

BERDYMUKHAMMEDOV'S TURKMENISTAN A MODEST SHIFT IN DOMESTIC AND SOCIAL POLITICS

Sebastien Peyrouse *

Abstract:

While Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov seeks to reintegrate Turkmenistan on the international and regional levels and attempts to establish new partnerships with foreign companies to accelerate investments, domestic policy seems a poor reflection of the regime's evolution. The authorities' attention is focused on social issues totally neglected by the regime of Saparmurat Niyazov. New schools were built, provincial hospitals have reopened, roads and railways are improving, land reforms, however small, are welcomed, and a modest decentralization has emerged. However, the general social situation remains tense: a total absence of public liberty, violations of religious rights, mostly unacknowledged massive unemployment, a loss of confidence of the middle classes, whose educational and professional opportunities have been reduced, increasing corruption of state organs, and rural poverty influenced by the social problems of recent years. Yet, the main long-term problem probably remains the country's lack of human capital, which was destroyed in recent decades and needs time to be restored.

Keywords:

Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, Domestic Politics, Education, Health, Media, Food Security.

Introduction:

In December 2006, the death of Saparmurat Niyazov raised many questions about the future evolution of Turkmenistan. The eccentricities and the dictatorial management style of the deceased president, his systematic repression of all opposition, and the increasingly difficult social situation, exacerbated by the financial misappropriations of the president and his entourage, lent the country an extremely negative image. The arrival to power of a new president raised hopes of a "thaw" along the lines of Nikita Khrushchev after the death of Stalin. The declarations and first measures decreed by the new Turkmen leader did in fact go in this direction, as Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov reoriented certain aspects of Turkmen policy. On the international level, he encouraged an exit from the country's isolationist policies and the revival of foreign cooperation, in particular in the economic realm.¹ Concerning domestic affairs, he announced large reforms in key sectors such as health, education, and agriculture. Among other improvements, he brought far greater attention to the trafficking and consumption of

* **Managing Editor, China & Eurasia Forum Quarterly.** This paper is also appearing simultaneously in *China & Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 2010, pp.47-67.

¹ Richard Pomfret, "Turkmenistan's foreign policy," *The China Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 2008, pp. 22-26.

drugs.² These problems have been recognized publicly and the country now participates in various regional and international projects aimed at limiting their growth. However, the much-awaited shift in domestic policies has been more cautious than what has taken place in foreign policy.

One of the most visible steps, the new Code of Social Security instituted in Spring 2007 has helped restore full pensions, or significantly increase them, for nearly 200,000 citizens who had been arbitrarily deprived under Niyazov. Water and electricity are still free, payments for rent and heating are symbolic, and many staples such as flour and salt are sold at low prices and sometimes for a loss, as during Soviet times. Meanwhile other benefits enjoyed by the Turkmen people have been put into question: rising gasoline prices, limiting free access to city gas to 600 m³ per year, the override to be charged through meters installed in 2010. The official exchange rate was 5,200 Manat to the dollar when Berdymukhammedov came to power, and has now reached 14,200 Manat, leading to very high inflation. Furthermore, since unemployment is officially non-existent, pauperized people cannot claim social or financial assistance. Finally, despite the promises to decentralize made in 2007 and the increased attention by the new president to rural areas, the autonomy of municipalities and local councils is more symbolic than real.

Public Space, Still Controlled:

Cult of Personality: Has One President Followed the Other?

Upon taking office, Berdymukhammedov put forth all the signs of deference necessary to establish his legitimacy as the successor of the first president of independent Turkmenistan and to pay homage to Niyazov. The “men of the December 21,” who put him in power, belonged mainly to the *siloviki* (representatives of the power ministries) and expected ideological stability. However, later in 2007, Berdymukhammedov diminished references to the “holy book” or the *Ruhnama*, Niyazov’s ideological “Red Book”, ordered the removal of Niyazov’s portraits from primary and secondary schools immediately after the educational reform, and seemed to hesitate as to where to take the ideological framework. From 2008 to 2009, the portraits of Niyazov in public spaces were gradually removed, new bank notes were issued without the face of the first president, and the official cult of the

² Bernd Rechel, Inga Sikorskaya, Martin McKee, *Health in Turkmenistan after Niyazov*, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, London, 2009, p. 25.

³ However number of holidays deemed not compliant with Turkmen traditions, such as Valentine’s Day, have been banned.

Ruhnama was quietly shelved. The most apparent excesses, like the changes to the calendar, were abolished and popular holidays such as Victory Day and International Women's Day were reinstated.³ Relocating the Neutrality Arch, one of the primary symbols of the Niyazov regime, was openly discussed. "Deniyazovization" accelerated when in 2009 the birthday of the former president was ignored, even though the occasion was marked with great festivities during his lifetime. The *Ruhnama* continues to be taught, but it is now recommended that teachers not to dwell on the chapters that mention Niyazov and his family. A special commission to confiscate Niyazov-era books, including the *Ruhnama*, was set up and searches were conducted of government and business offices.⁴

However, this progressive erasure of the cult of Niyazov gave way to a new cult of the second president and his family. Although Berdymukhammedov did not proclaim himself a prophet or confer upon his works prophylactic virtues as Niyazov decreed for the *Ruhnama*, the cult of personality continues. The portraits and writings of Berdymukhammedov have gradually replaced those of Niyazov.⁵ The media continue to describe him with designations similar to those of his predecessor, including "leader of the fair state", "dear son of the Turkmen people", and the "backbone of the nation."⁶ The theme of the "Great Renaissance", for which Berdymukhammedov would be the same incarnation, has replaced that of the "golden age" of the nation.⁷ A museum dedicated to his grandfather, who was killed during the great earthquake of 1948, opened in 2009 and the cult of his parents is spreading.⁸ Some measures related to the cult of personality should not be understood as mere gestures of ideological upbringing, but arise because of financial reasons. The requirement for each university or school to buy presidential works constitutes a significant source of revenue for the presidential administration. The decree on the obligation

⁴ Kumush Ovezova, "Author of Rukhnama not to be mentioned," *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, March 24, 2009, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1029>> (May 2, 2010).

⁵ Personal observations, Ashgabat, April 2008.

⁶ "Happy new cult!" *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, September 9, 2009, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=115I>> (May 2, 2010).

⁷ Slavomir Horak, "Velikoe V ozrozhdenie: prodolzhenie ideologicheskoi traditsii Turkmenistan [The Great Renaissance. The Continuity of Ideological Tradition of Turkmenistan]," *Politiks* 3, 2009, pp.100-115

⁸ "Grandfather's museum," *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, November 27, 2009, <<http://www.wochrono-tmoorg/en/?id=1226>> (May 2, 2010); "The statue of the President's father installed in the Ashgabat higher educational establishment," *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, February 15, 2010, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1289>> (May 2, 2010).

to play sports in the name of the good physical health of the nation requires citizens to pay a fee to join sports clubs, and is similar to the mandate to lay wreaths on monuments related to Turkmenbashi (Niyazov's ceremonial name) and his family, since the floral industry is run by relatives of the president.

Through multiple staged media appearances, Berdymukhammedov has sought to preserve a paternalistic attitude. He continues the tradition set by Niyazov of televised sessions in which persons accused of crimes are publicly reprimanded, making note of his openness and willingness to fight against crime, corruption, and abuse. A particularly tangible sign of the maintenance of a highly authoritarian regime, the situation of human rights has not improved at all since the death of Niyazov. Aside from very restricted possibilities for expression and movement, individual freedoms are limited. An unofficial curfew has been upheld, forcing citizens to return to their home before eleven in the evening, while a process of forced retraditionalization obliges women to dress in a traditional manner at formal meetings.

A Long-Awaited Cultural and Media Opening Delayed:

Despite the promising signs associated with the reestablishing of the theatre and circus, which were forbidden under Niyazov, the long-awaited cultural liberation has not taken place. In December 2009, the Turkmen national theater was ultimately banned from staging *Metranpazh*, a play by the Russian playwright Alexander Vampilov, as the Ministry of Culture decreed that it was more judicious to put on Turkmen plays.⁹ While all forms of art had been particularly mistreated under Niyazov, the hard sciences received the same treatment and were removed from the public space. Although Berdymukhammedov has not really restored any breathing room for the arts, he has sought to revitalize scientific endeavours, as he is aware of their direct and immediate impact on the state of economic development. By June 2007, he had ordered the reopening of the Academy of Sciences, which was abolished in 1997-1998, established a Fund for science and technology, and has again allowed thesis defenses in the exact science and humanities.¹⁰

A mark of the cultural closure of the regime, the publishing field remains paltry, limited to presidential works and a few other books that the authorities strictly control. All publications are still endorsed by the

⁹ "V Turkmenistane zapreshchena postanovka p'esy russkogo dramaturga [Turkmenistan forbids the staging of Russian dramatic pieces]," *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, December 2, 2009, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/?id=2304>> (May 2, 2010).

¹⁰ Rafiz Abazov, "Science in Turkmenistan: How Far Will Reforms Go?" *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, June 15, 2009, <<http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5150>> (April 14, 2010).

president's ideology advisor, Viktor Khramov, the former director for ideology of the Central Committee of the Turkmen Communist Party. Publishing is carried out by students from the Academy of Arts of Turkmenistan, whose cost is markedly less than that of professionals. Apart from school textbooks, the majority of publications are devoted to the president. In more than eighteen years of independence, not one literary work by a contemporary Turkmen writer has been published. Each year Turkmenistan holds a book fair, which is meant to showcase the cultural revival of the country. Whereas a number of Russian writers travelled to it in 2008, hoping to initiate some cooperation, the country is now so closed off that none of those Russian authors returned in 2009. It is still practically impossible to import books published in Russia, unless one is in possession of a special permit, which is extremely difficult to obtain. Some Russian editors were allowed to make gifts of books, later deposited at Turkmenistan's national library, to the fair in 2009.¹¹ Latinization also poses an obstacle, since the few classics from the Soviet era that have been republished are in Latin writing, which remains difficult to access for many of the country's citizens. In April 2010, Berdymukhammedov finally reopened the municipal libraries that his predecessor had closed down.¹² No additional Cyrillic typography machine was available in the country, with Gazprom reintroducing the first in 2007.

The hoped-for reforms in the area of freedom of the press have remained a dead letter. Today all media organizations are controlled totally by the state and are subject to permanent censorship. Only one information agency exists, the Turkmen State Information Agency (*Turkmen Döwlet Habarlary*) and all the information provided to journalists comes from the presidential press. At present, none of the twenty-five newspapers, fifteen magazines, four television channels, or four radio stations has the least bit of independence. As under Niyazov, the broadcasting of bad news, for example shortages or factory failures, is prohibited. A sociological study conducted clandestinely reveals that the Turkmen population gives priority to watching Russian television, followed by Uzbek and then Turkish television, via satellite;¹³ however,

¹¹ Kumush Ovezova, "Ne vsiakaia kniga - put' k progressu [Not every book is a way to progress]," *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, October 9, 2009, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/?heading=12>> (April 15, 2010).

¹² "V Turkmenii vnov' otkrylis' biblioteki, zakrytye pri Turkmenbashi [The libraries closed in Turkmenistan by Niyazov have reopened]," *Gundogar*, April 1, 2010, <http://www.gundogar.org/?topic_id=25&year=2010&month=4> (April 15, 2010).

¹³ "Pessimizm turkmenskikh telezritelei [The pessimism of Turkmen television audiences]," *Institute for War & Peace Reporting*, July 23, 2010, <<http://iwpr.net/fr/node/47336>> (August 17, 2010).

this remains the privilege of a minority. In 2008, Berdymukhammedov ordered the disassembly of satellite dishes, arguing that they blighted towns. Even if no written order followed, the dishes have begun to be taken down by the administration so they can be replaced by a cable system enabling the state to control the channels to which Turkmen citizens can gain access. According to the Turkmen Initiative report, the dismantling of these dishes is to be continued.¹⁴

In such conditions the vast majority of the population has no interest in the daily newspapers and magazines, which are considered of poor quality and pro-government. In order for periodical publications to survive, the government compels state employees to subscribe to several newspapers at once, and those who do not comply are threatened with dismissal. They must generally subscribe to the newspapers linked with their profession, but also to magazines without any connection to their jobs. Company leaders receive a quota from the ministry indicating the number of copies of each newspaper that must be distributed within the organization. In some provinces, a minimal subscription fee of about US\$18 has been set, a significant amount for those with very low salaries, such as teachers. The number of subscriptions is deducted from salaries and, in many cases, it seems that the interested person is not even asked to which newspaper he or she would like to subscribe. This results in some households receiving two or three copies of the same newspaper when the members of the same family work in different places.¹⁵

All internet subscriptions stipulate that users are not allowed to visit sites containing information likely to harm social morale, relations between the national minorities, and the prestige of the country. Since 2000, the state corporation Turkmentelekom has controlled the entire network. The opening of 15 Internet cafes in 2007 can certainly be counted as progress, but using the web requires the presentation of a passport, and the manager must obligatorily note the name and the address of the user. In 2008, the authorities installed new filters to prevent access to dissident sites.¹⁶ Exchanges of emails via the most popular sites such as Gmail, Yahoo, or Hotmail are monitored. Other sites were blocked in 2009, such as You Tube and Live Journal. Those

¹⁴ On Internet and medias in Turkmenistan, see *O sostoianii svobody sredstv massovoi informatsii, prava na svobodu slova i prava na dostup k informatsii v Turkmenistane* [On the state of the freedom of the press, and the right to free speech and to accessing information in Turkmenistan], Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, Vienna, 2008.

¹⁵ Nazar Saparov, "Subscription to periodicals is underway in Turkmenistan," *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, May 7, 2008, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1090>> (April 15,2010).

¹⁶ Personal observations, Ashgabat, April 2008.

who can gain access to the internet mainly work in companies and businesses, with access for ordinary citizens remaining extremely limited.¹⁷

Minority Rights and Restrictions on Religious Freedom:

The rights of national minorities are widely flouted. Under Niyazov, minorities were deprived of public expression and could not receive education in their national languages. It is still difficult to obtain information on national minority schools, most of which were closed or converted into Turkmen-language institutions. According to the Turkmen Education Initiative, there are only six schools in Mary with some instruction in Russian, five in Turkmenabat, four in Dashoguz, and five in Turkmenbashi.¹⁸ The Uzbek-language schools have all closed. Despite negotiations in 2007 between Nursultan Nazarbayev and Berdymukhammedov to build a Kazakh-language school in Turkmenbashi, it seems that the project has stalled. There is practically no media for the national minorities. Today only one Russian-language newspaper exists, *Neutral'nyi Turkmenistan*, as well as one dual language Russian-Turkmen publicity newspaper, *Habarlar*. The main television channel broadcasts one program in Russian for two hours each day. About 10% of radio information time is in Russian. None of the other national minority languages is used in the media.

Far more than his predecessor, Berdymukhammedov emphasizes the internal dangers that ethnic separatism and religious extremism pose, which the 2009 military doctrine discussed at particular length. The methods of control and repression against religion have barely changed. The second president since independence has extended all regulations imposed under the Soviet regime and then maintained or enhanced by Niyazov, in particular the obligation of every religious movement to register with the Ministry of Justice or else face a criminal penalty. The number of authorized movements remains extremely small. Although the separation of state and religion is specified in the Constitution, it does not exist in practice. The main body of religious control, the Committee for Religious Affairs (*Gengeshi*) continues to appoint Muslim representatives and Orthodox clergy, who then refuse to register "competitor" movements. The situation of religious education is equally difficult, as Berdymukhammedov has not allowed any madrasas to open.

¹⁷ "Prezident Turkmenistana ne vypolniaet obeshchaniia o dostupe v Internet [The president of Turkmenistan fails to respect his promises concerning access to the Internet]," *IWPR*, November 12, 2009, <<http://iwpr.net/fr/node/z9353>> (August 17, 2010); "Turkmen Internet. Our survey," *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, June 16, 2009, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?heading=4&page=17>> (August 17, 2010).

¹⁸ *Turkmenistan. The Reform of the Education System*, Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, Vienna, 2009, p. 20.

Muslims are forbidden from receiving religious training abroad and imams educated outside of Turkmenistan cannot earn tenure; only future Orthodox priests have the “privilege” of going to Russia to study. The number of people authorized to make the *hajj* has remained as low as before, 188 people out of the 5,000 authorized by the Saudi authorities in 2008.¹⁹ Like Uzbekistan, control over Islam is extreme. A somewhat dissident person, even if he or she belongs to a Sufi movement, may be imprisoned for “Wahhabism.” The mosques are empty, as believers prefer to avoid being controlled by the police and assimilated to the Islamists.²⁰

Many minority faiths are also banned, a punishment that is part of a broader policy of discrimination against national minorities. Shiism, practiced by the country's Azeri minority of at least 30,000 people, is a major target. No Shiite mosque can be officially registered and a handful of clandestine establishments and prayer rooms open to Shiites are tolerated in Sunni mosques. These illegal buildings numbered around five in 2008. A Shiite mosque in the village of Bagyr, near Ashgabat, was demolished in 2005. The last Shiite imam of Turkmenbashi, a city that is home to much of the Azeri community, was forced to leave the country the same year.²¹ The Iranian Embassy in Ashgabat maintains its own mosque, which is protected by diplomatic status, but remains inaccessible to citizens of Turkmenistan. This is also the case for Armenians, who were unable to obtain official recognition and are forced to worship in Russian Orthodox churches. Finally, as in most of the other Central Asian republics, a citizen belonging to the titular nationality who has converted to a Christian movement is subject to strong pressures. The Protestant movements are in the sights of the authorities, faithful Protestants lose their jobs and their children are threatened with expulsion from school. Police raids in places of worship or in the homes of believers remain commonplace.²²

Repression continues to be meted out regularly and some Soviet practices have been maintained, such as internment in psychiatric hospitals, which in 2008 happened to a correspondent of Freedom Radio, Sazak Durdymuradov. This practice seems to have returned in force because it can result in detention without going through the courts.

¹⁹ “Turkmenistan: Exit bans, haj ban, visa denials part of state religious isolation policy,” *Forum I8*, February 2, 2010, <http://www.forumI8.org/Archive.php?article_id=I403> (March 8, 2010).

²⁰ Personal observations and interviews with anonymous Turkmen citizens, Ashgabat, April 2008.

²¹ Sebastien Peyrouse, Sadykzhan Ibraimov, “Iran's Central Asia Temptations,” *Currents Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Vol. 10, 2010.

²² On the religious situation, see Felix Corley's reports at www.forumI8.org.

Prisons are overcrowded; the penal facility in the city of Bairamali was built to house 800 people, but now holds between 3,500 and 4,000. Many prisoners prefer to sleep outside, around the barracks when the weather permits. Visitation buildings are far too small, forcing families to pay bribes of around US\$30 to speak to a detained relative.²³ As in other prisons in Central Asia, the more affluent prisoners are able to achieve a higher standard of living, and can even bring in prostitutes and alcohol. Under Niyazov, regular amnesties guaranteed the government substantial income, since they were the result of deals with families. Under Berdymukhammedov, it seems that the number of people pardoned has fallen significantly.

Renewed Social Protections? Education, Health, and Housing: *An Educational System Difficult to Rebuild:*

It is perhaps in education where the hopes have been the highest. Some positive measures were taken and rapidly adopted in February 2007. Mandatory schooling, reduced to nine years by Niyazov, has gone back to ten years.²⁴ However, it still remains one year less than that of Russia, meaning that pupils are unable to obtain the necessary equivalents to pursue their studies in Russian universities. Niyazov eliminated several subjects such as physics, chemistry, universal history, and literature, while Berdymukhammedov has reestablished the human and natural sciences to the curriculum. From first to seventh grade, courses of physical education have also been reintroduced. Despite these positive measures, the announced reforms remain suspended.

The reduction in the number of teaching hours of the *Ruhnama* has also failed to create a freer atmosphere. All textbooks published after 2001 contain citations, texts, and extracts from it. On the other hand, any new textbooks published since 2007 contains multiple references to the new president. Some disciplines aimed at spreading the personality cult of the new president have been included in the curriculum. Students must, for example, study the “Policy of the Renaissance era,” in which they are taught about the new summits the country has attained and the justness of presidential decisions. Another subject called “Basics of a healthy life style” has been made compulsory and is taught on the basis of presidential works for one hour per week across all grades.²⁵ Most of

²³ “Koloniia v Bairamali [Penitentiary colony in Bairamali],” *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, November 11, 2009, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/?id=2263>> (May 15, 2010).

²⁴ “Ovnesenii izmeneniia v Zakon Turkmenistana ‘Ob obrazovanii v Turkmenistane’ [The introduction of changes to the Turkmenistan law ‘On Education in Turkmenistan’],” *Neitra/nyi Turkmenistan*, February 16, 2007.

²⁵ *Turkmenistan. The Reform of the Education System*, p. 10.

the persons responsible for it have no special training in teaching, but are rather recruited on the basis of their availability.

Officially, the number of teaching hours per instructor has been reduced, going from thirty to twenty-four hours per week, as has the number of children per class, which is now limited to twenty-five. But the lack of teachers in rural areas often makes presidential decisions difficult to enforce. Although the authorities announced a forty-percent salary increase for teachers, the raise has not been realized in practice, since this amount is deducted from salaries for various social needs. Most of the country's schools have not been refurbished since independence, with the exception of a few cosmetic renovations undertaken during summer vacations using funds collected from teachers and the parents of pupils. Schools lack qualified staff, for example, for teaching physics and chemistry. Berdymukhammedov decided instead to multiply the construction of new schools. The symbol of the new generation of schools, the Pushkin school, is the only one that maintains a Russian curriculum. Inaugurated in December 2009 in the presence of the Russian and Turkmen presidents, it is financed by Russian energy firms.²⁶ This school has today become one of the striking examples of the corruption of teaching. Even if entry is officially free, bribes of between US\$5,000 and US\$10,000 are allegedly required to enroll one's child, on top of which additional bribes are payable throughout the year, in particular in the form of gifts to teachers.²⁷ The Pushkin school enables access to Russian universities, where the education is better and the fees are markedly lower than in Turkmen universities.

Turkmen schools still have a general lack of textbooks. Most date from the Soviet era, although some were published during the 2000s, including textbooks for physics in 2003, English in 2006, and fourth grade mathematics in 2007. Possibilities for learning foreign languages remain very limited in terms of hours and are restricted to Russian which, given its disappearance as the language of learning, is increasingly taught as a foreign language, sometimes English, rarely German. The majority of Russian teachers left the country after they were dismissed from their positions, following Niyazov's decision to eliminate most of the classes taught in Russian and to forbid state administration to minorities. Until 2001, the country had about 1,900

²⁶ Marina Volkova, "Gazprom Opens School in Ashgabat," *The Voice of Russia*, December 22, 2009, <<http://english.ruvr.ru/2009/12/22/3187073.html>> (May 15, 2010).

²⁷ "Pochem besplatnoe obrazovanie v russkoj shkole? [How much is the free education at the Russian school?]" *Ferghana.ru*, December 30, 2009, <<http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=642,0>> (February 10, 2010).

middle schools, including 49 that provided all of their lessons in Russian and 56 with lessons partly in Russian. In 2001-2002, most were eliminated and the teaching of Russian was reduced from three hours to one hour per week. In Ashgabat, only two schools were able to retain two classes in Russian each. Everywhere else, most Russian courses were shut down and the children sent to Turkmen-speaking classes.²⁸

Berdymukhammedov also announced reforms to the university system, including the opening of new faculties, the implementation of computer science units, and fee-paying education. The obligation imposed by Niyazov to complete two years of work experience before entering university has been abolished. Tertiary education is no longer limited to two years and can reach four, five, or six years with the reintroduction of doctoral programmes, which had been eliminated. Research departments in universities are reopening, such as the Supreme Certification Commission, which has already conferred several dozen doctorates. The number of university places, however, remains well below the demand. In 2008, there were 20,000 applicants for only 4,000 places in the higher institutes, which means that the majority of students had to pay bribes. In 2008, new institutions emerged such as the Academy of Civil Service, the Institute of International Relations, and the National Institute of Economy and Management. Entry into the Institute of the Economy and Management, the state university, the Police Academy, or the military or energy institutes entails bribes of between US\$10,000 and US\$20,000.²⁹

Despite Berdymukhammedov promoting the end of the international isolation of the country, education and research exchanges with other countries remain difficult. In April 2009, the Turkmen president and his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev decided to institute reciprocal recognition for degrees; however, the measure has not yet been ratified by the countries' respective parliaments. The renowned Gubkin Institute of Oil and Gas, based in Moscow, has opened an office in Ashgabat to train young Turkmen to be oil professionals, as the country faces an acute shortage of technicians. But the operation and recruitment of the institute has fared poorly due to the steady deterioration of relations between Russia and Turkmenistan. In the context of deepening relations with the European Union, which is attempting to stand as a key partner of the new president, the Tempus and Erasmus Mundus programmes for student exchange were

²⁸ *Turkmenistan. The Reform of the Education System*, p. 20.

²⁹ "Somnitel'nyi progress turkmenskogo obrazovaniia [The doubtful progress of the Turkmen education system]," September 18, 2009, <<http://gundog.newhost.ru/?oII04842500000000000013000000>> (June 3, 2010).

established, although their adaptation to the Turkmen system has been particularly unsuccessful.³⁰ In 2009, the Turkmen authorities cut down drastically on cooperation with foreign universities, in particular those in Europe and the United States. Almost one hundred Turkmen students with the proper visas and enrollment documents were forbidden from pursuing their studies abroad. The authorities were concerned with the ideas, deemed too liberal, being disseminated in certain new universities in Central Asia, such as the American University of Bishkek or the KIMEP in Almaty. A study conducted by the Ministry of Education reportedly showed that 80% of students at the end of their schooling would prefer to leave the country to study or work abroad.³¹

Progress and Setbacks in Public Health:

The second area where reforms have been most anticipated is health. The new president has committed himself to putting the health system back on its feet, since it suffered severely from Niyazov's policies during his final years. In spite of the improvements, the Turkmen health system remains in bad shape. The number of trained personnel is far too few, and the system is suffering from the effects of the reduction of the duration of medical training to two years, which Niyazov imposed. Berdymukhammedov, a dentist by trade, increased the length of training to five years, but it will be necessary to wait a while until proper standards are again reached. Basic medical care remains very limited, in particular in rural areas, where access to care is clearly inefficient. Health financing is by no means transparent. As the Rechel report notes, it is still difficult to obtain official information about the country's health system, yet this is indispensable in the effort to outline strategies for improvement.³²

The regime maintains secrecy over numerous medical domains and their financing, and it continues to hinder the diagnosis of infectious diseases. It refuses, for example, to recognize that people are infected with HIV / AIDS and allegedly has reported only one new case between 1989 and 2006.³³ According to the Rechel report, this very low level is

³⁰ Peter Jones, "The EU-Central Asia Education Initiative," *EUCAM working Paper*, no. 9, February 2010, <http://www.eucentralasia.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/PDF/Working_Papers/WP9-EN.pdf> (April 17, 2010).

³¹ "Turkmenistan: Students Slapped with Five- Year Travel Ban," *Eurasianet.org*, November 12, 2009, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/civil_society/articles/eav111309b.shtml> (April 23, 2010). The ban was partly lifted at the beginning of 2010.

³² Bernd Rechel, Inga Sikorskaya, Martin McKee, *Health in Turkmenistan after Niyazov*.

³³ Bernd Rechel, Inga Sikorskaya, Martin McKee, *Health in Turkmenistan after Niyazov*, p. 18.

not credible. In 2009, for fear of provoking a movement of panic among the population, Berdymukhammedov restricted information on preventative measures designed to limit the spread of bird flu, and representatives from the Ministry of Health prohibited school children and state employees from wearing masks. The Ministry seems to have focused much more on the fight against the rumors than against the spread of the H₁N₁ virus. In November 2009, it requested the withdrawal of brochures providing information about the flu and its prevention that had been distributed in state organs. Posters designed in collaboration with UNICEF and put up in public places were also taken down.

Several international institutions, including the European Union, the World Bank, and the Islamic Development Bank, have expressed readiness to assist the country in the health sector; however, the hoped for cooperation with the international community in this area has also been called into question. Public health NGOs have not been able to develop, despite the policies of opening promised by Berdymukhammedov. The last NGO established in Turkmenistan, Doctors without Borders (MSF), left the country after claiming it was confronted with permanent hindrances from the political authorities.³⁴ Indeed, the government henceforth claimed to be capable of fighting tuberculosis on its own, but this is highly unlikely given the progression of infectious diseases. While MSF did not contest the authorities' plans for improvement in health-which include the opening of a center for the treatment and prevention of tuberculosis in 2007, within the State Medicine Institute, and a new strategy for the prevention and the fight against tuberculosis for 2008 to 2015-these plans will not bear any results until 2013-2014 at the earliest. Moreover, one person in five affected by tuberculosis in the country has developed a drug-resistant form, which is very difficult to treat and calls for international knowledge.³⁵

The Construction Boom and Continued Expropriation:

The famous construction boom under the Niyazov regime did not end with the leadership change. Berdymukhammedov seems as symbolically invested in new building projects as his predecessor. The corruption related to real estate is indeed a source of huge gains, whether in the context of big construction projects or smaller buildings. In 2008, for example, Berdymukhammedov ordered the renovation of two cinemas in

³⁴ "Vrachi bez granits. Pri prezidente-medike nam v Turkmenii mesta ne nashlos [Doctors Without Border did not find its place under the President-physician]," *Deutsche Welle*, December 22, 2009, <<http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,5046276,00.html>> (March 9, 2010).

³⁵ *Deutsche Welle*, December 22, 2009.

Ashgabat, allocating US\$20 million for the project while independent estimates showed that the actual cost of the renovation amounted to only US\$1 million. New buildings remain unaffordable for a majority of the population. Under Niyazov, the price of a three-room apartment in a new building was nearly US\$300,000 at the official rate (or approximately US\$62,000 at the black market rate). A credit scheme meant to facilitate the acquisition of new apartments has been adopted. However, the political and administrative authorities of several *vellayat* (regions) that lack the financial resources demand that buyers repay the loans too quickly. In Ashgabat, several persons who bought their apartments with cash or repaid their credit on time have been suspected of corruption and money laundering and summoned by the Prosecutor or Ministry of National Security (MNB).³⁶

The majority of newly constructed buildings are empty, whatever their original function. Cultural buildings are largely under-utilized; luxury homes cannot find tenants, and hotels lack guests. This is especially true in the famous tourist area of Avaza, near Turkmenbashi, the main Turkmen Caspian port formerly known as Krasnovodsk. The seaside resort is supposed to have sixty hotels, restaurants and shopping centers, recreational activities, a seven kilometer-long artificial river, six artificial lakes with beaches and islands, four acres of wooded parks, sports complexes, a Disneyland, a planetarium, an aquarium, and even an ice rink, as well as a free trade area to promote market entry for foreign companies. In 2009, six hotels were in operation to accommodate roughly the first 2,000 Turkmen tourists, often the workers of companies involved in the construction of Avaza who were forced to take their holidays there.³⁷

The policy of property seizure by the government without compensation has also continued. Despite official pronouncements guaranteeing compensation for any expropriated property, the government uses many arguments to deny the planned compensatory measures, which rarely correspond to the actual value of the destroyed houses.³⁸ The value of the underlying land, for example, is not taken into account in the compensation process. Many of those expelled are given small apartments in remote areas in return for their houses with land near

³⁶ "Housing issue," *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, August 25, 2009 <<http://www.chronotm.org/en/?id=1139>> (April 17, 2010).

³⁷ "Otdykhat' zastavia-t [Rest is mandatory]," *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, December 7, 2009, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/?id=2305>> (February 15, 2010).

³⁸ Dovelet Ovezov, Inga Sikorskaya, "Nedovol'stvo kampaniei turkmenskikh vlastei po snosu zhilykh domov [Property seizure organized by the Turkmen authorities creates discontent]," *Institute for War & Peace Reporting*, March 1, 2010, <<http://www.iwpr.net/ru/node/29959>> (May 2, 2010).

the city center. The political and administrative pressures are such that most of the victims of expropriations prefer silence. However, several reports confirm that the situation has improved compared to Niyazov, who in many cases offered no compensation at all.

Social and Economic Development Issues:

Agriculture and Food Security:

Agricultural questions, and the linked subject of food security, are important issues for the Turkmen authorities as they worry about destabilization in rural areas. Despite the reforms announced in 2007, meant to develop the private sector and allow farmers greater initiative, this sector is kept under tight state control. Numerous legislative changes have barely altered the situation. The state leases land, choosing crops and setting production quotas for so-called independent farmers, and then buys their output at unilaterally set prices. Farmers are still obligated to grow cotton or wheat, despite the desire of many to cultivate produce or livestock. The announced reforms have not led to a liberalization of agriculture, although some government actions, such as increasing the purchase price of grain in January 2009 (with a further increase expected to come in 2010), have helped to encourage grain production.³⁹ Berdymukhammedov also expressed support for livestock development, since half the meat and poultry consumed in the country is imported from the United States, Iran, Russia, and Kazakhstan. But with the exception of a few new factory farms for poultry financed by Turkish companies, the sector remains moribund.

To ensure autonomy in food production, an obsession of the regime, Turkmenistan would need to produce 2.5 million tons of grain each year. Officially, the country produces 1.8 million tons, but independent estimates describe an output that does not exceed one million tons,⁴⁰ thus necessitating imports of more than half the country's grain stocks. In addition, production is often of poor quality due to harsh climatic conditions and limited productivity. Some of the grain can only be used for livestock feed. Moreover, as under the previous regime, overly ambitious economic goals sometimes lead to serious consequences for the lives of farmers and the rest of the population. In the regions of Lebap and Dashoguz in 2008, the authorities were too late in giving farmers permission to prepare fields for new cottonseed, in the mistaken

³⁹ "Turkmen Farmers to Get Higher Prices," *Institute for War & Peace Reporting*, January 21, 2009, <<http://www.iwpr.net/fr/node/3961>> (March 17, 2010).

⁴⁰ "Turkmenistan. State hails food self-sufficiency, but many say claim is overblown," *Asia News*, July 26, 2010, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/State-hails-food-self-sufficiency, but-many-say-claim-is-overblown-I9037.html>, (July 26, 2010).

expectation of maximum yield. The fields were then already frozen and tens of thousands of hectares could not be worked.⁴¹ At the end of 2008, flour shortages provoked serious social tensions in these regions. Queues for bread multiplied and stocks sold within hours. Fear of renewed shortages of flour and rising wheat prices have led some people to buy more bread than necessary. Turkmen flour is still rationed, but the better off can obtain more costly Russian or Kazakh flour, which is sold without restrictions. Problems with the procurement of bread were still reported in some provincial cities in 2009.

The Deterioration of Irrigation Systems:

The agricultural situation is particularly sensitive as the country faces severe environmental problems, particularly the dilapidated state of its irrigation systems combined with the high water requirements of some crops, such as wheat and rice.⁴² The authorities seem to want to maximize the repair of existing structures and claim to have modernized hundreds of kilometers of irrigation networks throughout the country. Many of them remain dry or damaged and the country lacks the water pumps needed to irrigate its fields. The question becomes even more acute in the regions of Lebap and Dashoguz, fed by the Amu Darya, a river that had particularly low water levels in 2008. In both areas, a majority of wheat fields have not received any water at all and the crops can survive only through the water from snowfall. As throughout the rest of Central Asia, the winter of 2007-2008 was terribly cold, and in the region of Dashoguz, the livestock died.⁴³

The start of construction on the "Lake of the Golden Age", presented by Niyazov's propaganda as the solution to the irrigation problems of a part of the country, is considered by many experts as a future environmental tragedy and a source of potential tensions with neighbouring Uzbekistan. Berdymukhammedov has not questioned its construction, as he sees it as one of the engines of future irrigation of the Karakum desert. The filling of the lake, at a length of 103 kilometers and a width of 18.6 kilometers, could take fifteen years and cost about US\$4.5 billion. It is likely to have serious consequences, among them the drying up of already-abused irrigation networks, the massive evaporation of the lake during the summer, the desertification of the area around the

⁴¹ Sayara Djumabaeva, "Agricultural sector will recover on command," *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, January 8, 2009, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?heading=16>> (March 3, 2010).

⁴² Oraz Akhmet, "Will bread be sufficient?" *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, September 15, 2008, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1013>> June 11, 2009).

⁴³ "Considerable loss of livestock," *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, June 3, 2008, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=553> (April 17, 2010).

lake and, therefore, displacement by wind of sand and chemicals.⁴⁴

Turkmenistan is already affected by the ecological crisis of the Aral Sea, the poor water quality of which facilitates the spread of hepatitis, intestinal problems, and other infectious diseases. Despite some desalination and water purification plants that Turkish firms like Sekhil installed in the border region of Dashoguz, many Turkmen citizens continue each day to drink and use water unfit for consumption. The difficulty of accessing drinking water thus adds to environmental issues for a part of the population, especially in rural areas. In the summer of 2009, the authorities of Turkmenbashi and Dashoguz had to make cuts in water; in the latter city, water was available for only two to three hours per day. Steps have been taken to try to facilitate access to water, for example by allowing private companies to distill it, but demand still far exceeds supply and the cost of privatized water is too large for rural areas.⁴⁵

Costly Transportation:

Since coming to power, Berdymukhammedov had expressed his willingness to develop transport networks to open up the country and accelerate the transit of foreign goods on national territory. However, the improved transportation of goods is not intended to apply to individuals. The movement of people remains very difficult, for both economic and political reasons. During the Soviet era, Turkmens grew accustomed to travel, whether by land or air, at very low, subsidized prices. Despite several increases, this privilege had been kept under Niyazov for travel within the country, but the cost of transportation has dramatically increased since 2008. The lack of air links also leads to a demand that greatly exceeds supply and promotes the black market, where tickets are sometimes sold at ten times their face value. The movement across borders is always difficult; the fares for the most desirable routes especially to Turkey, the main destination for small business (*chelnohi*) - have risen sharply. The cost of road transport has also increased significantly, further reducing the mobility of Turkmen citizens. From 2007 to 2008, the cost of petrol increased by a factor of eight.⁴⁶ The political authorities decided to distribute free gasoline coupons beginning in the first half of 2010, to a maximum of 12.0 liters per month per

⁴⁴ Richard Stone, "A New Great Lake or Dead Sea?" *Science* 320, May 23, 2008, pp. 1002-1005; "Turkmenistan to create desert sea," *BBC News*, July 16, 2009, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/asia-pacific/8154467.stm>> (May 11, 2010).

⁴⁵ Nazar Saparov, "Lack of water in Turkmenistan," *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, May 28, 2008, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1091>> (May I, 2009).

⁴⁶ Alan Peskov, "Mnimoe blagosostoianie [An Illusory Well-Being]," *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, August 27, 2009, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/?id=2102>> (December 3, 2009).

vehicle. A car owner receives coupons for 72.0 liters every six months. The procedure for obtaining these vouchers has grown administratively complex after hundreds of thousands of tons of fuel was attributed to persons not entitled to it.⁴⁷

Migratory Flows and a Growing Demographic Crisis:

Despite the numerous administrative barriers, it seems that more and more people leave Turkmenistan to work abroad in Turkey, Iran, and increasingly Russia. These would-be migrants obtain tourist visas through travel agencies or manage to receive official documents to leave the country due to deep administrative corruption. Although much lower than migration from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, larger migration flows from Turkmenistan appear poised to take shape, mainly in the north and east. In 2005, 1,800 Turkmen “tourists” from the Dzhoguz region visited Russia; in 2006, this figure increased to nearly 2,400 and reached 4,000 in 2008.⁴⁸ While ethnic Turkmen tend to move to Turkey and Iran for work, ethnic Russians whose occupations have been particularly affected by Turkmen policies, such as teachers and professionals, dominate the flows toward Russia. Berdymukhammedov stopped Moscow’s repatriation programme of the Russians from abroad launched in 2006, closing the provincial offices of the Russian emigration services in 2008.⁴⁹

For the authorities, this emigration discredits the social reforms of the second president and further shrinks a population already in decline since independence. Unlike his predecessor, who said that the country had about 7 million inhabitants, Berdymukhammedov has quietly acknowledged the demographic crisis facing the regime, especially in urban areas. While no reliable figures are available, families with four to five children, common in the last years of the Soviet Union, have become rarer in large cities because of the social crisis affecting the country. Aid to mothers is extremely limited, around US\$12 per month.⁵⁰ Several measures have been taken to motivate births. In March 2008, a law known as *Ene Mahri* stated that women who give birth to at least eight children could receive social benefits. However, this financial incentive

⁴⁷ Meret Babaev, “Coupons for free Gasoline,” *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, December 24, 2009, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1239>> (February 10, 2010).

⁴⁸ Marlene Laruelle, Ed., *Dynamiques migratoires et changements soci(haux en Asie centrale* [Migration dynamics and societal changes in Central Asia], Petra, Paris, 2010.

⁴⁹ Essen Aman, “Turkmens move to Russia,” *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, April 28, 2008, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1058>> (March 10, 2010).

⁵⁰ Essen Aman, “Large families are uncommon in today’s Turkmenistan,” *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, March 25, 2008, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1054>> (May 10, 2010).

is limited and the status of *Ene Mahri* is granted only after the eighth child reaches eight years of age and all the other children are still alive, an indirect revelation of the high infant mortality rates in the country.⁵¹

Increasingly Omnipresent Corruption:

As in other countries in the region, the prestige of a profession includes not only potential salary earned, but also the potential for bribes that can be extracted in the exercise of one's profession. Corruption is especially accentuated in Turkmenistan, where high turnover in the upper echelons of the administration lead state officials to attempt to enrich themselves as quickly as possible. This turnover ensured the stability of the system under Niyazov, as it does under Berdymukhammedov, since ministers protesting against their dismissal become the target of inspections in which they are accused of corruption and embezzlement. In a country where unemployment is high, all functions related to the allocation of posts are particularly profitable. Berdymukhammedov therefore has not at all changed the political-administrative structure, and Niyazov-era policies continue in all the profitable sectors of the national economy. This is especially true for gas revenues, a portion of which is sent to accounts in Europe (Deutsche Bank is regularly suspected to receive Turkmen presidential accounts). The only difference between Berdymukhammedov and his predecessor is the clear implication for members of his family and his clan, the Ahal-Teke.⁵² The new president has therefore attempted to substitute his own financial networks to those controlled by the former president and his family. On a more modest social scale, small entrepreneurs face continuing pressures from the bureaucracy. Health and tax inspections are the most common because the payoff is usually more profitable than the fine that would otherwise be levied. Tax inspectors seem to calculate their payoff at about five to six percent of total sales. Thus to obtain a license to sell alcohol, one will generally pay a bribe of US\$7,000.⁵³

Conclusion:

While Berdymukhammedov seeks to reintegrate the country on the international and regional levels and attempts to establish new partnerships with foreign companies to accelerate investments have been made, domestic policy seems a poor reflection of the regime's evolution.

⁵¹ Essen Aman, *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, March 25, 2008.

⁵² Maksat Alikperov, "Turkmen Gas as a family business," *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, February 3, 2010, <<http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=I276>> (March 10, 2010).

⁵³ Maksat Alikperov, "Large-scale corruption of small businesses," *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, February 13, 2010, <www.chrono-tm.org/en/?heading=34> (May 16, 2010).

It is indirectly affected by the slight opening in certain international areas; Turkish, European, Japanese, and South Korean investments may change the situation in the region by opening a new facility or rehabilitating local production, which has sometimes been the case in recent years. The authorities' attention is focused on social issues totally neglected by the regime of Saparmurat Niyazov. New schools were built, provincial hospitals have reopened, roads and railways are improving, land reforms, however small, are welcomed, and a modest decentralization of power has emerged. However, the general social situation remains tense: a total absence of public liberty, violations of religious rights, mostly unacknowledged mass unemployment, a loss of confidence by the middle classes whose educational and professional opportunities have been reduced, increasing corruption of state organs, and rural poverty influenced by the social problems of recent years (rising gasoline prices, decreased numbers of subsidized products, difficulties in ensuring food security, and increased malnutrition). Rather than these issues, the main long-term problem probably remains the country's lack of human capital, which was destroyed in recent decades and needs time to be restored.

The case of Turkmenistan reveals how difficult it is to relax a dictatorial regime and to liberalize domestic policies so long as the same elites are in place. The change of a president does not necessarily entail real evolutions of political practices. The domestic policies remain the most difficult to liberalize, while foreign policy, in particular when energy issues are concerned, evolve more rapidly. This raises questions about the leeway given to authoritarian countries like Turkmenistan, which is often classified by international human rights organizations in the same category as North Korea and Myanmar/Burma. One may indeed wonder whether the tendency of Western observers to paint the regime in terms of its leader is relevant. Can Berdymukhammedov change the situation consistently or is he a hostage to the system? What degree of flexibility will be possible in a few years for the regime in an unstable geopolitical environment like that of Central Asia? The advocates of inaction can manipulate these questions, however legitimate. Throughout the twentieth century, some politicians with iron wills have drastically influenced their system and liberalized some of the most closed regimes. Given the complexity of the challenge, one may wonder to what extent Turkmen elites can attempt to change their country and meet growing social demands without creating a situation in which the political system would be completely reconsidered and former elites delegitimized.