

Turkmenbashi Purges Inner Circle

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The president dismisses key security personnel in apparent bid to foil a coup attempt.

President Saparmurat Niazov has mounted a purge of his security force after claiming that some of its members were guilty of abuse of power and corruption. But some suggest the move was really aimed at removing officials suspected of plotting to overthrow him.

The ever-suspicious Niazov is noted for constant shake-ups in government departments but this is the first time he has rounded on the Turkmen National Security Committee, TNSC, a local version of the old KGB.

Opposition politicians believe the purge was motivated less by concern about corrupt behaviour and more about Niazov's fear that the committee, hitherto staunchly loyal, was now plotting to overthrow him.

Fifteen highly-placed TNSC officials, including six department heads, were dismissed last month for "serious failings and gross violations of the law". The most senior member of the committee to be sacked was its chairman, Lieutenant-General Mohammed Nazarov, a onetime close comrade of the president.

Speaking in Ashgabat on April 1, the new head of the TNSC, Colonel-General Poran Berdyev, said those dismissed had been implicated in numerous of cases of abuse of power, illegal searches and arrests, blackmail, bribe taking and the covering up of crimes committed by members of the security service itself.

Until now, the TNSC has been considered a major prop for the authoritarian rule of Niazov who calls himself Turkmenbashi, or Father of the Turkmen. The shake-up of the organisation started after the accusations surfaced that its members had misused state funds to build hotel and factories for personal gain. One charge was that the deputy chief of the TNSC built himself a two-storey house with 18 rooms and a single storey dwelling with six rooms, all without knowledge of the government.

According to a government source, who wished to remain anonymous, the purge was really touched off by a report in which a member of the president's inner circle claimed that Nazarov was planning to overthrow the president.

The report said key roles in this plot were played by Nazarov's close aides who had been promised senior posts in the ministry for internal affairs, the prosecutor's office, the border guard forces and the foreign ministry, in preparation for Niazov's downfall.

A complaint about illegal activities by Turkmen security services was reportedly raised by US ambassador Laura Kennedy in a private conversation with Turkmenbashi at the beginning of March. It was after this meeting that Niazov pounced on the TNSC.

The president started off by demoting Nazarov but letting him stay in his job for a six months trial period - "to see if he could mend his ways". But he soon reconsidered and fired him outright. Now Nazarov is reportedly subjected to daily interrogations in prison and allowed to spend his nights at home under house arrest. He is also said to be showing signs of extreme physical exhaustion and psychological disturbance.

Also fired were the defence minister Major-Generals Gurbandurdy Begendjev, who headed military counter-

intelligence, and Khosse Reyimov, head of the department controlling state border security.

For some time, Niazov has blamed security chiefs for failing to prevent the spread of political opposition. On March 13, the former special adviser to the Turkmen embassy in Washington, Chary Annaberdyev, announced that he was joining the People's Democratic Movement of Turkmenistan. After receiving political asylum in the USA, the diplomat declared he had "a clear understanding of the falsehood, inanity and criminality of what is happening in my country".

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Location: Turkmenistan

Focus: Central Asia

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