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Staging Legitimacy: Mechanisms for Power Retention in Turkmenistan

Introduction

The rulers of Turkmenistan, while retaining a remarkable degree of domestic political stability, have succeeded in transforming the former Soviet republic into an independent state. The foundation for their success is a system of multiple and frequently interlocking mechanisms and performances focused on the retention of power. A key characteristic of this system is the hybridity of the methods applied, which display post-Soviet, totalitarian, rentier-state, and sultanist features, as well as – in certain areas – elements of post-Stalinism. Complemented by various kinds of performance and display, this system serves equally to encourage nation-building and as a basis for justifying and legitimizing the rule of the president.

Mechanisms and Structures of Power

The rulers of Turkmenistan succeeded in emerging from the implosion of the USSR in 1990-91 not just largely undamaged but in a significantly stronger position. To achieve this, the state, while retaining numerous features of the Soviet system of government – and reviving some Stalinist mechanisms – has been reduced to a tool of the government, whose only public face and figure-head is the president. This is typified by the fact that the representatives of all state institutions are personally answerable to the president, who may subject them to public dressing downs or transfer or fire them at will. This patriarchal personnel system is a means of safeguarding presidential power, and further serves to

- block the formation of alternative centres of power,
- destroy networks and patronage structures that could potentially rival that of the president,
- remove competitors and undesired members of the government,
- create an atmosphere of fear among state employees that serves to largely paralyse them from undertaking autonomous activity, and
- demonstrate the extent of presidential power and that of the existing hierarchies to the population.

At the same time, the usually phony reasons given for dismissal and imprisonment give the outward appearance that the president is essentially inter-

ested in the wellbeing of the population. Yet the high turnover rates in nearly all key positions mean that the government is permanently in a state of weakness. This appears to be a deliberate means of displaying the president as an anchor of continuity and stability in the midst of a highly unstable government.

International Relations: between Reality and (Mis)Representation

In Turkmenistan's international relations, there are clear contradictions between the levels of rhetoric and practice. The government pursues a foreign policy that deliberately seeks isolation and distance, yet the wider world plays a major role in the domestic sphere, where the government attempts to present Turkmenistan to the population as a highly integrated and well-respected member of the international community – in some regards even as a global role model. The cause of this contradiction is the equal value placed on the role of the international community in the overall system of rhetorical legitimization of the actions of the regime, on the one hand, and the mistrust of the potential consequences of uncontrollable foreign influence on the country's population, on the other.

One characteristic of Turkmenistan's international isolation is the nearly total refusal to maintain multilateral relations. Equally, bilateral contacts do not go beyond the minimum level determined by economic imperatives. To the extent that the government depends upon investment and expertise from abroad to ensure revenues from gas exports, it enters into partnerships with states that turn a blind eye to the flagrant human rights abuses. Besides Russia, which remains Turkmenistan's number one trading partner, these include, most significantly, China, Turkey, and Iran. Nevertheless, the country has recently faced considerable economic difficulties, and since the assumption of power of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, there have been some initial signs of a reluctant willingness to cautiously expand the limited range of contacts.

The government makes use of the near-total shielding of the population from foreign influences as a key instrument for the stabilization of its power by

- applying, since independence, an extremely restrictive visa policy, with the consequence that very few tourists reach the country, and are – outside the capital – required to be accompanied at all times by representatives of the official tourism service,
- banning most foreign print media in order to create almost total media isolation,
- blocking reception of foreign radio broadcasters since the 1990s,
- issuing a general ban on satellite dishes, as the president did in 2008, on the grounds that they damaged the visual environment.

The guiding principle of the exclusively state-owned media is to present a wholly positive depiction of the living conditions of the entire Turkmen people, the government's policies, the work of state authorities and, in particular, the actions of the president.

Turkmenistan's conspicuous strategy of distancing itself from the other post-Soviet states in Central Asia serves to justify its policy of national autonomy. Consequently, the many political, economic, social, historical, religious, and cultural commonalities it shares with the other states in the region are never mentioned in official publications; of the seven planned free-trade zones near the border, none has been established; and little progress has been made in creating a functioning cross-border infrastructure.

The president presents himself to his people as the outstandingly well-connected and well-respected leader of an internationally significant country, and uses this image to justify his tight grip on power. To shore up this claim,

- visits of foreign delegations are orchestrated with great pomp and ceremony and presented as events that will receive worldwide attention, regardless of their real significance;
- the president's foreign trips are regularly presented in the domestic media as serving to maintain established good relations, demonstrating these to the population;
- the praise given to the president by foreign dignitaries and visitors to Turkmenistan is reported in exhaustive detail; and
- book translations undertaken by international companies as a means of initiating business contacts are presented as proof of the worldwide interest in the thought of Berdimuhamedow.¹

At the same time, the international community is used as a general yardstick for the actions and achievements of the state. For instance, constitutional and legislative changes, decreed without exception by the president, are justified, irrespective of their content, by means of reference to the necessity of adapting to international norms or fulfilling so-called international standards. To defuse potential criticism of the human rights situation, Berdimuhamedow continually stresses that Turkmenistan is one of the richest and most highly developed countries on earth. In October 2014, he issued a decree, according to which "remarkable achievements have been gained in all sectors of the national economy [...] as well as in strengthening the foundations of a democratic, legal and secular state [...] enhancing the international prestige of neutral Turkmenistan and promoting and widening friendly [...] relations

¹ Cf. e.g., A number of books created by the President of Turkmenistan have been translated into the Czech and English languages, in: *Turkmenistan – The Golden Age*, 28 June 2012, at: http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/_eng/?id=990. Turkmenistan – The Golden Age Online Newspaper is supported by the State News Agency of Turkmenistan (Türkmen Döwlet Habarlargullugynyň, TDH). Citations are partly in English in the original and partly translated from the Russian by the author.

with nations and states of the world”². Gifts from foreign visitors are displayed in a monumental building specially erected in the south of the capital city, where they are described as “proof of the globally unparalleled standing of the president”.³

A further key propaganda element is the claim that products and services from Turkmenistan enjoy high international regard. This seeks to encourage the development of national pride and is presented in numerous media reports as symbolic of the successful modernization of the country. For instance, the media describes the production of consumer goods in Turkmenistan as meeting global standards,⁴ the country’s education, health, and social-security system as corresponding to international norms,⁵ sporting events in Turkmenistan as arousing “broad interest around the world”,⁶ and sporting facilities as “international level”.⁷ The same tendency can be seen in Berdimuhamedow’s personal efforts to gain recognition for world records set in Turkmenistan. Representatives of the Guinness Book of Records are invited to Ashgabat on an annual basis. Most recently, the city was certified as containing the greatest number of buildings clad in white marble (2013), the world’s largest indoor Ferris wheel (2012), the largest carpet in the world (2011), and the largest eight-point-star-shaped architectural feature (2011).⁸ Although the government would like to make use of success in prestigious sporting events, Turkmenistan’s lack of success in international competitions means that the focus has turned to the healthy lifestyle of the Turkmen people in general – with President Berdimuhamedow presented as the most prominent example.

2 Awards from the Motherland, in: *Turkmenistan – the Golden Age*, 20 October 2014, at: http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/_eng/?id=4098.

3 Museum guide, 19 May 2009.

4 Vepa Orazliev, Made in Turkmenistan, in: *Turkmenistan International Magazine* 6/2008, pp. 30-49, here: p. 37; also available at: http://www.turkmenistaninfo.ru/?page_id=6&type=article&elem_id=page_6/magazine_67/560&lang_id=en.

5 News broadcast on the “Turkmenistan” channel, 25 May 2009, at 10:00 a.m.

6 News broadcast on the “Turkmenistan” channel, 4 October 2009, at 10:00 a.m.

7 President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow sovershil rabochuyu poezdki po Ashkhabadu [President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow made a working visit to Ashgabat], in: *Turkmenistan – Zolotoi vek* [Turkmenistan – The Golden Age], 13 September 2012, at: www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/?id=2263.

8 Cf. Niyazova stanovitsya vse menshe [Niyazov is becoming less], in: *Khronika Turkmenistana* [Chronicle of Turkmenistan], 2 June 2013, at: www.chrono-tm.org/2013/06/niyazova-stanovitsya-vse-menshe; Turkmen Ferry Wheel gets into Guinness Book of Records, in: *Turkmenistan.ru*, 20 May 2012, at: www.turkmenistan.ru/en/articles/16268.html; World largest carpet made in Turkmenistan, in: *Turkmenistan.ru*, 1 November 2011, at: <http://www.turkmenistan.ru/en/articles/15558.html>; Star of Oguzkhan on Ashgabat’s TV tower hits Guinness Book of Records, in: *Turkmenistan.ru*, 31 October 2011, at: www.turkmenistan.ru/en/articles/15549.html.

Domestic Mechanisms for the Retention of Power

Although the constitution provides for it, there is no evidence of attempts to put the separation of powers into practice in Turkmenistan.⁹ The key feature of the political system in Turkmenistan is the ultimate supremacy of executive power, which is concentrated in the hands of the president. State institutions operate entirely according to instructions received from the president and his closest personal advisors. This is true of the courts as well as the parliament, which always passes the laws proposed by the president unanimously.

Religious life is controlled by means of the Council (*gengesh*) for Religious Affairs. Appointed by and reporting to the president, it monitors compliance with state policy on religion right down to the local level. Religious expression in Turkmenistan outside state control is illegal. According to official statistics, approval rates and election turnout figures are both between the high 90s and 100 per cent. Independent monitors have so far not been permitted to observe elections. Given the obvious and total lack of any democratic standards, the OSCE has refrained from making any attempts to arrange the sending of observers in recent years. In view of this, the fuzziness surrounding the distribution of competencies, and the lack of transparent decision-making, Turkmenistan comes near the bottom of all worldwide indexes measuring transparency and the rule of law.¹⁰

Contrary to the official portrayal of a homogeneous Turkmen nation, the people of Turkmenistan identify less with their nation than with one of the country's many tribes and clans. The continuing significance of tribal identities has been met by the president with a classic policy of divide and rule. The main beneficiary of this approach is the Akhal-Teke tribe, whose traditional home is the area around the capital, and to which both presidents of independent Turkmenistan have belonged. Since his assumption of power, Berdimuhamedow has removed the members of other tribes from all key positions in the state, replacing them with members of his tribe. Since these individuals have also tended to fill positions below them with members of their tribe, the Akhal-Teke now also dominate key areas of the state outside their traditional tribal territories down to the local level. As a consequence of the widespread corruption that pervades relations in nearly every sphere of public and private life – according to Transparency International, Turkmenistan has been one of the most corrupt states worldwide for years¹¹ – opportunities for

9 Cf. Institute for War and Peace Reporting/IWPR, *Turkmen Leader to Keep Lid on Democracy*, 14 April 2009, at: www.iwpr.net/report-news/turkmen-leader-keep-lid-democracy.

10 Cf. e.g. The Heritage Foundation, *2014 Index of Economic Freedom, Turkmenistan*, at: www.heritage.org/index/country/Turkmenistan; the Bertelsmann Stiftung, *Transformation Index BTI 2014*, at: www.bti-project.de/atlas; and Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2013, Turkmenistan*, at: www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2013/turkmenistan.

11 Cf. Transparency International, *The 2013 Corruption Perception Index*, at: <http://transparency.org/cpi2013>.

enrichment exist that provide Akhal-Teke with financial benefits as well as a hold on political power. The Akhal-Teke are therefore strongly in favour of retaining the current system.

A further means of retaining power is a system of incentives and disincentives that functions according to a model of relations between the population and the state developed and regulated by the government. This includes a comprehensive system of subsidies that ensures many goods and services are provided free or for a nominal charge. This broad redistribution of state revenues that ensures a large section of the population are provided with an adequate standard of living regardless of their personal income, is presented as a specific feature of Turkmenistan's system of government that can be attributed directly to the president. This serves not just to strengthen the position of the president, but also to give the population the impression that changing the system would bring direct negative consequences.

In exercising their desire to maintain control, the government makes use of a comprehensive apparatus of surveillance and repression. With a disregard for basic human rights, citizens of Turkmenistan are subject to almost total surveillance and extensive restrictions as they lead their everyday lives. This applies to freedom of religion, movement, and assembly, freedom of opinion and the press, and brings considerable restrictions to the use of media and the internet. In October 2008, a high ranking representative of the House for Free Creativity (the state media centre) noted sweepingly that censorship in Turkmenistan placed "high demands on the journalistic quality of praise". For more than a decade, Turkmenistan has occupied one of the bottom three positions in the World Press Freedom index.¹²

Ultimately, the exercise of fundamental civic and human rights, if not expressly forbidden, is only possible under supervision of the state. Any and all behaviour that deviates from the state-defined norms is severely punished. To enable this, the government operates an extensive network of punishment and work camps. The government has so far been successful in stamping out opposition before it could develop.

Education policy is also almost entirely focused on inculcating the state ideology of Turkmen nationalism and the excellence of the president's rule. Mass events organized by the state are a major feature of everyday life in Turkmenistan. Although participation is voluntary in principle, non-attendance can be heavily penalized. The function of these events is to lavish praise on the president and to express support for Turkmen nationalism. To this end, complex routines are choreographed, in which anything up to a hundred thousand participants often begin to rehearse months before the event. Besides regulating at least a part of the population's free time, these events also serve to reduce the widespread underemployment. The possibility of

12 Cf. Reporters Without Borders, *World Press Freedom Index 2014*, at: <http://rsf.org/index2014/en-index2014.php>.

using the labour of a considerable portion of the economically active population in more productive ways is not open for discussion.

Role of the Economic System

Turkmenistan's revenues from the export of gas underpin both the economy and the regime in Turkmenistan. The country possesses the fourth largest natural gas reserves in the world, which, thanks to the geomorphological conditions, are relative inexpensive to exploit. Relying on pipelines owing to an absence of ocean coastline, the government has managed to greatly diversify its trading partners in recent years. While the Soviet infrastructure was designed to allow export only to Russia, two pipelines have recently been opened to northern Iran, as has a high-volume link to China. An additional pipeline is planned to pass through Afghanistan to Pakistan and Fazilka in the Indian state of Punjab. The government's position in negotiating the price for exported gas has strengthened as a result, though it has not yet been able to reap the benefits of this as Turkmenistan's one-sided reliance on gas exports has led to the development of rentier-state structures that have a powerful negative effect on the country's long-term economic development. Alongside these factors, Turkmenistan also suffers from the fiscal consequences of the phenomenon commonly known as the "Dutch Disease", which frequently results from an economy structured in this way¹³ and has a negative effect on the development of a competitive manufacturing sector and the growth of domestic demand.

Turkmenistan's economy, which continues to be centrally planned, involves a broad degree of state control over virtually all the country's economic activity.¹⁴ As a result, international economic contacts require state approval, and business relations are conducted with state participation. Not only does the habit of employing people based on their tribal affiliation mean that state revenues are intricately entangled with the personal income of the president, it is also virtually impossible to differentiate between state finances and those of state-owned businesses and institutions. The latter, in a way that represents a continuation of Soviet practices, are required not only to perform their ordinary business activities and achieve the results planned for them, but also to undertake additional services for the state in areas (e.g. residential construction or park management) that have nothing to do with their core business. The companies that are contracted to perform these construction and service tasks are themselves also state-owned. This entangled state of affairs has led to the development of an ingenious system of barter between

13 Cf. Douglas Yates, *The Rentier State in Africa: Oil Rent Dependency and Neocolonialism in the Republic of Gabon*, Trenton, NJ, 1996.

14 Cf. Richard Pomfret, *Resource Abundance, Governance and Economic Performance in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan*, in: Zentrum für Entwicklungsforschung Bonn, *ZEF-Discussion Papers on Development Policy* 79, Bonn 2004.

contracting parties, those who tender for such contracts, and the managers of state institutions. The result is highly inefficient, yet has personal advantages for many participants and thus contributes to the stability of the system as a whole.

A further barrier to the successful development of the economy of Turkmenistan is the country's largely obsolete infrastructure, which has also been neglected since the 1980s.¹⁵ Even infrastructure for the extraction and transport of natural gas, which is vital to the survival of the regime, suffers from a lack of investment. This can be explained by the government's reliance on foreign expertise for its modernization. In the resulting conflict between the need to open up the country and the desire to maintain Turkmenistan's international isolation, the government tends – with a few necessary exceptions – to favour the latter. This problem is aggravated by the arbitrariness of the authorities' behaviour towards the few foreign companies that are willing to invest in Turkmenistan. They are required to observe numerous formal and informal rules and regulations, which are frequently modified, often contradict one another, and irregularly publicized. This is compounded by the widespread absence of a recognizable and effective system of rule of law.¹⁶

Although a number of large-scale infrastructure projects are given lavish attention in the media, these are less concerned with genuine needs than with keeping as many workers as possible occupied or with building prestige.

The Role of the Cult of Personality in the System of Power

The overwhelmingly ubiquitous personality cult surrounding the president appears so extreme in its totality that international reporting on Turkmenistan is dominated by its exceptional outgrowths. Yet this cult fulfils a number of essential functions. In particular, in the absence of any recognizable regime legitimacy based in rationality or tradition, it underpins the creation and presentation of a legitimacy that is founded on charisma. To do this, it must be put on display and updated regularly. The cult of personality can be seen to serve four interconnected goals:

Legitimizing the Presidency and the President

The existence of the nation state of Turkmenistan is the essential precondition for the existence of the office of the president of Turkmenistan. Consequently, the cult of personality contains a distinctly nationalistic element. The

15 Cf. Jörn Grävingholt, *Krisenpotenziale und Krisenprävention in Zentralasien. Ansatzpunkte für die deutsche Entwicklungszusammenarbeit [Crisis Potential and Crisis Prevention in Central Asia. Suggestions for German Development Co-operation]*, in: Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (ed.): *Berichte und Gutachten* 6, Bonn 2004.

16 Cf. Heritage Foundation, cited above (Note 10).

president may thus be portrayed not only as the creator (Saparmurat Niyazov) or upholder (Berdimuhamedow) of the nation state, but also presented as the personification of the unity of state and nation. To underline this far-reaching claim, the president is given honorifics such as “Great Father of the Turkmen People” (“*Beýik Türkmenbaşy*”: Niyazov) or “Most Honourable President, Protector of the Nation” (“*Hormatly Prezident, Arkadag*”: Berdimuhamedow).

To legitimize the president on a personal level, he is presented as the successor to major figures in Turkmen history. According to the official view, Niyazov’s predecessors include Oghuz Khan, the legendary founder of the Turkmen nation, as well as others, such as Alexander the Great. The president’s immediate ancestors are also recruited into this cause, being portrayed, for instance, as uncompromising patriots and paragons of family life – the twin central virtues of the Turkmen national ideology. These figures also present the population with an opportunity for individual identification, something that is not possible in the case of the president, who is represented as superhuman. A further source of the president’s legitimacy is his supposed superior mental acuity, which is demonstrated by means of his extensive scientific and philosophical publications, which allegedly enjoy a global audience. The media is also full of advice from the president on all aspects of life (including seemingly trivial matters). To underpin the relevance of this advice, it is reported that the president is constantly accompanied by high-ranking functionaries who are tasked with recording his utterances in notebooks. Finally, the president is also presented as an individual of superior abilities in nearly every field of endeavour. For instance, Berdimuhamedow is feted as a winner in various sporting disciplines, celebrated as a successful surgeon, and sings his own compositions to an audience of cheering thousands on his birthday, also playing the guitar and accordion.

Demonstrating Presidential Power and Popular Support

A great deal is invested in demonstrations of presidential power. To pre-empt potential challenges, the president ensures he is surrounded by the insignia of power, has himself granted numerous offices and positions, and is portrayed as both omnipresent and omniresponsible. Clear evidence that Berdimuhamedow places great value on the direct visual representation of his power is found in the many monumental structures erected under his rule – chief among them the presidential palace in central Ashgabat with its three golden domes.

Various means are used to compensate for the democratic deficit already sketched above by creating an image of the president as a figure who is equally popular among all ages and ethnic groups: For instance, rallies are held at which representatives of organizations, institutions, and companies pay homage to the president; extraordinary high turnouts are reported at elec-

tions; and the president is portrayed on numerous billboards against a background of crowds – either cheering or marching with him in step. The population is at once the target group of the cult of personality and an object instrumentalized for its production.

The Cult as a Strategic Resource

Almost immediately after the death of Niyazov in December 2006, the cult of personality he had build up around himself was replaced, without any public explanation, by one that rapidly grew up around Berdimuhamedow. Despite the scale of the Niyazov cult, which was almost unprecedented worldwide, it was apparently assumed that the sudden elimination of the once omnipresent cult would have no consequences for internal security and public order. This suggests that those responsible for its organization must have been aware of the incongruence between appearance and reality. And this leads to the conclusion that one target group the cult aims to impress is less the population as a whole than the president himself.

In the country's economic system, which is organized in a strict hierarchy centred on the president, gaining the interest of the leader is one of the very few means by which both internal and external actors may exert political influence or access to financial resources. In a perversion of the "economy of fascination",¹⁷ numerous actors thus compete for the president's attention. Attempting to surpass each other in demonstrating their adoration, they organize the translation of the president's books into various languages, exhaustively rehearse complex dance routines to ensure perfect performances on national holidays, sponsor competitions with prizes in his name, and finance the production and installation of plaques with his image and sayings. In the hope of receiving funds for new schools or roads (or just advancing their careers), mayors humbly request to be allowed to rename their towns or villages after the president or his favourite horse. At least in one regard, therefore, the cult of personality can be considered as a strategic resource that can be used by anyone in Turkmenistan who is seeking influence or money. To make it easier for foreign companies to establish and maintain business contacts, lobby groups have been established outside Turkmenistan specializing in generating this kind of awareness.

Under close analysis, therefore, the cult of personality thus appears to be a somewhat contradictory component of the style of government in Turkmenistan.

17 Cf. Heiko Schmid, *Economy of Fascination. Dubai and Las Vegas as Themed Urban Landscapes*, Berlin 2009.

Nation-Building

Turkmenistan's comprehensive nation-building programme serves both the purpose of creating an unbreakable bond between the nation and the president and promoting the development of national pride. At the same time, it expresses a will to create distance between the Turkmen people, on the one hand, and neighbouring peoples and ethnic minorities in the country, on the other. The background to this is the awareness that the existence of a Turkmen nation state is the indispensable precondition for the president's right to rule.

To this end, a great deal of stress is placed on establishing a link between Turkmenistan's current frontiers and the supposedly ancient Turkmen nation, and – with a complete disregard for the changes wrought by Soviet borders policy – to present the state's current territory as the “sacred soil” that has been occupied by the united Turkmen nation for around 5,000 years.¹⁸ The government takes advantage of uncertainties in the historical evidence in order to arbitrarily select a series of events and largely mythological or historically dubious figures and placing them at the centre of Turkmen history. Ignoring events and circumstances that cannot be brought into agreement with the official version of history, everything that occurred on the soil of what is now Turkmenistan is claimed to be connected with the “superior” Turkmen nation and its striving for unity. Finally, the current ruler is portrayed as the result and climax of a Turkmen history considered as a strictly linear development.

In support of the notion of a Turkmen nation state with a history stretching back thousands of years, the history of nomadism is largely ignored, and nomadic traditions are reduced to the status of folklore. In denial of the actual facts, instances of sedentarism are put forward as typical of the advanced Turkmen culture.

This official history is spread via the media and particularly the education system. Alternative points of view are not tolerated, and no substantive discussion takes place.

At the same time, certain qualities and achievements are defined as specifically Turkmen, and this view is propagated by emphasizing Turkmen national traditions and values in the official version of history. President Niyazov wrote that the Turkmen is sublime because he belongs to a people responsible for exquisite and valuable cultural achievements.¹⁹ As proof of this, he names alleged Turkmen achievements, including the invention of the wheel, the world's first cultivation of wheat, and the introduction of monotheism. Particular value is placed on Turkmen carpets, which incorporate the typical tribal “*gul*” designs in their weaves. Together, the *guls* represent the unity of what are considered to be the five major tribes of the Turkmen na-

18 Cf. Saparmurat Türkmenbaşy, *Ruhnama* [The Book of the Soul], Ashgabad 2005.

19 Cf. *ibid.*

tion, and appear in various symbols of nationhood, including the national flag and the president's seal. Since the population of Turkmenistan consists of many more than five tribes, and the five main tribes have never been officially defined, the *guls* can be used in various ways to stand for all the Turkmen people. Many symbols depicting the cultural achievements mentioned above and intending to visualize national unity have been introduced and they are often presented in groups of five in imitation of the five *guls*.

In addition, numerous monuments symbolizing the unity of the nation have been erected, and many towns and streets have been renamed accordingly. The ideology of national unity is also expressed in the national dress code decreed by President Berdimuhamedow: Turkmen are required to wear only clothes considered to be native in style.

In order to avoid conflicts arising from the official views sketched out here and the reality, the government pursues a strictly essentialist concept of nationality, in which all the characteristics of the Turkmen nation are considered to be timeless and unchanging. As a consequence of this policy, ethnic minorities face a choice between unconditional assimilation and political, economic, and cultural marginalization.

Conclusion

The actions of the government of Turkmenistan demonstrate how deeply it mistrusts its own population. Ignoring the potential for the evolution of the political system, the government has robbed the population of the opportunity to make free choices and to express its own views. Instead, the population is treated as a risk factor. Consequently, the government demands total control. More than two decades after independence, the frequently imposing visual demonstration of the regime's supposed legitimacy can no longer disguise the fact that domestic stability has been bought at the price of general stagnation in nearly every aspect of political, cultural, and economic life. As well as a fatal tendency to kill off any attempts to deal with the country's real problems, Turkmenistan's ubiquitous system of repression also contains the seeds of long-term instability. In particular, Turkmenistan's deliberate policy of isolation, its mismanaged education system, the general failure to modernize infrastructure, an economy dominated by central planning and the rentier state, and the privileging of the president's tribe have entered liabilities on Turkmenistan's books that threaten the long-term survival of the current system.

As a result, the government can no longer afford to see its ability to maintain power as the only yardstick for measuring its success. If it wishes to remain in power in the long term, it needs to grant the people the opportunity

to articulate existing problems and fields of conflict.²⁰ While it is true that the reforms needed to bring this about would endanger the grip on power of some current decision-makers, the continuation of current practices would inevitably lead to the collapse of the system as a whole. Reform thus appears to be inevitable, even from the point of view of the country's rulers. Only by both ending its international isolation and simultaneously respecting the fundamental human rights and freedoms of the population can the current government hold on to power in the long term.

20 An example of the urgent desire for self expression and the articulation of current problems, which also exists in Turkmenistan, is a piece of graffiti by an unknown artist (seen by the author to the east of the centre of Ashgabad – 37°55'38.02"N 58°24'45.50"E in May 2009). For a number of hours, in large blue letters next to a well-used footpath could be read: "Punk's not De(A)D".