

Statement of  
Dr. Eric M. McGlinchey  
Assistant Professor of Government and Politics  
Department of Public and International Affairs, George Mason University  
Before the  
Commission of Security and Cooperation in Europe  
United States Congress  
Washington, D.C.  
November 19, 2008

Mr. Chairman and members of the Commission,

Thank you for the invitation to discuss Turkmenistan and prospects for change. I will divide my comments into three sections. First, I will highlight the substantive political, economic and social changes that have occurred since President Berdymukhamedov assumed power in December 2006. Second, I will offer three hypotheses that may explain these changes. Lastly, I will explore the implications for future change these hypotheses may hold, should any one of them be correct.

Here in my introductory remarks let me state my overriding conclusion. Turkmen politics, like Central Asian politics broadly, is centered on executive power. This executive dominance produces erratic, eccentric and often abusive rule. At the same time, executive dominance offers openings for political change. Autocratic executives frequently overestimate personal agency, believing they can institute yet carefully control incremental political reform. These miscalculations provide space for political opposition and, in some instances, open paths to true reform.

## **Substantive Change**

### *Politics*

Over the past two years the Berdymukhamedov government has encouraged change in politics, economics and broader Turkmen society. Most recently, the September 26, 2008 constitutional reforms provide institutional foundations for parliamentary power. The September amendments allow for the disbanding of the People's Council of Turkmenistan, a rump legislative body handpicked by the previous Turkmen president, Saparmurat Niyazov, and the establishment of a new 125 member *Mejlis*, or parliament.

In addition to this legislative reform, president Berdymukhamedov has presided over encouraging improvements in human rights. The European Union – Turkmenistan “Human Rights Dialogue” held in Ashgabat in June, 2008, demonstrates the Berdymukhamedov government recognizes the considerable interest the international community has in improved

human rights in Turkmenistan. Moreover, the now regular pardoning of prisoners during state holidays such as the Night of Forgiveness, State Flag Day, Constitution Day and Independence Day, is a welcome, if somewhat idiosyncratic practice.

### *Economics*

Paralleling this liberalization of human rights and parliamentary practices are several economic reforms. The September 2008 constitutional amendments, importantly, introduce property rights provisions that are critical for the development of a free market economy in Turkmenistan. Decreased state subsidization of gasoline prices, similarly, promises more efficient market allocation and consumption of resources and less rent-seeking behavior by government officials. Lastly, greater efforts at transparency, particularly the allowing of independent audits of major oil and gas fields, will yield greater international interest and investment in Turkmen energy.

### *Society*

These economic and political reforms are remarkable. Given the eccentricity and sense of personal grandeur that characterized Turkmenistan's previous leader, though, perhaps the most pronounced change since Berdymukhamedov's assumption of power has been the careful dismantling of the Niyazov cult of personality. In May 2008 the gold-plated Niyazov statue disappeared from Ashgabat's city center and in April 2008 the Turkmen executive decreed that the months of the year and days of the week would revert to their pre-Niyazov names (the months and days had been renamed after Niyazov, his mother, and real and imagined Turkmen heroes).

Accompanying this dismantling of Niyazov monuments has been the opening of Turkmen society and culture to the outside world. Restrictions on foreign travel have decreased, internet cafes have opened, primary and secondary education has improved, and the national opera and ballet, disbanded under Niyazov, have begun practicing again. Admittedly, even by Central Asian standards, these are small steps toward greater openness. Nevertheless, these steps are a welcome contrast to what was the suffocating Niyazov cult of personality.

### **Explaining Change**

One of the following three hypotheses may help explain the substantive political, economic and social changes I have outlined: (1) president Berdymukhamedov may be a *true believer* in liberal reform; (2) the president may be a *façade democrat* permissive of some reform as long as it does not threaten personalized power; and (3) the Turkmen president may be an *instrumental autocrat* who invokes reform so as to consolidate his own power while dismantling his predecessor's legacy. A slightly more expanded examination of the past two years will show that, while we can reject the *true believer* hypothesis, it is not yet clear if Berdymukhamedov is a *façade democrat* or an *instrumental autocrat*.

President Berdymukhamedov's political reforms, for example, lose luster when contextualized within the executive's broader autocratic strategy. The planned December 2008 parliamentary elections will not be competitive, but rather, will be wholly managed by the presidential party, the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan, and by *Galkynysh*, the president's umbrella "Revival Movement" that oversees labor, women and youth unions. The new Turkmen president, moreover, exhibits much the same mercurial behavior his predecessor did. In early 2008 Berdymukhamedov fired thirty state television employees after learning that a cockroach had, the previous night, used an announcer's desk as a running track during the live broadcast of *Vatan*, the Nation's evening news. And though the president readily parted with state TV employees, he has been less willing to part with political prisoners, most of whom are held incommunicado while great ceremony is made of the freeing of non-political prisoners during state holidays.

Berdymukhamedov's economic and social reforms similarly pale when placed in broader context. The Turkmen foreign ministry, for example, has repeatedly denied entry visas to Italian Eni executives. The *Wall Street Journal* attributes the visa denials to the Eni's failure to vet with the Turkmen president its negotiations to purchase Burren Energy, a British oil company with operations in Turkmenistan. Though the Italian executives may have misread the new Turkmen president, Berdymukhamedov's ministers appear savvy. In October 2008 the cabinet of ministers' archive directorate published a biography of Berdymukhamet Annaev, the Turkmen president's paternal grandfather, World War II veteran and village school teacher. And earlier this month, the cabinet collected to congratulate Berdymukhamedov on the publication of his new monograph detailing the history of equestrian sports and horse breeding in Turkmenistan.

Although I intend no insult to Turkmen horse breeding or to Berdymukhamedov's grandfather, I do question if we may now be witnessing the emergence of a new Turkmen cult of personality. Problematically, though Turkmen themselves may equally be questioning their president's new inclination to self-aggrandizement, the executive's reinstatement of press and communications restrictions offers society less and less voice to express discontent. Of the fifteen new internet cafes opened since Berdymukhamedov came to power, two have closed and the remaining thirteen are of limited utility give the Turkmen government's routine blocking of objective media outlets. The government has even taken to blocking YouTube, perhaps fearful the *Vatan* cockroach might make a second appearance.

## **Prospects for Change**

Ultimately, the prospects for change depend not on the September 2008 constitutional reforms or on any of the other reforms we have seen in Turkmenistan these past two years. Rather, future change depends on what underlying causality is driving president Berdymukhamedov's personalistic politics. From the preceding exploration of mixed political change and autocratic continuity, it is clear that we would be mistaken to conclude that the Turkmen president is deeply committed to liberal reform. We would be equally mistaken, though, to conclude Berdymukhamedov is simply an instrumental autocrat applying limited reform to purge vestiges of the old regime. Rather, this odd mixture of substantive change and political backsliding is indicative of a leader who is invested in the international discourse of democracy, human rights

and the global economy. This investment in democratic norms, however limited and tenuous, is a welcome change from Niyazov-era Turkmenistan and deserves further acknowledgement and encouragement from Ashgabat's international partners. Such encouragement yielded surprising and surprisingly positive results in the past, in Eastern Europe in 1989, in the Soviet Union in 1991, and in South Africa in 1994, and may equally advance sustained reform in Turkmenistan.

Chairman Hastings and members of the Commission, thank you for your attention and for the opportunity to appear before you today. I welcome any questions you may have.