

Niyazov's Turkmenistan: a sultanistic regime?

N.B. This is the first draft of a chapter to be jointly authored with Michael Ochs. Comments welcome.

Introduction

Turkmen never had an independent state until 1991. The territory inhabited by tribes that came to be known as Turkmen was frequently invaded throughout the centuries, its conquerors including the Oghuz Turks, the Shahs of Khorezm, the Mongol-Tatar forces of Genghis Khan, and Tamerlane. The Persian Empire subsequently took nominal control of the region. By the eighteenth century, Turkmen tribes, though not united in a state, occupied all of today's Turkmenistan. Russians were the region's most recent invaders, and Turkmen tribes mounted the fiercest resistance in Central Asia to their advance. Not until 1881, at the battle of Goek Tepe, did Russia take eastern Turkmenistan, which finalised Russia's conquest of all of Central Asia. Following the Russian revolution, Turkmenistan became the battleground of pro- and anti-Bolshevik forces, including British troops. By 1920, the territory fell to the Red Army, and in 1924 Soviet authorities created the Turkmenistan Soviet Socialist Republic. Soviet rule entailed the collectivization of agriculture in the 1920s and the gradual settling of the still largely nomadic Turkmen. Under Soviet central planning, the economy came to feature cotton, gas and oil, most of which was exported to other republics for processing. Turkmenistan's demographic composition was also transformed by the influx of non-Turkmen. During Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika, Turkmenistan had a reputation as one of the most conservative and backward Soviet republics. In August 1990, Turkmenistan declared sovereignty, but like the other heads of the Central Asian Communist Parties, the leadership in Ashgabat did not seek or welcome the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Post-1991 Turkmenistan has become the most repressive of all post-Soviet regimes and is ranked as one of the most repressive in the world. The superlatives do not end here. Saparmurat Niyazov has ruled gas-rich Turkmenistan since 1985, which makes him the longest serving post-Soviet leader. Niyazov is the only post-Soviet ruler to have invented a new title for himself: Turkmenbashi ('Father of All Turkmen'). His is the only post-Soviet state to have preserved a one-party system, which is occupied by the Democratic Party (the renamed Communist Party). No opposition is tolerated. Virtually all opposition activists have emigrated, have ceased activity, or are in jail. Others are dead: in September 1999, Khoshali Garaev died under extremely suspicious circumstances in prison. Though a Russian citizen, Turkmen authorities had arrested him in Uzbekistan in 1994 and brought him to Ashgabat, where they subsequently sentenced him and Mukhammetkuli Aimuradov to 12 and 15 years, respectively, in a maximum security labour camp for allegedly plotting to overthrow the government and kill Niyazov. Niyazov's regime is the only in the post-Soviet space to have publicly attacked non-traditional religions.ⁱ

To offer explanations for these superlatives, the paper is organised around the concept of sultanistic regimes. This framework is primarily useful as an ideal-type, and allows us to go beyond the traditional tools of Sovietology for explaining the contemporary Turkmen distribution of power. Officials claim Turkmenistan's political system corresponds to Turkmen traditions of consensus, eschewing open competition for political preeminence, and respect for leaders. Opposition activists, for their part, strongly reject the claim that the country's current political system accords with national traditions. Citing, *inter alia*, the traditional Turkmen Council of Elders, which provided nomadic tribes a forum for discussion and consultation, they claim democracy has deep democratic roots among Turkmen. To explore regime emergence and maintenance, the chapter is divided into three parts: a) characterisation of Niyazov's rule as a sultanistic regime; (b) regime genesis; and c) the possibility and nature of regime change.

Characterising the regime

In their edited volume *Sultanistic Regimes*, H.E. Chehabi and Juan Linz usefully pinpoint five characteristics by which to classify a regime. These are: the state over which the regimes presides; its personalism; its social base; its constitutional hypocrisy; and its political economy. The authors argue that sultanism blurs the distinction between regime and state, and is characterised by corruption, venality and patrimonialism and buttressed by a subservient army and a single party; spawns a pronounced cult of personality around the leader and a tendency toward dynasticism; may depend initially on the support of clearly recognizable groups but comes to lose much of its initial social support and rely on fear and rewards; lacking an ideological basis for its institutions, often governs with a constitutional façade; and is nurtured and maintained by a 'kleptocratic' relationship between state and market.ⁱⁱ The majority of these sultanistic regimes have been found in the Caribbean and Central America (in the West), have been relatively few in number, and almost all have now disappeared.

The state over which the regime presides

Robert Fishman among others distinguishes conceptually between state and regime.ⁱⁱⁱ The regime refers to the patterns of allocation, use and abuse of power in a polity. The state consists of a professional bureaucracy, armed forces, judiciary, and is likely to remain relatively stable within a regime change. In sultanistic regimes, the distinction is blurred: the regime arbitrarily and consistently intervenes in affairs of the state. It is able to do so by strengthening its hold on the military and other institutions and by centralising power.

One fundamental and immediate distinction between sultanistic regimes and Turkmenistan comes to mind: the absence of a significant, sizeable and autonomous military. With the partial exception of Uzbekistan, it is not possible to speak of any meaningful standing armies in Central Asia. Instead, the region's internal security services are more likely to provide alternative power bases. The absence of an army makes governing easier for the Turkmenbashi; it also implies, however that the Turkmen state is fundamentally weak, not least as officials are beholden to the president.^{iv}

This important exception aside, regime and state are all but blurred in Turkmenistan. Their fusion is made possible by the president, who stands at the epicentre of the political system. The president concentrates in his person all the key institutions of modern governance, as well as positions reflecting historically developed Turkmen symbols of authority, effectively combining state power and national legitimacy. State functionaries are individual servants to Niyazov, beholden to him in a complex patronage network. The bureaucratic elite is periodically reshuffled, even if dismissed officials in Turkmenistan suffer no other serious consequences and may well be rehired in some other capacity. The patronage system extends into society, and is fiercely regulated. One form of regulation is through the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan. The party's leader is the incumbent President and its structures are closely linked to the executive bodies and state administration, if not superimposed on or integrated into it. This party, fully loyal to the incumbent's policy, is regarded as functioning as the former Communist Party, assisting the state and providing all political initiatives. There are no opposition parties and no registered opposition non-governmental organisations in public life and political issues. Most registered "Independent candidates" are either part of the incumbent Parliament, civil servants, members of state enterprises or affiliated to one of the state-sponsored organisations.

The blurring of regime and state carries consequences for the ordinary Turkmen citizen. Turkmenistan disallows political pluralism, religious diversity or alternative expression. Like all other basic rights, freedom of religion is severely restricted. Only Islam and Russian Orthodoxy are registered in Turkmenistan. Turkmen law requires religious communities to have 500 members in order to be registered. When religious groups attempt to register, persecution intensifies. A Hari Krishna temple and the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Ashgabat were destroyed in 1999, making Turkmenistan the only country in the former Soviet Union where places of worship have been destroyed by the authorities. The media has long not enjoyed the partial freedoms it acquired in the glasnost period. The maximalist opposition is in exile. On 26 February 2000 the largest showing to date of the Turkmen opposition, all of whom are Turkmen residents in Europe, met in Stockholm and urged the Turkmen government to release political prisoners, among them the leader of the banned Turkmen opposition party Agzybirlik, Nuberdy Nurmamedov and religious activist, Khodzha Ahmed Orazgylych.^v

Personalism

It is the president that characterises the Turkmen polity. Personalism, buttressed by an extensive cult of personality, is an essential attribute of sultanism. Sultanism is based on personal rulership, but loyalty to the ruler is motivated not by his embodying or articulating an ideology, nor by a unique personal mission, nor by any charismatic qualities but by a mixture of fear and rewards to his collaborators. In independent Turkmenistan, Niyazov has wholly overshadowed and subsumed the party he heads, which is a pale imitation of its powerful forebear. Niyazov's 'cult of personality' does not extend to his Democratic Party, which hardly merits graffiti, or to his colleagues in the party of state apparatus. Turkmenistan's president alone is above reproach or even commentary.

Niyazov makes extensive use of a cult of personality. He is the only post-Soviet ruler to have invented a new title for himself: Turkmenbashi ('Leader of the Turkmen'), in an apparent imitation of Turkey's Ataturk, and his portraits are ubiquitous, along with the slogan "Khalq, Vatan, Turkmenbashi" (People, Nation, Turkmenbashi). Cities, towns and enterprises have been renamed after him and his image adorns the currency (all notes were replaced to depict the sudden change of his colour to grey after a heart operation). Generally sultanistic rulers like to be thought of a greater thinkers and fill many bound volumes - Niyazov initially decide to impart his legacy materially, notably in the construction of monumental palaces and an orphanage, or the more recent construction of a gold statue. The personality cult has intensified over time. He has promised to introduce the 'rukhname,' which is supposed to become the bible for the new religion he seeks to introduce. He has reportedly contacted embassies of Islamic countries and asked how they would react if he called himself a new prophet. The guide will answer 'all of life's issues', said presidential religious adviser, Murad Karryev, who described it as a 'secular book with sayings from the Koran.'^{vi}

According to Chehabi and Linz, sultanism owes its uniqueness to the particular combination of personalism and dynasticism. The reason for the dynasticism of sultanistic regimes is that rulers eventually trust only their kith and kin. Given their lowly origins and the tenuous social basis of their regimes, sultanistic rulers often attempt to create family alliances with the old elite. An interesting feature of some sultanistic regimes is that the founder is often more politically savvy than his son (and sometimes heir): examples are Reza Sha and his son Mohammad Reza Shah, Trujillo and his son Ramfis, Papa Doc and Baby Doc, Somoza Garcia and Somoza Debayle, Nicolae and Nicu Ceausescu, and perhaps Kim II-sung and Kim Jong-il. This is the case in Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan with Aliev's Akaev's sons respectively.

Dynasticism is not an option for Niyazov. His son has long emigrated?. Moreover, according to official biographies, Saparmurad Niyazov was born in 1940, in a worker's family. His family was killed in World War II, and his mother and the rest of the his family died during the 1948 earthquake in Ashgabat. He grew up in an orphanage and subsequently lived with distant relatives. Saparmurad Niyazov is an orphan, that is, he lacks the family and clan connections that still play a role in Turkmenistan's society and politics. Though many believe him to be a Tekke, official sources provide no information about his tribal background. Government spokesmen, when asked, usually reply that it is not important, and that Niyazov is President of all Turkmen.

Niyazov's most recent answer to the absence of dynasticism has been to create a presidency for life. On 28 December 1999, delegates to the Halq Maslakhaty (People's Council) ostensibly the most authoritative representative body in the country but actually a rubber stamp for Niyazov, gave him the right to remain in power permanently. His virtual coronation as 'president for life' flagrantly flouts OSCE commitments, which call for regular and competitive elections. The infinite extension of Saparmurad Niyazov's presidential term on 28 December 1999 effectively brought an end to the right to elect a president in Turkmenistan.^{vii} No other Central Asian state has gone this far (Nazarbaev introduced a far weaker variant in 2000). The legislature, whose fifty members are for all intents and purposes the president's nominees, passed unanimously a constitutional law which extends Niyazov's presidential term indefinitely.^{viii} The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the United States government, in parallel statements, deplored the decision in Ashgabat as violating the right of citizens in any country to elect their leaders in regular, free and fair elections.^{ix} Commented Aaron Rhodes, Executive Director of the International Helsinki Federation of Human Rights (IHF): 'Without choice, the population is in captivity. But international reaction to this outrageous development has been muted or non-existent ... If the OSCE and United Nations do not take the appropriate actions, the principle of democracy will be eroded and other leaders may follow the example of Turkmenistan.'^x

Social Base and Legitimacy

Turkmenistan's cult of personality could be seen as a peculiar nation-building enterprise, a device to address concerns about Turkmenistan's unity when people still tend to see each other as Tekke or Yomut, as opposed to Turkmen. The cult serves a people deprived of ideology, faith or any other stable central focus. Though not overtly ideological, as was its Marxist-Leninist predecessor, the regime has developed a virtual ideology of Turkmenistani patriotism, perhaps best symbolized by this oath: 'Turkmenistan, beloved fatherland, land of my birth, in my thoughts and in my heart, I am always with you. For the slightest harm I cause you, may my hand fall off; for the slightest calumny about you, may my tongue become powerless; at the moment of treason to your holy banner, may my breath be cut off.' Moreover, like other Central Asian leaders, Niyazov has sought to gain recognition by playing up to Islam when necessary but in reality the record has been one of intensifying repression, rather than accommodation. The result is a curious blend of resurgent Islam and secular dictatorship with his personality cult. This curious mix embodies the complex sources of Turkmen identity. Most Turkmen are Sunni Muslim, but like other nomadic peoples in the former Soviet Union, such as the Kazaks and Kyrgyz, who accepted Islam much later. Turkmen are not primarily defined by religion, especially after seventy years of Soviet rule and enforced atheism. Tribalism, rather than nationhood, has defined the Turkmen.

How far Niyazov is legitimate and has a social base is difficult to gauge. Very often sultanistic rulers come to power with the support of clearly recognizable groups - sometimes even, as in the case of Marcos, through fair elections. As the regimes become sultanistic, however, they lose much of their initial support and begin to rely increasingly on a mixture of fear and rewards. The ability of sultanistic rulers to stay in power depends on their freedom from the need to forge alliances with civil society and to build coalitions. This freedom increases if they can monopolise certain economic resources. In so doing the ruler may alienate significant elements of his own political elite, as we shall see in the section on elite decay. In the end the social bases of a sultanistic regime are restricted to its clients: family members of the rulers and their cronies. As an orphan and without potential heirs, Niyazov does not have the luxury of this narrow social base to fall back on.

Often sultanistic leaders gain their legitimacy abroad through the support of powerful superpower neighbours. He has not sought superpower patronage to date, which in other sultanistic regimes has often been used as a substitute for

domestic legitimacy (and Russia's presence in Tajikistan could be viewed in these terms). Indeed, Turkmenistan has opted for the opposite: 'positive neutrality'. Niyazov saw in his decision to join the Non-Aligned States in 1995 a means of delinking himself from external influence, notably Russia.

There are, of course exceptions among sultanistic regimes and Niyazov's may also be one. A dictator may enjoy genuine support in his home region or from his own ethnic segment because he favours it. Rainer Freitag-Wirringhaus writes that Niyazov, former First Secretary of Turkmenistan's Communist Party, enjoys the support of almost the entire population, 'with the strongest support in the countryside. He has managed to create an image of himself as supporter of the traditional values of Turkmen society and its political culture.'

Constitutional Hypocrisy

Just as domestically the regime cannot be called legitimate in the Western sense of the term, Niyazov has made no attempt to present it so to the Western world. This is again somewhat at odds with traditional sultanistic regimes which, lacking an ideological basis for their institutions, often govern with constitutions inherited from a previous democratic regime or enacted to give a legitimate appearance to their rule. The constitutional façade of sultanistic regimes means that they pay lip service to constitutions that provide for elected chief executives and parliaments, and in some cases even multiparty systems. The leaders often make a point of extolling democracy in their country while redefining it. To different degrees all four other Central Asian have engaged in this. Like Turkmenistan, all have democratic and secular constitutions but, unlike Turkmenistan, all have made a point of referring to their constitutions even when acts are unconstitutional. Niyazov dispensed with this lip service from the outset; during Secretary of State James Baker's visit in 1992, opposition party head Nurmamedov was being blatantly held under house arrest. Despite Turkmenistan's accession to the CSCE (now OSCE), the regime does not observe Helsinki Final Act commitments on political pluralism, freedom of speech, assembly or other fundamental human rights.

Instead, Niyazov has gone out of his way to emphasise how Western institutions are simply not appropriate to his country. President Niyazov has argued, on general terms, that the 'East is the East' and applying Western models 'is fraught with serious cataclysms.' The absence of conflict, bloodshed, and ethnic confrontations in Turkmenistan is also highlighted. At the July 1992 CSCE Summit Meeting in Helsinki, President Niyazov said 'for us, human rights are inextricably linked with national interests...', a formulation that emphasizes the needs of the state over the inalienability of human rights. The first destination for political dissidents was Moscow, where they established in August 1993 the Turkmenistan Foundation, headed by former Foreign Minister Abdy Kuliev.

Sultanistic rulers also often turn to plebiscites to prove their democratic legitimacy. Turkmenbashi was the first to introduce the practice of referenda in post-independent Central Asia. Elected president of the Turkmen SSR in 1990 with 98 per cent of the vote in an unopposed race, Niyazov had his term extended in national referenda in 1992 and again in 1994; in the latter case, a purported majority of 99 per cent of the voters approved an extension of Niyazov's term of office until 2003. Given what has already been said about Niyazov's attitudes to democracy, it is unlikely that the president is acting like a sultanistic leader by trying to prove his democratic credentials.

Political Economy

The kleptocracy characteristic of sultanistic regimes has the unspoken support of international business. The sultanistic economy is subject to considerable government interference, but this interference is rarely tied to any grand project of sustainable accumulation: the main aim is to extract resources. This monopoly ownership can take the form of state-owned industries (such as oil in Iran, copper in Zaire, or diamonds in the Central African Republic/Empire) whose revenues can be to a smaller (Iran) or larger (Africa) extent appropriated by rulers. Or rulers can set up monopolies as private persons.

Oil and gas play this potential role in Turkmenistan. Oil and gas production is monopolised by the state and hence Niyazov. This stifles private enterprise and ensures that the president, as the initial beneficiary of any foreign investment, will be responsible for any further distribution of wealth.

Chehabi and Linz conclude that the persistence of nomenklatura control, coupled with the absence of an entrepreneurial class, has engendered an intertwining of political and economic power that could well lead to sultanism if a leader emerges who has the requisite qualities to raise himself above the party apparatus. 'Belarus's president Alexander Lukashenko seems to be on the way to becoming such a dictator, as is Turkmenistan's Saparmurad Niyazov.' But in three important respects, then, Niyazov's regime departs from the principle characteristics of sultanism: 1) the absence

of an army; the absence of dynasticism; and, the absence of international norms or actors to determine or buttress its regime.

Regime Genesis and Maintenance

If these are the characteristics of Niyazov's semi-sultanistic regime, what factors primarily explain its emergence and maintenance? Chehabi and Linz group these into macrostructural and institutional variables, but highlight that individuals must be willing to become sultanistic rulers.

Macrostructural factors to explain regime genesis

Specific economic and international structures are key to the emergence of sultanism. These include: a modernised transportation and communications system; isolation of the rural masses; smaller, less complex (not bound by tradition) population; easily exploitable resources whose production is in the hands of one or only a few enterprises; massive doses of foreign aid; interest by foreign actors in 'order' which maintains the existing regime; persistent crises of sovereignty.

Of the five Central Asian states, Turkmenistan comes closest to these conditions. Turkmenbashi's extensive cult of personality has been best placed, through a modernised transportation and communications system, to shape the contours of the emerging regime. A recent addition has been a state television channel exclusively devoted to the Turkmenbashi. Governance in Turkmenistan, as compared to that in Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan, is simplified by the small (approximately 4.8 million), relatively compact population, where significant cleavages are absent. From the outset Niyazov centralised his control of the regions and has consistently reshuffled regional cadres. About 55 per cent of Turkmenistan's population remains rural and cities are generally ethnically homogeneous. Society is 'conservative', with conditions favourable to the consolidation of existing power structures. As Ochs writes in 1995: 'The authoritarian regime seems to be consistent with the mentality of the society in its tribal and local orientation.'^{xi}

International factors also explain the present regime. Foreign support and aid have traditionally acted as midwives to sultanistic regimes. Niyazov has, like other Central Asian leaders, benefitted from the support of the international political and business community. Turkmenistan has played the gas and American cards to consolidate its independence. Furthermore, as highlighted by Ochs in 1995, the regime's 'apparent 'macro' game plan has been to hold down on any domestic political liberalization or economic reform while working to increase revenues from the sale of natural resources on the world market. This income in turn would allow the government to continue large-scale subsidization of basic goods and services provided to a small population.^{xii} And later echoed by Olivier Roy: 'Turkmenistan's only guarantee of independence is by selling its natural gas.... Turkmenistan is in the process of becoming a 'gas republic' in which the power of some major international companies and that of a megalomaniac president sit comfortably side-by-side.'^{xiii} Said a senior US businessman in January 2000, a project to lay a natural gas export pipeline from Turkmenistan across the Caspian Sea offers economic advantages too big to be dropped because of Turkmen restrictions on democracy. More recently, and as part of a recent shift of Turkmenistani foreign policy from the West, Niyazov has found new allies in China and Iran, which similarly deplore Western practice of intervention and prop up their own authoritarian regimes.

Central Asia has not been prone to the external crises of sovereignty characteristic of the sultanistic regimes in Central America, Africa or the Caribbean. This is largely because the erstwhile colonial power, Russia, has been unable and unwilling to reassert its influence over Central Asia. This is not to say that the independent political elite in the periphery did not fear a resurgent Russia and Turkmenistan's distancing from Russian-dominated multilateral institutions, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States, can be seen in this context. Turkmenistan early on nevertheless recognized its ongoing dependency on Russia, and maintains the closest and least strained bilateral relations with Russia. Turkmenistan, unlike Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, has been particularly abetted here by its small ethnic Russian population. Not only does this reduce the sensitivity of Turkmen-Russian relations, it also provides Niyazov a freedom of manoeuvre that neighbouring Akaev and Nazarbaev cannot enjoy: the introduction of dual citizenship in December 1993 did not cost Niyazov much in terms of his overall state- and nation-building projects.

Apparently convinced that the Western desire for Turkmenistan's natural gas and oil - which Washington also does not want transported through Iran - protects him from any serious consequences, Niyazov simply ignores the numerous condemnations of his suppression of any viewpoint other than his own. He contends that his programme of long-term democratisation accords with Turkmen national traditions and is primarily intended to maintain Turkmenistan's

stability during a difficult transition period which will last until 2010. Turkmenistan's neutral status has in its mind legitimised this path - as a non-member of the international community it is not subject to its rules and norms.

Political Institutions and Personality as factors explaining regime type

Those political institutions most conducive to the formation of sultanism emerge from the breakdown of clientelist democracy or the decay of nondemocratic regimes. The type of sultanism most akin to what we are witnessing in Central Asia is African neo-patrimonialism, as demonstrated in the chapter by John Ishiyama. First, these states' arbitrary borders mean that each state's population was a culturally heterogeneous mix of peoples with no common precolonial traditions. Second, colonial government was by definition authoritarian government, and the elites had been socialised in this. Patrimonial administration replaced bureaucratic administration. Underlying this policy appears to be a largely unreconstructed Soviet paternalism vis-à-vis Turkmenistan's population, along with a strong distrust of a society not totally controlled.

Niyazov's retention of power since 1985 has facilitated his replacement of bureaucratic administration with patrimonial administration. Today's political networks are essentially Soviet networks, but with the important difference that these are now buttressed economically by the potential wealth likely to emerge from oil and gas exploitation. These Soviet-era networks had already given Niyazov free reign to govern in his own way and enrich himself (above all from the stolen proceeds of state cotton production). Severe repression has also not allowed any alternative economic or political networks to emerge. The open admission that the government agency Turkmenistan's Council for Religious Affairs controls the selection, promotion, and dismissal of all Sunni Muslim mullahs and Russian orthodox clergy recreates the Soviet-era division between tightly controlled 'official' churches and often radicalized 'unofficial' religious activities.^{xiv}

Nevertheless, it is fair to say that Soviet legacies apply elsewhere in the post-Soviet space and thus do not adequately explain why Niyazov's regime has displayed the extremes with which it has sadly become associated. Its lack of a border with Russia but with Iran make it a wild card. Its population is small, but so is Kyrgyzstan's. It has wealth, but so do Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The single most important differential lies not in structure but in the president, and it is the president more than any other factor that has shaped the regime.

It is almost tautological to point out that the personality of the ruler is a key element in understanding a sultanistic regime. There is no simple biographical and psychological portrait of the ideal-type sultanistic ruler, but certain traits are found with frequency. Founders of sultanistic regimes tend to have limited education and come from socially marginal backgrounds, and their upward mobility tends to have gone through accidental channels. Almost anything that could be renamed after him has been. The president's latest folie de grandeur is to dig an enormous lake in the Karakum desert. Since January 2000 smoking has been prohibited at every public place; the Path of the Leader is another health initiative, a path leading from the Turkmen capital up the nearest mountain, built over recent years to promote healthy walks among Turkmen.^{xv}

Regime Change?

Democratic elections, the accepted Western mechanism for governmental change, have so far been rejected. Minimal conditions for democratic elections, including basic freedom of expression, freedom of association, political pluralism and free media do not exist in Turkmenistan. In the context of Soviet successor states, Turkmenistan represents a unique case of consciously arrested development (compare Belarus), in which a single individual has come to dominate totally the visible political process. President Niyazov has no apparent rival or credible opposition, having permitted no individual, group or institution to emerge, much less to challenge his authority. Writes Rainer Freitag-Wirringhaus: 'There are real power struggles among the political class in the form of hidden struggles between different clans and tribes, but these have been cleverly exploited to consolidate Turkmenbashi's position.'^{xvi} In fact, if 'politics' assumes the accommodation, resolution and management of competing perspectives and the interests of various groups, Niyazov seems to be denying that politics in general exists in Turkmenistan. The characteristics and genesis of Niyazov's regime explain how Niyazov has successfully maintained this regime. Through a careful balancing act of co-optation of elites and society (mainly through the powers of patronage), the promised benefits of natural wealth, and the connivance of the international system, the Turkmenistani regime seems set to endure.

Niyazov has not demonstrated any serious inclination to loosen his absolute control of Turkmen society or to regard seriously the commitment he undertook when Turkmenistan joined the OSCE in 1992. Promises of liberalization remained dormant. In May 2000 preparations were reported to have been started by the leadership in Turkmenistan to develop the legal basis of the Presidential programme for socio-economic development to 2010.^{xvii} According to the President's 10-year democratization plan, Turkmenistan was moving gradually towards a multi-party system, with increased powers to be granted to the Majilis at the end of 1999, and the creation of opposition political parties to be

allowed by 2008 or 2009.^{xviii} But not soon thereafter the President reiterated that Turkmenistan should not experiment with democracy until society was ready for it.^{xix} While Turkmenistan's rulers may be willing to countenance a certain amount of open protest about economic conditions, there is no evidence as yet that they are prepared to tolerate any sort of political opposition.

This is not to deny sources of growing instability, however. Stability has been in part predicated on a revamped 'goulash communism,' in turn dependent on gas revenues to fuel economic growth. This depends on gas exports, which in the foreseeable future continues to depend on relations with Russia. Dependency on Russia compromises Niyazov's doctrine of 'positive neutrality.' Russia also has little interest in letting Turkmenistan develop an independent pipeline grid or become a competing supplier of natural gas, and Moscow has in the past cut Ashgabat's access to pipelines leading to Europe. This realisation contributed to Niyazov's move away from some of the basic precepts of Turkmenistan's 1992-5 economic policy-making by liberalizing the domestic economy and tying the sale of natural gas to cooperation with Russia, instead of stressing non-Russian outlets to world markets. This is partly also as a result of the realisation that Iran has only limited possibilities: a swap agreement, plus the 13 May 1996 opening of the Sarakhs-Mashad-Tedjen railway to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas, have reached their limits. A higher degree of external funding is needed.

But instead of securing this external funding from the West, Niyazov's recent attitudes have alienated it, and relations with Russia remain highly tense. In February 2000 Niyazov accused US envoy John Wolf of setting out political conditions for the trans-Caspian export pipeline. The United States supports construction of a pipeline, leading from Turkmenistan's natural gas reserves, via the Caspian Sea, through Azerbaijan, which has its own oil and gas reserves.^{xx} The Council for the Supervision of Foreigners, run jointly by the National Security Committee, Ministry of Internal Affairs, and Foreign Ministry, as of 2000 has been monitoring the movement of foreign nationals arriving or temporarily residing in Turkmenistan.^{xxi} Foreign human rights activists and journalists have been barred from Turkmenistan, or deported, making independent monitoring extremely difficult.^{xxii} This is part of a more general crackdown on the internal movement of foreigners as outlined above; almost a third of the country's territory is already off limits to foreigners and the Council will be used to control the activities of foreign diplomats and tourists. Niyazov is also isolating former allies by demanding entry visas from CIS citizens. The recent rapprochement of Turkmenistan with China should be taken as a sign not of diplomatic entrepreneurship but of isolation among post-Soviet states.

Furthermore, the careful balancing of personalism, Islam and secularism seems to be under strain. With the ethnic Russian share of the population having dropped from 15 to 2 per cent in 1999,^{xxiii} the maintenance of interethnic harmony is no longer a priority or even an excuse. Niyazov has stepped up a Turkmenisation of society, including the introduction of a stringent language law. This promises to alienate both non-Turkmen and Turkmen alike. Neighbouring Uzbekistan may also be less patient than Russia: the Uzbek minority is situated mostly along the Uzbek-Turkmen border and Uzbekistan's government subsidizes the education of Turkmenistan's Uzbeks in the Uzbek language. Society's patience is not infinite, and without serious structural reform of the economy discontent is likely to grow. Channels for voicing discontent are now all closed, heightening the risks of radicalism and reducing the prospects for external sources to allow gradual change while maintaining subsidies.

Meanwhile, the regime is becoming both more repressive and irrational. The indefinite extension of Niyazov's presidential term stripped independent political activists of their ability to formally challenge President Niyazov in elections, making them no longer a real threat. The arrest in January 2000 of 57-year-old Nurberdi Nurmamedov, co-chairman of Turkmenistan's sole alternative political movement, makes it clear that repression of peaceful political dissent now continues gratuitously. Known and perceived political opponents have been imprisoned, often amid allegations of torture. Others, including human rights defenders, have been forced into exile. The regime has also controlled information flow; on 28 May 2000 the government revoked the licences of the private Internet providers, creating a de facto state monopoly.^{xxiv}

Without doubt Turkmenistan has become the most religiously repressive of the former Soviet republics, in particular since 1999. Only communities of the Sunni Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church have been able to gain official registration since the law on religion was amended in 1996, while officials at all levels have spontaneously and repeatedly told both local believers and Keston that there are the only two religions allowed in the country (although this is nowhere stated in law). Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees have been deported from the country or harassed. An Adventist church^{xxv} and the two Hare Krishna temples^{xxvi} have been demolished to prevent the communities from meeting. The Bahais, Jews and Armenian Apostolic Christians are among other communities banned from meeting. Law enforcement officials are said to have broken up peaceful religious meetings in private homes, fining participants or detaining them for short periods; confiscated religious material; physically and verbally abused religious believers; and imprisoned some solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of religion and conscience.^{xxvii}

This increased repression is coupled with more *folies de grandeur*, with very real consequences for popular welfare. In July 2000 Turkmen President has suggested that the curricula at the country's higher educational establishments should be cleared of subjects unrelated to a given student's chosen profession. He added that a check of applicants' family background three generations back is important for revealing the worthiest higher education applicants, and that the priority should go to Turkmen-speaking applicants.^{xxviii} The same month Niyazov gave his education officials thirty days to prove that they have a good command of the Turkmen language or to resign.^{xxix} The Academy of Sciences has been destroyed and the same fate is planned for the National Library.

The reasons behind this renewed crackdown are unclear. It may be 'simply responding to the lack of enthusiasm for his new status. His state-appointed lifetime rule generated no response from other CIS presidents.'^{xxx} It may also highlight the regime's growing sense of vulnerability. Concluded a senior diplomat in the summer of 2000: 'Everywhere the president looks he is stymied. A note of desperation is beginning to creep in. He is not used to confronting reality and he doesn't want to give in to it.'^{xxxi} According to Wayne Merry, a Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council in Washington D.C., recent moves to restrict internet access in Turkmenistan appear consistent with Niyazov's efforts to 'isolate the country from the modern world and prevent what he would see as subversive influences, particularly from the West, and particularly from manifestations of globalization from penetrating Turkmenistan.'^{xxxii} The likely effects are destabilising.

Whether and how that instability is likely to lead to regime change is unclear. Any regime in which power and authority are vested in one individual, as opposed to established institutions, is inherently unstable. There is no vice-presidential post or an obvious successor to a president who has required treatment in Western hospitals for ailments presumed to be cardiological in nature. Article 60 of the constitution specifies that the president can be relieved of his office due to illness, if two-thirds of the Halk Maslakhaty's members so decide. Article 61 stipulates that the chairman of the Mejlis becomes acting president and elections must take place within two months. What would actually happen, though, is debatable.

Richard Snyder outlines usefully some pathways from sultanism, highlighting the importance of taking both structure and agency into account.^{xxxiii} The particular constellation of regime hard-liners, regime soft-liners, the moderate opposition and the maximalist opposition is crucial. In Turkmenistan, regime hard-liners dominate, regime soft-liners are weak, a moderate opposition is almost non-existent and the maximalist opposition is exiled, resident in Russia and Europe. Structural factors are also important; the particular relationships of ruler-state, ruler-society, and foreign-domestic all have an impact.

As Jeff Goodwin and Theda Skocpol have argued, sultanistic regimes are more vulnerable to revolutionary overthrow than liberal democracies or inclusionary authoritarian regimes: examples include Cuba, Iran, Nicaragua, and Grenada. Given its lack of links with civil society and its narrow social base, the regime's capacity for countermobilization is severely limited, which encourages maximalist tendencies in the opposition. Sultanistic dictators are more likely to generate elite and middle-class opposition from landlords, businessmen, clerics, and professionals, who resent their monopolization of key sectors of the economy. A full-blown societal crisis favours the emergence of charismatic authority or, as Weber put it, the 'natural' leaders in moments of distress - whether psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, or political. Even if a social revolution cannot be ruled out in Turkmenistan, the weakness of societal forces vis-à-vis the regime and its intelligence and law enforcement agencies render change 'from below' improbable. Nevertheless it cannot be entirely ruled out - mass protests played a part in the eventual toppling of Haiti and Romania's regimes, both of which structurally bear some resemblance to the Turkmenistan case. By the end of 1989, Ceausescu had alienated the armed forces, the RCP, and the international community, and his rule rested precariously on the terror created by the Securitate; The unraveling of Jean-Claude Duvalier's patronage ties to the black elite, his dependence on U.S. aid, and his loosened grip on the military were structural factors that weakened his regime.

In the likely absence of a social revolution and international intervention, change is most likely to emerge from within the incumbent elite. The degree of military autonomy is irrelevant in the Turkmenistani context and this reduces the scope for regime soft-liners (usually in the form of the military) to emerge. The more inclusive Niyazov's network

If regime change does occur Turkmenistan may prove to be the weakest link in Central Asia. This is because Niyazov has prevented the emergence of any rational, bureaucratic state and has not set up a logical successor. In this way Turkmenistan seems to bear most resemblance to Zaire until 1990 and Francois Duvalier's Haiti, but unlike both cases, Niyazov does not have a successor. Any change is likely to be chaotic and swift, with the successor more extreme and probably more nationalist than Niyazov. If for whatever reason (foreign pressure, attempt to defuse mounting opposition by providing a safety valve), the sultanistic ruler decides to liberalize his regime, the chances that this might lead to democracy are limited. It is during the crisis following the initial promise of liberalization that the regime loses

whatever vestiges of legitimacy it may have retained with at least some citizens. Since it is at the local level that state policies are carried out, contested, reshaped, resisted, or revised, the spreading of sultanistic practices at the local level bodes ill for the emerging democracies. And the scars of this regime will be deep. If the sultanistic regime is replaced by a democracy, chances are this new democracy will display strong clientelist tendencies, with the democratically elected leaders using the resources of their office to build nationwide patron-client relationships.

Conclusions

In an analysis of Turkmenistan the concept of sultanistic regimes is most useful for understanding regime genesis, somewhat useful for characterising the present regime, but less helpful for predictions about likely regime change. Some sultanistic regimes in Africa, such as those ruling Zaire and Equatorial Guinea, have shown considerable resilience. What we may be experiencing in Turkmenistan is *fin-de-regne* sultanism. This occurs when there is an absence of rules to regulate the passage of power. Authoritarian leaders thus often stay in office well beyond the point where they can effectively exercise power. Within the regime the lack of a widely accepted successor can then lead to an inertia where all involved agree to postpone the inevitable as long as possible. In 1974 Tunisia's President Habib Bourguiba was elected president for life, but then ousted in a palace coup by his interior minister. In Spain and the USSR the death of the ruler set in motion institutional mechanisms that in the former led to a legally regulated establishment of the monarchy that later eased the transition to democracy. In this period, the role of religion in maintaining legitimacy is likely to grow, in parallel with non-state religions. The Central Asian regimes, and that of Turkmenistan in particular, demonstrate how the higher density of international exchanges, the emergence of a transnational civil society, and the end of the Cold War, are still insufficient to counter the emergence of non-democratic regimes.

ⁱ For useful background analysis on the Turkmenistan's political development see Michael Ochs, 'Turkmenistan: the quest for stability and control,' in Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott (eds.), *Conflict, cleavage and change in Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University of Press, 1997), pp. 312-359.

ⁱⁱ H.E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz, *Sultanistic Regimes*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1998.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Fishman, 'Rethinking State and Regime: Southern Europe's Transition to Democracy,' *World Politics*, 42, No. 3 (1990).

^{iv} The opposite case is made for Russia by Anatol Lieven, 'Post-Communist Sultans on the Caspian,' <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/culture/articles/eav110800.shtml>, 8 November 2000.

^v For a useful assessment of political pluralism, see the Report of the ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission, 8-11 November 1999.

^{vi} RFE/RL Turkmen service, 26 February 2000

^{vii} Reuters News Agency, 3 April 2000.

^{viii} Erika Dailey, 'Leading Dissident Detained in Turkmenistan Amidst Silence from US,' source unclear in attachment 3/32.

^{ix} Turkmen Television, December 27-79; Agence France Press, 30 December 1999.

^x Statement of the OSCE Troika on Turkmenistan, 27 January 2000. (Attachment 3, p.15)

^{xi} (Dawisha and Parrot, 159)

^{xii} Ochs, *op.cit.*, p.314.

^{xiii} Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), p. 194.

^{xiv} NCA, Paul Goble, Analysis from Washington, 14 July 2000 [2/9](#)

^{xv} BBC Monitoring, Turkmen TV-Channel 1, 25 October 2000, [1/7](#)

^{xvi} Rainer Freitag-Wirringhaus, 'Turkmenistan's Place,' p. 159

^{xvii} OSCE Centre in Ashgabad, 'Spot Report: Plans For New Legislation,' 8 May 2000

^{xviii} [2/21](#)

^{xix} OSCE Centre in Ashgabad, 'Spot Report: Plans For New Legislation,' 8 May 2000

^{xx} Reuters, February 2000 [3/9](#)

^{xxi} Nikolai Mitrokhin, 'Turkmenistan's Open Surveillance of Foreigners Caps Policy of Isolation,' 2/14

^{xxii} Harassment and imprisonment of religious believers, Amnesty International, EUR 61/07/00, March 2000

^{xxiii} Lawrence A. Uzzell, 'Turkmenistan Continues Harsh Measures Against Protestants,' source?

^{xxiv} Istvan Venczel, Head of the OSCE Centre in Ashgabad, 5 October 2000 [1/13](#)

^{xxv} Felix Corley, 'Did Turkmen Authorities Need to Destroy Adventist Church?', Keston News Service, 21 January 2000.

^{xxvi} Brief Report on Incidents Against Hare Krishna Temples in Turkmenistan, [2/11](#)

^{xxvii} Felix Corley, 'Turkmenistan: Baptist Convert Threatened With Death,' Keston News Service, 20 November 2000.

See also Harassment and imprisonment of religious believers, Amnesty International, EUR 61/07/00, March 2000.

Those who refuse conscription face imprisonment under criminal law, and Amnesty International has received information on several young men sent to prison on these grounds in recent years. All have been Jehovah's Witnesses, whose religious beliefs do not permit them to bear arms for a secular power or to swear oaths.

^{xxviii} RFE/RL Turkmen Report, 16-22 July 2000. See also, Mariya Rasner, 'Learning to Love the Turkmenbashi,'

<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav091900.shtml>, 19 September 2000. Selection on the basis of genealogy is also being applied to cadres.

^{xxix} *Monitor*, 26 July 2000. [2/4](#)

^{xxx} NCA, Bruce Pannier, Turkmen Service, 11 January 2000, [3/27](#)

^{xxxi} Marcus Warren, 'A dictator's follies replace reality in capital of kitsch,' [1/27](#)

^{xxxii} Beatrice Hogan, 'Internet Access Issue Underscores Clash of Economic and Political Priorities in Turkmenistan,'

<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/business/articles/eav101800.shtml>, 18 October 2000.

^{xxxiii} Richard Snyder, 'Paths out of Sultanistic Regimes,' in Chehabi and Linz (ed.), pp.49-84.