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Turkmen Leader's Re-Election Assured

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ASHGABAT — Turkmenistan voted Sunday in a one-sided election certain to extend the rule of President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov over a country holding 4 percent of global gas reserves and ranked among the world's most repressive.

Berdymukhammedov, a 54-year-old dentist, is also prime minister, commander of the armed forces and chairman of the only political party in Turkmenistan. His word is final in the former Soviet republic.

Few citizens recognize anyone on the ballot other than the president, whose portrait can be found in parks, streets, offices and hotel lobbies across Turkmenistan.

Berdymukhammedov's seven token challengers, including government ministers and the director of a state-run textile factory, have lauded the president in the run-up to the vote.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has not sent observers, after deciding in December that its presence would not "add value," given the limited freedoms and lack of political competition.

Russian television channels, picked up by satellite dishes, are a rare connection with the outside world in a country where Facebook and YouTube are blocked.

After winning the last presidential election in February 2007, Berdymukhammedov began gradually dismantling the often bizarre cult of personality around Saparmurat Niyazov, the country's first post-Soviet leader, who died of a heart attack.

Keen to diversify gas sales and attract investment, Berdymukhammedov has engaged foreign governments and promised economic reforms while avoiding the more eccentric traits of his predecessor.

Some analysts say the election is being choreographed to present an image of democracy to the West, where energy companies are vying for a share of natural gas reserves and oil fields in the Caspian Sea.

China is in pole position to snap up these resources. It has lent more than $8 billion to help Turkmenistan develop its energy sector, and it built a 2,000-kilometer pipeline to its border.

Meanwhile, talks on a trans-Caspian route to Europe drag on.

International rights groups say there is little evidence that Turkmenistan is improving its human rights record.

"Turkmenistan remains closed to international scrutiny by choice," said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International's Europe and Central Asia deputy program director. The organization said its repeated requests to visit the country had gone unanswered.

Only North Korea and Eritrea ranked lower in the 179-country press freedom index compiled by Reporters Without Borders. Human Rights Watch said in its latest annual report that media and religious freedoms were subject to "draconian restrictions."

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