

Niazov Anti-Corruption Drive

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'Oriental pasha' cracks the whip hand over venal officials.

In the Oriental fairy tale, "A Thousand and One Nights", Kharun ar-Rashid, the ruler of Baghdad, dresses in disguise and walks the streets of his capital to find out whether his officials are abusing their power over ordinary people.

Today's ruler of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niazov, 61, may be called a president, but in many respects he has much more in common with the ruler in that fairy tale than a modern head of state.

Styled Turkmenbashi (leader of the Turkmen), the president-for-life wields all the power of an old Oriental pasha. After 15 years in office, Turkmenbashi decides virtually everything. He combines the posts of president, prime minister and commander-in-chief, chairs the Security Council and heads the Democratic (formerly Communist) party, which is the only political party. The constitution entitles him to appoint and remove leaders of all public bodies and have a say on all major industrial contracts.

Like the ruler of Baghdad, Turkmenbashi also likes to don a false moustache and beard and tour his country undercover to find out how his governors behave. After concluding that many behave very badly, he likes to dress them down in public.

Most weeks, TV viewers can see this spectacle for themselves. There, on the screen, they can watch their stern-faced president attacking officials who "only care for their own well-being" and then doling out the appropriate punishment.

After publicly savaging "treasury thieves", or corrupt officials who have amassed luxurious palaces, Niazov removes them from office and forces them to return their state apartments or other land "acquired through unlawful means". "After reading the complaints," the president said on one of these occasions, "one can't help concluding that you should all be put behind bars."

As part of his strategy, Niazov has introduced the practice of appointing managers on six-month "probation" contracts, saying, "If an individual has talent, without doubt he will reveal it in six months. If he can't, then we will have to part."

The principle of appointing "Khalifs (rulers) for an hour", as they are nick-named, has become a rule, reiterated in several presidential decrees, with the stipulation that "in case of unsatisfactory performance, they are to be removed from office". The result is a rapid turnover of officials, ranging from deputy premiers, ministers, their deputies, directors and bankers.

Turkmenbashi prefers public condemnation to criminal prosecution. There are no open trials of corrupt officials. After former agriculture minister Tagandurdi Nuriev was caught using state money to buy 60 vehicles in Iran and distributing them to his friends, Niazov did not put him in jail. "We told him to go to his native village," he said, "and work hard on the land, paying for his guilt with honest toil."

When the former chairman of the Central Bank was discovered siphoning \$60 million into Russian banks and using some of it to pay for the renovation of his mistress's house, the president merely ordered him to

return the money to the state. On that occasion, his clemency served him badly. The treasury thief defected abroad with all the money he had stolen.

As a result of endless reshuffles, the country's leadership has changed so many times that ordinary people joke they will all have chance to sit in an official's chair.

As part of the war on corruption, Niazov has also begun stopping the salaries of officials convicted of "irregularities" in work, and transferring the money to the budget. Dozens of officials have suffered this penalty over the last few months, including the head of the meteorological service - for making an inaccurate weather forecast - and the president's own press secretary - for smoking in a public area.

In another attempt to improve the calibre of public officials, Niazov has begun to personally conduct in-depth interviews with candidates for top positions, ordering the winners to work in the lower levels of their departments before taking up their posts.

When Annaguli Jumagildijonov was made a deputy energy minister for six months recently, Niazov typically ordered him to spend the first three as a factory foreman. Only after "having widened his knowledge about the principles of work in the entire complex," as he put it, was the incumbent allowed to start work as deputy minister.

Niazov even inspects the family trees of candidates for state positions, searching for ancestors with criminal convictions. "Since many traits are family ones, and everybody brings up their children like themselves, I need to find out who their parents were, to see if they had thieves in the family," he said.

The president intends to give these inspections legal sanction. According to a draft resolution of the Mejlis (parliament), a law on state service incorporating "the fundamental ideas of Turkmenbashi about further improvement of the work of the state apparatus", will be discussed at the next session of the assembly next month.

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