Governance in Central Asia: The case of Turkmenistan

Bess Brown

Authoritarianism in Central Asia
Encouraging democratization in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia has proved to be one of the most difficult tasks undertaken by the international community since these states gained their independence eleven years ago. In the immediate aftermath of the breakup of the USSR, it appeared that the leaderships of at least Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were committed to following a course of political reform that would eventually result in these two countries adopting the characteristics of democratic states. Tajikistan’s development in all areas — economic and social as well as political — was stunted by the five-year civil war. The two countries that seemed least likely to move rapidly toward political reform were Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, an expectation that has unfortunately proved accurate.

By 2003 the hopes for relatively rapid democratization have been disappointed throughout Central Asia. Not one of the states in the region has discarded the authoritarianism that was imbibed from the Soviet system and that is considered by the Central Asian rulers to be a necessary corollary to the process of transition from a Soviet-style political and economic structure to a European-type democratic and free-market one.

For all the rulers in the region, maintaining control is the top priority, usually in the name of preventing economic and social upheaval during the transition period. While all the Central Asian countries have had presidential elections since they became independent, with the exception of Tajikistan there has been no change at the top since 1990, at the latest. And Tajikistan’s president is currently attempting to change the country’s Constitution to permit him at least one more seven-year term. Whatever the justification they give publicly for wanting to remain in office, none of them wants to give up power voluntarily, as the various ways they have used to tamper with elections has demonstrated. Kyrgyzstan’s Askar Akaev, who seems to be trying to restore the perception of the international community that he is truly committed to democratization, is reported to have said in recent months that he would not care to run again. But against that assertion it is necessary to consider how presidential elections have been conducted in Kyrgyzstan, with credible challengers being denied the chance to run.

The failure to create a reliable mechanism for leadership change is only one of the potential sources of instability arising from the reluctance of the Central Asian leaderships to fully commit themselves to democratization, but it is likely to be one of the most dangerous because of the potential for political and social chaos when the current ruler departs the scene. But the country that is most likely to suffer

---

1 Bess Brown was Political Officer in the OSCE Centre in Ashgabat from January 1999 to August 2002.
the most from a change at the top is the one that has made the least progress toward democratization, namely Turkmenistan.

**The dynamics of power in Turkmenistan**

According to the assessment of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), of all post-Soviet states Turkmenistan lags furthest behind in all transition indicators. At the beginning of Turkmenistan’s existence as an independent state, this country with a relatively small population and enormous hydrocarbon resources, had the best chance of all the new countries in the region of providing its people with a high standard of living in a relatively short period of time. But this expectation failed to take into account the idiosyncrasies of Turkmenistan’s head of state, Saparmurat Niyazov. This former head of the republic’s Communist Party saw himself as a modern-day Ataturk who would meld the Turkmen tribes into a nation-state that would be his personal monument and claim to immortality. During the years of independence, President Niyazov has succeeded in concentrating unchecked powers in his hands. And the international community, faced with a choice between taking advantage of economic opportunity and alienating the increasingly dictatorial leader, forgot some of the hard lessons learned in dealing with the Soviet system, particularly that a ruler such as Niyazov is likely to see accommodation as a sign of acquiescence in his actions.

Politically, Turkmenistan has become a caricature of Stalinism minus the indiscriminate terror, at least until the alleged attempt on Niyazov’s life in November 2002. An efficient system of informers run by the Committee (now Ministry) for National Security has helped to keep popular disaffection under control. The president presents himself as the benevolent father-figure who knows best what the population of the country needs and should want. To ensure the loyalty of the population, soon after independence he began supplying free gas, water and electricity. The citizens are constantly reminded of how good their life is in comparison with other countries that do not enjoy such benefits. The result has been to create a society based on dependence.2

Niyazov himself has sought to justify his paternalism by pointing out that Turkmenistan is a completely new state made up of tribes sharing a common history, language and cultural traditions, but who in the centuries prior to the Russian takeover in the 1880s had fought more among themselves than with outside forces. It is the task of the president to create a national consciousness that takes precedence over tribal identity. Judging from the attitudes of the Turkmen

---

2 Probably the best sources for a general overview of the political and social situation in Turkmenistan is the series of annual human rights reports issued by the US State Department. They may be found on the Department’s website, www.state.gov. Much of the information in this article was obtained during the author’s three and a half years living and working in Turkmenistan, 1999-2002, and hundreds of conversations with Turkmen citizens, including government officials at all levels, and representatives of international organizations working in the country, none of whom can be cited by name for obvious reasons. The reports by various authors on specific developments in Turkmenistan that are published on the Eurasianet.org website are very helpful.

*Helsinki Monitor 2003 no. 3*