

Ashgabat's Immaculate White Marble Façade

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Grand architecture aims to reinforce national identity, but the human reality is different.

The Turkmen capital Ashgabat stretches out in an expanse of opulent white marble palaces, government buildings, golden domes and carefully manicured parks.

Turkmenistan's first president Saparmurat Niyazov, known as Turkmenbashy, and his successor Gurbanguly Berdymuhamedov invested heavily in construction intended to reinforce a sense of Turkmen identity.

There are portraits and statues of the two men everywhere in the city, which has been built on a large scale.

Ashgabat has made it into the Guinness Book of Records with the world's biggest carpet, the greatest number of fountains in a public place, and the largest architectural star, positioned on the façade of the city's television tower.

Located along the ancient Silk Road, the city was founded in the late 19th century as Tsarist Russia's administrative centre for the trans-Caspian region.

After independence, oil and gas money quickly transformed the city, with old neighbourhoods bulldozed and new ones springing up overnight.

(See **Homes Demolished in Ashgabat** and **Housing Market Confused but Booming in Turkmenistan**).

Its architectural style has been called Muslim modernist, linked to that of the Gulf cities and Azerbaijan's capital Baku, another post-Soviet city boosted by oil profits.

But its immaculately clean centre is almost completely empty of people, despite its population of around a million.

Locals avoid the streets and avenues along which the presidential motorcade is likely to pass, one Turkmen activist told a Human Rights Watch event on June 27.

"People [who live in the centre] cannot approach the window or turn on the air conditioning," said the activist, who asked to remain anonymous. "People are afraid of walking in the streets."

Ashgabat's grand scale also bears little resemblance to the rest of Turkmenistan. Outside the capital, most Turkmens are forced to live very simply.

"All investment in the country is targeted at Ashgabat and Avaza, a resort on the Caspian Sea. All other regions are underfinanced," said another Turkmen activist at the same event.

Ordinary people face myriad restrictions on their human rights and are not allowed to travel out of the country without hard-to-obtain exit visas. Turkmenistan was ranked third from last in the 2016 World Press Freedom Index.

There is a huge gap between the rural and urban populations and tribal divisions, as well as high levels of discrimination against ethnic minorities and limited access to health facilities and education.

(See **Slow Recovery for Turkmen Healthcare** and **Turkmen Students Flee Abroad**).

Away from the gold statues and sumptuous fountains of central Ashgabat, life in Turkmenistan looks very different.

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