

Crime and Punishment the Turkmen Way

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A chief prosecutor who was the president's enforcer falls foul of the system she served. The advantage of working in a government like Turkmenistan is that senior posts regularly become available. The downside is that sooner or later, you will be axed, just like your predecessor and no doubt your successor too. The price of failure is often high – ritual humiliation by President Saparmurad Niazov followed by trial and imprisonment.

That's a rule Kurbanbibi Atajanova might have considered more carefully before taking up the post of prosecutor general – a powerful position in a Soviet-pattern legal system where justice is weighted towards the prosecution.

For a time she acted as the president's right-hand woman, presiding over the prosecution of a succession of ministers who either really were mired in corruption, or were just unfortunate enough to incur the president's ire.

It was Atajanova who oversaw the jailing of at least 50 people following the alleged assassination attempt against the president at the end of 2002. And last year her office prosecuted such major figures as Yolly Kurbanmuradov, the deputy prime minister responsible for oil and gas, Rejep Saparov, the head of Niazov's administrative office, oil and gas minister Saparmamed Valiev and Ilyas Charyev, head of the state-owned oil and gas producer Turkmenneftgaz.

On April 10 the president's enforcer left her post, ostensibly stepping down voluntarily to enjoy a well-deserved retirement.

But that story changed on April 24, when the president turned up at the prosecution service to announce the findings of an investigation into Atajanova's alleged misdeeds. As a sideline to prosecuting high-profile figures, she apparently appropriated their assets, acquiring dozens of houses, shops and cafes across the country, over 20 cars, thousands of sheep and, for reasons still unexplained, 30,500 buckets.

"I am astonished at your greed," Niazov said to Atajanova, in remarks shown on Turkmen TV. "You took 30,500 buckets – why?"

Turning to investigators working on the case, he said, "Have you found out why she took them? What did she need 30,000 buckets for? Did she use them for something or not?"

Niazov said that in the case of oil and gas minister Valiev, Atajanova withheld 60,000 of the 90,000 US dollars confiscated from him. She buried the money in the ground "like a dog with a bone", the president said.

Even human beings were not sacrosanct, according to the president, as military personnel attached to the prosecution service were turned into manservants, or sent out to tend Atajanova's sheep.

It has become commonplace for ministers and other top officials to go through the cycle of appointment, a year or so in power, and then disgrace and imprisonment. In each case, the president stages a public humiliation ceremony, enumerating the official's alleged crimes at a televised meeting generally attended by the individual concerned, who then pleads for mercy.

Atajanova's case was no different. After the president had finished reciting her sins, she was given an opportunity to respond.

"I am very guilty. Everything that has been said here is correct and I fully admit to it. There is nothing here to deny and nothing to add," she said, breaking down in tears.

"My great leader, I just ask you for mercy.... I have three daughters but no son [to support me].... Please be merciful and do not put me in prison."

Niazov was unforgiving, telling the former prosecutor, "The president cannot show indulgence by absolving someone from investigation, and he will never do so. If you have committed a sin, then serve your punishment."

But he indicated a way for her to help her own case, "If you have taken any more stuff, then give it back. Pay your debts... while the investigation is under way."

What is never clear when an official is suddenly alleged to have amassed huge wealth is why, in a tightly-controlled police state like Turkmenistan, no one noticed before. That leads many people watching the spectacle on TV to conclude that all officials are corrupt, but only the ones regarded as potentially powerful or troublesome are removed.

"Now the country has been given a long list of the accused's misdeeds," said a journalist in Turkmenistan, who preferred to remain anonymous. "What for?"

In a rare glimpse of how he may operate, Niyazov announced that he had had his doubts about the prosecutor for the last six months, and that he had received a lot of letters from people complaining of blackmail and extortion.

"The crimes of this level of official are obvious - everyone knows about them," said the journalist. "But he needed her [Atajanova] to cover for his own ignoble actions.

"Clearly, the things she knew went beyond the critical mass of what it is permissible to know. There was a logic to her trajectory: she became just another victim of a regime in which she was a zealous participant."

Since her case is highly politicised, objective information about whether Atajanova is guilty of any of the crimes attributed to her is unlikely ever to come out.

Trial and a lengthy jail sentence now seem inevitable. But the net has been cast much wider, and as well as prosecution service staff, the former prosecutor's relatives are reportedly being hauled in and

interrogated.

The removal of Maral Bashimova as minister of culture and broadcasting seems to be part of this wide sweep. She was sacked for “grave shortcomings” in her work, but once again, Niazov appeared at a meeting shown on state TV on April 27 to flesh out the allegations.

It is unusual enough for women to reach high office in Turkmenistan. But while polygamy is not unknown in this traditionally Muslim society, Niazov made the startling accusation that Bashimova had two husbands. Not only that, but one of them had murky business dealings with the disgraced prosecutor.

“A person who has two husbands cannot hold the post of culture minister. Of course, it’s your own personal affair to divorce one husband and get together with another. But in order to enjoy a good reputation you should be with one husband.... One of your husbands is trading using Atajanova's money.”

These sensational performances certainly liven up the otherwise stultifying content of the heavily-censored TV programming. What is less clear is whether Niazov is using them to seek some kind of popular approval or just to keep his entourage intimidated into obedience.

“As long as the regime stands and the dictator is on the throne, there is a need to demonstrate strength... by any means possible,” said a sociologist who asked not to be named.

Bashimova’s replacement as culture minister, Enebay Ataeva, was dismissed as finance and economy minister two years ago, but was not disgraced and instead held a lesser position as a trade union official.

Ataeva now seems to have been recycled. “There’s just no one he [Niazov] can rely on,” said the sociologist. “There aren’t any qualified people left among those still prepared to serve the regime.”

The TV humiliations look set to continue. These days, new appointments – including that of, Ataeva - come with a health warning: there is a six month probationary period, and if the official is dismissed at the end of it, he or she will not be eligible for any other post.

Location: Turkmenistan

Focus: Central Asia

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