of international cooperation and peace-loving neutrality. Domestically, he describes the development of Turkmenistan since independence as an embodiment of the Turkmen people's collective spirit. Most likely in response to his many critics, Niyazov argues that the mutual trust between himself and the Turkmen people has created a "stable platform" for the establishment of democracy and the rule of law. However, he also offers a striking caveat to this assertion, cleverly framing it for today's political environment: democracy must be implemented gradually with due consideration given to the exigencies of fighting terrorism.

Rall, Ted. 2006. "The Glory That Is Turkmenbashi." In *Silk Road to Ruin*, ed. J. P. Trostle. New York: NBM: 36-56.

Annotation: The author, a syndicated columnist and cartoonist, set out on to write an adventure travel piece about Central Asia, which, due to its subject matter, equally aims to capture humor and grim reality. The second chapter, dedicated to the Turkmenbashi personality cult, reads as a "greatest hits list" of Niyazov's more absurd antics: outlawing gold-capped teeth, changing the names of the months of the year, and erecting a towering gold-leafed statue of himself in Ashgabat, the capital city, which rotates 360 degrees so that his gilded face always points toward the sun. The author also reports on the profligate construction of an \$8 billion Turkmen Lake--another one of Niyazov's gratuitous prestige projects—in the center of the Karakum Desert, while the Turkmen people languish in poverty with a reported \$1,440 per capita annual income.

Sabol, Steven. 2003. "Turkmenbashi: Going It Alone." *Problems of Post-communism* 50 (5): 49-57.

Annotation: This article provides the context for the political developments in Turkmenistan following the November 2002 assassination attempt on Niyazov's life. The author details many of the most salient peculiarities of the Niyazov personality cult, analyzes the incoherence of domestic political opposition after the failed assassination, and then contemplates the prospects of a successful post-Niyazov transition. Unsurprisingly, he does not reach very sanguine conclusions: increased political repression has effectively eliminated domestic opposition and Niyazov's own unwillingness to groom a successor, presumably for fear of creating rivals within the government, sets the stage for a tumultuous, perhaps even violent, transition whenever the Turkmenbashi personality cult reaches its end.

Stoudmann, Gerard. 2003. "Turkmenistan, a Human Rights 'Black Hole'." *Helsinki Monitor* 14 (2): 117-124.

Annotation: The article offers a critique of the "Moscow Mechanism" invoked by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in response to human rights violations associated with a government crackdown following a supposed 2002 assassination attempt on Niyazov's life. While the author's analysis is rather abstruse and technical, he does provide a short history of human rights developments in Turkmenistan since independence, and points to the country's increasing insularity on the international stage, particularly in its defiance of the OSCE and international human rights norms.

Turkmenbashi, Saparmyrat. 2005. Rukhnama: Reflections on the Spiritual Values of the Turkmen. Ashgabat: State Publishing Service Turkmenistan.

Annotation: Saparmurat Niyazov's pseudo-spiritual book on Turkmen heritage and culture is one of the central pillars of the Turkmenbashi personality cult. Recited by school children, quoted in mosques and churches, and compared to the Bible and Koran in importance, the Rukhnama is a rambling collection of Niyazov's homespun aphorisms and historical inventions about the Turkmen people. Purportedly revealed to him by God, the Rukhnama is considered by some to be a bizarre, chaotic text written in an attempt to elevate Niyazov's status from political leader to spiritual prophet divinely leading Turkmenistan through an unprecedented "Golden Century." The book itself is a fascinating window into Niyazov's delusions of grandeur, and yet the oath that begins the book belies any thought of him as a harmless eccentric. "At the moment of my betrayal to my motherland, to her sacred banner, to Saparmurat Turkmenbashi the Great," the oath ominously intones, "let my breath stop!"

Oppression of Ethnic and Religious Minorities

2005. *Turkmenistan: The Clampdown on Dissent and Religious Freedom Continues*. New York: Amnesty International.

Annotation: Amnesty International's comprehensive report compiles an exhaustive list on violations of civil and political rights in Turkmenistan. The report draws particular attention to the disparity between Turkmenistan's deplorable human rights record and its obligations as a signatory to both the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights and the Convention Against Torture. This flagrant repudiation of the country's commitments under international law has provoked severe criticism from the international community, and a section of this report demonstrates the positive effects that international pressure has had in goading Niyazov to release prisoners of conscience and lessen restrictions on religious practice.

Corley, Felix. 2004. "Eastern Europe: Osce Conference on Discrimination--a Regional Survey." *Religion in Eastern Europe* 24 (5): 38-44.

Annotation: Despite the commitment made by all OSCE states to respect freedom of religion, guarantees of this right remain scant among some member states in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. This report identifies Turkmenistan, along with Uzbekistan, Belarus, Azerbaijan and Armenia, as a chronic violator of these fundamental principles. Some of the most worrying restrictions on freedom of religion include the required registration of religious groups, the censorship of religious literature, and the discrimination and forced deportation of ethnic minorities.

_____. 2005. *Turkmenistan: The Year of Praying Dangerously* Transitions Online. http://www.ciaonet.org/pbei-2/tol/tol_2005/jan3-jan10/jan3-jan10g.html.

Annotation: The article chronicles the demolition and confiscation of local mosques, churches, and other houses of worship by the Turkmenistan government since the late 1990s, underscoring the extent to which the state controls and proscribes religious practice. The article's sources variously report that the state has targeted mosques in which imams have rejected the imposition of Niyazov's pseudo-spiritual book, the Rukhnama, as a text on par with that of the Koran. Others report that the demolitions have targeted private mosques financed by Arab charities that practice Wahhabism, a Saudi brand of Sunni Islam condemned by the president as discordant and disputatious.

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. 2004. "Religious Freedom in Turkmenistan: Briefing of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, May 11, 2004." Washington, D.C.: CSCE, United States Congress.

Annotation: This transcript of the CSCE hearing on religious freedom in Turkmenistan highlights some of the more disturbing restrictions on religion that have developed under

President Niyazov. Although Niyazov reportedly opened official registration to religious groups beyond Sunni Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church, state control of religion still remains a salient issue and has been employed to further the Turkmenbashi personality cult. As the panel of experts testify, the Committee for Religious Affairs appoints all imams in Turkmenistan, the Rukhnama has been elevated to equal status with the Koran and the Bible, and religious leaders are required to quote it extensively in their sermons. Additionally, fear continues to suppress the free practice of religion in those groups which suffered harassment at the hands of the state before Niyazov opened registration to all religious sects.

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. 2003. "Annual Report of the United States Commission on Religious Freedom." U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom: 40-41, 103-104.

Annotation: The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent federal agency that monitors religious freedom around the world, includes Turkmenistan on its list of "countries of particular concern" due to its severe restriction of religious practice and its repression of religious minorities. The report indicates that independent religious groups in Turkmenistan are strictly outlawed as an extension of Niyazov's attempt to monopolize control over Turkmen society. Only two religious groups, the Sunni Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church, are officially permitted, though their practice is strictly limited by the state. The continued intimidation, harassment, torture, imprisonment, and even mass deportation of religious minorities within Turkmenistan particularly concern the Commission. The Commission makes policy recommendations to the President of the United States, the Secretary of State, and Congress on how to better promote religious freedoms in countries where the practice of those freedoms is extremely poor.

Health and Human Rights

2003. "Health and Dictatorships: Effects of Repression in Turkmenistan." *Lancet* 361 (9351): 69.

Annotation: The article provides general information that links the worsening political repression in Turkmenistan to an alarming decline in public health. The article speculates that an enforced campaign of ignorance within the country, combined with high rates of intravenous drug use and a spiraling AIDS crisis in Central Asia, could lead to an imminent epidemic, despite official indications that HIV infection is low. Additionally, the article highlights the difficulty of ascertaining reliable health statistics in a country as insular as Turkmenistan, where international organizations are restricted and governmental health reports are notoriously unreliable.

Gore, Hayden. 2006. *RPCV Sarah (Turkmenistan 2004-2006)* accessed http://web.mac.com/hayden_lisa/iWeb/biggieblog/RPCVPodcast/85064210-3DFC-4725-AC09-32FA378A918B.html.

Annotation: A Returned Peace Corps Volunteer from Turkmenistan (one of only 110 American in the country according to the U.S. Embassy) speaks in this podcast recording about her experience living and working for two years as a community health volunteer outside of Ashgabat. As one of the few foreign development workers in the country, her reflections on life under Niyazov's autocratic rule provide a unique first-hand perspective into one of the most insular countries in the world. The interview closes with a particularly harrowing experience at the Saparmurat Turkmenbashi Airport, an appropriate symbolism of the bizarre, Orwellian nature of life in Turkmenistan.

O'Donnell, Lynne. 2004. "An Autocrat's Troubled Waters; Turkmenistan Lake Project Threatens Environmental Catastrophe." *Wall Street Journal*, July 16.

Annotation: Among other prestige projects initiated by President Niyazov, the construction of the Golden Era Lake, a 75 mile long artificial lake in the middle of the Karakum Desert, is perhaps the most outlandish and potentially dangerous. Scientist fear that the project will divert water from the Amu Darya, a primary tributary of the Aral Sea, worsening the desertification of the region and contributing to an environmental disaster which is already among the worst in human history. Niyazov claims that the project will ensure water for future generations of Turkmen, yet many believe that it will aggravate the water crisis, losing more water through seepage and evaporation than it will ever save.

Salvage, Jane. 2006. "Caring in a Forgotten Land." *Nursing Standard* 20 (30): 26-27.

Annotation: The author, an international nursing consultant sent to Turkmenistan by the British Embassy, couples her first-hand observations about the astonishing lack of available health care in the country (Niyazov intended to shut down all rural hospitals outside the capital in 2004) with a London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine report about lagging health indicators in the country. As a health professional who has had access to medical facilities in Turkmenistan, her account corroborates reports of Niyazov's efforts to purge the country of qualified medical personnel and its deleterious effect on the country's health system.

Public Indoctrination and Enforced Ignorance

2005. "IFLA Blasts Turkmenistan Library Closings." *American Libraries* 36 (6): 24-26.

Annotation: The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and Institutions calls on President Niyazov to revoke his order to close all libraries outside of the capital city, calling it "one of the most profound onslaughts on intellectual freedom rights . . . in many years." The IFLA expresses concern that the destruction of books and library closures are being carried out

as part of an effort to promote the Rukhnama, Niyazov's own book of spiritual musings, as a tool of public indoctrination.

2006. "Inside the Mad Despot's Realm." *Economist*, 5/27.

Annotation: This article offers a quick, comprehensive overview of life in Turkmenistan under Mr. Niyazov's repressive rule, chronicling some of the more absurd "reforms" undertaken to aggrandize the president and to strengthen his control over the country. Particular emphasis is placed on the depressing state of public education, where mandatory schooling was reduced from 10 to 9 years and the standard curriculum replaced by a youth-indoctrination program centered around the study of Mr. Niyazov's two-volume "Book of the Spirit," the Rukhnama.

2006. *Rfe/RI Correspondent Dies in Turkmen Custody* Prague: Radio Free Europe/Radio Free Liberty. <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/9/0F829491-5086-43FC-A870-7B4AEC160105.html>.

Annotation: This article recounts the questionable circumstances surrounding the death of Ogulsapar Muradova, a Radio Liberty reporter who died while serving a seven-year sentence in a state prison. At the time of her arrest and conviction for illegal ammunition possession, the charges against her were widely criticized as politically motivated fabrications. According to the article, her family was told Muradova died of natural causes, though her body showed significant signs of trauma.

2006. *Worldwide Press Freedom Index 2006*. Paris: Reporters Without Borders: accessed http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=639.

Annotation: Reporters Without Borders ranks Turkmenistan as the world's second worst violator of press freedoms, pointing in particular to the death of Radio Liberty reporter Ogulsapar Muradova as evidence of Niyazov's intolerance for criticism. Turkmenistan (No. 167 in the rankings) precedes only North Korea (No. 168) on this dubious list of the most inhospitable countries for journalists. The list was compiled by surveying press freedom organizations, correspondents, journalists, jurists and human rights activists around the globe.

2006. *North Korea Tops CPJ List of 10 Most Censored Countries* Committee to Protect Journalists. http://www.cpj.org/censored/censored_06.html.

Annotation: President Niyazov's editorial control over daily newspapers, the closure of all libraries except the one that hold the president's books, a ban on foreign publications, and a news media dedicated to the obsequious praise of the president distinguishes Turkmenistan as the third most censored country in the world according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. CPJ compiled the list based on 17 criteria established by experts in the field of human rights, press freedom, and media law.

Takhbatullin, Farid. 2006. "Rukhnamania: Fantasies of a Dictator." *Index on Censorship* 35(3): 161-167.

Annotation: Turkmen satirist Farid Takhbatullin, who served three years in a Turkmenistan prison for his environmental work, discusses the maddening irrationality of Niyazov's rule, while providing a cultural and historical context for his rise to power. As a Turkmen jailed for his moxie, Takhbatullin speaks pointedly about state censorship and its role in Niyazov's consolidation of power. Of particular interest, Takhbatullin describes how the Turkmen people have internalized official censorship, producing an insidious form of self-censorship which further silences an already closed society.