



Presidential Succession in Turkmenistan: Issues for Congress

March 29, 2022

Overview

Turkmenistan, an authoritarian country rich in hydrocarbons that borders Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and the Caspian Sea, held a snap presidential election on March 12, 2022. [Serdar Berdimuhamedov](#), son of incumbent President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, won with a reported 73% of the vote and was [inaugurated](#) on March 19. Analysts had long [speculated](#) that Serdar was being positioned by his father to succeed to the presidency. The younger Berdimuhamedov was [elected](#) to parliament in 2016 and went on to hold a number of increasingly senior government positions. In September 2021 he turned 40, the minimum age for presidential candidates. Despite rumors about Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov's health, analysts were [surprised](#) by the timing of the election. Some speculate that it may have been [motivated](#) by January unrest in neighboring Kazakhstan, while others [emphasize](#) that it was the culmination of a long-term process rather than a “knee-jerk reaction.”

According to longtime [observers](#), “it is difficult to describe what is occurring as a transition in any real sense.” Some analysts [interpret](#) the fact that Serdar won with 73% of the vote, as compared to his father's electoral victories of 89% in 2007 and over 97% in 2012 and 2017, as evidently intended for “Serdar not to eclipse Gurbanguly.” The elder Berdimuhamedov remains chair of the upper house of parliament, although it is unclear how active he will be politically. Some [speculate](#) that the entrenchment of both father and son within Turkmenistan's power structures may be a source of political instability.

The country's Central Election Commissions claimed voter turnout exceeded 97%. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) did not send an election observation mission, [citing](#) Turkmenistan's failure to address previous OSCE recommendations—particularly those related to political pluralism and fundamental human rights—in addition to time constraints related to Turkmenistan's pandemic mitigation measures. No election in Turkmenistan has been deemed free and fair by OSCE observers since the country became independent in 1991.

The elder Berdimuhamedov, 64, assumed power after the 2006 death of Turkmenistan's first president. Like his predecessor, Berdimuhamedov created a cult of personality around himself, isolated the country, and suppressed dissent, reportedly [embezzling](#) billions of dollars in state revenues. Although his current

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term was not set to expire until 2024, Berdimuhamedov [announced](#) in February that it was time for the country to transfer power to “young leaders.” Nine candidates registered to run in the snap election, but none was seen as serious competition for Serdar Berdimuhamedov.

Background

Executive power in Turkmenistan is largely unchecked. The president has extensive powers, including presiding over the Cabinet of Ministers and appointing and dismissing judges and regional governors. Observers have termed the bicameral legislature a “[rubber-stamp body](#).” Although Turkmenistan has three officially recognized political parties, the OSCE [describes](#) the country’s political environment as “only nominally pluralist,” as all three parties are aligned with the president and electoral procedures fail to meet international standards.

Freedom House ranks Turkmenistan as one of the least free countries in the world, [describing](#) it as “a repressive authoritarian state where political rights and civil liberties are almost completely denied in practice.” Citizens are reportedly subject to widespread surveillance, arbitrary arrest and detention, and torture. The State Department [describes](#) corruption in Turkmenistan as rampant. Because of its violations of religious freedom, Turkmenistan has been designated as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act ([IRFA](#)) since 2014.

Outlook and Issues for Congress

Turkmenistan’s geography and energy resources make it a potential strategic partner for the United States, but the development of U.S.-Turkmenistan ties is hampered by the country’s uninviting investment climate, repressive government, and generally closed nature. Bilateral engagement to date has focused largely on regional security issues, particularly issues related to Afghanistan. Turkmenistan’s constitution outlines the principle of “[permanent neutrality](#)” as the basis for the country’s foreign policy. In practice, this principle translates to foreign policy isolationism.

Analysts expect any reforms undertaken by Serdar to be [cosmetic](#), and his rule to be geared toward [regime preservation](#) and maintaining Turkmenistan’s [authoritarian kleptocracy](#). Nevertheless, the country’s leadership transition coincides with significant economic and regional instability, raising the question of expanding bilateral engagement. For example, Congress may wish to consider how increased engagement with Ashgabat could address regional security issues related to [neighboring Afghanistan](#). Although Turkmenistan has adopted a pragmatic approach to the Taliban, security concerns persist along the countries’ shared border. Turkmen forces [reportedly](#) exchanged fire with Taliban troops in January.

Turkmenistan’s economy is in a deep crisis that may be exacerbated by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, particularly if Russia redirects its natural gas exports to China, the main buyer of Turkmenistan’s gas. Turkmenistan holds the world’s fourth-largest natural gas reserves, and gas is the country’s primary export and source of foreign exchange. Congress may wish to consider how engaging with Turkmenistan—and Central Asia more broadly—could help reduce U.S. partners’ energy dependence on Russia. Some analysts see Turkmenistan as a [potential alternative](#) to Russia as a gas supplier; the proposed Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline would enable Turkmenistan to supply gas to European markets, but has been hampered by opposition from Russia and Iran, as well as unresolved questions concerning Caspian seabed rights. The planned Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, first proposed in the 1990s, would open new markets for Turkmenistan and improve South Asia’s energy security, but its completion remains [highly speculative](#).

Some Members of Congress have drawn attention to human rights concerns in Turkmenistan, including [wrongful imprisonment](#) and [press censorship](#); analysts assess that these conditions are unlikely to

improve, and they may hinder bilateral cooperation. While Turkmenistan has been designated as a CPC under IRFA since 2014, the State Department regularly waives the related sanctions, citing U.S. national interests. In its 2021 [Annual Report](#), the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recommends that the State Department lift the sanctions waiver, given the country's record of severe and wide-ranging violations of religious freedom. USCIRF additionally recommends that the U.S. government limit security assistance to the country under IRFA Section 405(a)(22) and impose targeted sanctions.

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