

No Surprise at Polls in Turkmenistan

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Young women dressed in the traditional Turkmen style distributing refreshments to voters Sunday in Ashgabat. **Marat Gurt**

ASHGABAT, Turkmenistan — Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov won a new five-year term by capturing 97 percent of the vote, election officials said Monday, but a Western expert called the vote a democratic sham.

All of Berdymukhammedov's seven opponents praised his leadership in their campaigns, making the authoritarian leader's victory in Sunday's election a mere formality.

Berdymukhammedov improved on his 2007 performance, in which he secured his first term with 89 percent of the vote.

The Russian head of the monitoring mission sent by the Commonwealth of Independent States said his "heart rejoiced" at the vote.

"We don't want the same kind of elections and democracy that we are seeing today in Libya and Egypt," CIS Executive Secretary Sergei Lebedev said. "Look at what's happening in Syria, where the people are being thrown into the abyss of civil war, supposedly under the guise

of democracy."

Lebedev said CIS monitors noted some minor irregularities but said they were unlikely to have any impact on the final result.

Central Elections Commission chief Orazmyrat Niyazliyev called the vote democratic and said it contributed to national unity.

But Annette Bohr, an expert on Turkmenistan at the London-based Chatham House institute, said the election presented only the facade of a democratic process.

"It is the typical faux democracy that you see in so many countries," Bohr said.

Turkmenistan is the subject of avid interest from the West, Russia and China for its natural gas reserves, which are estimated to be the fourth largest in the world.

Berdymukhammedov, a 54-year-old dentist, came to power after the 2006 death of his eccentric, iron-fisted predecessor, Saparmurat Niyazov, amid promises of opening up the country's tightly controlled political system.

Seeking investment and markets for his gas, Berdymukhammedov has taken steps to bring his country out of the isolation of the Niyazov era, engaging foreign governments and avoiding eccentricity.

Though his absolutist tendencies pale next to those of his predecessor, Berdymukhammedov is acquiring his own cult status. Already prime minister and commander of the armed forces, he was bestowed with the title Hero of Turkmenistan last year.

Turkmenistan's exiled opposition played no part in the election. They say Berdymukhammedov did not follow through on a promise to invite opponents back home to contest the vote.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe had said earlier that conditions were not suitable for a vote-monitoring mission and Turkmenistan did not invite its observers.

(AP, Reuters)

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