

# Turkmenistan Exiles to Return Home for Presidential Election

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ALMATY, Kazakhstan — Prominent figures in Turkmenistan's exiled opposition say they intend to accept the president's invitation to return home and take part in a presidential election next year.

But Nurmukhammet Khanamov, the Vienna-based chairman of the Republican Party of Turkmenistan, said Wednesday that he and his allies would need guarantees of safe passage before traveling back to Turkmenistan. Khanamov and colleague Khudaiberdy Orazov were sentenced in absentia for their purported involvement in a 2002 assassination plot against the country's then-president.

Turkmenistan has been ruled by President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov since the 2006 death of eccentric authoritarian leader Saparmurat Niyazov. Berdymukhammedov has vowed to gradually reform the country's political system, but Turkmenistan remains a one-party state where authorities keep a tight grip over information.

Still, the country has acted recently to improve its democratic credentials. The president last

week urged political opponents to return to Turkmenistan and participate in its February presidential election.

Khanamov says he is hopeful and announced in a statement with Orazov that their return to Turkmen political life could lead to a democratic transition.

"We believe that this is an attempt to revise the current form of government, which was inherited from Niyazov, and to make the transition to a civilized and democratic form of government," the statement said.

Khanamov said he has contacted the Turkmen Embassy in Austria to initiate dialogue with the government that he hoped would be overseen by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Another Vienna-based Turkmen rights activist, Farid Tukhbatullin, said the invitation to the opposition was a ploy designed to distract public attention from a blast at a munitions storage site outside the capital last week that authorities have admitted killed at least 15 people. Tukhbatullin has cited local witnesses as saying many more were killed.

Turkmenistan adopted a new law regulating the conduct of presidential elections in June, laying out more democratic terms for future votes. Presidential candidates must be either backed by a political party or collect at least 50,000 signatures to qualify and no longer need approval from a now-defunct advisory body.

The law says candidates must have lived in Turkmenistan for at least 15 years before elections remains in place, however, which would exclude politicians now in exile.

"If they refuse to acknowledge us and accuse us of being terrorists, and refuse to negotiate with us, then it means that all these words have just been public relations," Khanamov said from Vienna.

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