

Turkmen President Begins Second Term

February 19, 2012



Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov at the swearing-in event Friday in Ashgabat for his second term as president of Turkmenistan. Analysts say his reelection to lead the tightly controlled Central Asian republic was guaranteed.

ASHGABAT — Turkmenistan's authoritarian president was sworn in Friday for a second term during a lavish ceremony filled with adulation.

Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov won the recent presidential election with 97 percent of the vote.

What Berdimukhammedov does with Turkmenistan during this second five-year term is the subject of avid interest from the West, Russia and China because of the Central Asian state's natural gas reserves, estimated to be the world's fourth largest.

Berdymukhammedov first came to power after the 2006 death of Saparmurat Niyazov. Although he has diluted much of the cult of personality established around Niyazov, his promises of political reform in the ex-Soviet state have been largely unmet.

Still, at a government meeting this week, Berdimukhammedov reaffirmed vows that he

would install a multiparty democracy and develop a civil society.

State media meanwhile have taken to referring to the president as Arkadag, Turkmen for "protector," a moniker reminiscent of Niyazov's title of Turkmenbashi, or "Father of the Turkmen."

Some 3,000 people in the capital, Ashgabat, attended Berdymukhammedov's inauguration.

Berdymukhammedov performed the swearing-in against the backdrop of a gigantic carpet inscribed with one of his own slogans: "The government is for the people."

After the inauguration, Berdymukhammedov gave a brief speech in which he promised to carry out reforms aimed at improving well-being in the country.

Turkmenistan is set to hold parliamentary elections next year. The toothless rubber stamp legislature is occupied solely by the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan, which is the only legally registered party in the country.

Berdymukhammedov has suggested that a new party might be created to represent agrarian interests. That party, too, would almost certainly be tightly controlled by the state.

While it is hard to gauge the president's genuine level of popularity in country where no independent media is allowed to operate and dissent is brutally stamped, discontent is greatly tempered by generous state subsidies enabled by the country's vast energy revenues.

Household gas, water and electricity are all provided free. Families also receive monthly rations of salt.

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