

Project on Emerging Actors

Turkmenistan's new elites

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This study is based on informal interviews conducted in Kyrgyzstan in May 2007, in Turkmenistan at the end of June 2007 and in Moscow in early July 2007. Among others, the author met exiled members of the opposition, Turkmen students studying abroad, journalists, businesspeople and many international, primarily diplomatic, observers of Central Asian affairs. The general interpretation of the text is largely attributable to the author's impressions while on the ground and from his contact with the local population.

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Introduction

Solid: that is how the Turkmen regime appeared in the aftermath of the transition of power that followed the death of Saparmurat Niyazov on 21 December 2006. The dictator, who died of cardiac arrest at the age of 66, had ruled with an iron fist over the Central Asian former Soviet republic since 1985. For more than a decade, he had undertaken a series of major purges, crushing any seeds of opposition to his now autocratic power. He personally came to embody the regime, having built a maniacal personality cult around himself. However, despite the death of the man who insisted on being called *Turkmenbashi, Father of all Turkmen*, the country did not descend into chaos¹.

The regime remained in control of the situation at all times. It is possible that President Niyazov handed over power to Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, who announced the passing of *Turkmenbashi the Great* on television on the morning of his death, which occurred at 1.10 a.m. on 21 December 2006 according to the official version² of events, and was to head the committee organizing the funeral, which took place three days later. Regardless of whether power was handed over to Berdymukhamedov or whether he seized it, Sovietologists and Kremlinologists immediately understood that he would be the future president of the Republic of Turkmenistan. A man from Turkmenbashi's inner circle had taken his place - the regime was not dead.

This solidity of the Turkmen regime suggests that its evolution will also depend on its elites. Indeed, Turkmenistan's five million citizens are not involved in the political administration of the country; the opposition, or those who claim to represent it, are not in a position to offer a political alternative; all power lies in the hands of the new president, Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, who was appointed head of State on 14 February 2007. However, the President has surrounded himself with trusted colleagues and allows a degree of independence, at least executively, to technocrats.

This study is intended to examine the functioning of the new Administration in Turkmenistan. Although he has adopted numerous political 'instruments' favoured by Turkmenbashi, which makes a democratic approach unlikely, President Berdymukhamedov seems committed to opening up his country to a greater extent. Whether in terms of bringing the national education system in line with internationally recognized systems or re-establishing diplomatic and economic relations with the rest of the world, particularly the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the West, cooperation with Turkmenistan is increasing, particularly as the country's needs are considerable. There is a severe shortage of qualified people – managers, engineers and technicians – at a time when the State wishes to move towards rationalizing its economy and more effectively exploiting its natural resources.

However, Turkmenistan must be able to accept and, moreover, initiate the reforms necessary to achieve economic and political development, on a more harmonious and sound basis. In this connection, the role of the elites will prove crucial, particularly that of future administrators, entrepreneurs and engineers: future actors who will be responsible

¹ However, everyone was asking themselves if the country was going to descend into chaos or violence: *Turkmenistan: Could Niyazov's Death Lead To Political Struggle, Instability*, Golnaz Esfandiari, RFE/RL, 21 December 2006.

² Doubts were expressed early on with regard to this official version and the cause of death of the Turkmen President. Cf. the long study *The Curious Death of Turkmenbashi*, Dr. John C.K. Daly, Occasional Paper, Jamestown Foundation, January 2007. Nonetheless, one of our most reliable sources believes that the official version is probably true.

for monitoring and executing change. In that sense, the young people of Turkmenistan are of strategic interest.

- Who will be the future managers and technicians of Turkmenistan?
- How do these young people perceive the developing new administration?
- What can they contribute to the country?

But the immediate priority is not to undertake a political examination of the new government in Turkmenistan. It is not our intention to identify more democratic alternatives to the current regime. It seems much more relevant and in keeping with the socio-political circumstances in Turkmenistan to assess the country's efficiency and consider means of improving it.

An in-depth analysis of the political mechanisms that seem to underpin the new administration of power in Turkmenistan will be followed by a summary of the expectations and opinions of young educated Turkmen from the emerging middle class, which represents one of the most promising talent pools for Turkmen development and expresses the hopes of a generation.

Berdymukhamedov: between firmness and openness

There is no 'revolution' in Turkmenistan. Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov is both maintaining his predecessor's political legacy and breaking with it. He never ceases to surprise, simultaneously taking over the former regime's excessive personality cult and harshly ousting some of its key men. He maintains the fundamental principles of Saparmurat Niyazov's regime, while attempting to correct his glaring errors.

The pillars of the dictatorship endure

President Berdymukhamedov employs the same political administration 'tools' that proved efficient under Saparmurat Niyazov. There is, undoubtedly, no better way to assert his authority.

The personality cult

On 29 June last, the new president celebrated his fiftieth birthday. Under Mr. Niyazov, the president's birthday was cause for significant official festivities in his honour. The ceremonies for the new president followed exactly the same model: placing of wreaths at Kipchak in the morning, at the monument erected in memory of both the 1948 earthquake and part of the former president's family who died during the tragedy, later a concert at the palace and finally *sadaka* (a traditional Turkmen meal) at the Ayna restaurant.

President Berdymukhamedov took advantage of this occasion to award himself the country's highest honour, the Order of the Motherland. Thus, he awarded himself an impressive gold and diamond pendant weighing almost one kilogramme for his 'outstanding achievements', reported the Neutral Turkmenistan newspaper enthusiastically. While he was at it, the President received \$20,000 and a 30% salary and pension increase. On that day he also issued 200 gold and 200 silver coins bearing his image.

Admittedly the president, like his predecessor, announced that he did not wish his birthday to be celebrated officially, yet he did nothing to prohibit or prevent the preparations, which he may have organized himself. Important foreign delegations travelled to Turkmenistan for the occasion: apparently nine Russian planes landed the day before at Ashgabat airport.

More generally, it is interesting to note that, on the ground, portraits of the new president are appearing and multiplying in the country's streets, as are billboards bearing his quotes. Last June, portraits of Turkmenbashi took pride of place in public places all over the country. However, generally, the images of the first two presidents were increasingly starting to appear side by side. Gradually, the photographs of the new president moved closer to the places of symbolic and political importance. For example, at Ashgabat city hall there is a large portrait of the new head of State, but it still faces a gold bust of Turkmenbashi displayed in the garden opposite it.

Many of the country's civil servants must now be facing a moral dilemma: should they take down the portrait of Saparmurat Niyazov or not? To do so could send a strong signal of allegiance with the new president, but it could also suggest volatility and a premature critical attitude towards his predecessor. Everywhere – in markets, at stationery stalls – portraits of varying sizes and quality are for sale. It is the civil servants themselves who buy them to hang in their offices.

It seems that the personality cult surrounding President Niyazov is gradually disappearing. At least this is what we are led to believe by the removal, on 7 July last, of the gold profile of Turkmenbashi displayed on the upper right hand corner of the screen on the public television channel. "It was removed pursuant to a 'directive'", explained the broadcaster on Saturday³. This discretion and the prudence with which the portraits of the former president are gradually being replaced throughout the country highlight that it might not be that easy to move from one personality cult to another.

The process seems indispensable to the functioning of the current Turkmen regime. With power (still) concentrated in the hands of the president, everyone is caught up in a rationale based on symbols of allegiance. The weakness of the political institutions and the absence of a civil service⁴ mean that civil servants are forced to show their allegiance to the highest level of government, thus proving their legitimacy to occupy their post and guaranteeing a minimum of protection.

In the eyes of the average Turkmen, however, this personality cult does not exist. When they agree to talk politics, Turkmen are, in fact, very rational and practical. They ask to what extent the authorities can resolve their everyday problems. A European expatriate, who has been living for several years in Ashgabat, speaks of "a society where pretence constantly prevails". Everybody uses the ideological 'jargon' and the language of signs and gestures of allegiance to the regime, without for a moment believing the speeches required by such an exercise.

***Rukhnama*⁵: the cornerstone of national ideology**

President Berdymukhamedov seems to be making the nationalism introduced by Saparmurat Niyazov, and by extension the *Rukhnama*, the ideological basis of his power. At his investiture, the new president took an oath on the Koran and the *Rukhnama*. Moreover, in the new law on the President, published on 4 July 2007, he has just introduced into Turkmen legislation the provision that "the investiture ceremony for new presidents must be carried out with the Koran and the *Rukhnama*".

The massive propaganda in relation to the *Rukhnama* can be seen all over the country. These are clearly vestiges of the Niyazov era. In the streets, at factory entrances, on school walls, naturally, at airports, basically everywhere, there are posters about the book which has been elevated to the title of saintly work.

That said, the new president of Turkmenistan seems to want to correct, or at least give the appearance of correcting, some of his predecessor's excesses. It would seem that it is no longer obligatory to read the *Rukhnama* first thing every morning at school, and some establishments stopped this practice before the end of the 2006-2007 school year. In addition, the president seems to be devoting himself to other more concrete and effective writing projects, such as the book he has just published on the Turkmen health system⁶; it is to be hoped that this is not an early-warning sign of a moralising frenzy and intent.

³ Agence France-Presse, 7 July 2007.

⁴ Civil servants' careers can end from one day to the next.

⁵ « Book of the holy spirit », according to S. Niyazov.

The book contains guidelines for policy of the republic, thus justifying the dictatorship, elements of morality addressed to Turkmen, a revisited version of the glorious past of the Turkmen people and poetry written by Turkmenbashi.

⁶ «Türkmenistanda saglygy gorayşy ösdürmegift ylmy esaslary» («*The scientific basis for the development of Turkmenistan's health system* »).

Prestigious major projects

The signature at the end of July 2007 of a new contract between the French company Bouygues International and Turkmenistan, worth \$85 million, for the construction of three buildings for the Turkmen Ministry of State Security⁷ proves that the policy of undertaking major projects initiated by Turkmenbashi is being pursued. By the end of April, the President had already ordered the construction of a new luxury district in the capital, to include a skyscraper, an artificial lake and a golf course. Turkmenistan's Golden Century would appear to be set to run as a source of propaganda. However, Turkmen citizens rarely criticise this policy of major projects in Ashgabat⁸. In fact, the Turkmen people met by the author often seemed proud of their city.

Controlled media

No significant liberalization measures have been taken since February 2007. Turkmen television's style has not changed, with propaganda still playing a major role in reports. Though President Berdymukhamedov had given cause for hope last March when, during a speech to the People's Council, he called, for example, for greater access to the outside world. Once again, more recently, at a meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers on 17 August 2007, the president criticized the work of the media, particularly the lack of creativity in television programmes, but said nothing in particular on the treatment of information.

Access to information via the internet is extremely limited. Any sites providing information critical of Turkmenistan are blocked, notably those of the opposition in exile, major human rights NGOs and Eurasianet, Ferghana.ru and Centrasia.ru. The new internet cafés opened in all of the country's major towns are expensive (€3.60 per hour) and their connections extremely slow. Initially, police guarded the doors; since the summer, that seems no longer to be the case.

Free basic goods

Gas, petrol, electricity and bread are still almost free. These advantages are considered by Turkmen as real 'social benefits', for which the regime must get some credit⁹.

These measures form the basis of support for the regime, much more so than nationalistic ideology. "Indeed, we are prepared to renounce politics and expressing our opinions for this [free basic goods]", explains a Russian from Turkmenistan. "In fact, you can live pretty well here if you don't get involved in politics."

Ministerial rotation and instability of the civil service

The new president, like his predecessor, is expected to base the internal stability of his administration on the instability of the careers and responsibilities at the highest administrative and/or economic level in the public sector. Maintaining the probation period of six months for ministers and senior civil servants suggests that there will be continuity in this area. This is one of the corollaries of the personality cult: the country's institutions weaken as the president's power increases and access to resources depends on presidential goodwill.

It is true that it is difficult to refer to 'rotation', since, if there has been any it has been in the form of punishment, and not simple replacements. All of these changes are

⁷ A 20,000 m² apartment building, a 9,000 m² officers' house and a 23-hectare sports complex.

Following the signature, Olivier Bouygues, vice-president of the Bouygues company, had a meeting with President Berdymukhamedov on 30 July last.

⁸ Interview by the author on the ground, June 2007.

⁹ Interviews conducted by the author in Turkmenistan, June 2007.

attributable to Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov taking over the country's political and administrative apparatus. The arrest of Akmurat Rejepov, the powerful former head of Saparmurat Niyazov's presidential security force, and his recent imprisonment, which serve as a lesson to everyone, perfectly illustrate the process initiated in summer 2007. In addition, the 'economic failure' which has often been cited recently as a justification for firing senior managers of public enterprises does not seem to be a very credible reason. "How can we speak of failure if the people in question only assumed their posts three months previously? The candidatures for management posts in the ministries and various departments were only approved in March. How could they have caused the economic failure of their enterprise in such a short period of time¹⁰?" In short, on the basis of meetings on the ground, it seems that the current 'rotation' is the result of internal political scheming, as was the case under Niyazov's presidency.

The case of the former minister for construction and mayor of Ashgabat, Orazmurat Esenov, is a case in point. He was dismissed from his post at Ashgabat city hall on 22 May 2007, officially because of delays with certain construction projects and incoherence in the city's development. In fact, his misfortune might actually be due to the fact that he started to establish his own network of patronage, by distributing apartments, particularly in the capital.

The same can be said of Paizygeldy Meredov, minister for agriculture, arrested in early August, along with his two sons (later released) for fraud in exporting cotton. It is likely that the problems of this man, reputed to be one of the richest in the country, are due to something other than this embezzlement. Indeed, he was apparently already arrested for several days for reasons best described as 'political' shortly after Niyazov's death.

Finally, Yagshygeldy Esenov, dismissed from his post as president of the Supreme Court for not having succeeded in leading the State Commission on security forces, was, oddly, not even allowed to complete his trial period.

Consolidation of the new power

Since April 2007, President Berdymukhamedov has been busy removing from office the people likely to threaten his power. Indeed, within the space of a few weeks, he dismissed all of the heads of the law enforcement agencies, with the exception of the minister for defence. At the same time, it would seem that the new president has appointed some of the people from his entourage to some of the country's key posts, thus reinforcing clan solidarity¹¹.

Berdymukhamedov: a legitimate heir?

Until now, it has been generally accepted that a duo was heading the country, in the form of Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov and Akmurat Rejepov. Early on, these partners seemed to get to work, dismissing the president of Parliament (Majilis) as early as 21 December, although, according to the Constitution, he was supposed to act as interim president. Akmurat Rejepov, as head of the National Security Council, was then gaining importance. The body he was heading had been given the right to convene the People's Council (*Halk Maslahaty*) to dismiss the president in the event of 'incapacity' to govern the country. Nonetheless, Rejepov, who was arrested in mid-May, did not prove to be as

¹⁰ Interview conducted by the author in Turkmenistan, June 2007. The dismissal of personnel following the resignation of the head of a department, ministry, etc. is known as 'carousel': the person replacing the head comes with his own teams, who buy their posts.

¹¹ The Tekhe tribe, of which president Niyazov was a member, was not of any official importance. Informally, however, it occupied a central place, as indicated symbolically by the supremacy of the Tekhe motif in Turkmen rugs, which are real emblems of national culture.

Visit by the author to the National Rug Museum in Ashgabat.

strong as he appeared; furthermore, the Council never met and therefore never really commenced work. The succession might not have been as manipulated or manufactured as it seemed.

According to another version of the events surrounding the death of Saparmurat Niyazov¹², President Niyazov knew he was going to die. So Akmurat Rejepov apparently alerted Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, who went to see the president while he was still alive and conscious. Thus, the president arranged his succession and, to a certain extent, 'appointed' his health minister, giving him clear and solid legitimacy within the upper echelons of Turkmen politics. Whatever the case, nobody of influence in Turkmenistan questions the authority of the current president, and the succession process, which broadly resembled a coup d'état, provoked no noticeable resistance.

Reclaiming control of the security forces

After only two months in power, the new president started to attack the key men in Turkmenistan's law enforcement agencies in a rapid and decisive manner, with the exception of the minister for defence. There were rumours that the minister had been arrested, but it seems that these were unfounded.

This series of arrests and dismissals began on 9 April with the dismissal of the Minister for Internal Affairs, Akhmamed Rakhmanov. In accordance with a method borrowed from Niyazov, President Berdymukhamedov publicly accused the minister, in a humiliating fashion, of not having imposed discipline in his ministry and of having allowed corruption and extortion from businesses, including foreign companies, to develop within the ministry.

In mid-May, the powerful Lieutenant General, Akmurat Rejepov, was dismissed from his post and was apparently arrested several days later, on 17 May. The event followed the arrest several days earlier of Murat Agaev, the director of the private company *Oriental*, associated with Rejepov, who worked with the United Arab Emirates. Rejepov's son, colonel Nurmurad Rejepov, was himself arrested a little later, on his return from the United Arab Emirates, where he was a military advisor at the Turkmen embassy. He had apparently invested money there or hired safety deposit boxes to store documents. Several days after his arrest, he was escorted to the United Arab Emirates in order to clarify the situation. In the course of a closed hearing in summer 2007, Akmurat Rejepov was apparently sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment for corruption and other crimes. His son and the businessman received prison sentences of thirteen and seventeen years respectively.

Also in May 2007, the Minister for State Security, Geldymukhamed Ashirmukhamedov, was arrested and the deputy minister, Agajan Pashshyev, was dismissed from his post.

Finally, it should be noted that Saparmurat Niyazov's son, Murat, protégé of Akmurat Rejepov, was allegedly, at around the same time, in spring, almost expelled from Turkmenistan.¹³ The young man allegedly left the country and had his Turkmen passport confiscated.

Did all of these men pose a threat to Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov? Nothing leads us to believe this. There is no mention of real or direct threat. For its part, the Turkmen opposition in exile prefers to point to financial disagreements among corrupt figures: Akmurat Rejepov was allegedly too grasping in his sideline business activities¹⁴. The more likely explanation is that the new President sought to protect himself and distanced himself from the men he could not control.

¹² Reported by a reliable source in Ashgabat.

Interview conducted by the author, Turkmenistan, June 2007.

¹³ Unconfirmed information obtained from a source based in Vienna.

¹⁴ *Niyazov's security chief arrested, hunt begins for stolen funds*, John C.K. Daly, Jamestown Foundation, 6 August 2007.

The Government under control

The new president tends to surround himself with people he can trust. He has, logically, given preference to the family pool, unlike his predecessor, who never made appointments based on nepotism.

- Ata Oveznepesovich Serdarov, Minister for Health: cousin.
- Khojamyrat Annagurbanov, Minister of the Interior: related by marriage. He had, however, already exercised strategic functions: he had been deputy minister of the interior for several months, having previously been head of the police in Ashgabat.
- Maisa Yazmoukhammedova, 36-year-old woman, deputy chairperson of the Cabinet, promoted on 14 July: cousin.

He has also made appointments among people from his region of origin (the Akhal velayat¹⁵, home of the Tekhe tribe).

Ministers from Akhal velayat.

- Kakageldy Charyardourdyev, Minister for Culture, Television and Radio, from Gok-Depe.
- Rashid Meredov, deputy chairperson of the Cabinet of Ministers and Minister for Foreign Affairs, the regime's de facto deputy leader.
- Geldimuradov Khojamyrat, Minister for the Economy and Finance.
- Gurbangeldy Melekeyev, Minister for Trade.
- Jemal Geoklenova, Minister of State, president of the carpet museum (*Turkmenhaly*).
- Esenmyrat Orazgeldiev, Minister for Agriculture.

However, there is no shortage of counter-examples, although ministers from the Mary velayat may also be Tekhe, since this tribe extends over both velayats.

Ministers from the Mary velayat.

- Khadyr Saparlyev, deputy chairperson of the Cabinet of Ministers.
- Ykloumberdi Paromov, Minister for Textiles and Industry.
- Gurbanmurat Atayev, Minister for the Oil and Gas Industries and Mineral Resources - an essentially executive role¹⁶.
- Muratgeldy Akmammedov, Minister for Water Resources.

Ministers from the Balkan velayat.

- Tagyev Tachberdy, deputy chairperson of the Cabinet of Ministers with responsibility for energy - an essentially executive role.
- Garouagdy Tashliev, Minister of State, Director of Turkmennebit (petroleum company) - an essentially executive role.

Ministers from the Dashogouz velayat.

- Yakshigeldy Kakaev, Minister of State, Director of Turkmengas.

It should also be noted that the average age of ministers has decreased significantly, which goes hand in hand with the technocratization of appointments. This last point is recurrent in the Turkmen political arena, with overly political profiles representing a threat in the eyes of the head of State. "The youth of the ministers can be explained by the need to command weak people, without experience and knowledge of the workings of

¹⁵ Administrative region of Turkmenistan, of which there are five.

¹⁶ The president retains final decision-making power on energy issues.

the administration of the country", explained a foreign businessman who has been living in Turkmenistan for several years¹⁷.

Rationalization of power

The new president now controls all the levers of power.

- President of the People's Council (*Halk Maslahaty*) - elected 30 March 2007.
- President of the Democratic Party, the country's only authorized political party - elected 4 August 2007.
- Leader of *Galkynysh* (Revival), a movement that groups together trade unions, youth organizations, veterans' associations and all other Turkmen non-governmental organizations (NGOs) - elected 4 August 2007.

He is also engaged in more strictly controlling the office of president. The law on the President of Turkmenistan, published on 4 July on the www.turkmenistan.ru website has provisions to this effect. The new law is made up of five chapters and twenty articles which "define the legal, economic, organizational and other foundations of the work of the president of Turkmenistan, listing the guarantees of his functions as well as the guarantees for the outgoing president and his family"¹⁸. The text also reaffirms the principle of election by universal suffrage, thus showing a will not to return to a mandate of 'president for life' that Turkmenbashi had granted himself in 1999.

However, the foundations of the regime remain the same: far removed from democratic ideals. In the first and almost only interview Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov granted, he explained his vision for the internal political development of the country: "If I had to define myself (...), I would use the term 'moderation'. I always remember a phrase my father used when I was a child: 'Never run when you can walk'. (...) Attempting to resolve a social or economic problem in one go, and once and for all, is bound to lead to chaos and instability (...) In its fifteen years of independence, Turkmenistan has not experienced any economic or political crises. This means that the course outlined in the Constitution is in line with our historical stage of development. As to democracy, this tender substance cannot be imposed as an imported model. It can only be carefully nourished by using the wisdom of national experience and the traditions of previous generations. You have just observed the national presidential elections. What further proof do you need of the firm democratic foundations of society than that the Turkmen people have elected a new head of State from among six candidates?"¹⁹

In a period of time so short that it surprised everyone, President Berdymukhamedov managed to take over and directly control the entire State apparatus, most notably the law enforcement agencies. This process has in no way prevented him from reforming the former regime. He is not reproducing his predecessor's power: he is reconstructing it. It is still too early to say whether the phase of consolidating power is complete. Changes, on the other hand, are still in their infancy.

¹⁷ Interview conducted by the author, Turkmenistan, June 2007.

¹⁸ Text available in English on www.turkmenistan.ru *Turkmenistan publishes law on country's president*, 4 July 2007.

¹⁹ Interview with the President of Turkmenistan, published on www.turkmenistan.ru, 17 February 2007.

Pragmatic overtures

Ever since Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov was certain of succeeding Saparmurat Niyazov, he has made reference to the need to undertake reforms, particularly in the fields of health, education and pensions. Did he do this only to garner the support of the people, particularly the urban middle class, or does he really plan to effectively rectify the serious errors committed by his predecessor?

The resolve to reform

To a large extent, he is repairing the errors committed by President Niyazov. But without a doubt, these initiatives also establish the new president's legitimacy and give him a degree of political strength at a time when he has to alienate some of the country's political and administrative elite. Clearly, in so doing he is also improving his country's image abroad.

- Education.

Extending compulsory education by one year, from nine to ten years; recognition of qualifications acquired abroad; opening of Russian establishments.

The extension of primary and secondary education, accompanied by the extension of higher education from two to five years²⁰, has been experienced as a real liberation by the people. Young people, who feared remaining isolated from the rest of the world due to their lack of knowledge, are well aware of the detrimental effects of an education system based excessively on the *Rukhnama*, which they consider to be largely a series of untruths that cannot reasonably serve as the basis for effective teaching.

The announced reforms should also enable young people to study, and maybe even work, abroad. This immediately diversifies employment opportunities.

More particularly, these changes affect the Turkmen urban lower middle class, which now believes it can provide a future for its children and could therefore become a pillar of support for the new regime.

However, in the summer of 2007, it was still far from certain that the Minister for Education would be in a position to recruit the 23,000 additional teachers necessary to implement the reforms. Modest teachers' salaries hardly attract candidates.

- Pensions.

Review of pensions, particularly for the elderly whose allocations were withdrawn or significantly reduced following the decision of January 2006.

The increases were paid from July 2007.

- Health²¹.

Better access to healthcare. However, the reform does not yet seem to have been planned in detail.

- Social security. Law voted on in March 2007 and entered into force on 1 July.

The law aims to improve the pensions system for retirees, but also improve allocations to war veterans, persons with disabilities and young mothers (with a child under three).

- Police and administrative pressure.

²⁰ Until then, higher education lasted two years, combined with two years of work experience in the public sector.

Interview conducted by the author, Turkmenistan, June 2007.

²¹ Contrary to what has been extensively reported by the Western media, all of the provincial hospitals were not closed in 2005 ; in fact few actually were. Western insistence on this issue shocked some Turkmen.

Interview conducted by the author, Turkmenistan, June 2007

In mid-July, the obligation to have authorization to travel within the country, particularly in border areas, was abolished.

The majority of Turkmen the author met put the impact of that measure into perspective. "It's true, it's already a little easier to move around the country", said a small businessman, "but that's not where the real problem lies. It remains extremely difficult to move house, to move for professional reasons or to buy property in another velayat or raïon [district] where you are not registered. There is no freedom of movement in this country. People can't choose where they want to live"²².

In addition, police control does not seem to be diminishing. However, the establishment in February of a State commission tasked with examining complaints from citizens, as well as the dismissal of the Minister of the Interior, Akmamed Rakhmanov, constitute undeniable progress.

- Human rights.

At the end of August 2007, the Government of Turkmenistan announced the establishment of an inter-ministerial human rights monitoring commission. The commission is officially tasked with ensuring the country respects its international obligations in this field.

This initiative strongly resembles a public relations exercise. However, it remains to be seen whether it really translates into an improvement in the situation on the ground and a real reduction in human rights abuses.

On closer examination of these reforms, it appears that the new Turkmen president does not always have the means to match his ambitions. Widespread corruption, which undermines the country, coupled with the incompetence that prevails in the public sector, undoubtedly stunts the president's resolve.

Nevertheless, the president has not publicly undertaken to combat corruption, which is far from a central policy issue, on a large scale. He has said nothing, for example, regarding preferential treatment in the education system, which deprives many young people whose parents do not have the means to 'finance' their university admission and exam success from studying.

To date, he has simply acted against corruption in the police force by dismissing the Minister for the Interior in April 2007. He also, notably, ordered the closure of the International Niyazov Fund at the end of June 2007, which was a real pillar of corruption under the former regime²³.

Calculated rapprochement with Russia

For several months now, Turkmenistan has been renewing its special relations with Russia. The signature on 12 May 2007 of an agreement providing for the modernization of the Turkmen system of gas pipelines to Russia and the construction of an additional branch²⁴ to Turkmenbashi is a clear illustration of this, even though, on the face of it, it was Vladimir Putin who forced the invitation²⁵. The consent granted in June 2007 to the Russian company Lukoil, authorizing it to participate in the exploitation of three oil fields, confirms the new orientation of Turkmen foreign policy. In addition, Gazprom is clearly very actively involved in Ashgabat, where it opened a new office in 2005. The senior

²² Interview conducted by the author, Turkmenistan, June 2007.

²³ On Turkmen gas revenue, cf. *It's a Gas. Funny Business in the Turkmen-Ukraine Gas Trade*. Report. Global Witness, 25 July 2006.

²⁴ Signature in the presence of Vladimir Putin and Noursoultan Nazarbayev.

²⁵ *Du Caucase à l'Asie centrale, « grand jeu » autour du pétrole et du gaz*, Régis Genté, Le Monde diplomatique, June 2007.

management of the Russian gas company have, however, not met in person with the head of State, unlike the representatives of Chevron, Total and BP.

It is also worth noting, as all the country's observers have done, that it was immediately after Vladimir Putin's visit to Turkmenistan in mid-May that President Berdymukhamedov dismissed Akmurat Rejepov, the head of the presidential security service, who had worked alongside Saparmurat Niyazov for 21 years. Did the Kremlin lend its support to the new Turkmen President in this delicate operation? Has Moscow become the new guarantor of Turkmen power? Time, no doubt, will tell.

Finally, Russia has, very recently, taken on a frontline role again in terms of education²⁶.

Nonetheless, Turkmenistan is applying itself to maintaining control of the relationship, for fear of falling under the political and economic control of the big Russian neighbour.

- The president and his minister for foreign affairs, the regime's second-in-command, have reiterated at every possible opportunity since December 2006 that Turkmenistan is a neutral country.

The neutrality conceived by Boris Shikhmuradov when he was minister for foreign affairs under Saparmurat Niyazov was specifically devised at the time to contain Russian influence. This strategy endures today and it is very unlikely that it will be called into question, even in the long term.

- At the same time, Ashgabat is pursuing a 'multi-vectorial' policy by also maintaining close relations with Washington and Beijing. Thus, President Berdymukhamedov had only just returned from his first official visit to Moscow when he hosted in the Turkmen capital a senior representative of the American petroleum group Chevron.

This restraint vis-à-vis Russia is a constant in Central Asian diplomacy, which systematically returns to it sooner or later.

The return of Turkmenistan to the international arena

Turkmenistan is endeavouring to return to international relations by appearing in various forums, not all of which are dedicated to energy issues. Thus, the Turkmen head of State attended for the first time, as an observer, the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Bishkek on 16 August; similarly, he made his first official visit to Saudi Arabia, to which Turkmenistan, on the face of it, has no hydrocarbons to sell.

- Relations with China, a preferred partner.
Relations are based primarily on the sale of gas. On 17 and 18 August in Beijing, the two heads of State signed an agreement for the delivery of 30 billion cubic metres of gas per year starting in 2009, for thirty years, and the construction of a gas pipeline to transport it to China, through Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. This means that Turkmenistan will have to increase its production by 50% in two years, which seems unlikely.
For its part, the Chinese petroleum company (CNPC) is attempting to obtain an oil deposit to exploit in Turkmenistan.
- Relations with the United States.
Demand is primarily from Washington, which has engaged in intense diplomatic activity in Turkmenistan. Indeed, the country is strategic for at least four reasons (trans-Caspian gas pipeline, usage opportunities at two Turkmen airports, control of borders against drugs, and monitoring of possible transit of radioactive material to Iran).

²⁶ This phenomenon is addressed in the second part of the report.

However, energy issues are at the crux of negotiations. In fact, the oil company Chevron is starting to take a close interest in Turkmenistan: its vice-president visited the Turkmen head of State on 4 May 2007 and the company was due to open an office in Ashgabat in summer 2007.

- Relations with the European Union.
Europe is primarily interested in the gas question. The new Turkmen president has never discouraged European efforts, but nor has he given priority to the trans-Caspian gas pipeline project²⁷. He will no doubt address the issue if he does, in fact, visit Brussels in autumn 2007. But he could also raise again the issue of the 'trade agreement' that the EU refused to sign in 2006 on the grounds of human rights violations in the republic.
- Relations with Iran.
Relations are intense. From Ashgabat's perspective, the aim is to maintain good neighbourly relations and sell gas and finished energy products, which Iran is sorely lacking. From the Iranian point of view, it is necessary to ensure that Turkmenistan does not get too close to Washington, or at least to avoid a situation where it might be tempted to accede to possible anti-Iranian pressure from the United States.
- Relations with Turkey.
At the economic level, contacts are flourishing. Some 5,000 Turkish businessmen are allegedly working in Turkmenistan. At the political level, however, activities are at a standstill, which hardly leaves room for optimism with respect to the European energy corridor project.
- Relations with other Central Asian republics.
President Berdymukhamedov pays special attention to Turkmenistan's Central Asian neighbours. In this connection, it is interesting to note that the Uzbek President is due to visit Turkmenistan in October 2007 and that Ashgabat plans to reopen an embassy in Azerbaijan²⁸.
- Relations with the Gulf States.
The new president attaches importance to identifying Turkmenistan as a Muslim country. In fact, it is likely that the release on 9 August 2007 of the former Grand Mufti of Turkmenistan, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, was also to be seen as a gesture aimed at that part of the Muslim world. On 25 August 2007, Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov started an official visit to the United Arab Emirates.

An ambiguous overture to the opposition

It was in summer 2007 that the new Turkmen president gave the first encouraging signs for political prisoners from the Niyazov era. On 9 August, President Berdymukhamedov signed a decree pardoning eleven people who had been condemned to long prison sentences for their alleged involvement in the attempted assassination of the president on 25 November 2002. Hundreds of people had been arrested in the aftermath of that event.

The pardon concerns in particular:

- Turkmenistan's former Grand Mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah²⁹.
- The former Minister for Justice, Youssoup Haitiv.

²⁷ It is difficult to identify which are the priority pipeline projects. In any case, relations with Russia and China take priority over those with Europe.

²⁸ This embassy has been closed for six years due to a disagreement concerning the Serdar-Kapaz oil deposit. *Turkmenistan will reopen embassy in Azerbaijan*, Associated Press, 13 June 2007. The two presidents appear to have reached an agreement.

²⁹ Arrested in March 2004 following the failed assassination attempt. He was likely also punished for his criticism of the verses of the *Rukhnama* engraved on the mosque of Gok-Depe.

- The ex-deputy Minister for Agriculture, Imamdourdy Ykloumov.
- Olga Prokofeva, sister-in-law of Saparmurat Niyazov, former Deputy Minister for Agriculture until 1994, found guilty of attempted assassination and coup d'Etat against President Niyazov in 2002³⁰.

The full list of the eleven people pardoned was not published.

However, none of the most important men arrested after November 2002 have been released, including in particular Boris Shikhmuradov, ex Minister for Foreign Affairs under Saparmurat Niyazov or Batyr Berdyev, Turkmen ambassador to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Similarly, it might seem surprising that Yolly Gurbanmuradov, who was a victim of the 2005 purges while he was responsible for the country's hydrocarbon sector³¹, did not benefit from presidential clemency. Originally from the same village as the future president, it seems, above all, that he played a key role in his accession to government. According to one of the leaders of the opposition in exile, Khoudaiberdy Orazov, it is Gurbanmuradov who convinced Niyazov to appoint Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov as minister for health, who would represent his (Niyazov's) interests in the Cabinet of Ministers. In early 2007, a rumour circulated that he had been released from prison and placed in a detention centre³².

Why does the President not release these high-profile political prisoners? Is it the new President's firm resolve not to take the risk of reintroducing into the political arena men and women who were once powerful? Does he intend to release them from jail once his power is definitively consolidated?

These questions are even more disconcerting given that the opposition, or those people who claim to represent it, no longer mean anything in Turkmenistan. They have generally been outside the country for too long to hope to play any political role at present. These personalities are no longer considered fully-fledged actors on the Turkmen political scene. Many of these members of the opposition are, in fact, far from faultless themselves³³, which causes further damage to their credibility. "Nobody is supporting them at the diplomatic level", confided a European diplomat in January, outside a meeting of all Turkmen opposition factions in Vienna.

A future Turkmen 'spring'?

Although Turkmenistan is clearly not taking the democratic route, this is not stopping it from experiencing a degree of domestic liberalization. This pragmatism marks the beginning of an era of possibilities for the country's future elite – young students – who, generally, are very influenced by official Turkmen national ideology, and dream of putting their knowledge and energy at the service of their country.

But, conscious of the difficulties faced by the State, these young people deplore the corruption and various political, economic and social deadlocks which prevent them from putting this enthusiasm at the service of their country and making Turkmenistan a State like any other within the international community. However, it appears that the young people continue to believe in a future Turkmen 'spring', which could lead them to getting involved in the new administration.

³⁰ She was sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment in absentia. A leader of the opposition, she now lives in exile. Olga Prokofeva was allegedly tortured.

³¹ President Niyazov then felt that this man had become too powerful and threatened his own power.

³² Unconfirmed information

³³ Khudaiberdy Orazov, for example, is an oligarch who grew rich while he was director of the Central Bank of Turkmenistan, for which legal action is being taken against him in his country.

Prospects for Turkmen youth

It cannot be denied that there is today, despite everything – the excessive use of the *Rukhnama*, the shortage of qualified teachers, the corruption and all of the deficiencies experienced by the system since 1991 – an educated Turkmen youth. These young people are from Turkmenistan's emerging middle class, from those urban families that firstly benefited from Soviet cultural influence, and then from the beginnings of capitalism, and managed to best navigate the catastrophic years of the Niyazov era. The luckier ones among these young people, a minority, managed to finish their studies abroad. This group recounts its experiences, opinions and current expectations, which are representative of those of an entire generation.

This research is based exclusively on a panel of 24 Turkmen students³⁴ who are studying four-year courses at the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in fields ranging from management to comparative politics and journalism. All were previously pupils at Turkish-Turkmen or 'Russian' schools in Turkmenistan³⁵. They were then selected by the NGOs American Council for Collaboration in Education and Language Study (ACCELS) and International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), and were awarded scholarships to study at schools in the United States in the framework of the Freedom Support Act (FSA) or Future Leaders Exchange Program (FLEX), financed by the US Department of State. These young people, in particular, could come in the near future to play a role in the development of their country.

Education and training

In the eyes of all the country's young people, the new president is still in a state of grace. There is, on the face of it, no hostility. The majority of young people even enthusiastically welcomed the reforms of the education system announced piecemeal. For the first time, having suffered as a result of the catastrophic decisions of President Niyazov, they feel they are being taken into consideration and being provided for by the new regime.

Failed education in Turkmenistan

The quality of the Turkmen education system has plummeted since the country gained its independence. The number of educational establishments is decreasing. In addition to the 1,700 secondary schools and fifteen or so vocational institutions, there are only sixteen universities and higher education institutions left. Various reasons are cited for this situation.

- The poor implementation of the major education reform of 1993 and, among other things, the move from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet.

³⁴ The author met 14 boys and 10 girls in May 2007, of a total of 115 Turkmen students enrolled at the university .

They all have a scholarship of \$2050, paid directly to the university by the United States Government and various private foundations and organizations.

All of the passages that follow in inverted commas are from interviews conducted by the author with these young people in May 2007 in Bishkek.

³⁵ The Russian schools as such were closed from 1993 onwards. One of the main leitmotifs of the major reform of 1993 was to break with Soviet teaching style and at the same time with Russian teaching. Only one school that really taught through Russian survived – the Pushkin school in Ashgabat, which has now actually been extended (with funding from Gazprom) in view of the apparent improvement in Russo-Turkmen relations.

- The dictatorial regime and the dominance of the *Rukhnama*, which particularly hindered the development of some disciplines, notably the humanities³⁶.
- The lack of human resources after independence: many Russians left Turkmenistan in the early 1990s; many teachers were dismissed after the 1993 reform.
- The inadequacy of education budgets, which are insufficient to buy enough school books.
- The reduction of university education from five to two years (to which two years are to be added as work experience in the public sector).
- The absence of private schools, which prevents Turkmen from accessing an alternative system, with the exception of some local or foreign NGOs that give language or computer classes.

Meanwhile, widespread corruption remains the principal impediment to receiving a fair and successful education. Admission to university is generally only possible by paying a sum of between five and eight thousand dollars. You must pay at least €4,500 for admission to the Makhtumkuli University in Ashgabat, one of the most prestigious in the country. It appears that the bribe is paid only on admission to the university. Unlike the practice observed in other former Soviet republics, it does not seem to be necessary to pay the professors or university management at exam time. In order to gain access to employment afterwards, you have to be prepared to part with more money, through a network of obligees. Here again, according to the very principle of corruption, the individual who benefits from it should not be obliged to work in order to obtain it. In this way, the Turkmen administrations are riddled with incompetence.

The sums of money demanded and paid are very significant in a country where the average salary is in the region of 50 euro per month. For many, studies are so expensive that young men "give up the idea of studying, do their military service and become taxi-drivers. This is what one of my friends did, for example", explains one student. Those who have a few hundred euro (every month) to pay for their children's studies send them to universities in other countries of the CIS, such as Kyrgyzstan, where between three and four thousand Turkmen students are enrolled in university.

Degrees: the key to opening doors

It is true that securing employment depends on one's connections and the price paid to buy a post, but, without a degree, a candidate is not even considered for the job. A degree is the passport required for all careers. It is therefore paradoxically essential and insufficient at the same time.

All the young Turkmen interviewed by the author pointed out this contradiction, but they all also wish to believe that a degree and skills will suffice in the future to gain a place within the system. In the end, they have a very pro-active attitude, along the lines of "if you want it, you can do it".

The race for good schools

The families of this emerging Turkmen middle class try to enrol their children in the best schools in the country, that is, primarily the so-called 'Russian' or Turkish-Turkmen schools, which are established in all the big towns.

³⁶ In 2003, President Niyazov suggested excluding the humanities and natural sciences from the secondary school and higher education curricula, describing them as 'obscure' and 'disconnected from real life'.

During Saparmurat Niyazov's reign, the majority of Russian schools had to close, as study of the *Rukhnama* became omnipresent and foreign languages, including Russian, were taught increasingly less.

Those schools that resisted, particularly the Turkish schools, offered better quality teaching, notably several foreign languages – Russian, Turkish and even English. Moreover, some of the teaching staff came from Turkey. It is certain that the young Turkmen who benefited from these schools had a different exposure to the world.

The inevitable stay abroad

Studying at a foreign university is almost an imperative for any young Turkmen who wishes to succeed. The inadequacy of the university level in Turkmenistan, inversely proportionate to the level of corruption, forces students to find alternatives abroad³⁷. The luckiest among them benefit from a Western, especially American, programme which covers all their costs.

The aim for these young people is to receive a real education and obtain a real degree, even though, until now, foreign qualifications have been held in much lower esteem than those obtained in Turkmenistan. It was worth risking this rather than stagnating in an environment that is still strongly influenced by Sovietism and incompetence. All the students who spoke with the author highlighted that "teaching in Turkmenistan is very old-fashioned and out-dated, still very Soviet. There is a lack of modern material in schools and universities. Teachers are ill-qualified and still too influenced by the system of the USSR." A young female student, brought up in a highly educated family, said "my family wanted me to go to study elsewhere because of the low level in Turkmenistan. My parents wanted me to go to Russia. But, in the end, they decided on Bishkek. It wasn't as far from home".

Paradoxically, it should be noted that the principal obstacle to children studying abroad is not financial. Turkmen middle-class families that are not well off send their children to university in Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Turkey and Kyrgyzstan, where fees are not too high and the cost of living is more or less the same as in Turkmenistan. In Och in Kyrgyzstan, for example, university enrolment costs only €250. Children from rich families, on the other hand, manage to get places in establishments in Russia or the United States and Britain, provided they have learned English³⁸.

The reduction of compulsory education in Turkmenistan to nine years had recently complicated equivalences with foreign systems. Students either had to do a preparatory year or start a programme at a lower level. The reform initiated by the new president could therefore only be popular among young people.

Gaining university experience abroad is, above all, part of a strategy to find employment in Turkmenistan itself. One of the students the author spoke to confided that his "aim is to work for two or three years in Europe, for example, in finance or economics, and then return to Turkmenistan and look for work in a multinational company, in the oil or gas sector. Then, he wishes out loud, if I work well, Turkmen managers will notice and ask me to work for a national organization. Our country needs specialists. Eventually, I want to be a civil servant, to serve my country, to be someone who is needed, to be called up...and if that doesn't work, I will set up my own business". Similarly, others admit to

³⁷ Interview conducted by the author with Turkmen students in Kyrgyzstan, May 2007.

³⁸ Many parents do not hesitate to pay for private English classes for their children, despite the relatively high cost of such classes. Young Turkmen can take classes at various NGOs such as ACCELS and IREX, but also, for example, in the "Bashkent" Turkish education centres in all of the country's major towns, which offer courses designed by the University of Oxford. This allows the students to pass the competitive exams for places on the Freedom Support Act (FSA) school exchange programme for secondary students, financed by the US Department of State. They can then apply to universities in the United States. These organizations compensate for the shortage of English teachers in the country. In 2003-2004, 12,000 teachers were dismissed, many of whom were language teachers. As a result, English is barely taught in Turkmen schools. Cf. *Studying foreign languages in Turkmenistan*, "Turkmen Initiatives for Human Rights" TIHR, 30 October 2006.

having the ambition to “work for a foreign NGO or an international organization (UN, OSCE) in Turkmenistan. They offer good salaries – around \$250 per month”.

A refined view of Turkmenistan

Over the course of their time abroad, many young Turkmen start to wonder about the state of their country. Their return from this experience fundamentally clarifies their perceptions, particularly concerning their home country.

A young girl returning from the United States after a year at school in Wisconsin as part of the FLEX programme recounted her impressions: “This time abroad was for me a series of shocks. The first was arriving in the United States from my small town of Balkanabad. Then, discovering my country from the United States because I could read stuff about Turkmenistan that I had never read before. I learned a lot of things about my country, particularly about the politics and economy. I was also surprised to see how much the American media exaggerate on many subjects, such as the story about all the provincial hospitals closing. And then I returned, and fell into a depression. Everything seemed so outdated to me, and our natural resources are used so poorly...there is a lack of experts in all areas”.

This experience in the United States rarely leads to a rejection of the Western world. On the contrary, the young people are forced to compare the regimes and political practices they have encountered, either from personal experience or from having studied them. One young person, for example, says he is rather taken with Sweden and Norway which he considers “more democratic than the United States”. Generally, they all prefer Europe to the United States “because of the old and powerful culture”. In the same way, many recognize a number of advantages to the Turkmen police State. One of the students notes that “if Turkmenistan was as open as Kyrgyzstan, with our clan society there would be war.” Another adds: “I liked our former president because he managed to maintain discipline in our country. We could also have experienced a revolution, like in Kyrgyzstan, but we have seen that it is pointless. We need a strong leader”. On this point, for the majority of the Turkmen students the author met, the overthrow of power experienced by this small Central Asian republic in March 2005, referred to as the “Tulip Revolution” resulted only in chaos, looting and disorder. This opinion leads almost all of them, on their return, to appreciate the order that reigns in Turkmenistan, even though this is at the expense of freedom.

The ambition to serve their country

In the end, the majority of the young Turkmen who benefit from a stint abroad return with the pressing desire to be useful to the State and their homeland. Contrary to what is commonly believed, studies abroad, in the United States in particular, do not in the least result in the student adhering to a counter model critical of their country, but rather seems a solid experience that will have to be made of benefit to and put to the service of the needs of Turkmenistan.

In this way, some students take the initiative of setting up in their home towns ‘community services’³⁹ for the NGO ACCELS. One of them, for example, gives classes on life in the United States, globalization (an unknown concept in Turkmenistan) and equality between men and women. This attitude seems to be encouraged by ACCELS, which urges the young people to get involved in such voluntary projects that help their compatriots.

This desire to serve their country has only been reinforced since Kurbanguly Berdimukhamedov became president. The education reform he launched is welcomed by young Turkmen. Three points are specifically raised in this context:

³⁹ Voluntary work with a relatively informal group or organization of which one is a member.

- Extension of compulsory schooling from nine to ten years.
- Opening of branches of Russian universities in Ashgabat⁴⁰.
- Enhanced prestige of foreign degrees.

In the short term, from now on it will be possible to study and work abroad. Taking into account the unemployment rate⁴¹ in the country, this opening up seems absolutely salutary. The recognition of foreign degrees is perceived as an additional encouragement to returning to work in the country. One student in Bishkek expressed the views of many of her young compatriots, stating: "the new President has not made any mistakes since his arrival". According to them, he seems in tune with the expectations of the population, particularly the young people.

The majority of students try to be optimistic with regard to the evolution of the regime. Many hope that the new president will encourage meritocracy and act to combat corruption, so as to promote real quality degrees, obtained abroad in particular. They believe in opening up society, particularly to foreign media. In the minds of these young people, many opportunities to participate in Turkmenistan's development are opening themselves up.

The Turkmen middle class in power

It is very unlikely that the young people from the middle class, represented by those students in Bishkek, will eventually gain access to high decision-making posts and drive a new approach to issues. The current socio-politico-economic elite in Turkmenistan does not seem accessible. "It's another world", says one student. Often, young people from the educated elite in power study in Ashgabat at the Pushkin high school, an establishment reserved for children of those in power, to which children from the middle class do not have access.

This exclusivity of the Turkmen elite naturally gives rise to criticism from among the students interviewed. Several denounced "those who are ministers or senior civil servants but don't have any qualifications". "The children of the rich pay a lot of money to go to university. Then they don't study when they're in. That doesn't stop them from getting good, very well-paid, jobs and having nice cars etc. All that stems from corruption. But they end up in jail". This story, told in the form of an observation, closely resembles a call for justice.

It is not unrealistic to think, however, that the new Turkmen president, who has already taken a number of measures aimed precisely at that emerging Turkmen middle class, might eventually want to make it one of the pillars of his power, against the powerful established networks that reigned under his predecessor. The reform of the education system is not one of the lesser signals he has already given. It is in no way intended to encourage social and political revolution. On the contrary, the new regime needs loyalty and trust, dedication and optimism. These Turkmen students, symbols of this middle class, are clearly prepared to get involved in that way. All they want is for their merits to be recognized - they are in no way querulous. They are proposing an ideological synthesis, merging tradition and openness to the outside world, which corresponds perfectly with the political interests of the new regime.

⁴⁰ A branch of the very reputable Moscow State University (MGU), and another of the Goubkina Medical University.

⁴¹ Unofficial figures point to an unemployment rate of between 50 and 70% in the republic.

Ideological reconstruction

Young Turkmen today, from a developing Turkmen urban middle class, attach great importance to tradition, or, more specifically, to their perception of their traditions. Moreover, those who have had the opportunity to study abroad feed on direct external influences. These, however, also affect the masses of young Turkmen in Turkmenistan, via international television networks. Music, fashion and cinema thus influence large sectors of urban young Turkmen in Turkmenistan. The Soviet control that persists, associated with the strength of the propaganda surrounding the *Rukhnama*, makes it possible to contain foreign cultural influences. Rather than experiencing openness to the outside world in the form of protests, or even revolution, the young people attempt to reconcile it with what they refer to as 'their' values, those of nationalism and Turkmen 'tradition'.

The importance of tradition.

The value placed on tradition serves as the basis for Turkmen nationalism. National and patriotic values take up traditional Turkmen principles, which include moral instructions (healthy living, honesty), social practices (secularism, respect for elders, solidarity) and dress codes⁴². The young people the author spoke with subscribe to and fully recognize these customs. None of them even consider it a political instrumentalization. Nor do they show signs of feeling stifled, or having their freedom hampered, even though these messages are permanently drummed into them in educational establishments, at public celebrations and in the media.

For example, a young student in Bishkek considers that "these traditional values are not really encouraged by the government for political reasons. Each family itself teaches its own children from the start what is right and wrong, that they must respect the old *Aksakal*, that guests must have the best place at the table and be given the best pieces of meat at mealtimes".

Another student attempts to sincerely demonstrate that a 'Turkmen-style' democracy does, in fact, exist: "it depends what you understand by democracy. If it means that everyone is involved in political life then, no, of course we do not have a democracy. But with the *Halk Maslahaty*, our people's Council, where many wise old men⁴³, among others, are members, we can say that the authorities are constantly listening to the people. In our society we have so many dealings with each other that everything is known and all of the population's needs can be referred to the higher authorities". Here, of course, he is echoing official propaganda.

Basically, they feel that they have 'roots', which are an essential part of their identity. So one of them decided to stay in his country despite his mother's wishes for him to work abroad. Another notes that he knows several young people, including among his close friends, who have signed up for extra-curricular courses to learn how to make traditional Turkmen rugs.

Finally, it is interesting to note that it is vital, at the higher end of the social ladder, to clearly declare one's support for traditional, and therefore national, values. Indeed, power rests largely on nationalism and the claim of uniqueness.

⁴² At school, girls must wear the traditional Turkmen dress as well as the little hat known as the *takhia*. Boys, on the other hand, wear a uniform, and have to get a bowl haircut once a month.

⁴³ In particular the *Aksakal* (white beards), who command great respect in Turkmenistan and are members of various councils charged with resolving local conflicts, for example.

Dress habits

The adjustments to tradition concern primarily, and in fact almost exclusively, dress codes. Young people blithely attempt to reconcile them with modernity and personal style, copied from the fashion of international or local stars disseminated in particular by the Russian MTV music station which is very popular among young Turkmen. Jeans, for example, are a silent demand for freedom of dress. They are banned in schools, but are common in discos.

All in all, although the dress code is regulated for everybody in the public domain, in private it all depends on the individual family. The usual divide in Turkmenistan between the 'Russified' (synonymous with 'Europeanized') and the others, who have never left the country, notably to study, is central to understanding the way people dress. 'Russified' Turkmen can dress in a more Western fashion.

Foreign cultural influences.

Foreign culture penetrates Turkmenistan through television. Satellite dishes are proliferating throughout the country. All sorts of music CDs, particularly Western, are available in the country's markets, arriving from Russia.

Eminem and other American artists, whether rap, R'n'B or hip hop, are very popular in Turkmenistan. "Young Turkmen dream of America", explains one student. Rap, in particular, is very popular in Turkmenistan, but there is no revolutionary message or any social demands hiding behind this strong liking for this style of music. Alongside the American stars, there are also more 'regional' stars, such as the Turkish singer Tarkan and Russian bands and singers, such as Dima Bilan.

There appear to be few underground groups in Turkmenistan. Any there are are made up of young Russians in the country, such as the group Outplaz, which plays in various private venues or less popular nightclubs.

In theory, the internet is the other means of accessing the outside world. The opening of internet cafés in the big towns across the country, at the request of President Berdymukhamedov, is not revolutionizing attitudes. In fact, they are not the first source of internet access in the country. At the ACCELS and IREX centres in Ashgabat and the other main towns, there are free computer rooms available for young people. The new cafés appear to be primarily used by young adults, often looking for jobs, who use the computers to type up their CVs or cover letters or administrative correspondence.

Unpoliticized youth

Young Turkmen are not and cannot be politically involved. The majority of them seem to think it is impossible to change the situation and that it is therefore pointless to risk one's career or youth by trying to spread a political message. They are most probably right on this point. However, there is no shortage of initiatives. It is true that Turkmen students who have had the opportunity to study abroad might be considered the exception in comparison to those who remained in the country and suffered the effects of the educational deficiencies of Saparmurat Niyazov's regime.

However, you only need a few decided people to lead others. It is no doubt still too early for these people to express themselves and undertake activities, even cultural or humanitarian ones. The means of getting involved remain too controlled by the authorities.

All of these students really hope that, at the instigation of the new president, at least private non-political initiatives will be able to be supported and that the general climate of suspicion that prevailed under Saparmurat Niyazov will subside.

Concluding summary

It is true that Turkmen youth is not limited to that lucky, urbanized generation from the emerging middle class that has had the chance to live abroad. Nonetheless, their connection to the country does not differ significantly. The majority of young Turkmen from all social classes proclaim an attachment to tradition tainted with nationalism that they attempt to modernize under the impact of external influences. However, these young people, with the exception of a few among the children of the current political-administrative elite, cannot expect to have any influence over the destiny of the State in the short term. Basically, it seems that the educated children of the developing middle class represent what Turkmen youth as a whole strives to be, that is, a spawning ground of fairly well educated young people, agents of change, loyal to the State and connected with the outside world, but excluded from the circles of political and economic power. This process is still largely contingent upon the full implementation of the education system reforms launched by the new president. If they are completed successfully, the movement will only be accelerated.

From that time on, Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov's new State would be well advised to rely on a popular base that is so solid and dynamic. The new team leading Turkmenistan, today seeking skills capable of putting the country back on the right development track, will find in this potential youth an ideal pillar to support its power which is still developing. Clearly, the accession to power of the new president has aroused in these young people a real hope of seeing Turkmenistan function better. They want to believe that their merits will be recognized and their skills and knowledge in demand. They are ready to serve the regime both ideologically and professionally. Their interests coincide perfectly.

From a European perspective, it can only be pertinent to encourage and support this process of transition in Turkmenistan towards asserted pragmatism and openness to the outside world, with the aim of creating deep links with Turkmenistan in the medium term. It would be good, however, unlike the United States, not to propose an applicable political model straight away. The young students, as we saw, have signalled their attachment to a 'Turkmen-style' form of democracy, at least to a national, even patriotic, tradition. The European Union would certainly be better off giving priority to providing assistance for technical and scientific training in the strategic sectors of the economy, such as the gas and oil industries, textiles, agriculture and construction. In this way, the Member States could judiciously offer a series of scholarships to Turkmen students and/or organize inter-university exchanges. Basically, what Turkmenistan needs more than political thinkers preaching democracy is competent engineers capable of ensuring effective gas production, to fulfil all its export promises.



Europe, our frontier

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