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Turkmenistan to Hold Snap Presidential Vote in March

By AFP

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Turkmen leader Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov **Алексей Дружинин/ТАСС**

Turkmenistan on Saturday announced a snap presidential election for March 12 after autocrat leader Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov said he was ready to step down, with his son expected to succeed him.

"The president ... gave us an instruction to prepare for early presidential elections on March 12," a spokesman for the election commission, Bezergen Garrayev, told AFP by telephone.

Gas-rich Turkmenistan, a former Soviet republic, is one of the world's most repressive, secretive states and little is known about how the regime makes day-to-day decisions.

Berdymukhamedov is its main face. His pastimes -- including horse riding, mass cycling, composing songs and authoring books -- are widely covered on the internet.

His 40-year-old son Serdar Berdymukhamedov is now the second most powerful government

official with a broad purview over the economy as vice-premier.

In a keynote speech in parliament on Friday, Berdymukhamedov said he reached "a difficult decision" about his leadership because of his age, adding that the Central Asian country needed "young leaders", the state information service TDH reported.

Berdymukhamedov, 64, said the proposal to involve "youth" in the leadership of the country were "approved" at the session, in further quotes that appeared on TDH's website early on Saturday.

"In this regard, the Chairman of the Central Commission for holding elections and referendums was instructed to start relevant work in accordance with the constitution and legislation of Turkmenistan."

Berdymukhamedov said he wished to remain in politics in his role as chairman of parliament's upper chamber.

Friday's session in parliament's upper house marked the 15th anniversary of the first of three crushing electoral victories for Berdymukhamedov in his career as president.

He has never faced a real opponent at a ballot and his regime tolerates no dissent.

A former dentist and health minister, he succeeded the country's founding autocrat president Saparmurat Niyazov -- styled Turkmenbashy, or Father of the Turkmen -- when Niyazov died in December 2006.

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