

## Turkmenistan: Could Niyazov's Death Lead To Political Struggle, Instability?

By Golnaz Esfandiari

**President Niyazov in 1991**  
(TASS)

WASHINGTON, December 21, 2006 (RFE/RL) -- The implications of the death of the Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov are not yet clear. RFE/RL analyst Daniel Kimmage believes his death could lead to some political instability in the country and also to a power struggle. RFE/RL correspondent Golnaz Esfandiari conducted this interview

**RFE/RL:** What are the implications of Niyazov's death for Turkmenistan? How likely it is that there will be political instability?

**Daniel Kimmage:** It's very difficult to predict whether or not there will be political instability, but given the fact that the political system of Turkmenistan has been gutted over the last decade and reduced to a single person, what this means is that the succession really could go in any direction. So I'm always reluctant to say that there will be political instability or there won't be but in this particular case there are almost numerous chances for any sort of outcome, precisely because there is so little functioning formal political structure in place after Niyazov reduced everything to his person. So unfortunately in this case we do face the prospect of political instability.

**RFE/RL:** Deputy Prime Minister and Health Minister Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov has been named acting head of state. What do we know about him and how likely it is that there will be changes in the policies of the country, both domestic and international?

**Kimmage:** The very first reaction that we got officially from Turkmenistan is that the policies of Niyazov will be continued but it's really so early right now that it's very difficult to say because, of course, within what remains of the Turkmen political elite -- which we have to remember has been decimated by purges over the last few years -- one can only speculate on the amount of jockeying that is going on so it's not entirely clear this is the individual that will succeed Niyazov, this is [only] the person that is currently there. One of the descriptions that has been quoted -- and there is not a lot of information available -- but one of the descriptions that was quoted is that [Health Minister Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov] is a sort of a member of Niyazov's generation. There is going to be a funeral on the 24th of December and then a meeting on the 26th of December of the [People's Council] and I think in that period we may see other people emerge or perhaps not, so, we'll have to wait for a while.

**RFE/RL:** So meanwhile we should expect a struggle for power?

**Kimmage:** I think, of course, a power struggle is only natural. The only situation you can compare this to, perhaps, would be the Soviet Union in the wake of [Soviet leader Josef] Stalin's death and, as we recall, the Soviet Union's political system handled Stalin's death and it did produce a successor. Turkmenistan is perhaps a more extreme case: there is even less of a functioning structured political system so it's only natural that there will be a power struggle, but of course we have to bear in mind that the people that are participating in this power struggle within Turkmenistan, they are not used to functioning as independent political entities. They're used to structuring their careers around a single person; these are minor satellites orbiting around the sun and now the sun is gone so it's very unclear how they'll act, whether or not they will be able to act as independent political actors, which is what makes the likelihood of a power struggle, of course, very great and what makes its outcome so unpredictable.

**RFE/RL:** What should we expect in the coming days and weeks? I believe according to the constitution there should be general elections in two months.

**Kimmage:** What I would stress is that in this case the formal mechanism, the constitutional structures, these are going to be a sort of very general guidelines because under Niyazov these things really did not mean very much and of course the power struggle that begins now is going to happen behind closed doors and, in general, we received very little information out of Turkmenistan over the last few years. Now, of course, we don't know what information is going to emerge, we know that there will be a struggle for power. Between now and December 26 is the general time frame for what is going to happen but it is very, very difficult to gauge. We will have to watch very carefully for whatever political announcement comes out of Turkmenistan; we will have to gauge this against the potential political struggle that will be unfolding in the next few days.

**RFE/RL:** What will be the impact of the death for the Turkmen people? He had influenced every sphere of their life.

**Kimmage:** One hopes that his death would open the door to some sort of reforms, a loosening up of the political system, there are many positive outcomes that one could hope for -- what we have to remember is that right now there is no predetermined course. There are many possible outcomes for Turkmenistan and for the Turkmen people but there is no guarantee that any single one of them will come true. Of course one has to hope but there is no guarantee that the death of a political figure who dominated the political scene is going to necessarily lead to reform.

**RFE/RL:** What does it mean for the other countries in the region, for other Central Asian states?

**Kimmage:** I think it means a number of things: for other Central Asian countries it comes as a reminder that these are, in general, political systems that are structured around a string of presidents who dominate the scene -- of course to a lesser extent than in Turkmenistan -- but it comes as a reminder that these presidents are mortal and that in the event of their sudden death we are left to speculate about these personal factors. That it is not, in general, a stable situation in the region so that's the first general reminder that it provides. The second, of course, is that Turkmenistan occupies an important position within Central Asia as a major supplier of natural gas; natural gas that plays an important role for Russia, natural gas that is part of the general system that includes a European supply of gas. So there are major potential implications, for example, if there would be political instability in Turkmenistan it would affect the shipments of natural gas. It could have a far-reaching domino effect that could reach Europe. So there are many possible implications both on a regional level -- where it reminds us that these are not inherently, terribly stable political systems. To the international geopolitical level it touches on a great level the energy-security questions.