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The Curious Death of Turkmenbashi

BY JOHN C. K. DALY

The unexpected death of *Turkmenbashi* (Leader of the Turkmen), Saparmurat Atayevich Niyazov, in the early morning of December 21, 2006 in Ashgabat of “acute heart failure,” had the rumor mills in that isolated capital swiftly spinning.¹ The diagnosis was announced the same day. The medical commission investigating Niyazov’s death as well as the certified post-mortem report stated that the cause of death was acute cardiac arrest. Dr. Hans Meissner, Niyazov’s German cardiologist, confirmed that the cause of Niyazov’s death was a heart attack, despite a medical examination several weeks earlier that had given him a clean bill of health.² Niyazov had ruled Turkmenistan 21 years to the day, taking over the country on December 21, 1985.

The government itself hardly quelled the issue, commenting that a possible contributing factor was “diabetes mellitus.”³ According to several sources, Niyazov had a toe amputated several years ago due to diabetes complications, while local physicians speaking on condition of anonymity said that the president had weak blood vessels, which could have led to cerebral hemorrhage.⁴

Only a handful of foreign correspondents were in Ashgabat when Niyazov died, and many Western media reports concentrated on the more garish aspects of his “cult of personality,” leaving many questions about Niyazov’s passing unanswered. At stake is the personal control of billions of dollars in natural gas revenue from the world’s fifth largest natural gas reserves, estimated by the Central Intelligence Agency in 2002 at 1.43 trillion cubic meters.⁵ (The Online Turkmenistan Information Center states that the country’s reserves could be as high as 15.1 trillion cubic meters.)

Did Niyazov die of natural causes, or were darker forces involved? Speculation swiftly began to circulate that the latter was the case. In trying to uncover Niyazov’s mysterious sudden end, a useful caveat to keep in mind would be Lucius Cassius Longinus Ravilla’s old Latin adage *Cui bono* (to whose benefit).



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HEALTH FACTORS

One incontestable fact is that Niyazov had been experiencing various health problems for more than a decade before his death. The issue of Niyazov's health first attracted media attention in February 1994, when Niyazov flew from the Davos Economic Forum to the United States for a medical examination, after which he had surgery for phlebitis in his left leg in Houston.⁶ Two years later, while visiting Turkey for discussions on a Turkmen-Iran-Turkey natural gas pipeline, Niyazov reportedly again received medical treatment.⁷

Whatever the true condition of Niyazov's health may have been, on September 1, 1997 he underwent quadruple bypass heart surgery in Munich.⁸ At the time, Meissner said that Niyazov suffered from a "very severe illness of the vessels, which supply the heart."⁹ Following the surgery, Niyazov presented German cardiologist Hans Meissner with a \$580,000 Akhal-Teke horse, of which there are less than an estimated 3,500 worldwide.

On November 10, 1998, Meissner reexamined Niyazov and pronounced him in "good health." Meissner, who had operated on Niyazov in Germany, subsequently moved from Germany to Turkmenistan.¹⁰ Meissner would visit Niyazov in Ashgabat two or three times a year. In March 2002, he pronounced that Turkmenbashi was in "great" physical shape.

Following the last diagnosis, however, exiled opposition leader Boris Shikhmuradov disagreed:

"At the moment of his surgery, blood circulation didn't exceed 26 percent of his heart function. After the bypass surgery, the process was restored, but doctors warned him that he should keep a strict diet and follow medical prescriptions. Of course, he followed none of them. Quite the opposite. He continued to drink—in particular, cognac, which is his regular drink. This has completely ruined the results of the surgery. Starting in 1998, German doctors have regularly been warning that his health condition was degrading."¹¹

Turkmenbashi had a low opinion of his country's health professionals. Speaking to an audience of students and state and public officials at the Agricultural University in Ashgabat in April 2005, Niyazov said, "I have a dentist from Germany taking care of my teeth."¹² Like Lenin, Turkmenbashi distrusted local doctors whom he considered poor professionals, commenting at a cabinet meeting that Turkmen doctors "cannot even administer an injection."¹³

Despite the upbeat prognoses, in September 2004, Niyazov was the first patient for a routine medical examination on the opening day of a new diagnostic center in Ashgabat. Meissner, heading a team of six doctors, declared Niyazov to be in good physical shape as a result of Niyazov's quitting smoking a few years previously and engaging in a moderate exercise program.¹⁴

Niyazov's heart, however, was not his only organ feeling the weight of advancing years. In March 2005, he was operated on by a team of German doctors led by Ulrich Schaalder at the Niyazov International Medical Center in Ashgabat for a cataract in his left eye. After the surgery, he was given his usual clean bill of health, with Schaalder proclaiming that they had restored his vision "100 percent."¹⁵ The year ended with yet another physical conducted by a team of German doctors again led by Meissner, who told reporters, "Niyazov's inherent and immutable good spirit enables him to resist constant stress and manage physical strains connected with the leader's working pace...He loves his job." The tests included an ultrasound, X-rays and electrocardiogram procedures.¹⁶

Unfortunately for Turkmenbashi, 2006 would see his health decline despite such rosy prognoses. He would not live to see the year's end. On October 20, Niyazov told participants at the Annual Conference of the Association of World Turkmen in Ashgabat, "Many of my deputies are fasting [during Ramadan]. Only I cannot fast because I'm taking tablets. After my heart disease, [physicians] gave me medicine. Life itself has

released me from fasting. So, don't blame me."¹⁷ Despite this startling admission, three days later, a team of German physicians headed by the indefatigable Meissner declared after two days of extensive tests that they found Niyazov, who it is now known would only live for two more months, in good health.

Still, all was not well in the kingdom of Turkmenbashi, as on November 17 *NewsCentralAsia* announced that Niyazov was scheduled for additional ocular surgery in January 2007, following a medical exam by a team of German doctors led by ophthalmologist Professor Arthur Mueller and anesthetist Dr. Klaus Chaikovskii. Mueller told reporters that Niyazov's right eye should be operated on, "so that his sight is balanced." Chaikovskii added that Turkmenbashi was in "very good health" and that "all his organs are working normally." Niyazov died the following month.

WAS NIYAZOV MURDERED?

While rumors are rife, few are willing to openly suggest that Niyazov might not have died a natural death, or even died on December 21, as was reported. Indicating possible government foreknowledge of Niyazov's demise, the day before the "light of all Turkmen's death," a spokesman of the Uzbek National Customs Committee said that Turkmenistan unexpectedly closed its border with Uzbekistan.¹⁸

Turkmen former Foreign Minister Avdy Kuliev, in an article entitled "Niyazov Always Feared Dying an Unnatural Death," writes about the number of peculiarities surrounding Niyazov's death. Kuliev is quick to note the facts: Niyazov seemed healthy just before his death; Meissner, his German personal physician of many years, was not involved in the autopsy and Berdymukhammedov in a rapid manner quickly assumed power.¹⁹ Kuliev even speculates that those involved might not only have been Turkmen but "also...outside forces."

Russia's Institute of Religion and Politics researcher Zurab Todua also suspects foul play, noting, "Niyazov was helped to go by those who had 'access to the body' and controlled his doctors...First, after the heart operation in 1997, he was regularly checked by German doctors. The last time was literally before his death. It was reported that the president was 'in great form, all organs are functioning normally.' Second, attempts on Niyazov's life had been made before—the most high-profile one was on November 25, 2002." Todua adds that while Niyazov punished the conspirators, public dissatisfaction remained high. He points out that top Turkmen officials clearly did not look shocked by Niyazov's death, with his funeral proceeding so smoothly that it seemed as if its scenario had been written well in advance.²⁰

The chairman of the Islamic Committee of Russia, Geydar Cemal, is confident that the Turkmen leader was killed, as Niyazov "was noted for his strong health."²¹ Bayram Shikhmuradov, one of the leaders of the Republican Party of Turkmenistan, is also suspicious of the official accounts, saying, "The speed with which the Turkmen authorities found a way out of a difficult situation, with the lightning arrest of the speaker of parliament and the naming of the deputy prime minister as the president's temporary successor, is worrying. They were ready for it, and they quickly put their plan into action." As the son of Turkmenistan's former Foreign Affairs Minister Boris Shikhmuradov, he was in a position to have significant contacts with the Turkmen opposition both outside and inside the country.²²

In March 1999, Foreign Affairs Minister Shikhmuradov led peace talks in Kandahar where he reportedly met Taliban leader Mullah Omar. Three years later, Niyazov announced that 49 people, including 17 foreigners, had been arrested in connection with an assassination attempt on November 25, reportedly led by Shikhmuradov from exile. Shikhmuradov returned to Turkmenistan from Uzbekistan the following month and received a life sentence.

Another potentially disaffected group that might have wished to see Niyazov dead were drug traffickers who use Turkmenistan as a transit country for Afghan heroin to reach Russia on their way to European

markets. A report prepared by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime stated that in 1998 about 40 tons of heroin passed through Turkmenistan from Afghanistan. By May 2003, Dmirtri Rogozin, head of the Russian Duma's committee on international affairs, openly accused Niyazov of involvement with the Taliban in the drug trade in exchange for fuel shipments. He charged the Niyazov administration with maintaining covert contact with terrorists, including bin Laden, and reporting that Major Vitaly Usachev, head of the Ashgabat airport border guards, in 1997 revealed that hundreds of pounds of heroin were discovered in government luggage. Usachev was subsequently arrested and shot.²³

On November 8, 2006, the month before Niyazov died, Nikolai Gavrilov, a former Ministry of National Security department head, was found murdered in his Ashgabat apartment along with his wife. Gavrilov had sensitive information about the drug trade through Turkmenistan and knowledge of the involvement of Turkmen officials in the narcotics trade, including the former General Prosecutor Gurbanbibi Atajanova (who was subsequently arrested and charged with organizing a drug trafficking ring), former presidential advisor Yolly Gurbanmuradov and others.²⁴ After retiring, Gavrilov worked at the Ashgabat zoo and attempted to emigrate to Russia, but was thwarted by government officials. No one has been arrested yet for the Gavrilov murders. Niyazov's attitude toward drugs was hardly conventional, at one point declaring that, "opium helps relations with women," the same year that the Turkmen government stopped reporting opium seizures.²⁵ The trafficking charges were also supported by Turkmen opposition leaders; in Washington in 2002, Kuliev told the author that Niyazov was personally involved in the drug trade and stored tons of heroin in presidential residences.

Drug barons have not hesitated to attack the highest elements of government authority when threatened—in November 1985, 11 Colombian Supreme Court judges and 90 other people died when M-19 guerrillas forced their way into the Colombian Palace of Justice. During the 26-hour siege, a fire destroyed all pending extradition requests and other counter-narcotics documentation.²⁶ If Niyazov attempted major transit price increases in the manner he dealt with energy clients, he would certainly have angered drug barons.

Murder by poisoning is difficult to prove because a medical examiner collecting tissue samples must forward them to state crime laboratories for testing, which can take days. While many poisons like thallium leave residual traces in the body, some poisons disappear after death, such as cyanide. A person can die from cyanide poisoning, but the cyanide may not be detectable after death. Furthermore, embalming with formaldehyde interferes with tests for cyanides. There is no indication that such toxicological tests were even carried out.

FOLLOW THE MONEY

The day after Niyazov died, the *Financial Times* reported that Germany's Deutsche Bank reportedly held \$1.68 billion in accounts controlled by Niyazov. A \$1.68 billion Turkmenistan government contract was reportedly signed in 2001 to export gas to Ukraine and has since been managed by Deutsche Bank on behalf of the Turkmenistan central bank.²⁷ The Vienna-based Turkmen opposition Republican Party of Turkmenistan wrote to German Chancellor Angela Merkel demanding an "official investigation" of the Deutsche Bank accounts, alleging there is an estimated \$3 billion in illegal Niyazov accounts. Deutsche Bank has thus far refused to comment. Six months ago, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development cautioned that Turkmen central bank accounts were under the "discretionary control of the president without appropriate regulation and transparency."

Further muddying the waters, the *Financial Times* reported that Aleksandr Zhadan, who controlled Niyazov's financial affairs, reportedly fled Ashgabat the day before Niyazov died. Zhadan, an old family friend, was Niyazov's private secretary before the collapse of communism in 1991 and deputy head of the presidential administration. Additionally, Zhadan served as Niyazov's personal treasurer and managed his bank accounts abroad for nearly 20 years, and escaped, possibly to Israel.²⁸ Zhadan disappeared with

important state documents.²⁹ Two days later, *Kommersant* reported that Zhadan was the liaison for many of Niyazov's contacts with important Western centers of influence. Niyazov personally approved all energy contracts and all revenues that went into the accounts controlled by him rather than into state entities. Therefore, Zhadan doubtlessly had unique insights.

The vast energy revenues attracted other sticky fingers as well—in May 2005, Deputy Prime Minister Elly Kurbanmuradov, who was in charge of the energy sector, was fired and subsequently jailed for 25 years on various charges, including corruption. Two months later, Rejep Saparov, head of presidential administration, received a 20 year jail sentence on corruption charges.

During an interview with Savik Shuster, *Vremya Novostei* correspondent Arkady Dubno said that he had received an e-mail stating that Zhadan fled to Firiuza, 23 miles west of Ashgabat on the northeastern slopes of Kopet Dagh, where Niyazov maintained a residence. There Zhadan met with Niyazov's widow Muza Alekseyevna and Irina Niyazov, who reportedly was fully briefed on her father's accounts.³⁰

THE PRIZE

Among Turkmenistan's natural gas clients nervously watching all this medical flummery was none other than Gazprom, whose relations with Niyazov over the years might most diplomatically be described as strained. Niyazov since 1991 had repeatedly pressured his clients to pay ever-increasing fees for Turkmen gas and multiple times had unilaterally halted supplies, sometimes for years, to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia, Tajikistan and Ukraine to press his point. The only certainty in negotiating with Niyazov was his unpredictability.

From 1991 to 1993, the Turkmenistan economy thrived on its gas and cotton exports. Yet Niyazov was desperate for Western currency, and his only tangible asset was the country's energy reserves. Lack of access to hard currency markets resulted in a decrease in the country's gas output in 1995 to less than half of the pre-Soviet level.

The first to feel the chill was Armenia, when in December 1996 Turkmenistan cut gas deliveries as a result of Armenia's \$75 million debt to Turkmenistan.³¹ Four months later, it was Ukraine's turn due to an unpaid \$700 million debt with Turkmenistan, losing about \$1 billion until it resumed supplies to Ukraine on November 1, 2000. The Russian firm Itera was initially contracted to export Turkmen gas, for which it paid just \$10 per 1000 cubic meters.³²

In January 1998, Niyazov rejected an offer from Russian Prime Minister Chernomyrdin and Transneft Chairman Rem Vyakhirev to purchase Turkmen natural gas for \$32 per 1,000 cubic meters. The following year, Niyazov would turn off the tap to Moscow, only resuming deliveries on March 6, 2001 after more than a year. Russia, Turkmenistan's biggest market, took careful note of Niyazov's hardball tactics.

The price squabbles, however, continued. On December 27, 2004, the Turkmen Foreign Ministry said that gas supplies to Russia and Ukraine would be cut due to a dispute over prices. They cut gas supplies four days later. This time Ukraine buckled quickly, agreeing on January 3, 2005 to pay \$58 dollars per 1,000 cubic meters of gas. A triumphant Niyazov said at a news conference that his demand for increased prices was due to the falling value of U.S. dollar.

Turkmenistan's natural gas exports earn more than \$2 billion annually. Turkmenistan delivers about 50 billion cubic meters a year, the majority of foreign natural gas that Russia imports, allowing Gazprom to support both exports and internal consumption.

The high point in Niyazov's gas pricing brinkmanship came last June, when he forced Gazprom's chairman Aleksei Miller to agree to a 54 percent gas price hike in a 25-year bilateral accord under which Turkmenistan would supply Russia with 162 billion cubic meters of gas at \$100 per 1,000 cubic meters.³³ While Gazprom has played similar hardball with Georgia, Belarus and Ukraine, there was little that Miller could do but agree.

Despite his victory, Russian heavy-handedness and stinginess caused Niyazov to consider other options for gas exports. In an effort to circumvent Gazprom's monopoly, Turkmenistan in 1997 opened the 125-mile Korpeje-Kord-Kuy pipeline to Iran, which in 2006 carried about eight billion cubic meters annually. In April 2006, Niyazov signed a deal with China for natural gas exports and the commissioning of a Turkmenistan-China pipeline by 2009.³⁴ Unhappy with Gazprom's monopoly, besides the China pipeline three other pipelines were under discussion: the Trans-Afghan Pipeline, which, like the proposed Chinese pipeline, would handle 30 billion cubic meters annually; a pipeline along the Caspian coast to improve export capacity to Europe; and a pipeline to the United Arab Emirates, through Afghanistan and Pakistan.³⁵ If the projects came to fruition, Gazprom would be completely cut off from Turkmenistan's natural gas exports. Furthermore, a newly discovered massive gas field in Iolatan in Mary province had a potential seven trillion cubic meters of gas, which Niyazov said would provide Turkmenistan with enough natural gas to honor obligations to export 200 billion cubic meters annually for 35 years.³⁶ Niyazov signed an order allowing the Turkish Calik Energy Co. and China's National Petroleum Co. to begin developing the Iolatan reserves. Russia was about to lose out on billions in transit revenues.

The uncomfortable reality for both Gazprom and Turkmenistan is that they need one another. Europe now represents nearly 70 percent of Gazprom's total revenue, with its product reaching 21 Central and Western Europe countries. In 2000, production in Gazprom's two largest mature fields declined 20 percent, with the result being that Gazprom still has not recovered its 1999 production levels.³⁷

Gazprom also sells the majority, about two-thirds of its annual gas production of about 550 billion cubic meters, in the Russian domestic market. Until 1994, Gazprom treated Turkmenistan as a beggar client state, allocating it a transit quota of 11 percent of Transneft's total capacity. The situation changed in 2000 when Gazprom was no longer able to meet all its delivery obligations because of declining production in its Western Siberian fields, where 80 percent of its assets are. Gazprom then allowed increased Turkmen access to the lower-priced Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) market, while continuing to reserve the higher-priced markets for Western and Central Europe.³⁸ In January, *Kommersant* quoted Gazprom spokesman Sergei Kupriyanov as saying Gazprom intended to hike the average gas price for Europe to \$250 per thousand cubic meters, a fact that can hardly have escaped Niyazov's attention.³⁹

The Russia domestic market with its regulated low prices absorbed 325 billion cubic meters of gas in 2005, generating losses for Gazprom of nearly \$1 billion.⁴⁰ Exports to the higher-paying West, providing the majority of Gazprom's profits, were accordingly planned at 151 billion cubic meters for 2006.⁴¹

Niyazov's triumphal 54 percent rate increase would drastically cut into Gazprom's 2007 profit margin. Gazprom planned to buy 30 billion cubic meters of gas from Turkmenistan in 2006.⁴² Purchases from Turkmenistan were scheduled to rise to 70-80 bcm annually by 2007-08.⁴³ If the price Gazprom paid for the 70 bcm rose \$46 per 1,000 cm to \$100 per 1,000 cm, the new rate would force Gazprom to cough up an additional \$3.8 billion for Turkmen gas imports in 2007 alone, with no guarantee that Niyazov might not impose further price hikes. Such a sum would severely erode Gazprom's record profits, which were \$5.2 billion in the second quarter of 2006, a 123 percent increase from the previous year's period.⁴⁴ A further grudge against Niyazov by the energy executives of other Caspian riparian states is that his perverse attitude toward dividing the Caspian's waters made a final delineation impossible, which thwarted both offshore exploration and the laying of undersea pipelines.

Despite the massive energy revenues flowing into Turkmenistan, little benefit has reached the Turkmen people. The United Nations estimated that 44 percent of the country's population lives on less than \$2 per day.⁴⁵ The CIA in 2004 estimated that Turkmenistan suffered from 60 percent unemployment. In contrast to the living conditions in neighboring post-Soviet countries, Turkmenistan's 4.5 million still live almost the same way as they did under communism. Funding for social programs is only 22 percent of Turkmenistan's 2007 budget, as compared to around 67 percent in nearby Kyrgyzstan last year.⁴⁶

THE END AND A NEW BEGINNING?

While Niyazov's health was somewhat problematical, if he was indeed killed the list of suspects would be extensive, ranging from impoverished citizens to disgruntled government officials, from drug traffickers to foreign energy executives, all of whom would benefit from the demise of such a mercurial, autocratic despot and a more rational and predictable replacement regime. Niyazov certainly did not lack internal and foreign critics who were increasingly unsettled by his unpredictable style of government.

It is notable that both foreign energy officials and Turkmen government functionaries hastened to assure one another that it would be "business as usual" even before Niyazov was buried. The Russian delegation to Niyazov's funeral was the largest foreign contingent. Former Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, now Russian ambassador to the Ukraine, accompanied Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov. Other Russian attendees included Gazprom head Alexei Miller, who led a delegation of high-ranking officials from the gas giant.

The new government scrambled to communicate to its foreign partners that despite Niyazov's death all energy contracts would be honored. The day after Niyazov's death, acting President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov said, "Let foreign consumers of our oil and gas not worry. Turkmenistan will strictly follow its commitments, and no event is able to influence our exports, because there is strict government control over all this."⁴⁷

ENDNOTES

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¹⁶ ITAR-TASS, December 13, 2005.

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- ⁴⁰ Prime-Tass, November 29, 2005.
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