

AN ANALYSIS ON THE AUTHORITARIAN NATURE OF THE TURKMENBASHY REGIME

Selçuk Gürçamⁱ

ABSTRACT

The patrimonialistic or sultanic character of the Turkmen regime, as outlined in this research, the Turkmen leader Saparmurat Niyazov's distinctiveness was determined in a way that also included his country's social structure. Although the tribal social structure and the communist form of government were identified as the two historical roots of such a regime, this study focused on the Turkmenbashy era in order to narrow the scope of research and analysis. In this regard, the study began by sketching a brief theoretical framework based on Weberian analysis. The discussion then moved on to the "rentier state" and "rentier economy" arguments. The creation of civil society and the nation's tribal nature were identified as a result of this argument. Finally, the arbitrariness of the interaction between Turkmenbashy and primary institutions was examined. The impact of the leader's cult of personality was also evaluated in the last part.

Keywords: Saparmurat Niyazov, Turkmenistan, rentier state, authoritarianism, patrimonialism

INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines the patrimonialistic or sultanic character of the Turkmen regime established by Saparmurat Niyazov Turkmenbashy (1940-2006), who served as the President of Turkmenistan for 15 years between 1991-2006. The Turkmen leader Niyazov's uniqueness is identified in a manner that takes into account his country's social formation as well. Although the two historical sources of such a regime is perceived as the tribal social structure and the communist system of government (Knowlton, 2006, p. 35), we are not referring to the Soviet era, but to the Turkmenbashy era mostly in order to restrict the domain of research and analysis.

In this sense, the paper starts with drawing a brief theoretical framework that springs from Weberian analysis. Then it moves on to the argument of "rentier state" and rentier economy. Following this argument, civil society formation and the tribal nature of the nation are identified. Eventually, the relationship between Turkmenbashy and primary institutions is analysed on the basis of arbitrariness. Also, in the last section, the impact of the leader's cult of personality is assessed.

PATRIMONIALISTIC RULE IN TURKMENISTAN AND LINZ'S MODEL

To begin with the nature of an extensive authority, Max Weber mentioned that "patrimonial" authority as such emerges "when authority, in essence, is traditional but the man has the power to exercise his authority by his own autonomy" (Weber, 2005). Maybe the most striking example of the patrimonial type of leadership and regime has been observed in Turkmenistan.

ⁱ Independent researcher. İğdır Provincial Special Administration, İğdır-TURKEY. ORCID: [0000-0003-0426-329X](http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0426-329X). E-mail: selcukgrcm@gmail.com

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In this demographically small country, the post-Soviet development gave a regime in which leaders' cults and personalities are worshipped. At this point, referring to Bohr's (2003, p. 9) argument provides us with an outlook that sustains such a relationship between the regime and the leader:

Although generally relegated to the residual category 'authoritarian', the highly personalistic regime constructed by independent Turkmenistan's first president, Saparmurat Niyazov, more closely conforms to 'sultanism', a term first coined by Max Weber and revived by Juan J. Linz in the 1950s. Containing strong elements of personal rulership, despotism, constitutional subversion and reliance on a foreign power, Niyazov's government is generally consistent with Linz's conceptualisation of a sultanistic regime, which, *inter alia*, is distinguished by the leader's freedom to exercise his power without restraint, at his own discretion and above all unencumbered by rules or by any commitment to an ideology or value system. Loyalty to the 'sultan' is motivated by a mixture of fear and rewards, according to Linz's model, and binding norms and procedures are continually overturned by his arbitrary personal decisions. Easily exploitable natural resources, such as oil or gas, whose production can be monopolised by a few enterprises, can provide the resources to sustain such a regime.

The theoretical framework outlined above fits into the picture drawn by the ex-president of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov Turkmenbashy, who promised to make his country "Kuwait of Central Asia". He established such a regime that tries to make patrimonialism live even in the twenty-first century.

The attempt to sustain patrimonialism or sultanic one-person rule is very pervasive that even the death of the sultan-like leader could not challenge the regime. In this sense, the socio-political formation and the economic structure make the system more immune to destruction.

RENTIER STATE MODEL AND TURKMENISTAN

Niyazov's assertion to make his country "Kuwait of Central Asia" may imply an economic ambition, but it also has political aspects. Ahmet Kuru (2002) evaluates such a situation by referring to the "rentier state model". He argues that

The rentier state model based on the natural gas and oil politics is the best analytical tool to analyse the newly independent republics of Central Asia. Natural gas and oil politics essentially affects both socio-economic and political structures of those countries, in a similar way that it has shaped the rentier states of the Middle East and North Africa. Furthermore, natural gas and oil politics has an eminent impact on Central Asian republics' foreign policies and their intra-regional relations, similarly to the explanations proposed by the rentier state model. (Kuru, 2002, p. 52)

Lisa Anderson (1990, p. 61) defines a rentier state as "a state reliant not on the extraction of the domestic population's surplus production but externally generated revenues, or rents, such as those derived from oil." The rents provide the income which is to be distributed and result in the "considerable political influence" of the rentiers (Bromley, 1994, p. 94).

Kuru (2002, p. 53) rightfully states that after 1990, Turkmenistan faced a transition from socialism to a rentier state economy. For him, the rentier economy, together with a colonial legacy, results in several problems. The political problem is: Mechanisms of resistance, such as traditional social structures, are deliberately weakened by the colonial power. In the post-independence era, suppressed social institutions and organisations must be rehabilitated. However, thanks to rentier revenue, the state grows overly powerful in relation to society. The state views social institutions and associations as sources of political resistance and oppresses them, similar to colonial methods. In many rentier states, the upshot is a weak society in the short term and a weak state in the long run (Kuru, 2002, pp. 54-55).

CIVIL SOCIETY FORMATION AND TRIBAL NATURE OF THE NATION

Following this line of analysis, the civil society formation in this country and the tribal patterns of the nation should be taken into account. The “kolkhoz” (collective farm) system impacts the perpetuation of the patrimonial system. For example, Oliver Roy (1999) argues that the democratic movements are usually urban-based; however, the rural notables generally support the presidential power. “The consequence is that no process of democratisation could bypass the rural areas. They are until now organised along with the kolkhoz system, which is an administrative, economic, and social entity. The issue of kolkhoz system is at the core of any approach to the building of civil society” (Roy, 1999, p. 109). It is also stated that the kolkhoz system could be seen as a way of “neo-traditional social fabric in Central Asian rural areas” (Roy, 1999, p. 120).

Moreover, concerning civil society, Frederick Starr (1999, p. 27) writes that the “development of civil society in Central Asia is still at a rudimentary stage” precludes strong demand for democracy in a total sense. Concerning NGOs, the picture today is not very bright as well. According to the International Crisis Group (ICG) report, there are specific barriers set: Its treatment of civil society groups demonstrates the regime’s anxiety about the opposition or any unsanctioned acts. A law “On Public Associations” was enacted in 2003, boosted penalties and outlawed any act by unregistered groups. If people work with an unregistered NGO, he or she is liable for two years. The registration process for an NGO became even more difficult. Most of the officially recognised 89 NGOs are state-run, while some 300 registered and unregistered groups were operating in the country (ICG, 2004, p. 8).

The tribal nature of the Turkmen nation also contributes to the formation of an authoritarian regime. Niyazov, who named himself as Turkmenbashy (head of Turkmen) and dedicated himself to fostering “all-round development of the historical, national, and cultural traditions of the people of Turkmenistan” (Edgar, 2004, p. 1), for example, was of Teke origin. Although the Turkmens still take pride in their ancestral origins and prefer to marry within their tribal communities, the tribal differentiation is perceived as an obstacle to the national togetherness of the Turkmens. The state refrained from mentioning Niyazov’s origin. “The president spoke out strongly against those who would elevate tribal loyalties above national patriotism. Niyazov also used genealogy to justify the dictatorial nature of his own rule, arguing that the adoption of democracy and a free press might inflame tribal conflict” (Edgar, 2004, p. 265). The tribal nature prevents democracy since “tribal political commitment was directed towards patriarchal authority and motivated political following” (Geis, 2004, p. 59).

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PRESIDENT AND THE INSTITUTIONS

Looking at the means of administration and governing that Turkmenbashy makes use of could probably provide us with plenty of illustrations on the basis of arbitrary and authoritarian rule. Kareem Al-Bassam emphasises arbitrary one-person rule in a way that the dictator bypasses the institution, namely *Mejlis*, which he appoints.

Niyazov began to rule Turkmenistan by presidential decrees called normative acts. Using these acts, the president could circumvent the *Mejlis*, but since he had personally nominated every member of that body and directed their legislative activities, the only natural effect has been to weaken the concept of the rule of law in favour of the personal rule (Al-Bassam, 1997, p. 402). Also, the relationship between the party, bureaucracy, the state and the leader has to be pointed

out. The president combines state power and national legitimacy by concentrating all of the primary institutions of modern governance and posts reflecting historically formed Turkmen symbols of authority in his person. Individual state functionaries were Niyazov's personal subordinates, answerable to him through a complicated patronage network. He reshuffled the bureaucracy on a regular basis. The patronage system pervaded society and was strictly controlled. The Democratic Party of Turkmenistan, which is the former Communist Party, is one method of regulation. The sitting president is the party's leader, and the party's structures are intimately linked to the executive agencies and government. If it is not superimposed on or incorporated into them—the party is steadfastly committed to the incumbent's agenda (Cummings, 2008).

It is argued that the power became more centralised around Niyazov since November 2002 assassination attempt. ICG (2004, p. 2) report refers to the complaints of diplomats on the monopoly or absolute control over the decision-making process: Growing personalisation of authority is not solely an impediment to normal decision-making: quite notably, it has eroded only those formal political procedures and institutions. Niyazov changed the constitution in August 2003, limiting the powers of parliament and establishing the 2,504-member *Halk Maslahaty* (People's Council Assembly) as being the most prominent legislative body. There is no actual legislature because it just meets once a year to congratulate the leader. Niyazov was the chairman of the board for the rest of his life. The assembly was never serious either, but as one former international organisation's leader put it, "the parliament was weak, and now it is even weaker." Governments and ministries are both unable to make choices on their own. Only the presidential administration wields real authority in the political system, which is virtually broken. The president's regime has become increasingly isolated as he has gathered authority around himself. "The country is more isolated and dogmatic in its behaviour," a diplomat concluded.

As illustrated above, the personal rule in Turkmenistan has no limits in its arbitrariness. The legislative bodies in appearance, namely *Mejlis* (Parliament) and *Halk Maslahaty* (People's Council), for Kuru, only "rubber-stamps" of the president (2002, p. 58). Thus, the institutions of a modern state seem to be procedural, formal, soulless and phantom means of the authoritarian regime of Turkmenistan.

The former president Turkmenbashy outlines his perception of democracy in a provocative way that no democracy could be more comprehensive than his regime. He said that "In Europe and certain other countries, everyone is hurrying us, speaking we have no parties, democracy. But we have democracy and lots of human rights. Go to work where you want, say what you want... Set up your business, go away or come to us, you may study, get education... No democracy could be wider" (Kommersant, 2005). This saying shows that how democratic values could be degraded and emptied by demagogic discourses. Knowlton rightfully clarifies this point by evaluating the perception of democracy. She (2006, p. 36) says, "If democracy simply means that people are granted the opportunity to vote for their leaders, Turkmenistan is a democracy. However, if it also means that people are allowed to form their own parties and be elected in opposition to the party in power, Turkmenistan is definitely not a democracy."

THE LEADER'S CULT OF PERSONALITY

In order to fully account for the nature of the regime in Turkmenistan, we have to look at the leader's cult of personality. At this point, Gökçen Oğan (2007, p. 60) refers to Turkmenbashy's reference to Turkmen nationalism to fill the ideological vacuum by defining "Turkmen" identity around his personality with an attempt to make it cult. As Cummings (2008) puts it,

Niyazov employed a cult of personality to great effect. He was the only post-Soviet leader to coin a new title for himself: Turkmenbashy (Leader of the Turkmen), in apparent reverence to Turkey's Ataturk, and his images, together with the slogan "Khalq, Vatan, Turkmenbashy" (People, Nation, Turkmenbashy), were omnipresent. His likeness graced the currency, and cities, towns, and businesses were called after him.

Unlike other sultanic rulers, who like to be recognised as exceptional thinkers and fill numerous bound books, Niyazov chose to leave his legacy by material means, such as the construction of colossal palaces and an orphanage, as well as the creation of a gold statue. Over time, the personality cult has become stronger. He was vowed to introduce the 'rukhnname,' which was supposed to serve as the bible for the new religion he was attempting to establish. He was said to approach Muslim ambassadors to inquire about how they would have reacted if he declared himself a new prophet. According to presidential religious counsellor Murad Karryev, the guide would address all life's concerns and be a secular book containing Koranic sayings (Radio Liberty, 2000).

Kareem Al-Bassam (1997, p. 402) illustrates the significance and influence of namings and slogans in the perpetuation of this cult: A developing personality cult has aided the consolidation of power under one man by showering several accolades on Niyazov and renaming canals, highways, ships, a city, and even some children after him. "Khalk, Vatan, Turkmenbashy", a derivation from a fascist motto, was plastered all across the country. While the president did not condone these activities, he did acknowledge that they serve as a tremendous unifying force for Turkmen. "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" and Niyazov was a prime example of this. That can be seen in the palaces that have sprung up in Turkmenistan's deserts.

CONCLUSION

The perpetuation of patrimonialism in Turkmenistan has been linked to several factors and it has roots in history, economy and society, as well as the political system. Nevertheless, it is a fact that the impacts of international forces become essential, and there emerges a response from civil society as well. For example, Lucy Earle (2005, p. 251) argues that

Many international donors are beginning to show an awareness of the fact that Central Asian civil society is far from a blank sheet and have acknowledged certain aspects of 'communal' civil society. In recent years, donors have sought to involve individuals in their community-level projects who fulfil traditional positions of responsibility within the village and to promote pre-Soviet forms of community mobilisation.

Despite its strength, the patrimonial rule in Turkmenistan may become vulnerable to reform itself because of the pressures of change. However, it seems to be continuing for some more time as an interesting case for studying in the domain of political science. The ambiguity will dominate the predictions for a period of time since observing the results of the death of the leader Turkmenbashy. For example, it was ambiguous what would happen to the superficial attempt to organise the nation along the lines of the cult of leader's personality with the absence of him or what will the new leader intend to do with the cult of ex-leader. It is an interesting case that the system of one-person rule still continues after Niyazov.

Also, the rentier state model should be taken into account in consideration of the future of the Turkmen regime. For example, if the revenues from gas and oil increase as a result of new pipelines that bypass Russia and reach Europe, it would probably double the prices of these resources since the dependence on Russia results in the exploitation of Turkmen natural

resources with low prices compared to the world market. In this sense, increased revenues would mean more investment in social affairs and rising living standards of Turkmen people, which would lead to rising awareness and participation, or at least demand for participation.

To sum up, the sultanic character of the regime in Turkmenistan is analysed in terms of leader, institutions, economy and social formation. However, what makes this case unique is its reluctance to change. Thus, there is a need to approach the regime's nature by putting it in a more comprehensive theoretical framework. This means that one should not insulate the Turkmen regime by referring to its uniqueness.

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