

Election Candidates Talk up Change

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The election promises made by the various candidates in the February 11 presidential poll in Turkmenistan have left some prospective voters cold, but others believe the pledges could translate into positive changes.

It is difficult to gauge public opinion in Turkmenistan, but a straw poll conducted among the electorate reflects diverging degrees of optimism that the candidates are really serious about changing things for the better – and considerable pessimism too. The names of the people we talked to have been changed for safety reasons.

The candidates have offered criticisms – albeit mild ones – of the state of affairs in Turkmenistan. This is unprecedented in a country in which the late president Saparmurat Niazov used to be the only person allowed to mention the existence of problems.

Addressing voters in the Dashoguz region of northern Turkmenistan, Amaniaz Atajikov, the region's deputy governor who is running for the presidency, noted that agriculture and industry face many problems which need to be addressed. He also said that the common practice of inflating economic statistics, inventing production figures, other illegal practices destroy people's will to give 100 per cent to their work.

However, many voters say such remarks are superficial. Mary resident Bayshim Saparov, for instance, said that while Atajikov noted that there were problems, he did not talk about how to tackle them.

Abdyldy Chopanov was invited to a public meeting in the southeastern city of Mary with another candidate, Ashirniaz Pomanov, the mayor of the western port city of Turkmenbashi. Pomanov restricted his remarks to general themes such as the environment and to matters of a very parochial nature – for example the need to provide workers with the right overalls, to make special dietary provision at factories involving dangerous chemical processes, and to lay on buses to take people to and from work.

Atakhan Mukhammedov, who lives in the eastern city of Turkmenabat, says it is unrealistic to expect a closed society to suddenly be transformed into an open one. The mere fact that the candidates are already talking about defects in the system gives grounds for hope, he said, adding that he anticipated that a time might come when people are no longer persecuted for holding opinions that differ from the official line.

Muhammedov referred to a newspaper report of a speech by another candidate, Orazmurad Garajiev, who said he supported the general view that conditions for army conscripts must get better. Muhammedov said there are so many problems with the army that they can only be dealt with if they are discussed openly. He said his own son lost so much weight in one month of military service that he became unrecognisable. After he was demobilised he said the soldiers were fed very poorly, usually on rice with no meat or even fat in it.

Voters have paid particular attention to speeches made by the front-runner, acting president Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov, who has promised reforms in schools and higher education, better pensions and new jobs.

Atamyrat Allayarov, a teacher from Khojambas district, approves of Berdymuhammedov's plans to increase schooling from nine to ten years and to get the school leaving certificate recognised in other countries. Allayarov noted that after Berdymuhammedov spoke about these things, the other candidates

followed suit. But he is unhappy that none has yet proposed improving working conditions for teachers or reducing classroom numbers.

Charyyar Saparmedov, a private taxi driver, is happy that Berdymuhammedov promised to create new jobs, and does not really care that he failed to talk about rampant unemployment.

Other people believe that all this talk is just a way of distracting attention from the real situation. According to Tejen resident Garaja Annaev, one only has to look at the newspapers to realise change is not going to come easily. If things really were about to change, the newspapers, radio and television would already be reflecting this and changing the way they themselves work. But he said they are still no different from the way they were a month, a year, or several years ago. Until the media reports diverse and contradictory views, and allow their audience to make up its own mind about the truth, nothing will change in Turkmenistan. In Annaev's view all the candidates - with the exception of Berdymuhammedov - are talking about problems merely for form's sake.

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