



Turkmenistan — Va-PoReg Country Report

Kailitz, Steffen, et al., 2026: Varieties of Political Regimes (Va-PoReg). Country Report Turkmenistan, Dresden: Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/JYEL7U>

05/06/1881 Start Part of Other Country [of Russia]: After the suppression of the Emirate of Bukhara (1868) and the Khanate of Khiva (1873), the Turkmen area remained independent.¹ Turkmenistan was annexed by the Russian Empire and was incorporated into the Empire as the Transcaspian Oblast on 05/06/1881.²

11/07/1917 Continuation as Part of Other Country [of Russia, Communist Ideocracy]: On this date the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) was proclaimed.³ On 04/10/1918 the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (initially, the Turkestan Socialist Federative Republic) was officially proclaimed. The Turkestan ASSR was an autonomous republic of the Russian Federative Socialist Republic, which included territories of present-day Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (Fedorenko 2015: 3).⁴ On 08/07/1921 Turkmenistan was established as the Turkmen Oblast under the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR).⁵ Universal suffrage was introduced in 1924.⁶

12/28/1922 Continuation Part of Other Country [of USSR, Communist Ideocracy]: On this date, the RSFSR voluntarily entered into the Union treaty forming the USSR, subsuming Turkmenistan as part of the Soviet Union.⁷ On 05/13/1925 Turkmenistan was declared a republic within the Soviet Union and given the name Turkmen SSR.⁸ During the Soviet era, Turkmenistan followed a unique path within the USSR, influenced by its distinct geographic, cultural, and economic contexts. Incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1922 and established as the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic (Turkmen SSR) in 1925, Turkmenistan saw the consolidation of Soviet power and the imposition of a centralized authoritarian regime that tightly controlled political life and suppressed dissent. The early Soviet period focused on dismantling traditional tribal structures and integrating Turkmenistan into the Soviet system. The Communist Party of Turkmenistan became the sole political authority, with leaders often appointed from Moscow to ensure loyalty to the central government. Local autonomy was minimal, and decision-making was dominated by directives from the Kremlin, eliminating political competition and opposition. Economically, Turkmenistan was heavily oriented towards cotton production, becoming the republic's economic backbone. Large-scale collectivization forced individual and communal farms into state-controlled collective farms (kolkhozes) and state farms (sovkhozes), disrupting traditional agriculture and causing social upheaval and famines due to mismanagement and forced quotas. This cotton monoculture made Turkmenistan dependent on a single crop, neglecting food production and environmental sustainability. Industrialization efforts focused on supporting the Soviet military-industrial complex and extracting resources like natural gas and oil. Infrastructure projects, including railways and factories, were prioritized to facilitate resource extraction, reinforcing central control as the local economy became tightly integrated into the Soviet system. Culturally, Soviet policies aimed to create a homogeneous socialist identity, promoting the Turkmen language and national culture within Soviet ideology through educational institutions, theaters, and cultural centers. However, traditional practices and Islamic institutions were suppressed to eliminate potential opposition. Religious leaders and cultural figures resisting Soviet policies were often persecuted, imprisoned, or exiled. Political repression was pervasive, with the secret police (NKVD and later KGB) monitoring the population for dissent. Intellectuals, activists, and ordinary citizens suspected of anti-Soviet sentiments faced harsh punishments, including imprisonment in labor camps or forced relocations. Elections were merely formalities to legitimize predetermined outcomes, ensuring the Communist Party remained unchallenged and eliminating any possibility of genuine political competition.

Despite political repression, Soviet rule brought certain advancements to Turkmenistan, such as improved education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Literacy rates increased, and modern medical facilities expanded, though these benefits were unevenly distributed and often overshadowed by repression and economic hardships. In the late 1980s, as the Soviet Union weakened, Turkmenistan experienced rising nationalist sentiments and calls for greater autonomy. Gorbachev's policies of Glasnost and Perestroika introduced some political openness, but significant change remained limited. The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 ended Soviet rule in Turkmenistan, leading to its independence and the establishment of a new national government. LIED and V-Dem do not treat Turkmenistan before 1990.

10/27/1991 End Part of Other Country [of USSR, Communist Ideocracy]/Start Personalist (One-Party) Autocracy: Niyazov held control over independence, with the Supreme Soviet elected in January 1990 being under communist dominance (Clark/Thurman/Tyson 1996, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 103). The Communist Party of Turkmenistan (CPT) was renamed the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (DPT), and former internal party structures were preserved, including party cadres and elites. However, the DPT possessed zero political decision-making capacity from the outset. Classification as personalist autocracy rather than one-party autocracy is warranted because Niyazov's rule immediately satisfied all three essential personalist criteria: (1) concentration of executive power in one person without institutional mediation, (2) absence of effective institutional checks on the ruler's core decisions, and (3) non-institutionalized succession mechanisms. From 1991 onward, the narrative of nation-building already revolved around the emerging cult of personality, with authority personalized through coercive and patronage networks ensuring direct dependence on Niyazov rather than flowing through party organs.⁹ According to Polity5, the executive held unlimited authority with no institutionalized constraints on decision-making power. V-Dem indicators confirm that judicial constraints on the executive (JCE) and legislative constraints on the executive (LCE) were absent throughout the period. The DPT served purely as an administrative instrument, while Soviet-era bureaucratic structures retained some administrative capacity for policy implementation, they exercised no political constraints on Niyazov's decisions, distinguishing this regime from party-based autocracies where party organs retain institutional authority. The diagnostic tests for distinguishing one-party from personalist autocracy confirm personalist classification from 1991: Could party organs theoretically constrain or remove the leader? No—all decisions flowed from Niyazov personally. Did elite advancement require party endorsement beyond personal loyalty? No—the assembly consisted of hand-picked loyalists.[3] Could the party survive the leader's removal? No—as demonstrated by the chaotic transition following Niyazov's death in 2006, revealing complete absence of institutional succession mechanisms. Up until 2010 the DPT remained the only legal party, but this legal monopoly served personal rule rather than constituting party-based authority. This represents a semi-institutionalized variant of personalist autocracy where personalist patterns coexisted with partially retained Soviet-era administrative structures. According to LIED, both executive and legislative elections were held, but they were not categorized as multiparty. FH classified the country as not free (scores 11-14), and political liberties were absent according to LIED and V-Dem's PCLI. On 12/28/1999, the assembly declared Niyazov President for Life (Macmillan 2022b). This formalized already-existing reality of unconstrained personal rule rather than marking a regime type transition. By 2003, Niyazov wielded exclusive control over both executive and legislative branches. The cult of personality took on ever greater proportions, extending to Niyazov's parents, with the title *Turkmenbashi* (Head of all Turkmen) exemplifying the intensifying personalization.¹⁰¹¹ The 1999 declaration represents deepening of personalist features (from borderline semi-institutionalized toward paradigmatic personalism within the same regime type rather than a qualitative regime change).

12/21/2006 End Personalist (One-Party) Autocracy/Start One-Party (Personalist) Autocracy: On this date Niyazov died (Lansford 2021). On 02/11/2007 Berdymukhammedov was elected president with nearly 90% of the vote (Macmillan 2022b). After constitutional reforms increased the size of the Assembly (*Mejlis*), fresh elections were conducted on 12/14 and 12/28/2008, a year ahead of the constitutional requirement.¹² All 125 members elected to the Assembly were members of the DPT or pro-presidential independents. The balloting

marked the first time that foreign monitors were present as observers, although international groups criticized the elections for irregularities and because no opposition parties contested the elections (Lansford 2021). It was only in 2010 that parties other than the DPT were legalized. But even after formal legalization, opposition parties are prevented from emerging.¹³ On 12/15/2013 elections were held. The governing Democratic Party of Turkmenistan won 47 seats, the recently created Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs won 14, trade unions won 33, women's groups 16, youth organizations 8, and citizens' groups 7. An observer mission from the Commonwealth of Independent States concluded that the elections were free, orderly, and competitive, but human rights campaigners dismissed them as a token gesture, noting that genuine opposition leaders are all in jail or in exile. Observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe said that some improvements were made in the legal framework for elections, but that choice was limited. The Turkmen government noted that, apart from Turkmen, there are also ethnic Russians, Kazakhs, and Uzbeks represented in the parliament (Lansford 2021). On 02/12/2017 Berdimuhamedov was reelected president with 97.7 % of the vote in balloting (Lansford 2021). In balloting for parliament on 03/25/2018 the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan and pro-presidential independents won 103 seats, followed by the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs with 11 and the Agrarian Party of Turkmenistan (APT) with 11 (Lansford 2021). Until today elections are held but those are only open to pro-presidential and DPT-candidates. And even this pro-presidential parliament is seen by observers as a rubber-stamp parliament.¹⁴ Further, there have been substantial changes by current office holder Berdymukhammedov to further entrench presidential powers in the constitution, such as lifelong presidency. According to FH, the country is consistently considered not free during this regime period, with a score of 14, which we also interpret as not free. Political liberties were absent according to LIED and V-Dem's PCLI. As per Polity5's classification, the executive wielded unrestricted authority without any formal limitations during this time. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were absent, and V-Dem's LCE is similarly interpreted as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also absent. In the parliamentary elections in March 2023 all seats were won by regime-friendly parties. According to LIED, both executive and legislative elections were held, but they were not categorized as multiparty.

One-Party (Personalist) Autocracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional sources (Heinritz 2007)

Notes

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkmenistan>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Turkmenistan

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkmenistan>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Turkmenistan

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Soviet_Federative_Socialist_Republic

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkestan_Autonomous_Soviet_Socialist_Republic

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkestan_Autonomous_Soviet_Socialist_Republic

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_Union#Treaty_on_the_Creation_of_the_USSR

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkestan_Autonomous_Soviet_Socialist_Republic

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic_Party_of_Turkmenistan; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Turkmenistan#; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saparmurat_Niyazov#

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Turkmenistan#History; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Turkmenistan#

¹² https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Turkmenistan_2016?lang=en

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic_Party_of_Turkmenistan#

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Turkmenistan#Political_parties_and_elections

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