

Turkmenistan: Fate of Kurbanmuradov Uncertain

Author: [the.iwpr](#)

Little has been heard of one of the president's longest serving officials since his arrest last month.

Mystery surrounds the fate of one of Turkmenistan's most senior government officials, who was sacked by President Saparmurat Niazov some weeks ago on suspicion of embezzling some 68 million US dollars.

Deputy Prime Minister Elly Kurbanmuradov, who was in charge of the former Soviet republic's vast natural gas and oil revenues, was removed from his post on May 20 and charged with embezzlement.

Kurbanmuradov was regarded as the president's right-hand man and had held the post of vice premier for eight years. From 1992 he was also the head of the republic's Vneshekonombank, and was later put in charge of the development fund of the oil and gas industry.

He has been charged with embezzling state funds and has had his property – which allegedly included 20 houses and apartments, 18 cars, large amounts of computers and audio-visual equipment, 4,500 sheep and 28 cows – confiscated.

The move by Niazov – who likes to be called Turkmenbashi, or Father of all Turkmen – has been greeted with bewilderment by officials and international analysts alike.

Following Kurbanmuradov's arrest, there have been various reports about his fate, mainly based on rumours, which cannot be verified. In the first week after his detention, it was reported that he had died in prison. It later turned out that one of his relatives arrested some days after the official had hanged himself in his cell.

In Turkmenistan, it is commonplace for the family and close associates of an arrested official to be included in investigations into the alleged wrongdoing, and this case was no exception.

While only a few of Kurbanmuradov's relatives were detained for any length of time, all were questioned, had their property confiscated and are now under police surveillance.

Sources close to the official's family say that they have no idea if he is alive or dead, as they have been refused permission to visit him or even send him parcels of food.

An almost complete media blackout on Kurbanmuradov's arrest has fuelled speculation.

The wall of silence was lifted briefly on June 11 with a television broadcast in which Turkmen national security minister Geldymukhammed Ashirmukhammedov alleged that the deposed official had been working for foreign spy agencies and had conspired to sell the republic's oil and gas for reduced rates. However, no more information about this allegation – or any specific charges related to it – have been forthcoming.

As well as being admired for his business acumen and ability to solve difficult foreign policy issues, Kurbanmuradov was largely considered to be a possible successor to Turkmenbashi.

The official's fall from grace is now being seen as a warning to all. If Turkmenbashi's "favourite" – a person who seemed to have such a firm and stable position in power – can be cut down without warning, lesser bureaucrats had better watch themselves.

All government ministers and top civil servants are appointed by Turkmenbashi alone, and he is well-known for swapping posts and sacking people for no apparent reason. New officials are usually appointed every six months, and are presented with contracts that specify that they can be removed at any time.

This invariably results in hardship as no state company or private business will risk angering the president by offering a job to such a person.

In response to the most recent dismissal, the exiled opposition Republican Party of Turkmenistan said that the problems facing the country would only be eased when the president – not his officials – was removed from power.

"[Kurbanmuradov] may well have embezzled millions [of dollars], but Niazov has embezzled billions," the party claimed in a June 12 statement.

"Just look at Niazov's egg-sized diamond rings, palaces, his private planes, villas and bank accounts abroad. No matter how much Niazov continues to put all blame on his ministers....he is the head."

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