



POLITICAL ELITES AND STATE REPRESSION IN TURKMENISTAN

Élites políticas y represión estatal en Turkmenistán

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The aim of the article is to analyze the power relations among the Turkmen political elites so as to grasp a better understanding of the rationale of constraint and its supremacy over all features of society. Through the recent history of domination, the burden of foreign financial dependence, and the ancestral configuration of the society; the reader will be able to perceive how life lingers under an imposed 'objective order' of things which renders all counteraction utopian. That is, a complete immersion into the logics of repression of this enigmatic Central Asian republic.



Abstract

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar las relaciones de poder existentes entre las élites políticas de Turkmenistán en busca de un mejor entendimiento de los métodos de coacción y su supremacía sobre todos los aspectos de la sociedad. A través de la historia reciente de dominación, el lastre de la dependencia económica extranjera, y la configuración ancestral de esta sociedad; el lector será capaz de averiguar cómo la vida subsiste en este impuesto "orden objetivo" de las cosas que convierte cualquier alternativa en utópica. En resumen, una completa inmersión en la lógica de la represión de esta enigmática república centroasiática.



Resumen

Turkmenistan; clan; gas; graph; Niyazov; political power.
Turkmenistán; clan; ga;; grafo; Niyazov; poder político.



Key words

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Fechas

1. General context of Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan certainly qualifies as the most obscure country in Central Asia and remains a mystery for political observers of the entire world. Rated 178th out of 180 states regarding media freedom (RSF, 2016), and the 2nd country in Asia with less political and civic liberties (Freedom House, 2017), this opaque resource-rich country presents a lethal combination of the Soviet security apparatus and the free will of dictatorial governments bound to maintain the population isolated and uneducated.

After Turkmenistan was literally forced into independence in 1991, its self-proclaimed governors were 'burdened' with the task of having to design an economic viable plan without Moscow's paternalistic guidance. Luckily for the rulers, the Turkmen people were little aware of the fact that their soil was captive of the 'gas curse' to such an extent that it hosts the 4th largest gas reserves in the world¹. This unforeseen manna of foreign currency was only comparable to earlier outbreaks of black gold in the Middle East and Africa (Gleason, 2011).

The abundance of natural gas drove the administration into short-term bizarre policies², a full external dependence and utilitarian repressive governance. Indeed, authoritarianism and indiscriminate superfluous expenditure act as mutually reinforcing factors. The first provides the context for a ludicrous use of financial resources driving the masses to economic dearth, and thus arousing a social unrest that is bound to be repressed through authoritarian means.

Despite the slightly optimistic promises of socio-political modernization made in 2006 by the newly appointed government (Gleason, 2007), after the death of the former president Saparmurat Niyazov under strange circumstances³, this heavily unpopulated territory has been ruled in the same eccentric manner by the former president's dentist, Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov.

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1.1. Economic context: the 'gas curse'

In order for the government to operate unimpeded, official data on the revenues of natural gas has not been published for the last few years⁴. These precious figures are easily hidden from the public by the opacity of public accounts, thus conferring unlimited powers to the ruler and nurturing the myth of an omnipotent know-it-all leader of the Turkmen.

Admittedly, gas and oil exports from Turkmenistan are currently endangered by 2 factors: the scarcity of pipelines (Gleason 2011) and the desires of an ever more capricious dictatorship. As for the first, given the earlier failed attempts to construct the Trans-Caspian pipeline⁵, Iran and above all Russia settled as Turkmenistan's traditional clients. Following an unprecedented

1 According to Gleason (2011), gas reserves were estimated in 2.6 trillion cubic meters in 2007 through the audits of BP and EIA. However, on the next year, the capacity of the Yolotan-Osman gas field alone was assessed to oscillate between 4 and 14 trillion cubic meters by Gafney, Cline and assoc. Still, this leads Turkmenistan only to the 11th position in the list of the world's largest producers (CIA, 2016) due to the exporting difficulties.

2 Up to the point of replacing the names of the days and months for those of Niyazov's relatives and Turkmen poets (Warren, 2002).

3 Many sources claimed that his death was due to the abuse of heroin, which constitutes a widespread practice in Turkmenistan (Kalder, 2010).

4 See (Bendini, 2013).

5 See interview with former US ambassador Tracey Jacobson in (Journeyman Pictures, 2012).

geopolitical strategy, Russia would resell the gas to Europe through its infrastructures, thus providing companies as Itera with almost unlimited room for corruption (Peyrouse, 2012e).

Eventually, the commercial relations with the two energy super powers worsened to the point it resulted in a unilateral resignation of their contracts⁶. Waiting for a hypothetical intervention of other Asian commercial partners, as India or Pakistan (Peyrouse, 2012e), China emerged thereafter as the sole stable customer.

Per contra, this virtually yields no revenues to the administration due to the millionaire unpaid debts that the Turkmen administration had incurred in exchange for technological imports (Peyrouse, 2012e) and financing of dubious projects⁷. This way, the Asian giant is successfully gaining the monopoly over the Turkmen gas industry, imposing ridiculous buying tariffs well below the market-prices.

Regarding the second factor, the president's increasing paranoia and narcissism⁸ are perfectly illustrated by the constant affronts of the state apparatus towards the representatives of potentially investing states, namely the spontaneous absence to short-noticed ceremonial acts in Ashgabat.

This chronic instability does obviously not go without consequences. In fact, Niyazov's commitment to provide all citizens with free housing as the culmination of a period of increasingly subsidized services (Gleason, 2011) fell apart like a house of cards. Similarly, the once inexhaustible reserves of foreign currency appear now as the main threat to the national economy. This lack of awareness has driven the administration to confront this shortage with innocuous measures, such as the constant surcharges that the foreigners must face⁹.

Nevertheless, this worsening has not hampered the enormous drain of funds that serves to fuel bank accounts in Europe. In particular, the German Deutsche Bank, which hosted up to US\$20 billion within the FERF (Foreign Exchange Reserve Fund) according to international estimates (Global Witness, 2014).

The waste pipe of the state's economy: the construction industry

In a like manner to other Soviet oil-rich territories such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan or more recently Chechnya, throughout the past two decades Turkmenistan has gained itself a notable reputation for being the new *Mecca* of extravagant constructions with unlimited budget¹⁰. Unfortunately, this insanity does not even bring substantial benefits for local companies, since the poor Turkmen industry cannot cope such 'ambitious' projects.

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6 See (Abdurasulov, 2007)

7 For instance, the Amu-Darya gas project is China's largest overseas natural gas project. In 2010 the rights to make use of the gas reserves in South Yolotan were obtained by a consortium led by CNPC, and financed by the Chinese Development Bank (China AidData, 2010).

8 As a matter of fact, foreign diplomats have been requested to address the president in terms of "the most illustrious" or "leader of the fair state" (Foreign diplomatic staff, personal communication, March 5, 2017).

9 The few foreigners allowed to visit the country are overcharged in dollars with additional consular and airport fees and thrice the normal price at state hotels.

10 The tremendous constructions in the capital of each Welayat contrast with the situation in smaller cities. For example, many small cities as Bayramali, in the Mary region, are not even equipped with computer services at the train stations.

Therefore, international companies guided by influential advisors to the government enjoy profitable contracts that steadily undermine the already weak state of the economy. In particular, Turkish companies under the influence of Ahmet Çalik seem to dominate now the construction sector. Namely, Polimeks Construction won a contract of US\$1.4 billion to build the Olympic City project while Calik Holding is enrolled in the construction of emergency services at a cost of over US\$ 100 million (Hurriyet, 2012). Meanwhile, the French giant Bouygues still holds a privileged position, despite finding it increasingly difficult to deal with the whims of the regime.

The cost of these ventures is not only financial, but also lays at the origin of severe human rights violations. Many political prisoners are in fact employed in pharaonic (and often extremely harmful) ventures such as the “Lake of the golden century” in the Karakum desert (Peyrouse, 2012b) or the unused tourist resort in the Caspian city of Avaza. The latter is considered indeed as an entirely state-funded loss-making business¹¹ which thence lacks the necessary foreign private investment, but serving nonetheless to preserve the profitable bribe system.

At the same time the monumental constructions in Ashgabat have dreadful consequences on the price of the mortgages which, according to local testimonies, multiplied by five in the last five years. Unprivileged citizens even have their houses expropriated, often receiving no compensation¹² (HRW, 2011) and witnessing how the fashionable ‘happy villages’¹³ and ‘elitkas’ are built instead. These 5-star ultramodern apartments are rented for the price of 1,500\$ a month (for foreigners, much less for local politicians), although most of them remain empty (Local embassy staff, personal communication, March 8, 2017).

On top of this, edifices for governmental usage have been built since the late 90s under the most sybarite requirements. All public buildings, for example, had to be constructed with marble brought directly from Italy (Huang, 2015). This fascination for esthetic excellence surely confronts the authorities with an unsolvable dilemma: whether to bring the admiration of foreign visitors into the country at the risk of a social injurious impact.

1.2. The rationale of the dictatorship: purifying of the “national blood”

Any dictatorship whatsoever cannot just linger thanks to the abundance of natural resources, but rather it needs some sort of pseudo-ideology which may foresee a better future for the nation. That is, the homogenized negation of human freedom which can lead the entire society to cave in for the sake of an unattainable golden future¹⁴ of happiness (Marcuse, 1964).

In Turkmenistan this is fulfilled by the ‘ethnocratization’ of the country similar to that in other Central Asian states. The official slogan “one people, one homeland, one Turkmenbasi” (*Halk, Watan, Turkmenbasi*), which is obligatory each day in schools (Peyrouse, 2012a), resembles the

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11 In fact, even though the hotels are empty it is hard to get a reservation since the employees prefer to keep occupation low (Foreign diplomatic staff, personal communication, March 5, 2017).

12 This policy was especially visible during the construction of Niyazov’s Theme Park in Ashgabat in 2004 (Peyrouse, 2012a). In order not to have their houses demolished, citizens should have the “domovaya kniga” (residential rights) and pay enormous bribes. Those houses registered under “dachnaya chast” (rest house) are obliterated, especially affecting Russian families who often establish themselves in tents right where their houses are demolished.

13 These endless villas of green-roofed chalets have become the icon of the government’s obsession for neatness.

14 For instance, to legitimize the far-fetched investments in construction projects portrayed to reduce Turkmenistan’s isolation (as the unpopular 5th Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games) drawing the attention from social issues.

German *Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer*. But contrariwise, the Turkmen regime is utterly based in paternalism with an iron fist, lacking any serious political agenda.

This populist mechanism was materialized as the 'Movement for the national revival', pursuing a *chistaya krov'* (a purified blood) which could serve the interests of the Ahal Teke clan in power. Accordingly, it was seasoned with a wide variety of mystical stories about the origin of the Turkmen and their impact on the world's history, which were verbalized in Niyazov's masterpiece: the *Ruhnama* or "soul of the people"¹⁵.

The ethnical segregation

The population of Turkmenistan does count, nevertheless, with several minorities in a similar fashion to all other former Soviet territories. As stated by the UN, it is mainly constituted by 81% of Turkmen, 9% of Uzbeks, 3% of Russians and in a lesser number, Armenians, Azerbaijanis and Tatars (UNHR, 2016).

Along Niyazov's mandate, the collectives of Uzbeks and Russians were especially targeted under discriminatory policies. Around 50,000 Russian nationals were denied the double nationality and confronted with the choice of either leaving the country or adopting the Turkmen citizenship. In addition to this, women from these minorities were forced to wear the *chabity* and *chekmeny* national dresses, under the threat of being sanctioned for a "lack of nationalism" (Rubio, 2014).

Up to now, minorities are banned from state employment and their access to higher education hampered by the fact that minority languages¹⁶ are barred from teaching and cultural activities (UNHR, 2016). This situation contrasts with the Law on Ethics presented by the government in 2016, which punished any behavior inciting national or religious hatred (Ministry of Justice, 2016).

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The regional segregation

Allegedly, the abovementioned type of marginalization has by far not been the gravest in the past few years. As expected, the new articles on the Turkmen criminal code do not refer to the discrimination among the 5 *welayats* (regions)¹⁷ since President Berdymukhamedov and his Teke tribe (based in the region of Ahal) prevent by coercive means the inclusion of a non-member into the national political scene.

They moreover grant privileges to their fellow citizens with unjust measures such as the concession of houses and the abolition of working permits for non-residents in Ashgabat. Nationals "from the region" are in fact considered as 'dirty turkmen'¹⁸ (Local embassy staff, personal communication, March 8, 2017). The majority of them appear completely dissociated from the regime¹⁹, declaring on their side to despise the 'non conventional lifestyle' of the Ahal elites.

15 See description in section 2. 2.

16 The closest language to the Turkmen is said to be Uyghur, in Xinjiang.

17 Ahal, Balkan, Dashoguz, Lebap and Mary.

18 This pejorative term is analogue to the one of "limitchik" during Soviet times, aimed to appoint the non-Moscow citizens allowed to work in each state company through the quotas (hence "limited").

19 They are more religious and yet show a great nostalgia from the Soviet ideals.

The amount of human right violations which these citizens have to put up with is unprecedented, such as being banned from working in state companies (meaning almost all Turkmen companies). The *Ahal Teke* hold most economic resources in the capital, thus preventing other citizens from reaching the capital. To this purpose, the freedom of registration was closed by the state apparatus to prevent them from buying apartments in Ashgabat, meaning that with a *propiska* (registration of residency²⁰) from other region one remains illegal.

The motive for repression

Resources alone do not shape the paradigm of political domination and, by the same token, that does not unequivocally set the path for repression. Some scholars suggest otherwise, as Friedman with the “first law of petro-politics” claiming that “the price of oil (or gas) and the progress of democratic freedom are inversely correlated” (Friedman, 2006). Yet if this were to be true, then the decay on the market prices would bring about more freedom for political opposition (Gleason, 2011).

As a matter of fact, the deterioration of the national economy creates social tension to which trapped totalitarian authorities are likely to react in a more ruthless manner, not less. This occurred when Niyazov’s policy of subsidies was frustrated by the economic international context, and it has not changed under Berdymukhamedov. To be sure, now that Turkmenistan is virtually left with no well-paying partners, human rights violations are only multiplying.

Besides, it remains questionable whether natural resources alone constitute a cause for authoritarianism or rather just for its perpetuation. Other ex-soviet states, such as Belarus, did not have to rely on the “gas curse” to exert brutal repression²¹. As for Turkmenistan, the economic potential came as a surprise to the elites in the early 90s, when it was already clear that autocratic policies would comprise the governing guidelines.

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2. An in-depth study of the Turkmen elites

As in other Central Asian republics, political elites in Turkmenistan (known as the *Khan*, descendants from the Father of the Nation Oghuz Khagan) try to distance themselves from conservative monarchies and their archaic succession proceedings. And yet they are in an even greater need of traditional and mystical mechanisms for their survival.

The regionally-motivated tribal bonds, known by the Soviets as *perezhitok* (remnants), prove extremely important in traditional societies like the Turkmen (Peyrouse, 2012a), in which most citizens lack strong political aspirations. They belong to complex well-founded family and social structures that constitute the kernel of their vital aspirations. That is why kinship solidarity is usually a necessary condition for matrimonial alliances, where the *dower*²² and the mutual trust constitute the sufficient clause.

20 One of the interviewees declared paying 600 manat to the police twice a year, 60 manat to the “ZHKHA” and 500\$ for each kid in school age; under the explanation that “he does not have the right to stay here”. Additionally, cars from other areas are requested to be left near the blockposts (checkpoints) at the entrance of Ashgabat.

21 The case of Belarus is quite illustrative in terms of alternative sources of legitimating (Baumann, 2017).

22 This provision is made by the groom to the bride’s family, in contrast to the dowry.

Marital strategies are thence employed by politicians to secure the support of other clans. Although “the clan in the anthropological sense is not a network in the political sense” (Peyrouse, 2012a), it is the most straight-forward membership to an influential network with access to resources.

2.1. The configuration

The study of political networks, even with such a prominent hierarchy as the Turkmen’s, entails a major dilemma: on the one hand, a fairly faithful sociological representation will drive the hierarchical position of each unit in the network *undecidable*. On the other, if reality is simplified to the point where this hierarchy becomes determinable for all units, the structural diagram will remain highly unrealistic and incomplete.

Admittedly, the Turkmen ‘clan’ structure presents a considerable advantage: the association of individuals into greater political units. Therefore, given a set of elements and their relations (original graph) faithful enough to reality, we are able to obtain a structurally equivalent simplified scheme (image graph)²³.

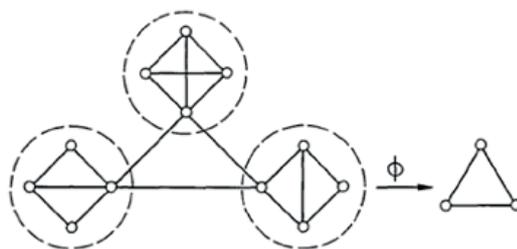
Let $G = [V(G), E(G)]$ be a graph consisting of a set of *vertices* V and a set of *arrows* E where the *path* between any 2 vertices v_i, v_j is denoted by \cdot . The idea is then to gather socially equivalent individuals in groups in order to reduce the number of vertices. This is achieved by an association (*partition*) $\{h_1, h_2, \dots, h_m\}$ of the set of vertices, with the induced graph G_h is defined as follows:

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Fig 1 (Malyshev 2016): Example of a partition where every 4 elements are grouped into single units

Where \bar{h}_i is the general notation for a vertex in h_i , and Φ is the mapping of elements into the image.

$$\exists \overline{h_i h_j} \in E(G_h) \leftrightarrow \exists \overline{v_{h_i} v_{h_j}} \in E(G)$$



Of course, the question emerges as to which partition is the most suitable one. To that end we assume that for every h_i, h_j , if an element v_{h_i} has a force relation over an element v_i then h_i has a force relation over h_j . This appears as a natural condition for a faithful sociological representation since otherwise the existence of a force relation between 2 groups would not necessarily imply the existence of a force relation between whatever 2 of their members

In terms of *minimal paths* between elements, this undesirable condition is expressed as follows: let $(v_i^* v_j)$ be the set of all vertices on all minimal paths joining v_i and v_j and $\Phi(v_i, v_j)$ the transforma-

²³ That is, the patterning of the data graph should persist in the image graph through a suitable transformation (homomorphism).

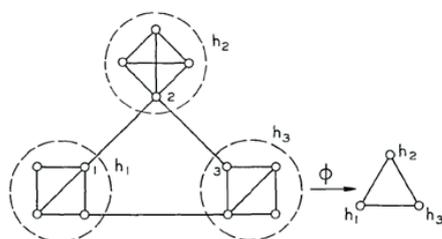
tion under a certain partition. If $\exists h_i \in \Phi(v_i * v_j)$ with $h_i \notin \Phi(v_i) * \Phi(v_j)$, then there exists a minimal path between 2 units which does not represent a minimal path between their images under Φ .

Fig 2 (Malyshev 2016): Example of a partition which “conserves” minimal paths

To avoid this, we will demand the partition Φ to verify the following condition:

$$\Phi(v_i * v_j) \subseteq \Phi(v_i) * \Phi(v_j) \quad 24$$

For every $v_i, v_j \in V(G)$



A ‘Clan-based’ political network

In Turkmenistan the importance of the clans lost strength during Niyazov’s rule, as he worked in quite an isolated basis. Conversely, Berdymukhamedov has fully restored the usual Central Asian nepotistic model, encircled by members of his clan and his family²⁵.

While the departed president assigned political posts in accordance only with personal loyalty, the justification for these choices is nowadays complemented by the necessary (yet not sufficient) condition of belonging to an influential clan. Either way, the base of the elites remains as narrow as before and regional elites are marginalized²⁶ instigating a potential source of conflict.

The main clans can be distributed as follows (Peyrouse, 2012a):

- » The ‘Teke’ clan, suffering from strong competition among its subgroups for the revenues obtained from gas and drug trafficking.
- » The subclan of ‘Ahal’ (h_1) basically “runs the country”²⁷, comprising the president, the governors of other regions and most security units. It controls the state courts and the power ministries, and bases its supremacy in the geographical localization.
- » The Mary branch (h_2) occupied privileged places within the state apparatus, the scientific, medical and cultural institutions²⁸. Their economic power is based in the shared control the gas deposits of South Yolotan and Amu Darya, and the Afghan border.

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24 This is known in graph theory as a Boyle homomorphism.

25 For instance, the defense minister and secretary of the National Security Council, Yaylim Berdiev.

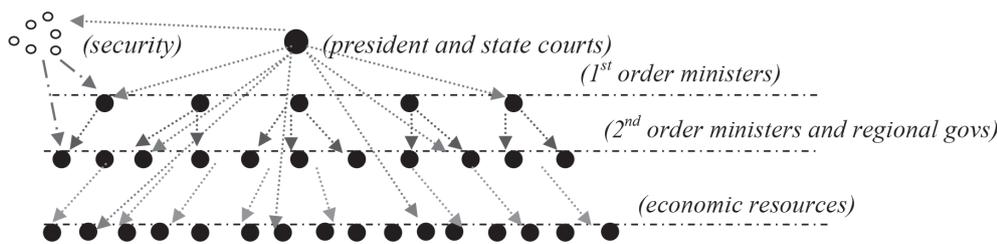
26 The strategy of purges has prevented the rise of charismatic leaders within the clans, which have hence lost relevance in the national political scene.

27 The emblem of this preeminence is the white Ahal Teke horse, which the president appears riding in sculptures and newspapers.

28 This is one of the reasons why Niyazov decided to sabotage these 3 fields. (See section 2.2.3).

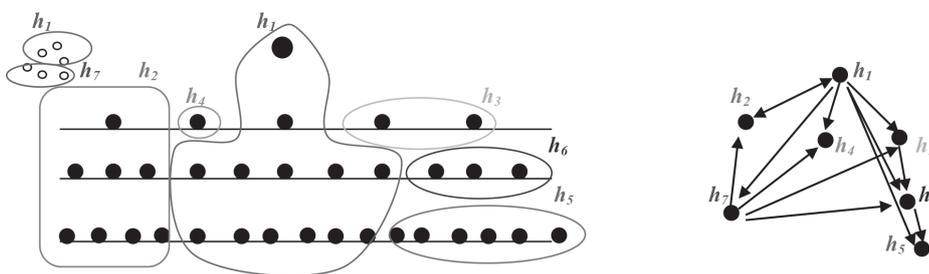
- » The Kyzyl-Arvat division (h_3) counted many government ministers. Its leader Khan Akhmedov was backed by the Mary and Chardzou clans through a marital strategy, threatening Niyazov's power.
- » The Balkan clan (h_4) once took control of the ministry for oil and gas until its leader Nazar Sojunov was forcibly exiled in Russia.
- » The Yomut clan (h_5) in the Caspian: a constant source of conflict due to the abundance of resources in Balkaan, and their open position against the energetic monopoly of Ashgabat.
- » The Dashoguz clan (h_6) gained importance through the networks of two of its members (Redzhap Saparov and Khudaiberdy Orazov) until they were prosecuted by Niyazov.
- » Others as the Chardzou or the Ersary clan (h_7) in Lebap have considerable weight among the security and secrete services.

Fig 3: A representation of the elite individual units (the arrows indicate the force relations)



This graph allows no accurate discussion on the hierarchy among the units. Therefore, we group the units together following the previous division²⁹.

Fig 4: The 'clan' partition and the resulting graph. Only a tribe spread out through all layers can face h_1



Given that a dominating set is defined as a subset $D \subseteq V(G)$ such that each element of $V(G) \setminus D$ has a neighbor³⁰ in D (Malyshev, 2016), it is now possible to establish different coalitions that secure domination. For example, while h_1 may be self-sufficient, it would welcome an accord with h_7 and h_6 to "delegate" the repression of the other clans.

²⁹ The proof for the conservation of the minimal paths is left to the reader.

³⁰ A vertex v is neighbor to v' if they are connected by an arrow.

2.2. The evolution of the elites

Very few things changed along the Turkmen power system on the aftermath of the *Perestroika*. Except for the governor of Ashgabat, almost all the other state representatives were once again appointed, and the communist control apparatus of surveillance in business and public institutions entirely safeguarded (Sabol, 2010). Under these circumstances, the “ten years of stability” program, which was supposed to launch the nation into a “golden age for the Turkmen” (Peyrouse, 2010) was no more than an illusion.

Niyazov secured then his power by opting to reduce the *Mejlis* (Parliament) from 250 to 50 members (Peyrouse, 2012a) easing the suppression of any reformist attempt from its side. Thereafter, the road was paved for unlimited presidential powers since the transition from the totalitarian state to an ethnocentric personalist dictatorship had occurred unnoticed. In other words, the 1st generation of “Soviet-free citizens” grew up within a normalized absence of information other than that of the “leader”³¹, and so the ‘objective order of things’ served to block any change. Under this established universe of behavior, any sign of flourishing patriotism in the newborn state was dragged into veneration for the ruler (Geenberg, 2003).

The power transfer tools

On the aftermath of Niyazov’s death (December 21st, 2006) the dominating group faced a major challenge: the necessity to transfer the power to the representative of the clan. This constitutes one of the most serious factors for political instability from all the possible mechanisms of autocratic transition (Korotayev et al., 2014).

Even though there were traces of competition among the members of the *nomenklatura*³² (Peyrouse, 2012c), the constitution was illegally bypassed depriving the constitutional successor (that is, the president of parliament) of any access to power (and liberty). Instead, the former dentist of Niyazov and later minister, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, was designated as acting chairman. Nevertheless, he counted on the support of the state security services.

Under these circumstances, the non-monitored elections on February 2007 were nothing else than a mere formality. Berdymukhamedov and his counselors (known as the “men of December 21”) created the National Security Council (NSC) (Gleason, 2007) and consummated the rise of the domination of the secret services (executive) over the political succession (legislative)³³.

The cult of personality

These one-man-based non-ideological regimes are certain to rely on the extravagant enhancement of the natural gifts of the ruler, comparable in recent history only to the reign of the Iranian Sha. In fact, adulation of the most conceited sort identically served in both cases to nationals and foreign governments who pursued their piece of the gas and oil share (Kapuscinski, 1987).

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31 In 1999 Niyazov was appointed president for life and named under Turkmenbashi (the great leader of all Turkmen).

32 The term was coined in Soviet times to describe the individuals with key bureaucratic positions appointed by the Communist Party.

33 This was claimed to be the distinctive clause of autocracies by the political sociologist Nicos Poulantzas.

Illustrations of these practices were regular under Niyazov, whose colored hair was portrayed as a divine sign of rejuvenation³⁴, and had a group of researchers to prove his ancestral bond with Mohammed and Alexander the Great (Peyrouse, 2012a). It finally culminated in an otherwise unparalleled fashion by the publication of a life moral guide for the Turkmens: the Ruhnama.

Forcibly studied in schools (Local embassy staff, personal communication, March 7, 2017), this work aimed to provide the Turkmen people with brand new values borrowing elements from the Koran³⁵, the communist literature, the president's child memories and traditional Turkmen epics. In fact, it managed to stuff the minds of many with bizarre myths, such as the invention of the wheel by the Turkmen, or the creation of their nation by a descendant of the biblical prophet Noah (Police officer *Brigadier*, Personal communication, March 13, 2017).

This nonsense got eventually out of hand: it was translated into dozens of languages, its study (with a whole governmental body devoted to it³⁶) was entitled mandatory to get a driving license, and finally a copy inside a Russian-Ukrainian rocket was launched into the space meant to orbit the Earth for a period of 150 years (BBC News, 2005).

An illusory new era

Berdymukhamedov seemed to oppose this egocentrism at first, but time proved that the “de-niyazovization campaign” (Ziegler, 2014), similar to the one that Nikita Khrushchev carried out with Stalin, would only give way to a new wave of narcissism.

Since 2007, the readings of the Ruhnama disappeared from TV and the extensive bibliography of the current president gradually replenished the school hours devoted to its study³⁷. By the same token, all other symbols of veneration were suppressed: Niyazov's portraits were replaced³⁸, new banknotes issued without his face³⁹, and even the Turkmen calendar was reinstated (Sullivan 2015).

Berdymukhamedov's golden equestrian sculpture now dominates Ashgabat's skyline, confirming that after years of being praised, the ruler of any dictatorship ends up trapped in a paranoid unreality in which the superior qualities of wisdom and leadership once artificially assigned to him become true, as well as the chimerical image of national economic blossom brought to him.

These one-man-based non-ideological regimes are certain to rely on the extravagant enhancement of the natural gifts of the ruler

Dismantling the legislative institutions

Regardless of a country's historical dictatorial past, the subjugation of the people is continuously in need of novel mechanisms which demean any theoretical legislative processes. Accordingly,

34 This actually entailed a great expense, since the portraits that overflowed the cities had to be replaced.

35 Niyazov ought to consider it as the “second holy book after the Koran”, which resulted in major protest from neighboring Muslim countries (Volkhonsky, 2006).

36 State Institute for the cultural heritage of the peoples of Turkmensitan.

37 All publications are strictly controlled by the executive branch of Viktor Khramov, and except for reprints of ancient literature, they are all devoted to the president.

38 With a picture of Berdymukhamedov bowing to the former president even forbidden.

39 In 2000 he appeared in every banknote and a series of coins were produced with his image to honor his birthday. Now those coins just serve for recreational purposes at the desolated theme park of “The World of Turkmenbashi Tales” in Ashgabat.

the aforementioned minimization of the *Mejilis* yielded to the establishment of the *Halk Masaly* (the people's council), constituting the niche of Niyazov's flattery (Journeyman Pictures, 2012).

Conversely, this organ was dissolved by Gurbanguly's administration in an attempt at decentralization (Kunysz, 2012) providing the local *Hakims* (directly elected by the citizens), with a greater power. This, however, was just an exercise of outward appearance, inasmuch as this process, as well as the appointment of judges and employees of the NSC, requires presidential approval.

Other mechanisms comprise the manipulation of elections⁴⁰, which the OSCE even refrained from monitoring in 2017 (Putz, 2017), the prohibition of associations independent from the state⁴¹ (Peyrouse, 2010), the 10-year obligatory residence for political candidates (which legitimizes the disqualification of dissidents in exile), or the *prikaz yashuli* to legitimize unfair rules⁴² (Panier, 2017).

Dismantling the education system

Perhaps the most dramatic effect of these policies is the one on the educational institution. To be sure, under the commandment of the previous ruler all libraries in rural areas closed due to the "lack of skills of the villagers"⁴³ (Amnesty, 2003), the Academy of Science was shut down (Peyrouse, 2012b) and the human sciences were ousted by topics such as "The literary heritage of Saparmurat Turkenbashi" (Local embassy staff, personal communication, March 7, 2017).

At the same time, the theoretically free (yet mediocre) tertiary education emerged as the paradigm of corruption, with bribes fluctuating from US\$ 60,000 to US\$ 100,000 (Local embassy staff, personal communication, March 7, 2017). Consequently, education in other CEI countries appeared cheaper and superior, yet ironically, a source of gradual change for social behavior⁴⁴ (Police officer *Brigadier*, Personal communication, March 13, 2017).

3. Power relations and repressive policies

Contrary to the common approach to one-man-dictatorships, the ruler should not be regarded as a superior enlightened figure, but rather as an 'agreement between the parties' compromising elites under a high cost of withdrawal. The potential severe punishment is executed by an organ of personal surveillance and repression integrated in all state institutions: the MNB⁴⁵.

The theoretically free (yet mediocre) tertiary education emerged as the paradigm of corruption

40 OSCE observers indicated in private that some of the old ladies supervising the polling places openly falsified the votes themselves.

41 As of 2006 there was no independent public organization according to the OSCE (OSCE, 2006).

42 The order of the elder' is a justification widely used appealing to the undisputable wisdom of the senior citizens.

43 Nowadays the existing libraries are dramatically underused. Dashoguz, for instance, is granted with a colossal marble one with albeit only a handful of students willing to use it, and no personnel with computer skills to teach them.

44 From 2009 many scholars were forbidden to resume their studies abroad (as those in the American University of Bishkek). Some, therefore, could only return to Turkmenistan upon completion of their studies (Department of State, 2012). This is however denied by the airport authorities (Police officer Brigadier, Personal communication, March 13, 2017).

45 The Ministry for National Security (former KGB) is authorized to confiscate all goods without a legal order and imprison political subjects. Absurdly enough, more than 100 employees of this organ were imprisoned since 2002 (Peyrouse, 2012a).

This establishment is moreover responsible for the professional disqualification of exiles abroad to the end that the opposition will remain scattered and unorganized. And it is indeed the case: there are those who joined the opposition from the first moments of the dictatorship ('first wave') who mistrusted newcomers previously working for the state apparatus who suddenly suffered from 'democratic revelations'. At the same time, the first are often depicted as an 'old ineffective opposition' by politicians such as former Prime Minister Boris Shikmuradov⁴⁶.

3.1. Elimination of political enemies and purges

Whether the purported *coup* in November 2002 was self-arranged by the authorities or not, the truth is that it set the foundations for a major wave of political elimination. So much that it motivated the construction of a concentration camp in the Karakorum desert for the 'Novembrists' (Crude Accountability, 2014) in the Stalinist "societal-cleansing" fashion that Niyazov himself praised. Crimes by state officials were thereafter broadcasted, and so the president had powers to condemn any potential competitor to public lynching⁴⁷.

In order to perpetuate this system of random purges, Niyazov had to be surrounded by officials "not worth purging". In other words, non Turkmen who couldn't run for the elections as, for instance, Russian Viktor Khramov, Turkish Ahmet Çalik, and Israeli Iossif Maiman (Peyrouse, 2012a).

Under the mandate of Berdymukhamedov, these liquidations have materialized into a sinister revenge of the past: state officials having actively participated in the fervent adulation of Niyazov, or worse even, having witnessed the means of power transfer in the ministries, the *Prokuratura*, or the NSC were bound to fall into obscurity. Sarcastically, just as those whose fate they had attended (Peyrouse, 2010).

In order to perpetuate this system of random purges, Niyazov had to be surrounded by officials "not worth purging"

Mechanism of repression

Repression is an over-used notion that is gradually being bereaved of its dramatic significance, especially in the academic domain. With this in mind, the present section contains a brief description of the psychic and physical means of terror used by the security forces.

Following an old Soviet tradition, dissidents (and homosexuals) are interned in psychiatric hospitals and drugged, since the constitution requires no legal order for it. Next, the extraction of confessions prior to imprisonment is achieved through beatings, needles embedded in fingernails, electric shocks, rape and boiling (Crude Accountability, 2014).

Not surprisingly, the health conditions of these facilities (namely prison camp MR-K/16 in Bayramaly and maximum security labor camp LB-K/11) result in massive epidemics of tuberculosis

46 On December 28 2002, after being charge with the authorship of the 'coup', his confession speech prior torture was broadcasted and he was sentenced to life immediately after and kept incommunicado ever since. Citizens even queued up at the council chamber to demand worse punishment (Khudaikulova 2012).

47 These systematic purges undermined the state functioning and fostered outstanding corruption since politicians realized the little time they had in power to get rich. After an eventual imprisonment, this money would also serve to pay the bribes to purchase freedom in Niyazov's traditional Ramadan's amnesty (Turkmenistan.ru, 2004). A sum that under Berdymukhamedov rose up to US\$40,000 (Vilmer, 2009).

to such an extent that on March 2016 their infirmaries were compelled to unregister 65% of the infected “for improvement of the statistical data” (ANT, 2016).

Undoubtedly the emblem of Turkmenistan’s repression is the prison of Ovan Depe, 70 kilometers north from Ashgabat. Although some sources claim that the prison was closed by the current president after the riots succeeding Niyazov’s death (Crude Accountability, 2014), in 2017 it is still functioning and no organizations are allowed to visit it (or even to inquire about the state of political prisoners)⁴⁸.

Censorship and other religious restrictions

Consistently, the government dominates all public and private communication blocking the use of social media and networks⁴⁹ and forbids any non-state channels other than several Russian ones recently allowed. Not to mention the control over religious creeds which, as in other Central Asian countries, generates an Islam administered (and repressed) by the state in order to avoid any Islamic opposition and prevent divergent interpretations.

The burning of 40,000 copies of the Koran in 2000 and the obligation to praise the president during the Friday sermons serve to illustrate this restraint. It led, moreover, to the imprisonment of important figures such as Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah refusing to teach the Ruhnama in the mosque (Peyrouse, 2012c).

But undoubtedly the most controversial measure was the restriction to make the Hajj (with 188 pilgrims in 2008 and 2010, and none in 2009) (Corley, 2010). Applicants waited several years and once there they were always accompanied by members of the KNB.

3.2. The configuration of the power network

The study of power relations within a sociological structure is one of the most complex problems in modern political science, even when dealing with dictatorial structures. Although these regimes are normally based on loyalty-protection contracts, compliance is rarely granted in Turkmenistan (Gleason, 2007).

As for to the respondents, two Jews known as the *zamestitel'nye prezidenta* (deputy presidents)⁵⁰ appear to be above him: former Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov and ex-Mossad agent Iossif Maiman. Correspondingly, the president constitutes a comfortable “agreement” between them due to his mild character.

While the Turkmen media portrayed Mr Fradkov as having no more than a usual diplomatic relation with the authorities (Turkmenistan.ru, 2007), the truth is that in Nyazov’s funeral he took

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48 The OSCE has repeatedly requested to inspect these facilities, but the regime does only enable access to a modern luxurious (and inhabited) prison for women.

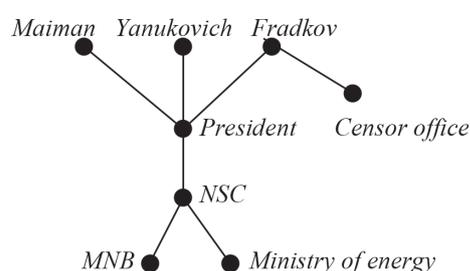
49 Including whatsapp, youtube, facebook, vkontakte, odnoklassniki, livejournal, etc. Yet the same as in Iran, this restriction is very often bypassed by the use of VPN tunneling from a remote server.

50 In total there are supposed to be 10 of those people, each of them supervising 3 or 4 ministries (Local embassy staff, personal communication, March 7, 2017).

up the foremost position (together with Viktor Yanukovich) in accordance to their full control over Turkmenistan's foreign gas trade⁵¹ (Peyrouse, 2012c).

What is the relative position then of the individuals in the power structure? Let's begin by identifying "equivalent individuals" within a network: for a certain graph G , two vertices $v_1, v_2 \in V$ are *structurally equivalent* if and only if their permutation generates another graph G' that conserves every vertex⁵² (that is, G is *automorphic* to G') (Everett et al., 1990).

Fig 5: Within this graph, Maiman and Yanukovich are structurally equivalent, whereas Fradkov is not

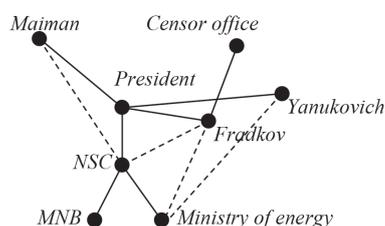


However, this property is only a qualitative, and not a quantitative property. To the end that an order could be established, we define the set of neighboring vertices of v , $N(v)$, and inductively the higher order neighborhoods as $N^{i+1} = N(N^i(v))$ ⁵³. We can now define v_1, v_2 to be *neighborhood-isomorphic* ($v_1 \equiv v_2$) of degree k if and only if $N_k(v_1)$ has the same number of elements than $N_k(v_2)$ in a similar disposition.

Developing the structure in figure 5 a bit further, we obtain the following results:

Fig 6: We see for example that Maiman \equiv Yanukovich in degree 1, but not in degree 2 (Yanukovich would only reach the MNB in degree 3)

Meanwhile, Fradkov \equiv President in degrees 1, 2 (covering actually the whole structure)



External support: the energy-thirsty West

Contrary to neoliberal democracies with imperial ambitions, such as France, Israel or the US, dictatorships call for approval from outer sources instead of their own citizens' (Gleason, 2011; Greenberg, 2007). Aware of that, foreign governments and multinationals adulate the presi-

51 Presumably power was divided within the energy sector to prevent the emergence of individuals with strong networks.

52 To make things easier we now work with undirected graphs. That is, reciprocal power relations.

53 Two vertices reached by the same $N^k(v)$ are said to be in the same 'orbit' (k) of v .

dent⁵⁴ pursuing substantial contracts, which results in a huge drain of state funds and thus on heavier economic constraints for the people.

Turkmenistan is the vivid proof of how criticism can easily be deflected in the context of a gas curse (Khudaykulova, 2012) arousing the enthusiasm of foreign governors craving to set their national gas companies in a privileged position⁵⁵ (Watters, 2009). Nevertheless, the IMF, the WB and the ERBD have already managed to assist in the progressive privatization of the energy and the banking sector (EBRD, 2012).

4. The impact on its society

The emptiness of the streets and parks in the center of Ashgabat and the quietness of its citizens reveal the fact that the absence of freedom has reached and overwhelmed every corner of the society. Indeed the 'mechanisms of conformity' have invaded all layers of the population, which subsequently militates against any qualitative change. The social space for imagination constituted by values and aspirations is not validated by the prevalent rationale, in an effort to absorb all political opposition.

This social "spontaneous repulsion" that serves to pacify the existence is quite a natural consequence of an entire history under domination⁵⁶: a kind of "superior irresistible force" or dogmatic indoctrination which respondents claim to be inescapable unless one leaves the country (Local embassy staff, personal communication, March 7, 2017).

Social collectives are, nevertheless, quite unequally affected by the regime's oppression

4.1. The distribution of society

Social collectives are, nevertheless, quite unequally affected by the regime's oppression. We might hereby distinguish two non-overlapping fractions:

One completely subjected to the will of the government, forced to vote for a particular person or wear "uniforms" under the threat of random police retaliation. This fear of the unknown provides the government with incomparable power, forcing citizens, for instance, to actively engage in public demonstrations in support of the government⁵⁷.

These collectives rarely show strong professional ambitions and are extremely rooted in a traditional lifestyle where clans and family play a vital role. They so regard their relation to the regime as the "necessary condition" to guarantee their family peace, with a great deal of their happiness placed in the community. It constitutes the stronghold in which individuals can express their views without confronting the authorities: some sort of "shock absorber" for the oppression exerted by the state. The government is fully aware of it and even encourages these

54 Turkmen authorities are remarkably "emotional" and abhor any lack of commendation towards them (Foreign diplomatic staff, personal communication, March 5, 2017).

55 Europe is gaining interest in Turkmenistan as a preferential gas provider and is therefore ready to make concessions regarding human rights' standards (HRW, 2016).

56 Turkmens have all through their existence been conquered by stronger nations (Arabs, Persians, Mongols and recently, Russians) due to their inter-tribal conflicts.

57 Up to once a week they are brought in tens of buses from different towns, schools and factories to perform national dances and other folkloric activities. Even elder people are conscripted sometimes requiring the use of dippers to put up with the long standing hours.

practices by sponsoring the “cult of the family”, conscious that it is the best way to prevent the formation of any civil society.

The second (and minority) fraction is referred to as “private citizens”. Namely non-state workers, they are popularly known as *rusificirovanie* (“russified”) for their usual belonging to Russian-speaking families, which in Turkmenistan are conceived as of liberal nature. They are not submitted to any of the above impositions, but their domestic lives are equally coerced nonetheless. Finally, they are absolutely barred from any political life and influential post, a realization that begins at an early age⁵⁸.

The outright abnegation of the welfare state

In general, the dominance of such a narcissistic administration ballasts most of the inhabitants with a heavy social and economic dearth which drives them to perish emotionally due to the lack of vital perspectives. This entails grave social consequences, in particular the abuse of drugs⁵⁹ and alcohol, and the self-repressive nature of the community. In this case, in the shape of a patriarchal society where men, often neglected and humiliated in the public sphere, assert their authority⁶⁰.

What is more, female rights are severely undermined with no access to relevant posts and a wide range of eccentric unofficial measures, including the impossibility to obtain a driving license from 2012⁶¹, and so again, bribes rising up to US\$ 10,000 remain as the only solution.

Regarding the economic distribution, the high GDP of the country and the low density of population induced a per capita income of almost 7,000 US\$ in 2015 (WB, 2016a). However, this is categorically unrealistic, given that most citizens do not make up to 300 US\$ a month (Local embassy staff, personal communication, March 8, 2017). Accordingly, data on poverty aspects such as the Poverty Headcount Ration is concealed by the authorities to the international organizations⁶².

Unemployment is, as well, a massive source of civil discontentment in regions other than Ahal, and it is often the case that several members in one family remain unemployed. Yet in line with the former Soviet policies, real figures are masked by means of “artificial recruitment”⁶³ in which employees simply stand for long hours or carry out repetitive unnecessary tasks in

Unemployment is, as well, a massive source of civil discontentment

58 One of the respondents acknowledged that while studying at a Russian School “everything started to change” when she was obliged to study in Turkmen from the 7th year (Local embassy staff, personal communication, March 7, 2017). Another claimed not being able to enroll in university (even after paying the fees) owing to her Uzbek background (Local embassy staff, personal communication, March 8, 2017).

59 After the Soviet Union collapsed, the consumption of drugs shot up (due to the geographical enclave) and men’s death rate increased sharply (Chivers, 2007).

60 This results in a great number of abused women, even though few are able to report it as it frequently brings about their isolation from their own families (Local embassy staff, personal communication, March 7, 2017).

61 The unofficial explanation is that the current president had a car incident with a woman while driving in civilian clothes, and thereafter decreed that women were not skilled enough to drive (Local embassy staff, personal communication, March 7, 2017).

62 The only available official data is from 1993 and 1998, when the poverty gap at 1.90 US\$ marked 39.45 % and 14.54 % respectively (WB, 2016b). And any media reporting on these social concerns is rapidly banned (Greenberg, 2003).

63 This serves the double purpose of improving the statistics and preventing citizens from having the time and the energy to enroll in any kind of civil action. These strategies are widely used in the post-Soviet space, and governments as the Belarusian one show great concerns about it (Erickson 2017).

state-controlled business (including the hordes of street cleaning ladies), resulting in an official tolerable figure of 10.5% in 2014 (CIA, 2016).

Finally, the theoretically free medical care becomes, in practice, unreasonably expensive due to the bribes that state employees themselves insinuate due to their low revenues. Services are reported to be abysmal⁶⁴ and limited⁶⁵, despite the grandiose buildings hosting them and the cutting-edge technology, and patients are more often than not wrongly diagnosed (Local embassy staff, personal communication, March 8, 2017). Thus many citizens travel regularly to India even for any medical treatment.

4.2. The dissolution of all civil society

Contrary to the image of social passivity, the complete abnegation of the 'people' as a political entity is accomplished by a series of committed restrictions: the lack of independent institutions whatsoever, the abolition of association rights⁶⁶, the arbitrary arrests and notably the coercion toward family members. Hence, individuals are bound to accept this fate under the dogmatic '*budu gecher*' (everything will pass).

On the subject of the arrests, it is worth noting that public figures are especially vulnerable to be condemned with unclear charges, as the pop singers Nazir Khabibov and Palvan Khamudarov. The most frequently alleged reason is drug trafficking, since it is a socially accepted practice in Turkmenistan to publicly criminalize the offenders and air their confession on TV (TurkmenDissidentTv, 2016). But the truth is that the convicted often hold business that conflict with the government interests.

Finally, in what respects to mass unrest, the only significant confrontation recorded so far seems to be the one occurring on Sept 12, 2008 (day of the Ruhnama) in Ashgabat's north-west district of Khitrovka. A rebel group armed with professional light military equipment took hostages in a plant of potable water. The combats lasted one day, and while between 10 and 13 special units were alleged to perish, the number of civilian casualties remains unidentified.

Rumors had it that the event was connected to the opposition in exile, but the hijackers were most likely tied to drug trafficking and to personnel of the force ministries. Along with this hypothesis, it seemed to be a counterattack in an attempt to resist Berdymukhamedov's "battle against drugs"⁶⁷. In either case, the Turkmen society lacks at present the necessary structure and leaders to experience any sort of popular civic movement (Rubio 2014).

Contrary to the image of social passivity, the complete abnegation of the 'people' as a political entity is accomplished by a series of committed restrictions

64 With a consequent life expectancy of 61.5 years (WB, 2016b).

65 In 2004, all hospitals in regions other than Ahal were closed in line with the policy of clan discrimination (US NLM, 2007).

66 Groups of more than 10 people are subjected to police harassment (Amnesty International, 2003).

67 Khubaiberdy Amandurdyev and Akhmed Khodzhauliev, long surveyed by the security services, were killed in the combats (Peyrouse, 2012b).

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