

Turkmen Jails Bankers for Graft

July 31, 2011

The  Moscow Times

ASHGABAT, Turkmenistan — Turkmenistan has jailed three central bank officials convicted of corruption in an open trial in what it says is a bid to stem corruption.

President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov brooks no dissent, enjoys virtually unlimited powers and his word is final in Turkmenistan. His flamboyant predecessor, Saparmurat Niyazov, who enjoyed a bizarre personality cult during his 21-year rule until he died suddenly in 2006, had routinely held show trials of top officials to demonstrate his attempts to root out corruption.

State television on Friday showed the first of a Niyazov-style open trial under Berdymukhammedov, featuring a group of officials who were handed out long prison sentences.

"I held a responsible job, in which I embarked on a track of illegal enrichment. I extorted money from businessmen — worth a total of \$3.6 million," television showed Byashim Begjanov, a former head of international operations at Turkmenistan's central bank, telling the court.

"I repent for the grave crime I committed," he said.

Begjanov and two other senior central bank officials were each sentenced to 15 years in jail. Seven accomplices, whose occupations were not specified, also got long jail terms.

"The head of state ... stressed that we are launching a decisive fight against corruption, money laundering and bribery," Berdymukhammedov was quoted by state television as saying.

It showed piles of jewelry, sumptuous houses and foreign currency confiscated from the convicts.

"The measures being taken must become a good lesson for those trying to get rich illegally through fraud and bribes instead of working honestly and assiduously for the sake of a happy and prosperous life of the nation," state-controlled newspapers said.

Earlier in July, Berdymukhammedov fired central bank head Guvanch Geoklenov, citing "grave deficiencies in the work of the banking system," and replaced him with Deputy Prime Minister Tuvakmammed Japarov.

Under Niyazov, four central bank heads were jailed and the fifth one fled the country to escape prosecution. Shortly before his death, Niyazov sacked another central bank chairman and told him to go and work as a teacher, saying that he could no longer be trusted to manage state money.

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