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Turkmenistan Sets Presidential Election Date

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ASHGABAT — Turkmenistan's parliament has set a presidential election for Feb. 12, state media reported Friday, after last month's promise by the gas-rich nation's strongman leader to let the opposition take part in the polls.

Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov was elected president in February 2007 in what the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe said "could hardly be called elections," adding that they "were not absolutely free and fair."

Berdymukhammedov, a dentist aged 54, has let in a whiff of economic freedom in his reclusive nation of 5.4 million people that holds the world's fourth-largest natural gas reserves.

But he enjoys virtually unlimited powers, and the country remains one of the most repressive and reclusive in the world.

Seeking closer ties with the West as Turkmenistan seeks new gas export routes to bypass

Russia, Berdymukhammedov in July made an appeasing gesture to opposition groups living in exile to come and take part in the polls.

Berdymukhammedov, who brooks no dissent and is widely expected to be easily re-elected, has vowed that the upcoming election would be "a proof of our maturing democracy" and given guarantees of safety to any exiled opponent willing to run.

The small and disparate opposition reacted cautiously to Berdymukhammedov's invitation, saying it would first prefer to work out jointly with the government a clear, OSCE-monitored mechanism for its safe return and participation in the election.

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