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Turkmenistan: The beginning of the Berdimuhamedow dynasty

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Early presidential elections were held in Turkmenistan on 12 March. Serdar Berdimuhamedow, the deputy prime minister and the son of the outgoing head of state, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, was the victor, obtaining around 73% of the vote according to the official results (1–2% of votes were cast for the remaining eight candidates, individuals who are not widely known in the country). The turnout allegedly exceeded 97%. The OSCE ODIHR did not send a mission to the elections, citing logistical difficulties: the short pre-election period and the need to undergo a two-week quarantine upon arrival. The ODIHR report published a few days before the vote stated that the election regulations in Turkmenistan did not comply with international standards, and that recommendations relating to pluralism in the electoral process had been ignored.

Commentary

- Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow announced his decision to call early elections a month ago: the elections had been scheduled to take place in 2024 (the presidential term of office is seven years, but there are no term limits). He justified his decision in terms of the need to hand the government over to the younger generation: this year he will be 65, and his son 41. The Turkmen variant of the succession is a combination of the Azerbaijani dynastic model, in which the son wins the elections and takes power during his father's lifetime (but the latter no longer has any influence on the further course of state affairs) and the Kazakh model: the outgoing president names his successor who wins the elections, but he himself retains a number of legal instruments allowing him to control political processes in the country. It seems that the Turkmen elections may have been accelerated due to the events in Kazakhstan in January this year, as a result of which the former president Nursultan Nazarbayev was deprived of his functions. In Turkmenistan, the incumbent president retains the post of chairman of the upper house of parliament (the Halk Maslahaty), which was reactivated a year ago; formally he will thus have the second highest rank in the country, with a mandate to make strategic decisions. It should be remembered, however, that democratic institutions (parliament, elections) are purely façades in Turkmenistan. The driving force is the will of the president; he has dictatorial power, which is limited only by the need to take the interests of a narrow elite into account. A repetition of the Turkmen variant seems possible in Tajikistan, where President Emomali Rahmon would be replaced by his son Rustam Emomali.

- Serdar Berdimuhamedow has been in line to succeed his father for at least a decade. During this time, his posts have included parliamentary deputy, and he worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (in Ashgabat and abroad), where he rose to the position of deputy minister. He managed a central province of the country (the Akhal Region), and served as minister of industry and chairman of Turkmenistan's Supreme Control Chamber. In February 2021, he assumed the position of deputy prime minister created especially for him (in Turkmenistan there is no prime minister: the president himself is the head of government). The younger Berdimuhamedow graduated from technical studies in Ashgabat and the Diplomatic Academy of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In turn, while working in the country's representative office at the UN in Geneva, he took courses in international security at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy. Although he has visited Western countries (as well as Russia), speaks fluent English and accompanied his father in meetings with the leaders of the region (he has least experience with China), he does not seem inclined to break with Ashgabat's traditional isolationism in his policy. Firstly, Turkmenistan has positioned itself since the 1990s as a neutral country, which is intended to limit foreign influence in the face of the systemic weakness of the state's structures (threats to Turkmen sovereignty and stability come from Russia and escpecially China, and also from Iran and Afghanistan). Secondly, the key security issues or directions of development will most likely be dealt with (at least in the initial period) by Gurbanguly, leaving the day-to-day management of the state to his son.
- The new president's most important task will be to overcome the very deep economic and social crisis in which Turkmenistan has been plunged for several years; this began with the collapse in prices on the global oil and gas market in 2014 (gas exports are basically Ashgabat's only source of foreign exchange, the vast majority of which goes to China, on which Turkmenistan is economically dependent). It is impossible to estimate the scale of this crisis as there are no reliable data (in 2021 the International Monetary Fund questioned the figures presented by Turkmenistan's Ministry of Economy: according to those numbers, GDP growth was almost 6%, while the IMF estimated it at below 1%). It is known that in 2017–21 the price of sugar increased by 200%, that of potatoes by almost 250%, and that of oil by over 300%. The stores lack basic products, and people in Ashgabat start queuing for subsidised bread from 3 a.m. every day. The situation has been complicated by the COVID-19 epidemic, the extent of which also remains unknown (after its outbreak, the authorities tightened the borders even more), and the statistics – if any exist – are classified. It is hard to expect that Serdar Berdimuhamedow will make any fundamental changes in the functioning of the state, reducing authoritarianism or increasing its openness to the world, although it is possible that he will make some minor gestures of liberalisation to gain popularity after assuming power (the elder Berdimuhamedow took some such decisions, e.g. allowing internet cafés to open, after his first term in office began in February 2007).