

Turkmen Leader Opens Gold Palace

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ASHGABAT, Turkmenistan — To the accompaniment of deafening traditional music and trailed by a crowd of hundreds, Turkmenistan's president inaugurated his lavish new palace in the heart of the Central Asian nation's gleaming capital Wednesday.

The \$250 million complex built by French construction company Bouygues replaces the more squat golden-domed palace located a few blocks away.

The landmark appears to represent President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov's determination to expunge all signs of the personality cult dedicated to the country's previous leader, after whom the old presidential palace was named. It may also be a display of one-upmanship in Central Asia, where presidents have seemingly tried over the years to outdo one another in the grandness of their offices.

The new presidential palace is topped by three golden domes and, the president said, will be able to meet all the needs of government. But it is likely to draw criticism from government opponents — all of whom have been ruthlessly hounded out of the country — about waste and misspending while many Turkmens still endure poverty and hardship.

However, hundreds of people, including many bearded town elders and small children, waited under the searing sun for the president to arrive for the opening ceremony as they listened to folk music performances and watched traditional dances.

After performing the ribbon-cutting, Berdymukhammedov walked into the vast entrance hall followed by a large crowd that also included top government officials and diplomats.

The original presidential palace was named after the first post-independence leader, President Saparmurat Niyazov — a mercurial and often megalomaniacal character who officially went by the title of Turkmenbashi, or Father of the Turkmen.

Berdymukhammedov succeeded Niyazov, who died in December 2006.

As part of a concerted effort to dismantle Niyazov's personality cult, it is now no longer mandatory for high school students to take an exam on the rambling spiritual guide written by Niyazov; and the name of the first month of the year has been restored to January from Turkmenbashi.

While eschewing many of Niyazov's excesses, Berdymukhammedov remains deeply fond of the grandiose, overblown style that has come to distinguish the capital, Ashgabat.

Once a Communist-era backwater, rebuilt into a typically drab provincial Soviet city after a devastating earthquake in the 1940s, Ashgabat was radically transformed by Niyazov into a vast collection of curiously designed government buildings and starkly white apartment blocks. The result is remarkable, although visitors note that the city is frequently deserted and bears little by way of native personality.

No other city in Turkmenistan has received such treatment.

As well as building this palace and some of the country's most outlandish government offices, French company Bouygues also built the first presidential palace in 1997. The company once drew Niyazov's ire when the golden dome on a gigantic mosque it built in the leader's home village began to turn green.

Niyazov's original presidential palace was once notable for its flamboyant appearance, but it was subsequently outstripped in architectural stature by large buildings in oil-rich Kazakhstan and even impoverished Tajikistan.

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