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Publication Details

Brown, S. M. & Sheiko, K. 2006, 'The Soviet legacy and leader cults in Post-Communist Central Asia: the example of Turkmenistan', in A. Vickers & M. Hanlon (eds), *Asia Reconstructed: Proceedings of the 16th Biennial Conference of the ASAA, 2006*, Wollongong, Australia, Asian Studies Association of Australia, Canberra, pp. 1-13.

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**The Soviet Legacy and Leader Cults in Post-Communist Central Asia: the example of
Turkmenistan¹**

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While a new wave of democratic revolutions was widely expected in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, progress towards democratisation has proven slow. In many parts of the world, including Central Asia, victory in what Francis Fukuyama claimed was the last of history's battles has proved elusive.² Perhaps the most striking feature of the politics of Central Asia since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 has been the durability of the leader cults that have grown up around Presidents Nasultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan, and Saparmurat Niyazov in Turkmenistan.

To explain the failure of democratisation in Central Asia, scholars have pointed to the legacy of the Soviet past, the authoritarian logic of resource-rich rentier states, the absence of a Central Asian democratic tradition, relatively low levels of education, the small size of the middle class,

¹ This paper was presented to the 16th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Wollongong 26 June - 29 June 2006. It has been peer-reviewed and appears on the Conference Proceedings website by permission of the author(s) who retain(s) copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation."

² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press, New York, 1992)

and a lack of ‘civil society’. Matveeva summarised this long list of obstacles to democratisation in the Central Asia thus:

Their mixture of regional, family, clan, tribal and ethnic loyalties, the use of electoral systems and practices incapable of incorporating these elements, the majority parties virtual denial of legitimacy to minority interests and the anti-system stance assumed by opposition groups, the salience of natural resources as a basis for regime viability, and the lack of any widespread sense of public engagement and civic responsibility, aggravated by lower levels of urbanization and education, have together jeopardised the republics’ chances of achieving successful democratisation.³

More recently, S. Frederick Starr has attempted to shift the focus of Western scholarly debate away from general political and economic factors towards the positive contribution that the Central Asian leaders and elites have made to their own longevity. Rather than clones of the Soviet system or products of a static and authoritarian ‘Islamic’ political culture and ‘Asian’ system of values, Starr views the leaders of Central Asia as actively engaged in shaping their own destinies. In particular, these authoritarian regimes have had to build alliances within a complex web of clans and regional networks.⁴ For Starr, politics is at work in Central Asia even if there is a lack of visible dissent in the heavily censored official discourse of these states.

At the same time, Starr has made the case that Western scholars should not take the ‘hard’ authoritarian regimes of Central Asia at face value and that their authoritarianism conceals their leaders’ desperate insecurity and acute sense of weakness.⁵ Starr’s account is particularly valuable for at least two reasons. Firstly, it points to the agency of Central Asian leaders in shaping an alternative to the trajectories that were predicted for them in 1991, that is, democratisation or state failure. Secondly, Starr suggests that the insecurities of the regime are a primary driver of politics. Leaving aside the question of whether we should think of these regimes as weak or strong, the spectre of failure in the state-building process either through external meddling, internal unrest or, most likely, some combination of both, can be detected in the efforts of the post-Communist regimes to attach their rule to as firm a foundation as they possibly can. That foundation is described by the leaders themselves as a march towards ‘national revival’, a progress that required the invention of usable pasts, heroic ancestors and a new symbolic universe

³ Anna Matveeva, ‘Democratization, legitimacy and political change in Central Asia’, *International Affairs* 75 1999 75 (1), pp. 35-36.

⁴ S. Frederick Starr, ‘Clans, Authoritarian Rulers, and Parliaments in Central Asia’, *Silk Road Papers*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, June 2006, pp. 10-12.

⁵ *Ibid.*

that rests upon the politics of nationalism, an ideology that was kept from view during the Soviet period.

The argument put forward here is that the training of the Central Asian dictators within the Soviet system was excellent preparation for their new roles as champions of nationalism. It might seem odd that the Soviet Union, created to further the cause of socialist internationalism, should have served as a breeding ground of nationalism. Over the last twenty years scholars have tended to revise the earlier view that the Soviet state rehearsed the role of its tsarist predecessor in serving as a 'prison house of nations'; the new scholarly consensus has emphasised the Soviet state's role as an unwitting incubator of nationalism, and has noted Stalin's ability to blend a discourse of the supra-national state and the special qualities of the Russian nation.⁶ An examination of the rhetoric emerging from the present-day regimes in central Asia suggests that this model has survived the death of its authors.

There is no space here to deal in any depth with the complex histories of the five Central Asian states; instead, this paper will focus upon the example of Turkmenistan, often looked upon both as the most authoritarian of the Central Asian states and the home of the most extravagant leadership cult found in the region. The Soviet Union's Central Asian republics were quite literally creations of the early Soviet period. When the Russians conquered Central Asia in the nineteenth century, there was no polity that called itself a Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, Uzbek or Tajik nation. Rather, there were nomadic confederations, most notably the Khanates of Bukhara, Khiva and Samarkand.⁷ Created by Soviet politicians in 1924, Turkmenistan occupies an area that has links to competing Russian, Turkish, Islamic and Western political and cultural spheres.⁸ Opportunities and threats have appeared in the shape of the former colonial power (Russia), regional powers (Turkey and China), a populous neighbour (Uzbekistan, with twenty-seven million people, is by far the largest of the Central Asian states) and the growing interest in the region of the world's only superpower, the United States.

⁶ David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Russian National Identity* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge Mass, 2002), pp. 1-10.

⁷ Bingol, Yilmaz, 'Nationalism and Democracy in Post-Communist Central Asia', *Asian Ethnicity*, 2004, 5 (1) p. 45.

⁸ Ahmet T. Kuru, 'Between the State and Cultural Zones: nation-building in Turkmenistan', *Central Asian Survey* 2002 21(1) pp. 71-90.

By 2006, Turkmen made up 85% of the population of Turkmenistan; there were substantial minorities, especially Uzbeks (5%) and Russians (4%). The challenge from the perspective of builders of post-Soviet, independent Turkmenistan was to prevent the state from fracturing internally (Tajikistan, for example, plunged into civil war in the early 1990s) while maintaining sufficient independence from much larger neighbours that, in the worst of cases, might use political pressure or even military force to gain control of Turkmenistan's underpopulated but hydrocarbon-rich steppe.

Much media attention has focused upon the apparent excesses of the cult surrounding Turkmenistan's President-for-Life Niyazov. Niyazov is typical of the majority of Central Asian leaders in that he was the quintessential Soviet functionary. He was born in 1940 in the republican capital of Ashgabat. After losing his father in World War Two and the rest of his family in an earthquake in 1948, Niyazov grew up in a Soviet orphanage. Niyazov was trained as an engineer and became a member of the Communist Party in 1962. Although he came of age during the reformist Khrushchev era, Niyazov matured as a Communist during the Brezhnev era when there was a partial rehabilitation of Stalin's contribution to Soviet history. After Gorbachev came to power in 1985, Niyazov moved rapidly through the ranks from Chairman of the Council of Ministers of Turkmenistan to First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan. In 1990, he became chairman of the Supreme Soviet, at which point he led both the party and governmental apparatus of the republic. In 1990, Niyazov was elected the first president of the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic. Having at first supported the failed anti-Gorbachev coup of August 1991, which was undertaken in the name of restoring centralized control of the Soviet Union, Niyazov subsequently reinvented himself as an advocate of Turkmen independence, proclaimed in October 1991.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Communist Party of Turkmenistan renamed itself as the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan with Niyazov at its head.⁹ Niyazov ruled in a progressively more autocratic fashion until he became President-for-Life in 1999. Thereafter Niyazov chose to call himself *Turkmenbashi* a term that Niyazov's website translates as 'leader of the ethnic Turkmen'. Turkmenistan's state-run news is devoted almost entirely to the accomplishments of the leader; each broadcast begins with a greeting or prayer for the compassionate, merciful and esteemed Turkmenbashi.¹⁰ Niyazov's image is superimposed upon

⁹ Kuru, 'Nation building in Turkmenistan', p. 73.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 75.

state-run television programs and Turkmenistan's major Caspian Sea port has been renamed in Niyazov's honour. There are plans to make Ashgabat home to modern wonders such as an ice palace and the world's greatest zoo.

Niyazov has written a text, the *Ruhnama* or *Book of the Soul* that has replaced the Soviet-era textbooks as a compulsory source of instruction for students at every level in Turkmenistan's education system. Prospective government employees are required to memorise parts of this book by heart. The citizens of Turkmenistan are required to swear oaths upon the *Ruhnama*; passages from the *Ruhnama* can be read alongside passages from the Koran inscribed on a lavish mosque built in Niyazov's hometown in honour of his mother. Doctors swear a personal oath of allegiance to Niyazov in preference to the Hippocratic Oath. The months of the year have been renamed: January has been renamed in honour of Turkmenbashi. Niyazov's regime has pretensions to micro-manage the life journey of his people, mapping out for them new stages in the process of maturation. A Turkmen is an adolescent until the age of twenty-five; old age begins at eighty-five.

Not surprisingly, the more eccentric and megalomaniacal proclamations of Niyazov have received the greatest attention in the world's press. On the other hand, there is plentiful evidence that Niyazov and his regime are more than capable of acting rationally in their efforts to win domestic and international support. Niyazov has struck many observers as a shrewd politician who has succeeded in neutralising the powerful clans within Turkmenistan and in cultivating world leaders. In recent years, Niyazov has won praise from American Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and was welcomed into the club of NATO's Partnerships for Peace. Niyazov is sufficiently crafty to make concessions when they seem needed, telling his countrymen that there will be multi-candidate elections in 2010.¹¹

Neither Stalin nor Niyazov conformed to Weber's ideal type of a charismatic leader whose authority came from the people's trust. In the case of such closed and repressive societies we have no reliable methods of judging their levels of popular support. What can be claimed is that the regimes have sought to endow their leaders with charismatic authority. Using the Stalin cult as an ideal type, EA Rees has defined the leader cult as 'a deliberately constructed and managed

¹¹ Bingol, 'Nationalism and Democracy in Post-Communist Central Asia', p. 54.

mechanism, which aims at the integration of the political system around the leader's persona'.¹² This definition is useful because it focuses attention upon the agency of leaders and elites in constructing such a system of rule. Rees adds that veneration of leaders exists in almost every political setting, but that it is only in closed societies that leaders are endowed with omnipresent, ubiquitous and timeless qualities that are attached to the person and not to their office.¹³

As was noted above, we cannot say with any certainty how much popular assent leader cults in closed society attract from the general population; it seems possible, even likely, that fear, apathy and cynicism defined the general mood of the Soviet population under Stalin.¹⁴ Even so, most scholars have noted that cults are functional, if not for building mass support then in serving to bond the elite to the leader. Leader cults serve to convey to citizens the enormous power of the state while crowding out alternative ideologies and actors.¹⁵ They can also serve as a means of encouraging compliance among citizens and therefore reducing the need for repression.¹⁶ Stalin's lieutenants, having come under the spell of Stalin, competed with one another to please their patron, a process that was also observed in the case of Hitler, when the dictator's henchmen dedicated themselves to 'working towards the fuhrer'.¹⁷ Other scholars have noted that the leader cult served to fill the void created by the failed appearance of the promised socialist utopia; 'the gap between the ideal world still to come and the socio-political reality of the present had to be bridged by the creation and proliferation of usable myths'.¹⁸

Niyazov is clearly eclectic in his sources of inspiration. The French revolutionaries renamed the months, invented a new religion and mythic symbols while succumbing to the rule of an increasingly repressive and paranoid autocratic ruler. Stalin's books as well as his person were sacralized in the 1930s. Niyazov's veneration of his mother has a precedent in the Nazi cult of Hitler's mother; Turkmenistan's slogan of 'People, Motherland, Turkmenbashi' is eerily

¹² E A Rees, 'Leader Cults: Varieties, Preconditions and Functions', in Balázs Apór et al (ed), *The leader cult in communist dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2004), p. 4.

¹³ Ibid p. 8

¹⁴ Ibid p. 5

¹⁵ Wedeen, Lisa, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1999), pp. 143-45.

¹⁶ Nicola Pratt, 'Identity, Culture and Democratization: The Case of Egypt', *New Political Science*, 2005, 27 (1) p. 73.

¹⁷ Ennker, Benno, 'The Stalin Cult, Bolshevik Rule and Kremlin Interaction', in Balázs Apór et al (ed), *The leader cult in communist dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc*, pp. 85-89.

¹⁸ Klimó, Arpad von, 'A very modest man': Bela Illes', in Balázs Apór et al (ed), *The leader cult in communist dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc*, p. 59.

reminiscent of Hitler's similarly-phrased popular slogan of 'One People, One State, One Leader'. At the same time, it is clear that Niyazov is a child of the Russian and especially the Soviet world. While Niyazov has made a habit in his speeches of repudiating both Stalin and the entire Soviet experience, his success in remaining in power would appear to owe a great deal to the Soviet, and especially the Stalinist legacy.

In part, Soviet nationality policy in Central Asia repeated the tsarist state's determination to organise and bring under control its colonial subjects with the goal of preventing a Muslim or pan-Turkic uprising in the region.¹⁹ At the same time, recent work on Soviet nationality policy has emphasised how seriously the Bolsheviks took their claim that nationhood was a progressive step in the political transition from backwardness to modernity. Here, Stalin played a key role. Stalin's major contribution to pre-revolutionary Bolshevik theory was his *Marxism and the National Question*, which was published in 1913. According to Stalin and the official Marxism of the Soviet Union, a people pass through several stages, from tribes in the era of primitive communism to 'nations' in the era of capitalism. For Stalin, nations had to meet the criteria of a common language, territory, economy and culture.²⁰ Stalin's regime forced the pace of history so that the bourgeois nationalist phase of national development in Central Asia was passed over in favour of a more advanced socialist phase. At the same time, a discourse of nationalism soon crept into Soviet language even if the new republics were supposedly socialist in content and only nationalist in form.

In the 1920s and 30s, the Soviet policy of *korenizatsiia* or 'nativisation' promoted local ethnic Communists and an indigenous elite.²¹ Museums of national culture were built, written languages were created and schools built to inculcate in young Uzbeks or Turkmen an awareness of the officially sanctioned version of their national histories.²² Nationality was inscribed upon Soviet internal passports, affirmative action programs led to the hiring of native workers and, for some, their rapid advancement through regional Communist Parties. Central Asian elites came to use the

¹⁹ Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations* (IB Taurus, London, 2000)

²⁰ See Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-23*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1999), pp. 18-19.

²¹ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1993), pp. 102-105.

²² Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, New York, 2001).

Soviet administrative structure and its national boundaries as a resource for their own advancement.²³

Between 1924 and 1936, the Soviet state finally settled upon territorial arrangements that would transform Soviet Central Asia into five republics, each with a titular nationality, Communist Party and official language. The Bolsheviks created ‘nations’ in areas where only clans, tribes and language groups had existed before. As Ronald Suny has put it:

Rather than primordial nations slumbering for more than 74 years, waiting to be aroused by Gorbachev’s embrace, the nationalities of the USSR were constantly... constructed and reconstructed; traditions were selected, invented and enshrined; and even those with the greatest antiquity of pedigree became something quite different from past incarnations.²⁴

Nonetheless, the present generation of Central Asian leaders would, like most citizens of the former Soviet Union, have found strange and puzzling the Western academic consensus that nationality and nationalism are modern phenomena that are in important senses, invented and imagined.²⁵ The Soviet emphasis on *ethnos*, and the importance of history, geography and language inculcated primordialist perspective on nationalism even among those trained in Soviet academies.

The post-Communist leaders of Central Asia have found that much of the groundwork for their post-Communist state building was already prepared by the Soviet state itself. The Soviet state had, first of all, shown that the building of something resembling a nation-state was possible in a relatively short space of time. In the case of Central Asia, the Soviet state established frontiers, named the population, reinvented pasts, and matched languages with ethnic groups.²⁶ Moreover, Soviet ideology especially in the Stalin era legitimised the search for prestigious ancestors as a means of justifying present regime. The historian, Yuri Slezkine, who grew up in Russia, has recalled:

Children often fantasize about discovering an enviable set of ‘real parents’; nations can do something about it. One popular strategy is simply to lay claim to more prestigious progenitors (Noah's sons and Herodotus's distant tribes, e.g., have proven their usefulness on numerous occasions); another is to boost the status of existing ones

²³ Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations* (IB Taurus, London, 2000)

²⁴ Suny, *Revenge of the Past*, p. 160.

²⁵ For a discussion of this issue, see Matthew Levinger and Paula Franklin Lytle, ‘Myth and Mobilisation’, *Nations and Nationalism* 7 2001, 7 (2), p. 177.

²⁶ Roy, *The New Central Asia*, p. vii.

(my own Russian ancestors, I learned in grade (sic) school, had invented the radio, airplane, steam locomotive, and light bulb, while also defending their neighbors from barbarian invasions).²⁷

The obsession with glorious pasts and over-achieving ancestors was as much a part of Soviet discourse as it was feature of the nationalist discourse that was, officially at least, anathema to Soviet leaders.

There are many parallels between Soviet and nationalist discourse. Nationalists engage in what Levinger and Lytle have described as ‘primordialist fantasies... ,which juxtapose idealised images of the nation’s past and future with a degraded present’. It is a triadic structure of narrative that nationalism shares with religious stories, notably the Christian account of fall and redemption, but also earlier narratives of a lost golden age.²⁸ It is the task of nationalism therefore not to invent or construct national feeling but to reclaim it, not to create a new political category but instead to help a people rediscover its essence. It is a story reminiscent not just of Christianity but also of the Marxian journey from an earlier golden age of primitive communism through the dark night of class society to the workers utopia of the future.

In the rambling ‘Section Four’ of the *Ruhnama*, Niyazov has conjured a glorious past for the Turkmen, a nation that, according to Niyazov, is five thousand years old, descended from Noah and that has given birth to no fewer than seventy powerful states. The Turkmen established the Zoroastrian religion, the world’s first monotheism and their greatness reached its apogee in the empire of the Seljuk Turks.²⁹ Niyazov has described how the Turkmen lost their unity and identity amid the assault of a succession of foreign powers, including Russia, who labelled the Turkmen as pillagers and uneducated nomads. This precipitate decline reached its nadir when the Turkmen fell victim to Stalin’s purges and Soviet efforts to assimilate the Turkmen to the new Soviet man. This was the crisis that required a redeemer not to invent, but to restore the nation to health. Niyazov in the guise of Turkmenbashi accomplished that mission, ensuring that, as one of Niyazov’s slogans puts it, ‘the twenty-first century will be the century of the Turkmen’.

²⁷ Yuri Slezkine, ‘Who Gets the Past: Competition for Ancestors Among Non-Russian Intellectuals in Russia’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 1998 70 (3) p.754.

²⁸ Levinger and Lytle, ‘Myth and Mobilisation’, p. 177.

²⁹ Turkmenbashi, *Ruhnama* URL: , <http://www.ruhnama.info/> Consulted 30/07/06.

According to Rees, the leader cult in Communist regimes was ‘crucial in managing relations between the different levels of the power structure’.³⁰ For Rees, this occurred at three levels, firstly legitimating the power of the small ruling group, secondly managing conflict within the ruling stratum and thirdly acting as a bridge between the new ruling stratum and the wider society.³¹ The leader was presented to the general population as a saviour at a time of crisis or transformation. Thus Stalin’s cult first blossomed on the occasion of the celebrations for his fiftieth birthday in December 1929 at a time when the Soviet Union had just undergone the first steps along the path of rapid industrialisation and forced collectivisation. Authoritarian rule needs a pervasive sense of crisis as a backdrop because, as Rees has put it, ‘the leader has to symbolise something greater than himself’.³²

There is a protean element to leader cults that enables the cult to adapt to almost any ideology as required. In the case of Central Asia, the challenge confronting the former Communist leaders of the defunct Soviet republics was no less a task than the building of viable states whose existence would have to be explained and justified not just to its own people but to potentially predatory neighbours. At the level of rhetoric at least, the content of these new states would be provided by nationalism. In Gellner’s famous definition, nationalism is a political principle that requires that a nation is matched to a territory.³³ As Ozkirimli has put it, nationalism ‘resorts to a common rhetoric, that is, a rhetoric of ‘national interest’. In that sense, the discourse of nationalism is the ultimate explanatory, and legitimating framework in today’s world’.³⁴

Successful states have at least to some degree given the appearance that the interests of elites and ordinary citizens correspond.³⁵ A rhetorical emphasis on national identity and serving the ‘national interest’ is an important way of achieving this goal. At the heart of this project was the challenge of maintaining the unity of the Turkmen state while promoting a distinctive Turkmen identity. If all nations are ‘imagined communities’ that to some degree require constant reinvention and renegotiation³⁶, then Niyazov was determined to control this process of

³⁰ E A Rees, ‘Leader Cults: Varieties, Preconditions and Functions’, p. 21.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. p. 15.

³³ Ernst Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1983), p. 1.

³⁴ Umut Ozkirimli, *Theories of nationalism: a critical introduction* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2000) p. 229.

³⁵ Nicola Pratt, ‘Identity, Culture and Democratization: The Case of Egypt’, p. 76.

³⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, London, 1983)

imagination as much as possible from the top down. In terms of Anderson's typology of nationalist processes, Turkmenistan fits the category of 'official nationalism' where the state has driven the process of 'national revival'.³⁷

It would be a mistake to see this simply as de-Russification. Niyazov has rejected Soviet-era textbooks, and chosen Latin over the Cyrillic script. Russian television broadcasts were banned in 1999 and soon after government officials were required to be fluent in the Turkmen language.³⁸ But this was also a war against tribal dialects. These were to be marginalised by the homogenising impact of national media using the official Turkmen language.³⁹ Niyazov has shown no interest in serving as a junior partner in a larger pan-Turkic coalition. The written language of Turkmenistan is sufficiently different to that of Turkey to make it clear that it is Turkmenistan and not Turkey that is the true ancestor of the modern Turks. Turkmenistan and Turkey both claim the legacy of the Seljuk Turks whose empire dominated central Asia and the Middle East in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.⁴⁰ Niyazov has exhorted his countrymen to realise that Turkmenistan is unique and not simply a part of Turkish or Islamic history. Niyazov's very title of Turkmenbashi, 'leader of the Turkmen' is a direct challenge to the memory of Atatürk, 'leader of the Turks' and the founder of modern secular Turkey.

Niyazov's rhetoric is designed to make the point that Turkmenistan is no longer a Russian colony and nor will it become the colony of another power. This applies to religion as well. Like other Central Asian Republics, Niyazov upholds Islam as the religion of the Turkmen but rejects any political role for religious leaders, much like his Communist predecessors.⁴¹ According to Niyazov, Turkmenistan is a bridge between east and west. Niyazov's statue, embossed in gold, towers over the 'Arch of Neutrality', the dominant monument in Ashgabat. The term 'neutrality' is a constant refrain in Niyazov's rhetoric, an indication of the allegedly important role that Turkmenistan is destined to play in world affairs because, as the official propaganda would have it, Turkmenistan is the first country in the world whose 'permanent neutrality' has been accepted by the United Nations.

³⁷ Ibid, pp. 119-20.

³⁸ Kuru, 'Nation Building in Turkmenistan', p. 74.

³⁹ Ibid p. 75

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 76

⁴¹ Bingöl, 'Nationalism and Democracy in Post-Communist Central Asia', p. 44

There are many reasons why we should not be surprised at the longevity of the leader cults in Central Asia. The fate of President Akaev in Kyrgyzstan is instructive here. Kyrgyzstan boasted the highest per capita income in Central Asia, was the first of the Central Asian states to join the World Trade Organization and to privatise industry. President Akayev, alone among the leaders of Central Asia, eschewed the more visible signs of a leader cult. Yet it was Akayev, alone among the leaders of Central Asia, who was overthrown in a popular revolution. Like other ‘soft’ authoritarian regimes in Georgia and Ukraine, the rule of Akayev in Kyrgyzstan proved less durable than that of the harsher authoritarians in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

As the example of Niyazov in Turkmenistan shows, the defunct Soviet state provided its successors with many of the political and rhetorical tools needed for viability in a world dominated by the politics of nations and nationalism. The political formula that combines leader cults and nationalism represents a significant challenge to the progress of democratisation there and deserves to be taken more seriously as a likely long-term feature of the Central Asian political landscape.

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