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The Politics of Turkmenistan

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Introduction

Turkmenistan is a country often shrouded in secrecy and misunderstanding, a nation whose political system defies easy categorization yet exemplifies many traits of modern authoritarianism. Situated at the heart of Central Asia, it borders Afghanistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, as well as the Caspian Sea. Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkmenistan has maintained a rigidly controlled political environment that is unique in both its structure and the degree of centralized rule it enforces.

The legacy of Soviet governance, deeply imprinted on the country's institutions, has shaped the post-independence political landscape in profound ways. Much like its regional neighbors, Turkmenistan's state apparatus emerged from the ashes of the Soviet era, but it developed along an especially insular and personalized trajectory. The initial years of independence were dominated by Saparmurat Niyazov, whose self-styled title "Türkmenbaşy"—Leader of the Turkmens—came to symbolize the fusion of state and personal rule. Under Niyazov, Turkmenistan built an elaborate cult of personality and a totalitarian system that left little space for dissent or independent political activity.

The transition to new leadership following Niyazov's death in 2006 brought hopes of change, yet the consolidation of power by his successor, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, underscored the enduring resilience of centralized, authoritarian governance. His rule was characterized by both continuity and subtle rearrangement of political forms, including the ceremonial abolition and later reinvention of political bodies such as the Halk Maslahaty, or People's Council.

Most recently, the rise of Serdar Berdymukhamedov—and the continued prominence of his father, now the "National Leader of the Turkmen People"—has marked not only the entrenchment of a political dynasty but also the ongoing adaptation of the country's ruling structures. The Halk Maslahaty has been transformed into the supreme organ of state power, further reinforcing the consolidation of authority and blurring the boundaries between formal institutions and personalized statecraft.

This book offers a comprehensive guide to Turkmenistan's politics and political system, aiming to decipher the structures, actors, and dynamics that define one of the world's least-known countries. It explores both historical antecedents and contemporary developments, situating Turkmenistan's unique brand of rule within broader regional and global contexts. By analyzing government mechanisms, political elites, human rights, and foreign policy, this volume aims to provide readers with a nuanced understanding of Turkmenistan's place in the modern world and the enduring

patterns that continue to shape its political trajectory.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land and People of Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan, a country often described as one of the most enigmatic in Central Asia, is shaped profoundly by its geography. Covering an area of approximately 491,210 square kilometers (189,660 sq mi), it is a nation of vast, often stark, landscapes. Bordered by Kazakhstan to the northwest, Uzbekistan to the north and northeast, Afghanistan to the southeast, Iran to the south and southwest, and the Caspian Sea to the west, Turkmenistan occupies a strategically important position in the region.

Much of the country's terrain is dominated by the Karakum Desert, one of the largest sand deserts in the world. This immense expanse of sand covers about 70% of Turkmenistan's territory, influencing everything from population distribution to the availability of water. The name "Karakum" itself translates to "black sand," a reference to the dark soil found beneath the surface layers of sand.

Despite its arid nature, the Karakum is not entirely devoid of life or activity. Ancient trade routes, including the famed Silk Road, once traversed this very desert, connecting distant civilizations. Even in ancient times, rudimentary irrigation systems and wells allowed for some limited agriculture in certain areas. Today, the desert is also known for its significant reserves of natural gas, a vital resource for the country's economy. Drilling platforms and infrastructure related to the gas industry are visible reminders of this subterranean wealth.

The climate of Turkmenistan is predominantly continental and dry, with significant temperature fluctuations. Summers are long, hot, and dry, with average temperatures soaring and occasionally reaching extreme highs. Winters are generally mild and dry, although northern areas can experience colder temperatures and some snow. Precipitation is low throughout the country, with the majority of rainfall occurring between January and May. The Kopet Dag mountain range in the south, bordering Iran, receives the most precipitation.

Speaking of the Kopet Dag, this range forms a natural southern boundary and offers a contrast to the flat desert landscape. The mountains are geologically young and prone to earthquakes. Along the foothills of the Kopet Dag, as well as along the major rivers, lie the more fertile areas and oases where much of the population is concentrated.

Water is a precious commodity in Turkmenistan. The country has very few rivers, and most are found in border areas. The largest and most significant is the Amu Darya, one of Central Asia's major rivers. Rising in the Pamir Mountains, the Amu Darya flows northwest and for a considerable distance forms a natural border with Uzbekistan. Historically known as the Oxus, this river has been a vital source of water for irrigation

for centuries.

The Amu Darya's waters are extensively used for irrigation, particularly through the Karakum Canal. This massive canal, one of the world's longest irrigation and shipping canals, diverts a significant portion of the Amu Darya's flow to irrigate agricultural lands in the south and west. While crucial for agriculture, this extensive diversion has contributed to the shrinking of the Aral Sea, a significant environmental issue in the region.

Other important, though smaller, rivers include the Murghab and Tejen, which also flow from the mountains and are used for irrigation, often forming deltas before disappearing into the desert sands. The Atrek River is Turkmenistan's only river that flows into the Caspian Sea, but its flow is also significantly reduced by irrigation.

The Caspian Sea itself forms Turkmenistan's western border, with a coastline stretching over a thousand kilometers. As the world's largest inland body of water, it's often referred to as a sea due to its size and geological history. The Turkmen coast of the Caspian is generally arid and can be less than picturesque in places, particularly near industrial areas, though there are also areas with sandy beaches. The Caspian is important for fishing and shipping, and like the desert, holds significant oil and gas reserves. A notable feature of the Caspian coast is the Kara-Bogaz-Gol, a large, shallow bay that is often more like a lagoon or separate lake, known for its high salinity and deposits of minerals like mirabilite.

The population of Turkmenistan is estimated to be over 7 million people, making it one of the less populous Central Asian republics. The population density is relatively low, particularly in the vast desert areas. The most densely populated regions are the oases in the south, east, and northeast, where water is more readily available and supports agricultural life.

Turkmenistan is a multi-ethnic country, though the vast majority of the population identifies as Turkmen, making up around 85%. The Turkmen people have a rich history, with tribal divisions playing a significant role historically. Other notable ethnic groups include Uzbeks and Russians, who constitute smaller but still significant minorities. There are also smaller communities of various other ethnicities, contributing to a diverse cultural mix.

The official language of Turkmenistan is Turkmen, a Turkic language. Russian is also spoken, particularly as a second language, though its use has reportedly declined since independence.

Islam is the dominant religion in Turkmenistan, with the overwhelming majority of the population identifying as Muslim, mostly Sunni. Islam has a long history in the region and is deeply intertwined with Turkmen cultural heritage. While the government is

constitutionally secular and guarantees freedom of religion, in practice, religious life is subject to significant state control and restrictions, with only Sunni Islam and Russian Orthodoxy being officially recognized and registered with relative ease. There are also communities of other religious groups, including Eastern Orthodox Christians, who make up the largest religious minority, as well as smaller groups like Shia Muslims, Baptists, and others, though these often face greater challenges in registration and operation.

The major cities in Turkmenistan serve as important administrative and cultural centers. The capital and largest city is Ashgabat, located near the border with Iran in the south. Other major cities include Turkmenabat (formerly Chardzhou) in the east along the Amu Darya, Dashoguz in the north, and Mary in the Murghab oasis. These cities, particularly Ashgabat, have seen significant development, often featuring grand architecture and wide avenues, reflecting the country's attempts to project an image of prosperity and modernity.

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