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## Nation-Creation in Turkmenistan.

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Celebration of the national holiday “Neutrality Day” in Turkmenistan’s Olympic Stadium in Ashgabat on the occasion of the “15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Eternal Neutrality” in December 2010 [TURKMENISTAN, 2010])

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## Introduction

Turkmenistan's presidential stability is no coincidence. It is to the contrary the result of an elaborate governmental system aimed at maintaining this very stability. To allow for an understanding of the system, it is essential to take into account aspects of theories on nation building, paternalism, totalitarianism, political religion, despotism, sultanism and neo-patrimonialism as well as the semiotics of governmental symbolism. However by itself each of these theories, ideas and descriptions falls short of adequately capturing contemporary processes in Turkmenistan. For this reason a combination of components of the enlisted concepts is used in order to gain access to the all embracing governmental attempts at constructing a Turkmen nation while maintaining absolute power. Therefore the term "nation creation" is introduced. Nation creation is defined as a government controlled system that, under inclusion of economical, social, cultural, political and religious aspects of private and public life, is aimed at constructing a nation while maintaining absolute governmental power and control by all possible means. Though this system may appear to be a wild mix of at times absurd or even comical individual approaches and concepts, the underlying ruler-logic follows clear lines, which to connect is the aim of this article.

Isolated until today, Turkmenistan receives little attention in international media. And the majority of reports on Turkmenistan tend to focus on two subjects: its vast gas reserves,<sup>1</sup> the exploitation of which finances an exceedingly corrupt (TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL, 2009) rent-seeking economy and the excessive presidents' cults of personality.

Regardless of how the Turkmen regime is portrayed, be it called neo-patrimonial (GERO ERDMANN and ULF ENGEL, 2006; PAUL GEIB, 2000), described as sultanistic (JUAN LINZ, 1975; HOUCAN CHEHABI and JUAN LINZ, 1998; ANNETTE BOHR, 2003), referred to as despotic (MARKUS WEHNER, 2001), political religion (HANS MAIER, 2000) or totalitarian (JAN ŠÍR, 2008, p 220), most authors agree that the cult of personality created around the country's presidents -- the late Saparmurat Niyazov and his former dentist and presidential successor Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov -- are exceptional. But however remarkable this cult may look from the outside, it plays an important role in an elaborate system of power legitimization and maintenance. The cult aims at legitimizing presidential power, personally legitimizing the current ruler, demonstrating his power and (in compensation for serious elections) demonstrating his public support.

The second pillar is a complex arrangement aimed at creating awareness for and pride of the Turkmen nation. The government enforces this all-embracing programme with most rigorous methods in both, public and private space, going well beyond approaches usually described with the term "Nation Building."

The cult and nation-building form persuasive components, flanking the structural core of governmental stability. This stability is acquired through a president who, to the regional level, personally assigns nearly all official positions. The loyalty of key actors is secured through a tight network of clientelist structures. Additionally misbehaviour, discontent or disloyalties are immediately punished through regular governmental purges as well as public degradations and humiliations of ministers and other officials.

Through repressions, extensive surveillance and all-embracing paranoia, the Turkmen government has created an atmosphere of fear amongst the population. At the same time it derives some output based legitimacy from offering essential goods such as staple foods, energy or transport -- to mention just a few -- for free or at highly subsidized prizes. Thereby as fourth and final pillar in this system the government is based on a very traditional carrot and stick approach.

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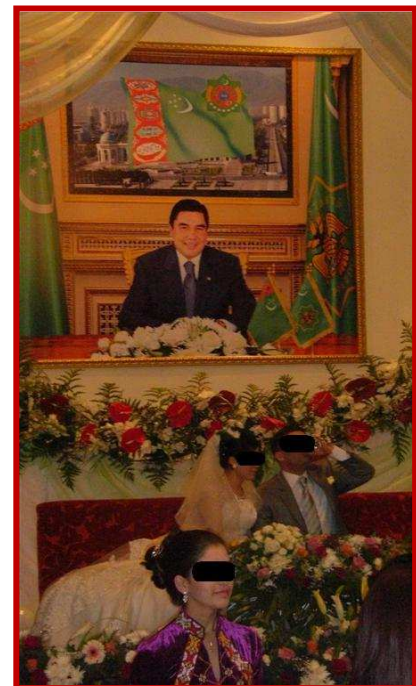
<sup>1</sup> Any information on the country's gas reserves is regarded as strategic secret. Accurate estimates are therefore difficult to obtain and even more difficult to verify. However, it is generally agreed that Turkmenistan owns around 8 trillion cubic meters of exploitable reserves -- the fourth largest reserves in the world. (RICHARD POMFRED, 2001; US DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 2010)

## Cult of Personality

By changing his name from Saparmurat Niyazov to Turkmenbashi the Great and subsequently renaming months and weekdays to his taste, banning nearly all books he didn't write himself, erecting countless (often golden) statues of himself and, in his later years, receiving international attention mostly through his increasingly arbitrary bans (e.g. forbidding golden teeth, pop-music, opera, circus, midwives, libraries, infectious diseases and the internet), the late president of Turkmenistan initiated a leadership that can to the best of our knowledge be described as unique and unprecedented.

However, Niyazov's successor, his former health minister and personal dentist Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov seems successful in following Niyazov's great footsteps. He has been both, careful and thorough in dismantling his predecessor's cult. Statues and monuments of Niyazov have by and large been taken down; his pictures have been removed from public buildings and schoolbooks alike. But the empty space wasn't kept idle for long. Portraits of the new president now adorn most public and many private buildings throughout the country. Quotations from his books and speeches are omnipresent along roads or public places and his publications have become standard textbooks at schools. For example on October 1<sup>st</sup> the newly published book "The Chronicle of Great Achievements" by Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov was strongly recommended as "valuable handbook for teachers and students" by the Turkmen government (TURKMEN GOVERNMENT, 01.10.2010). Additionally his picture appears on an ever larger range of products, from canned tomatoes to tea cakes, from cottonseed oil to sugar cubes (see pictures below). Furthermore the president is the only news on Turkmenistan's four national TV channels and while international newspapers remain illegal, his picture fills the front page of every edition of every Turkmen newspaper. In Turkmenistan's few bookstores it is virtually impossible to buy any book that wasn't written by or dedicated to the president.

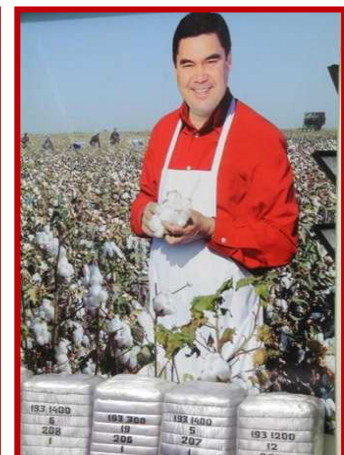
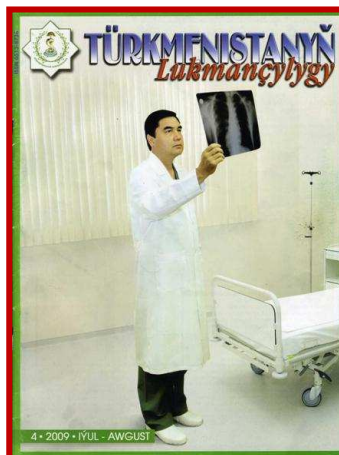
But this cult of personality isn't practiced as an end in itself or out of presidential vanity. Like his predecessor, Berdimukhamedov is lacking proper legitimization for the presidency. He fills this gap by claiming superior abilities, all embracing wisdom and at the same time behaving as omnipresent paternal leader. For these reasons keeping and extending the cult of personality around president Berdimukhamedov is essential for legitimizing and maintaining his position.



**Picture 1** (left): Front pages from a representative sample of Turkmen newspapers, collected in September and October 2008 as well as from March to June and in September 2009. **Picture 2** (right): Portrait of the president behind a couple during a wedding ceremony in Ashgabat (May 2009).



**Picture 3** (left): Portrait of President Berdimukhamedov on a pack of biscuits (April 2009). **Picture 4** (right): Schoolchildren reading a book written by President Berdimukhamedov (notice the President's portrait on the cover). Presidential writings are said to enjoy "high prestige on the world arena" and that his books are inspiring and enlightening for all mankind (TURKMEN GOVERNMENT, 12.07.2010) (May 2009).



**Picture 5** (left): The President in line with buildings erected under his presidency as well as during the reign of the Parthians, Seljuks and Timurids (March 2009). **Picture 6** (centre): The President as a physician before an operation during which he is said to have removed a tumour from behind a patient's ear (BBC, 15.10.2010) (cover of a periodical, September 2009). **Picture 7** (right): The President as cotton farmer (poster shown during the celebration of "Drop of Water is Crumb of Gold" national holiday April 2009).

## Nation-Creation

The development of theories on nation- and state-building began in the late 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>2</sup> The concepts developed to date show a considerable degree of variations regarding the supposed processes involved. However, they generally agree that nation building as it developed in Europe is hardly comparable to the developments observed in regions like Central Asia. While countries in Europe evolved over the past centuries, the processes in Central Asian countries weren't independently initiated before the early 1990s.

<sup>2</sup> See for example: KARL DEUTSCH and WILLIAM FOLTZ, 1963; CHARLES TILLY, 1975; ANTHONY SMITH, 1986; ERNEST GELNNER, 1990; BENEDICT ANDERSON, 1994; WALKER CONNOR, 1994; JOEL MIGDAL, 2001; ALAN WHAITES, 2008; SARAH PAINE, 2009.

But the time frame isn't the only and not even the most important difference. It is the shared Soviet history in combination with a complete lack of any tradition of statehood, let alone a national legacy, which makes the development of "nations" in Central Asia special.

The ruling elite of Turkmenistan turned this potential deficit into an advantage. It initiated and, until today, controls the nation-building process so thoroughly that the above defined term nation creation seems to be more appropriate. Nation creation touches all spheres of public and private life. All media, public and private places, schools and even weddings are exploited in support of it. The success of this programme is vital for the survival of the ruling elite and therefore any form of dissent or criticism is strictly punished. Nation creation, the cult of personality and extreme repressions are therefore inseparably interwoven.

## Nation Creation in Turkmenistan

When Turkmenistan declared independence in late October 1991, it was the second to last of all Soviet Republics, indicating the reluctance of the Turkmen government to separate from the imploding Soviet Union. One major reason for this was the fear of the ruling elite of losing their power. However, the most difficult task was not keeping the power in established hands, but preventing the new nation from falling apart.

Ethnically Turkmenistan was highly heterogeneous, with a strong Uzbek minority in the north and a significant Russian minority centred on the country's capital Ashgabat in the south. The country's borders, although ultimately defined in the early 1920s, so far hadn't had much relevance in people's daily lives. Adding this to the lack of Turkmen national legacy, it is hardly surprising that in 1991 there was little awareness for -- left alone identification with -- the Turkmen territory. But while Turkmen and Russians felt at best indifferent towards the new state, the Uzbeks had their closest economic and emotional ties with Uzbekistan and were potentially seeking some form of unification with the neighbouring country. For these reasons territorialisation and turkmenification of Turkmenistan were two important steps in the nation-creation process. Bloody conflicts in Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Tajikistan, Russia and Kyrgyzstan show just how imminent the threat of ethnic conflicts in post-Soviet republics still is.

The process of territorialisation includes all measures that are applied to raise awareness for the territory. This, for example, includes the noticeable number of maps showing the country's external borders. One such map is on the back of every Turkmen coin and banknote, on the Turkmen television stations it is shown before the hourly news and regularly the country's borders are part of national emblems or state-company logos, and so on. Raising awareness for the borders, however, does not include a reflection of their past. The borders are told to enclose the millennia old homeland of Turkmen tribes, despite the fact that the shape of Turkmenistan's internal and external borders clearly betrays their colonial origin.

The process of turkmenification includes all measures that are applied to convert Turkmenistan from a former Soviet Republic into an independent nation. One integral part of this was and is the naming and re-naming of places. As in nearly all post-soviet countries, the focus of renaming towns, districts, companies and so on was at first on places with a distinct Soviet name such as "Lenin Kolkhoz". The introduction of Latin script as a replacement for the Cyrillic alphabet was part of a process of suppressing all memories of the Soviet past. Additionally it allowed for a turkmenified transliteration of names. From the early 1990s thousands of squares, streets, institutions, buildings, rivers, mountains and at least ten towns were named after President Saparmurat Niyazov (JAN ŠÍR, 2008, p 204). But while the renaming process in most other formerly communist countries ended after a few years, in Turkmenistan places continue to be renamed until today. In the late 1990s the focus of new names shifted to honorary titles of Turkmenistan's first president, his parents and the slogans he coined. Under President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov no towns have been renamed to date. However, newly opened institutions such as schools or museums and mosques have been named after him and his male ancestors.

Bus stops in the capital Ashgabat may serve as an example for the allocation of new names. They bear the names of public holidays ("Drop of Water is Crumb of Gold", "Day of Revival and Unity"), governmen-

tal programs (“Neutrality”, “Great Renaissance”), so called Turkmen values (“Turkmen melon”, “Turkmen horse”) and important monuments (“Monument of the new constitution”, “Monument of Independence”).

<u>Name prior to 1991</u>	<u>Current name</u>	<u>Translation, Description and Remarks</u>
Kolkhoz Lenin	<i>Altyn Asyr</i>	<i>Golden Age</i> (Farm)
Howuzhan ( <i>Хоуцхан</i> )	Oguzhan	Legendary forefather of the Turkmen, Turkmen transliteration (District)
Garrygala	Magtymguly	Turkmen poet (District)
Çärjew	<i>Türkmenabat</i>	<i>Here live the Turkmen</i> (City)
Daşoguz	Saparmyrat Nyýazow	Civil Name of first President (District)
Lenin Street	<i>Turkmenbashi</i> Street	“ <i>Father of the Turkmen</i> ”, presidential honorary title (Street)
Krasnovodsk	Turkmenbashi	“ <i>Father of the Turkmen</i> ” (City)
Gyzylarbat	<i>Serdar</i>	<i>Leader/ general</i> , presidential honorary title (District)
Ýylanly	Gurbansoltan Eje	Mother of President S. Niyazov (District)
Kerki	Atamyrat	Father of President S. Niyazov (District)
Büzmeýin	<i>Abadan</i>	<i>City of Wealth</i> (City)
-	Gurbanguly Hajji	Named after 2007 hajji of President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov (Mosque)

A complementary part of Turkmen nation-creation is the official narration of the country’s history. The way this is being taught at schools and presented in the media differs from the internationally approved history of Turkmenistan to a degree that makes it appropriate to speak of government controlled re-written history. The focus of this official version of Turkmen history lies on the legitimization of the ruling elite through the construction of a seemingly linear Turkmen history as well as the creation of a national legacy. With the exception of World War II any reference to the country’s Soviet past or the Russian colonial period are completely covered up (MARLÈNE LARUELLE, 2007).

Shortly after the Deluge,<sup>3</sup> the legendary father of the Turkmen, Oguz Khan, is declared to have conquered Turkmenistan not through sword but with the word of Allah on his lips (SAPARMURAT NIYAZOV, 2005, p. 79; p92). From then on, in complete negligence of the people’s nomadic past, Turkmen are said to have formed a sedentary nation for five millennia (see e.g. Id., p. 54, 67, 77, 200, 202, 206)<sup>4</sup>. And despite the fact that Turkmen are the descendants of the Seljuks who invaded the country not before the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and the Oguz peoples who, by that time, lived in what today is southern Turkmenistan, the Turkmen nation is told to have exchanged philosophies and goods with Egyptian pharaohs (Id. p. 93).

Additionally the Turkmen are explained to be the founders of the Seljuk Empire (Id. p. 112). Furthermore they are supposed to have founded the Ottoman Empire (Id. p. 132), the Safawid dynasty in Iran (Id. p. 125) as well as the Punjab Empire (Id. p. 135), and several more Indian, Egyptian, Chinese and other empires and dynasties (Id. p. 108-110, 111-142, 282). And according to the official history, it was Turkmenistan, where the iron-age began, where the first tools, carriages, carpets, musical instruments, jewellery and ornaments were invented, the first horses, dogs and sheep were bred and the first wheat and cotton planted<sup>5</sup>. Although only a short excerpt of the official Turkmen history, it shows a unique pooling of events from distinctly different time periods.

<sup>3</sup> The Deluge is mentioned in the Bible (Gen. 6-9) and the Qur’an (see for example Surah Hud, 11:27 -- 51).

<sup>4</sup> Though Niyazov mostly refers to a Turkmen national history of five millennia, he is not consistent and sometimes dates the beginning of Turkmen history at 5000 BC. (SAPARMURAT NIYAZOV, 2005, p. 279f.)

<sup>5</sup> For carriage, Iron Age and tools, see: Id. p. 55;  
for carpets, musical instruments, jewellery, ornaments, horses, dogs and sheep, see: Id. p. 66ff;  
for wheat and cotton, see: Id. p. 66f, 175.

Since the Turkmen were the first people to live in Turkmenistan anything that ever happened on the territory of Turkmenistan is regarded as Turkmen. In order to produce a continuously advancing linear Turkmen history with President Berdymukhamedov as logical climax, he and the buildings constructed under his presidency are therefore regularly shown together with buildings from Parthian, Seljuk or Timurid rule. President Niyazov admitted that so far Turkmen history was taught differently. He explains this by the fact that it has been written by foreigners, envious or ignorant of the Turkmen's great past (see e.g. Id. p. 44f; 58f). And the style of history-writing hasn't changed much under President Berdymukhamedov. In 2010 the beginnings of Turkmen history were predated by another 3000 years, when it was officially declared that Ashgabat had an age of 8000 years (TURKMEN GOVERNMENT, 07.06.2010).

The soviet-style elections in 1991 hardly served as legitimating basis for President Niyazov. At the same time the implosion of the Soviet Union left an ideological vacuum which was seen as a severe threat to a successful nation-building process. Substituting the obsolete socialist ideology with worship for the President was seen as a panacea for both problems. Therefore presidential statements are regarded as apodictic truths with presidential adoration increasingly acquiring attributes of a religious cult.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore when President Niyazov declared the 21<sup>st</sup> century to be the Golden Age of the Turkmen (“*XXI Asyr -- Türkmeniň Altyn Asyr*”), in Turkmenistan this wasn't regarded as a somewhat debatable statement but as absolute truth. The same accounts for President Berdymukhamedov's declaration of the 21<sup>st</sup> century being the age of the “Great Turkmen Renaissance” (*Beýik Türkmenin Galkynyş*) and that the Turkmen “Government is for the People” (*Dowlet Adam Üçindir*).

This adoration consequently leads to a lack of alternative religions. Therefore, although Article 11 of the Turkmen Constitution guarantees freedom of religion (Конституция Туркменистана, 2008, p. 54), religious expression in practice is very restricted. In 2001 President Niyazov published the first of two volumes of his book “*The Rukhnama*”, a spiritual and moral guideline for the Turkmen with several chapters on the history of the Turkmen as well as the President's biography (SAPARMURAT NIYAZOV, 2005). This book is regarded as holy and has become mandatory reading at schools during *Rukhnama* classes. Governmental employees are even tested on their knowledge of the Rukhnama (EURASIANET, 31.08.2004). Imams, to the regional level directly appointed by the President, are advised to read from the Rukhnama instead of the Qur'an during prayer times (FORUM18, 01.03.2005). When refusing to do so, they have repeatedly been arrested and in several cases sentenced to imprisonments of several decades (FORUM18, 05.08.2008; FORUM18, 03.08.2010). Criticising the Rukhnama or insufficient knowledge of it is regarded as disrespectful towards the President and is severely punished (FORUM18, 05.08.2008; FORUM18, 03.08.2010). The entrance of Central Asia's largest mosque, built under President Niyazov's reign in the suburbs of Ashgabat near his birthplace, is inscribed with the words “The Rukhnama is the Holy Book. The Qur'an is Allah's Book” (“*Rukhnama Mukkades Kitapdyr, Gurhan Alanyn Kitapdyr*”).

It is no coincidence that the arrangement, appearance, and size of billboards and posters on public display throughout Turkmenistan resemble Soviet banners. The reason for this can be traced back to the 1980s, when the presidential advisors acquired the positions as ideological masterminds, a function they often hold to date. Their role in the nation-creation system seems to be of some importance, since they are among the very few officials who kept their posts throughout the reign of President Niyazov and politically as well as physically survived his frequent purges (MICHAEL DENISON, 2007). President Berdymukhamedov, after having successfully stabilized his position, subsequently removed nearly all officials appointed under his predecessor, the ideological advisors being among the few exceptions (JENS WILKENS, 2010).

Additionally canned tomatoes, apple juice, vodka bottles, and parks all bear the slogan “The 21<sup>st</sup> century is the Golden Age of the Turkmen”. For bus stops in Ashgabat the name was used so often that it became confusing. Therefore several “Altyn Asyr” bus stops were renamed according to local landmarks such as the “Altyn Asyr Restaurant” or the “Altyn Asyr Shop”. Instead of advertisements, the national TV-stations --

<sup>6</sup> Neutral'nyi Turkmenistan, 23.10.2004, p. 1-3 (for President Niyazov);

Neutral'nyi Turkmenistan, 27.10.2009, p 1-3 (for President Berdymukhamedov).

one of them itself named “Altyn Asyr -- repeat the slogan throughout the day. Under President Berdymukhamedov the repetition of presidential slogans turned into a ritual-like mannerism. Thus any news is certain to be “characteristic for the age of revival (*Galkynysh*)” or “a symbol for the great reforms initiated by President Berdymukhamedov”, be it the construction of a new apartment block, a newly published book or the opening of a zoo.

Between January 10<sup>th</sup> and January 23<sup>rd</sup> nearly 87% of all articles published through Turkmenistan’s national news agency TDH mentioned cultural events, publications, screenings of Turkmen movies, transactions conducted at the state commodity exchange and festivals as symbols for or demonstrations of the successful implementation of the “great reforms” initiated in the “age of new revival” under the “leadership of President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov” (examples include [all 2011]: TURKMEN GOVERNMENT, 10.01 (a, b, c), 12.01, 12.01, 15.01, 17.01, 18.01a, 19.01, 20.01, 21.01, 23.01 (a, b).

A study conducted among Turkmen media during the first three weeks of October 2010 found among others the following examples:

- A book “dedicated to the versatile activity of President (...) Berdymukhamedov (...) intended as new schoolbook illustrating Turkmenistan’s rapid progress in the epoch of new Revival and great changes” (TURKMEN GOVERNMENT, 01.10. 2010).
- The opening of a textile factory is a symbol “of new Revival and great reforms” (TURKMEN GOVERNMENT, 08.10.2010)
- The planting of trees by the president “is characteristic of the epoch of reforms” (TURKMEN GOVERNMENT, 11.10.2010)
- The opening of a zoo is “a bright symbol of the epoch of great changes and accomplishments” (TURKMEN GOVERNMENT, 13.10.2010)
- An investment forum „held on a yearly basis (...) demonstrates the (...) large scale economic reforms initiated by President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov” (TURKMEN GOVERNMENT, 18.10.2010)
- The publication of the book “The Grandson Making the Grandfather's Dream Come True” in Arabic “testifies the intense interest of foreign countries in our country and its leader -- the initiator of the policy of the epoch of new Revival, fundamental reforms and great changes”. The Book “tells about the life and activity of President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov” (TURKMEN GOVERNMENT, 21.10.2010)

In 2008 a process of replacing the old president’s slogans with new ones was initiated. These seem to be more deliberate than the previous “Golden Age”. Whereas in a Golden Age a society has already reached a perfect condition, an age of great reforms by definition allows for refinement. At the same time renaissance and revival promise a not too distant future in which all shortcomings that might still exist today will be gone. This of course will only come true with the people following the leader unconditionally and without dissent, since Berdymukhamedov’s predecessor already knew: “Individuality is the biggest trap of our era’s way of thinking” (SAPARMURAT NIYAZOV, 2005, p. 23. Similar statements: p. 377, 392).

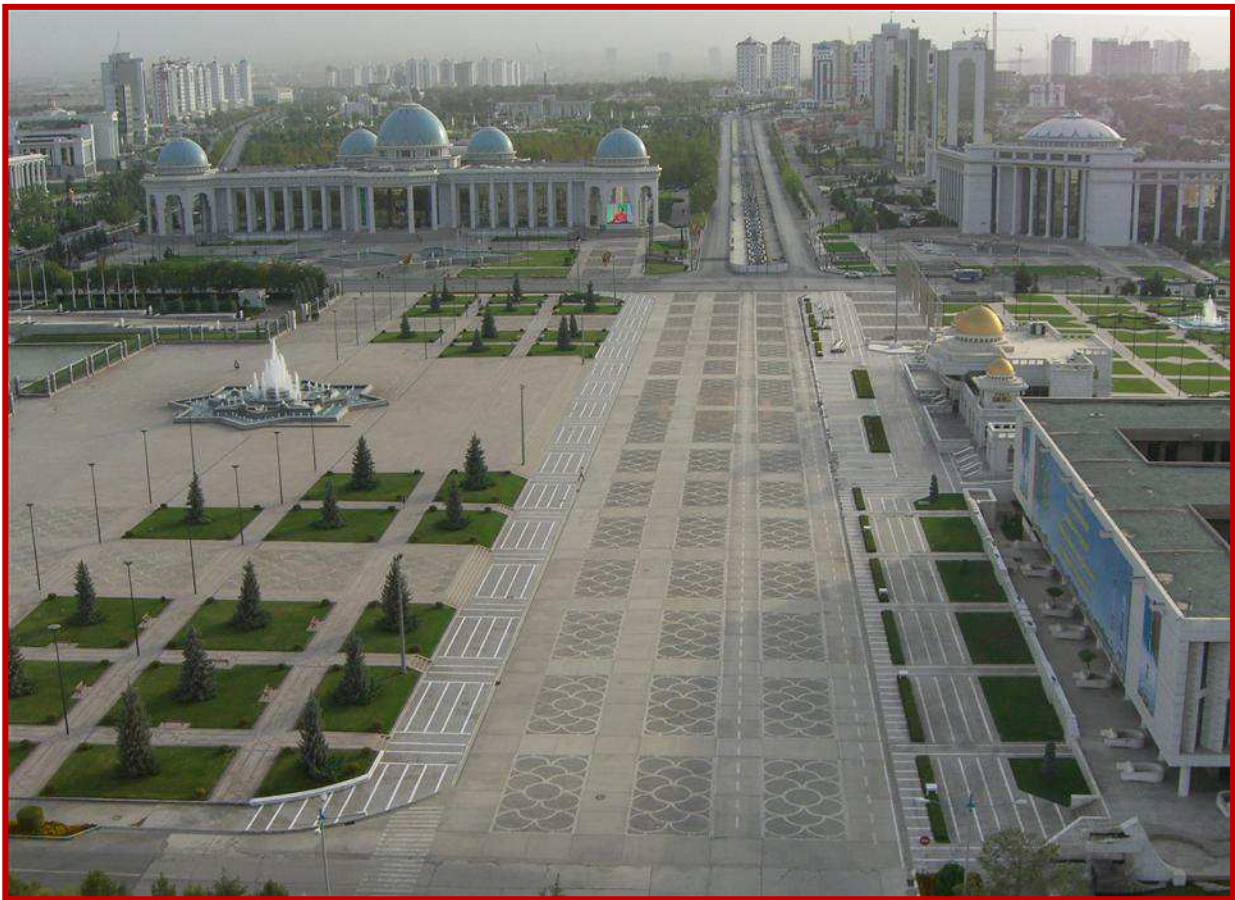
Following the president’s orders and under enormous economical efforts, the country’s capital Ashgabat is currently being reshaped. Large avenues, formidable triumphal arches, immense parade squares and monolithic buildings in detail follow layouts of totalitarian architecture. In Turkmenistan’s centrally planned economy all construction work is commissioned and financed solely by the government. For 2010 and 2011 alone the budget allocated to new buildings amounts to 23.6 billion US-\$ (RFE/RL, 26.01.2010; TURKMEN GOVERNMENT, 18.01.2010). The purpose of the construction campaign -- apart from serving clientelist structures -- is to convince the Turkmen of the importance and superiority of their nation. The limited scope of this article does not allow for a more detailed analysis of the backgrounds, intentions and outcomes of this



development. The pictures provided might however give an impression of recent architectural developments in Turkmenistan.



**Picture 8** (left): “Mosque of Spirituality of Saparmurat Turkmenbashi the Great” (May 2009).  
**Picture 9** (right): Inscription on the entrance gate of the mosque (translation: see text) (October 2008).



**Picture 11:** Central Square in Ashgabat as seen from the now demolished “Neutrality Monument”. Background left with blue cupolas: People’s Council (Rukhiyet), background right: Ministry of Fairness. The place is used for annual military parades as well as the strictly synchronized celebrations of national holidays. For scale note the single pedestrian crossing the square in the centre (September 2008).



**Picture 11** (left): Since all new buildings are covered with thin layers of white marble, insufficient workmanship is concealed for a while. But buildings erected only a few years ago already show clear signs of degeneration. Given Ashgabat’s location in an active earthquake zone, the outcomes of an earthquake could be disastrous. The picture shows a ministry in southern Ashgabat days before being covered in marble (April 2009). **Picture 12** (right): Road with several banks and ministries in central Ashgabat (September 2009).

No passenger trains or busses connect Turkmenistan with any of its neighbours. A weekly flight to Tashkent is the country’s only connection to any Central Asian nation. Exit visa were abolished under President Niyazov, but a blacklist bans thousands of Turkmen from leaving the country, including, for example students intending to study at foreign universities (HRW, 2009). The few visitors allowed into the country are not must not travel without governmental company at any time. Foreign languages are neglected at Turkmen schools, leaving ever fewer Turkmen capable of understanding Russian. While the national media is in complete control of the government, international newspapers or magazines are not available in Turkmenistan. In 2010 President Berdymukhamedov stated that Turkmenistan is capable to “satisfy domestic demand”, making the import of foreign media unnecessary (HRW, 2011). Reporters without Borders therefore placed Turkmenistan 176<sup>th</sup> among the 178 nations surveyed for their 2010 report on Freedom of the Press (RSF, 2010). And it has been among the three worst countries in the world in every year since 2005. Internet cafes in Turkmenistan are rare, expensive and closely monitored. Additionally a long list of websites is blocked and internet traffic is monitored. For these reasons Reporters without Borders put Turkmenistan on a list of twelve countries named “Enemies of the Internet”: “Apart from a few businesses and foreign embassies that can access the Worldwide Web, the few other Internet users can only access an ultra-censored version of the Internet nicknamed “the Turkmenet”. (RSF, 2011). Turkmenistan is not member of the CIS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation or, except for the United Nations, any other major international assembly. The exemplary moves enlisted here are, among other, similar restrictions, officially justified with Turkmenistan’s “Policy of Permanent Neutrality” (SAPARMURAT NIYAZOV, 2005). This voluntariness makes Turkmenistan’s international isolation exceptional. The major reasoning behind it is to prevent the Turkmen people from getting in touch with potentially destabilizing foreign thoughts and keeping all private and public life under strict governmental control.

About twice a year President Niyazov conducted public purges among his ministers and higher officials, jailing up to 10 of them each time. This was often followed by ritual public humiliations of other ministers and officials. The dismissed were usually accused with corruption or incompetence. President Berdymukhamedov follows the habit, albeit at an increased rate. In the latest round of purges on January 11<sup>th</sup> he dismissed 18 provincial and district governors, the administrative chief of the presidential office and the heads of Turkmenistan's migration service, national airline, fisheries and the national energy company (TURKMEN GOVERNMENT, 11.01.2011; IWPR, 2011). Earlier rounds of purges among his ministers and officials were conducted on November 5<sup>th</sup>, October 8<sup>th</sup>, October 1<sup>st</sup> and July 7<sup>th</sup> 2010 (TURKMEN GOVERNMENT, 05.11.2010, 08.10.2010 (b and c), 01.10.2010b and 10.07.2010 (a and b). Early in 2009 the president fired or jailed almost half the cabinet and governors from eight provinces for "failing to understand" the reforms he had in his mind. At the same time he warned all other ministers and governors that he "will dismiss them, if they fail to organize the work in accordance with (his) requirements." Most replacements were in turn sacked again at a later date (IWPR, 2011; TURKMEN GOVERNMENT, 16.01.2009).

The selection of successors is predominantly based on kinship and loyalties. Therefore periodic purges are also a result of changing personal allegiances and shifting loyalties. Through these purges the president is able to sustain a delicate balance of power, relieve himself of potential rivals and demonstrate his all-embracing power. However these regular reshufflings and purges create an atmosphere of unpredictability and a climate of instability among potential foreign and national investors alike.

Additionally he continues the practice of public humiliations of his subordinates. For example in January 2011 he "severely reprimanded" several ministers and his deputy prime minister "for their unsatisfactory performance" (TURKMEN GOVERNMENT, 18.01.2011 and 08.01.2011). Those publicly reprimanded and humiliated are usually reshuffled or jailed shortly afterwards, often without further public notification.

For these reasons in the World Bank's governance index of 2009 Turkmenistan is ranked close to the bottom of the lists for effective government and competence of public servants, with only North Korea, Burma and Eritrea evaluated worse (WORLD BANK, 2009). This is not least because of Turkmenistan's "record of arbitrary expropriations of foreign investment without compensation" (NAZ NAZAR, 2009). The latest major example for this behavior was the unheralded eviction of the Russian mobile phone company MTS on December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2010, leaving the 2.4 million subscribers without mobile phone connection and the company without compensation for their investment in Turkmenistan. MTS was forced to leave their hardware behind, which is now being used by Turkmenistan's remaining mobile phone companies "*Galkynysh*" and "*Altyn Asyr*" (CATHERINE FITZPATRICK, 2011).

In the short run the government benefits from all these: purges, expropriations, legal insecurity and corruption. They serve their role within complex loyalist-clientelist structures and support presidential stability, adding their part to the system of nation-creation. In the long run however they considerably constrain any form of economic development, left alone foreign direct investments. In their 2011 report on economic freedom, the Wall Street Journal enlists governmental negligence of all sectors except for the hydrocarbon industry, "opaque regulatory systems", the "nearly complete absence of property rights", "pervasive corruption", "rigid but outdated and ineffectively enforced labor regulations", non transparent and inconsistently enforced legal systems, "restrictions of foreign participations", "inconsistent rule of law", governmental ownership of all land, the "government controlled financial system", and the lack of a private capital market as major obstacles for economic development in Turkmenistan (WALL STREET JOURNAL, 2011). Additionally the long tradition of purges has made the government weak and deprived of nearly all competent actors (INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, 2003).

Both, the system of nation-creation and the underlying rentier-economy would be unthinkable without a constant influx of money resulting from the export of gas. Therefore modern exploration and extraction techniques are indispensable for its survival. Governmental investments however have so far been concentrated on prestigious architecture and the support of the President's costly cult of personality, leaving little for Turkmenistan's hydrocarbon industry and hardly anything for all other sectors of the country's economy. Adding this to two decades of voluntary international isolation, economical arbitrariness, excessive corruption, clientelism and governmental unpredictability, Turkmenistan's Soviet-era infrastructure is in desperate

need of repair. When in April 2009 Turkmenistan's major pipeline exploded, Russia was officially blamed for the incident. But while the government fell short of officially revealing possible causes of the explosion, consequences were very clear: for the months it took to repair the pipeline, Turkmenistan couldn't export any gas to Russia, leaving a relatively small pipe to Iran as only export route (UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL, 2009). The opening of a new pipeline to China has somewhat reduced the dependence on the pipeline to Russia, but its vulnerability to external shocks remains unchanged. Additionally the extraction and exploration of gas reserves has become increasingly inefficient, while urgently needed foreign investments and know-how are not at sight.

Near complete international isolation and purges are among the key components that kept the Turkmen system of nation-creation stable for so long. But while indispensable for the regime, the described outcomes of this very policy might simultaneously hold the seed for long-term destabilization. As an International Crisis Group report on Turkmenistan famously titled, the all-white facade already shows serious "Cracks in the Marble" (INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, 2003).

## Outlook

From a governmental perspective the Turkmen system of nation-creation has been highly successful. Unlike other Central Asian republics, Turkmenistan never experienced civil unrest or revolutions. Berdymukhamedov was able to establish himself as uncontested ruler of the country. And although outside Ashgabat the population lives in often desperate poverty, staple food and gas for cooking are guaranteed. Voluntary isolation has prevented the population from getting in touch with potentially destabilizing thoughts.

But this stability comes at a very high price. The governmental iron fist leaves no room for even the most basic human rights. The ageing presidential advisors might not be there to allow for another smooth exchange of one personality cult for another (leaving room for speculation on the effectiveness of the personality cult in the first place). And while the second generation of Turkmen schoolchildren is being educated in Turkmenistan's wrecked educational system, new strategic masterminds are not at sight. Furthermore frequent purges have deprived the country of its capable elite and created an atmosphere of governmental insecurity. Additionally Turkmenistan's all important gas-infrastructure has been vastly neglected over the past decades. And due to a policy of political isolation, economic arbitrariness and governmental unpredictability, foreign investments are likely to remain marginal.

Three of the pillars of Turkmenistan's nation-creation are therefore showing clear signs of erosion. Relying on the fourth, repressions, may keep the system running for a while, but the time for manoeuvres is running out. Soon the president will have to decide whether he seriously reforms Turkmenistan's foreign and domestic policies or, for better or worse, continues his "Age of Reforms".

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All pictures were taken by the author.

To ensure their security, the faces of private persons have been concealed.