

Election Rivals Hail Turkmen Leader

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ASHGABAT, Turkmenistan — Eight candidates are registered to compete in the presidential election in this isolated, energy-rich Central Asian nation, but the all-powerful incumbent's victory is so predictable his opponents are praising him.

State control is absolute in Turkmenistan, a former Soviet state, and the involvement of multiple candidates appears designed to lend a faint democratic veneer to the Feb. 12 vote.

The registration period, which officially ended Wednesday, saw an original 15 candidates whittled down after two applicants withdrew and a further five couldn't produce required documentation. Those left openly state full support for the policies of Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov.

Candidate rallies across the country are taking place against the background of large portraits of the president. In his election program, candidate Recep Bazarov, a regional agriculture official, hailed the "wise leadership of the respected President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov."

The perfunctory nature of the vote has left many uninterested, although state-mandated

displays of enthusiasm are frequently visible at public events.

"I don't expect any changes, since the incumbent has no serious competitors among the current registered candidates," said Ashgabat resident Ayzhamal, 52, who declined to give his surname for fear of government reprisal.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has declined to send an observer mission to the election, saying its presence would not "add value" given the limited freedoms and lack of political competition.

"There is no private or independent electronic media and publication of the first private newspaper was permitted only recently," the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights said after an assessment mission in December.

Turkmenistan has no opposition parties, and compliant state media extol the president daily. Rights groups rank the desert country, which borders Afghanistan and Iran, among the most repressive in the world.

Berdymukhammedov, a 55-year-old dentist, became president in 2007 after the death of the country's first post-Soviet leader, Saparmurat Niyazov.

His power has virtually no limits in the country of 5.5 million people. Not only president, Berdymukhammedov is also prime minister, commander of the armed forces and chairman of the only political party — the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan. His state-authorized nickname is "Arkadag," a word often interpreted as the Turkmen word for "protector." The title Hero of Turkmenistan — conferred six times upon his predecessor — was also awarded to Berdymukhammedov in October.

He won 89 percent of the vote in the February 2007 election that followed the death of Niyazov. He has built closer ties in particular with China.

(AP, Reuters)

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