

Post-Dictatorship Blues

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Muted reactions to the death of an omnipresent figure – and uncertainty about what now awaits the country.

Saparmyrat Niazov's face dominated television, newspapers and billboards for a decade, and his decisions had a huge impact on people's lives in Turkmenistan. He was almost deified in the personality cult he built up around himself, so proof that he was after all mortal has had a profoundly traumatic effect on his nation.

Loved or unloved, Turkmenbashi the Great, the Leader of the Turkmen, will be irreplaceable. The politicians he abused and humiliated over the years now face the unenviable task of holding together a system that revolved entirely around their master.

There were no newspapers on December 22 – unsurprisingly, as there was no more news of the president's activities to fill the pages. State television simply carried hourly repeats of official announcements put out by an emergency meeting of the State Security Council and the government.

The authorities have reacted by closing off Turkmenistan's already limited contact with the outside world. Flights and trains are not being allowed into the country, and government institutions have found their restricted internet access cut off altogether.

Inside the country, however, the streets are quiet and people are going about their business almost as if nothing has happened. Offices and shops are open as usual. The only outward signs of mourning are the black ribbons hanging from government buildings, and the municipal workers taking down the Christmas trees which in this country mark New Year.

On the streets of Ashgabat, the mood is of grief mixed with apathy. Most of all, people seem unsure what will happen next.

"I realise something awful has happened," said Gulnara Hojaeva, a doctor. "I'm in shock. I can't do anything, I wander round my apartment like an automaton not knowing what to do."

Others expressed grief, including both older people fearful of change as well as youngsters who have grown up in the strange post-Soviet world created by Niazov and know little else.

"How will we live now?" asked housewife Ejegul Saryeva, weeping. "Niazov did so much for us."

A schoolteacher in Ashgabat reported tearful scenes in her classroom. "I can't teach lessons – the children are crying and saying it's the end of the world," she said.

If some people were relieved to be rid of their despotic ruler, they were not prepared to say so in public. That is unsurprising, since surveillance was key to Niazov's grip on power. Telephone calls are now being tapped even more assiduously than usual, and the line goes dead the moment anyone starts talking

about the president's death.

Yet whispered conversations take place - passing on news and also the conspiracy theories that abound when the state media starve people of information.

One popular story has it that Niazov did not die of a heart attack, but was suffocated. Proponents of this theory ask how officials could otherwise have moved so fast with their arrangements that six hours after the president's death, the announcement on state television was accompanied by a female choir dressed in black and a backdrop of huge pictures showing Niazov from childhood to his time as head of state.

The public face of government is now Deputy Prime Minister Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, appointed acting president by the emergency government meeting. He looks unnervingly like Niazov.

The role of interim head of state would normally have gone to the speaker of parliament, Ovezgeldy Ataev, but the official report from the meeting said he had been ruled out because he was facing criminal charges. Subsequent statements said Ataev had been appointed as Berdymukhammedov's deputy.

The question now is whether Berdymukhammedov is merely a transitional figure or whether he represents a grouping that intends to fill the vacuum of power.

"It's no surprise that Berdymukhammedov has taken control," said sociologist Geldy Berdyev. "Niazov himself placed the executive in a superior position to the legislature."

He warned, "This arrangement is very dangerous. It seems Berdymukhammedov plans to hold onto power. If he seizes control, the Turkmenbashi regime will be perpetuated."

The next step is to convene the Halk Maslakhaty - a national congress with more legislative powers than parliament itself - for an emergency meeting on December 26. The congress must formalise arrangements for the transition of power and set a date for a presidential election. What is unclear is whether it will do more than rubber-stamp decisions already taken by the security council and the cabinet. Its unwieldy size and reputation for obsequious loyalty to President Niazov suggest the Halk Maslakhaty meeting will produce no debate or radical solutions.

In keeping with Muslim tradition, the funeral will take place as soon as possible. Niazov's body will lie in state in the Presidential Palace on the morning of December 24, and the interment will take place the same day in his home village of Kipchak, just outside Ashgabat. The period of mourning has been extended from December 26 to December 30.

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