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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Impact of Geopolitics on the Behavior of Government in Turkmenistan

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## Abstract

Geopolitical factors have always significantly influenced the politics and behavior of governments due to the continuity and stability of their effects. In Turkmenistan, due to the geopolitical characteristics of this country, examining and paying attention to these factors and their effects play an important role in terms of understanding and predicting the policies and behavior of Turkmenistan's government. Also, these characteristics seem to become more important because of this country's neighborhood and many commonalities with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The main question of this article is about the effects of Turkmenistan's geopolitics on the politics and the behavior of its government. Based on this study, it will be argued that Turkmenistan's geopolitics has, directly and indirectly, affected the politics and behavior of Turkmenistan's government by creating threats and issues such as instability and insecurity. It has also caused authoritarianism and centralism in the government.

**Keywords:** Geopolitics, Turkmenistan, Government, Politics, Authoritarianism.

## Introduction

Geopolitical factors are one of the most significant factors affecting the politics and behavior of governments. These factors can bring positive or negative results based on the conditions and methods of countries in applying and using them in domestic and foreign policy. Indeed, governments attempt to use geographical factors according to the type and extent of their influence on power to implement their political will at the national or international level (Valdani, 2008: 3).

The study of geopolitics is useful and even necessary for individuals who are responsible in politics including leaders, managers and executives. The study of geopolitics teaches on what basis a decision should be made, what factors and elements can be directed towards a specific

goal, and what tools should be used to achieve the goal (Ezzati, 2011: 4). In this regard, Morgenthau declared geopolitics as the most stable factor to determine the power, and hence the fate, of nations that all countries should pay attention to it, regardless of its impact on political decision-making (Hakim, 2017: 28).

Additionally, geopolitics can be considered as the study of the influence of geographical factors such as location, climate, natural resources, population and territory on the behavior of governments, which can bring many security and political challenges for governments (O'Callaghan, 2015: 574). In other words, geopolitical factors should be considered as an effective factor in the politics and behavior of governments whose issues are always at the center of their attention.

One of the important regions that can be investigated based on geopolitics in Central Asia and the countries of this region. This region has always had specific importance in terms of geopolitics. Moreover, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the geopolitical changes in the Central Asia increased the influence of geopolitical factors in this region. Additionally, the role of this region is considered as a bridge between Europe and Asia is significant. This region is bounded on the east by South Asia, China, and Far Eastern countries, on the west by the Caspian Sea, on the north by Russia, and on the south by Iran, which increased the importance of Central Asia. Also, this region has strategic importance for the powers because of its rich oil and gas resources, caviar, the neighborhood with countries such as Russia, China and Iran, and its position in the upper part of the Middle East, which has rich energy and mineral resources.

According to Sir Halford Mackinder's theory, Central Asia is located in a region which is called the heartland. From his point of view, the state that controlled it, then it would be well placed to dominate the world. For this reason, we are witnessing the attention and presence of regional and extra-regional powers in Central Asia and the confrontation and sometimes the conflict of interests of different countries in this region (Qaderi Najafabadi, 2002: 10).

Central Asia is a special region that is located in the heart of Eurasia. This region, as a crossroad of North and South and East and West, not only connects Eurasia from East to West but also connects the Asia continent from North to South as a channel. In other words, Western and Eastern civilizations and different religions and cultures have reached and intersected with each other due to this special geographical location which provides the basis for influencing other external and surrounding areas (Alizadeh, 2001: 177; Lopour, 2015: 3).

At the beginning of the 1990s and in 1991, attention was once again drawn to the developments and events of the Central Asia region. The region's structure underwent extensive changes and transformations due to geopolitical changes, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the independence of the former republics of the Union (Lopour, 2015: 2). New countries emerged with new geopolitical characteristics, and each of them inevitably continued to exist according to these characteristics.

Among the former republics of the Union, Turkmenistan has particular importance due to geopolitical factors such as being located in Central Asia and neighboring countries such as

Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan (which claim to be the leaders of the region), proximity to China and Pakistan, and even India, having rich energy resources, water resources, Muslim majority, and various minorities. Therefore, according to all the mentioned factors especially the neighborhood, commonalities and affinities of this country with Iran, it seems important to become familiar with the policies and strategies of the Turkmenistan's government and the factors affecting it. Generally, it can be said that the special geopolitical characteristics of Turkmenistan indicate the fact that geopolitical factors can influence the policy and behavior of the government, and plays the most important role in the current and future behavior of the government. In fact, due to the continuity and stability of the geopolitical factors, the importance of them multiplies that we can get proper knowledge and understanding in this field by analyzing geopolitical factors.

There may have been previous studies on the policies and behavior of the Turkmen government, but none have examined the impact of geopolitical factors on government behavior in Turkmenistan. Therefore, this study examines the impact of geopolitical factors on government behavior in Turkmenistan, which has not been studied in this regard so far.

As mentioned before, the main question of the present article is about the effects of Turkmenistan's geopolitics on the politics and the behavior of its government. This research adopts a descriptive-analytical approach to answer the question of how has Turkmenistan's geopolitics affected its government's policies and behavior? In the following, it will be discussed that Turkmenistan's geopolitics has, directly and indirectly, affected the politics and behavior of the Turkmenistan government by creating threats and issues such as instability and insecurity. It has also caused authoritarianism and centralism in the government.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

Geopolitics is a concept that has several definitions. Pirouz Mojtahedzadeh considers geopolitics as the effect of the environment or environmental phenomena such as geographical location, shape, and resources, in political decision-making (Mojtahedzadeh, 2002: 128). Salaheddin Shami defines geopolitics as the relationship between man and the environment and its influence on political behavior (both on individuals and political units) (Al-Shami, 2001: 222). Cordellier, in "the Historical and Geopolitical Dictionary of the 20th Century", opines that the geopolitical approach is basically to clarify the interaction between geography and politics caused by it (Cordellier, 2005).

By examining the above definitions, it can be said that geopolitics is the relationship between geography and politics and the influence of geography (factors) on politics. In geopolitics or political geography, the role of geographical factors in politics is investigated (Ezzati, 2011: 7; Hafeznia, 2011: 28; Cohen, 2003). This means that the subject of geopolitics is the influence and relationship between fixed geographical factors (position, size, unevenness, borders, water network and shape) and variable factors (population and natural resources) on the politics and behavior of governments. Fixed factors are natural and geographical

phenomena, and variable factors that some of which may have natural origins, are considered variable factors due to the role of quantity in them. Obviously, the degree of influence of geopolitical factors is different and unequal (Jafari Valdani, 2003: 22). It seems that Geographical position among fixed factors and human beings among variable factors play the role of two main poles in geopolitical analysis. Therefore, they will be discussed more than others in the investigation of effective factors.

**Figure 1: Geopolitical factors (characteristics)**

Fixed factors	Variable factors
Size(territory)	Population
Topography (unevenness)	Natural resources
Shape	
Borders	
Geopolitical position	
Waters and Rivers Network	

Source: Authors

### Description and Discussion

The collapse of the Soviet Union was an event that led to the emergence of new countries and, consequently, the creation of new geopolitical characteristics for each of them. Moreover, this event brought new geopolitical changes that made the Central Asian region and its countries more important, and had tremendous effects on each country in this region. Turkmenistan is one of these countries whose geopolitical changes after the dissolution of the Soviet Union made its geopolitical characteristics more significant. It should be said that the set of geopolitical characteristics of Turkmenistan is the main reason for the importance of this country. Furthermore, geopolitical factors are considered influential elements in policy and the behavior of the government of this country. Therefore, in the following, the geopolitical features of Turkmenistan and their effects will be discussed.

### Fixed Geopolitical Factors

#### Position

Indubitably, the position is considered one of Turkmenistan's most important geopolitical factors. Some factors have brought a specific situation for this country including, being located in the heart of Eurasia, a crossroads between East, West, North, and South, proximity to powers such as China, the historical and cultural influence of Iran and Russia, the neighborhood with the Caspian Sea, Afghanistan and the two countries of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The unique position allows this country to penetrate and attack its neighbors and surrounding areas or defend them.

On the other hand, Turkmenistan is the gateway to Central Asia and a privileged location for transportation and trade routes such as energy transmission. It is worth mentioning that besides

the strategic position of Turkmenistan which has attracted the attention of regional and extra-regional powers, some problems, such as being landlocked, have caused this republic to depend on other countries.



Figure 2: Map of Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan's neighborhood with Iran and Afghanistan, which has been the most important factor in Moscow's attention to Turkmenistan since the former Soviet Union until now, has caused this country to be affected by the consequences of Afghanistan's insecurity, and this issue has always had a negative impact on Turkmenistan's security. Furthermore, the neighborhood with the two republics of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (Regarding their leadership's claim in Central Asia), the existence of the Uzbek and even Kazakh minority in Turkmenistan, and their territorial disputes with this country, have always been one of the main concerns of Turkmenistan to establish sovereignty and threatened the government of this country at the domestic and foreign levels. It is worth mentioning that the same problems can be seen in Turkmenistan's neighborhood with Afghanistan. The existence of common ethnic groups on both sides of the border and the transfer of terrorism and insecurity from Afghanistan to the interior of Turkmenistan have always caused insecurity in Turkmenistan and forced the government of this country to deal with these issues. About Iran, it can be said that despite the historical and cultural influence of Iran in Turkmenistan and the common language, commonalities, and affinities of these two countries, the government of Turkmenistan considers Iran as a threat to its internal security which is caused by a kind of partial view of the whole by Turkmenistan towards Iran. Overall, the neighborhood of Turkmenistan with other countries that have disputes with each other - besides ethnic mixing - and with powerful states, have caused this country to tend towards the great powers.

In addition to the cases mentioned earlier, another importance thing about Turkmenistan can be seen in its transport corridors and transit energy. However, Turkmenistan is located in one

of the drug transit corridors from Afghanistan to Russia and Eastern Europe, which has brought insecurity and many negative consequences for this country.

According to what has been said before, it is clear that the position of Turkmenistan is unique. Despite being landlocked, many factors have created a suitable situation for this country, such as its location at the crossroads of East, West, North, and South, and neighboring powerful regional states such as Russia, Iran and China. However, the constant fear and dread caused by continual internal and external threats due to the position of Turkmenistan are always associated with this country.

### **Size of the country**

Turkmenistan has a relatively small area and lacks strategic depth. This feature has caused apart from the threats that may exist from outside the country, any insecurity and menace in the domestic area can also quickly spread to the whole country. These threats are exacerbated by some factors such as the desert nature of most of this country's area, the heterogeneous distribution of the population, and the specific position (as mentioned earlier). In other words the impact of the small size can be seen in both external and internal threats. It is considered a factor in strengthening the military, adopting an aggressive policy by Turkmenistan's government, and bringing constant fear to this country. As a result, this has caused Turkmenistan's government always attempts to monopolize power, deal with opposing voices and adopt a policy of relying on great power

### **Unevenness**

Turkmenistan is a mountainous country where about 10% of this country is desert ( Karakum Desert). Therefore, the population is concentrated only in the areas where there is water especially in the southern mountain range, which is bordered by Iran (the capital of Turkmenistan is also located in this area). This unfavorable position has created complicated conditions for this country to establish security and exercise sovereignty. Moreover, the mountainous regions have always been a place for gathering the opponents of Turkmenistan's government. In addition, the proximity of these mountainous regions to some countries, such as Afghanistan, has caused insecurity to enter Turkmenistan through these regions

### **Borders**

Borders are one of the most problematic and controversial issues in Central Asia. There are various types of border disputes in Central Asia. Some of these disputes are inherited from the former Soviet Union and others from the ethnicities that are forcibly separated from each other and now become independent. The most obvious example of the border dispute in Central Asia is the problems of the Ferghana Valley. The root of this issue can be seen in the framework of imposed borders by the former Soviet Union. But, the important thing is that due to the historical roots of these problems, it is not easy to solve them. The existence of border and

territorial disputes has been one of the most important tension and insecurity issues. For example, some cases of Turkmenistan's border disputes can be seen with Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and specially with the Republic of Azerbaijan in relation to water border. Although some steps have been taken to resolve these disputes, specifically with Kazakhstan, there are still challenges on the borders of Turkmenistan and its neighbors. In addition, three out of five provinces of Turkmenistan have a common frontier with Afghanistan which has always been a problem for Turkmenistan and brought negative security consequences. The mountainous nature of Turkmenistan's borders (specially borders with Afghanistan) is also one of the factors that has created a difficult situation for this country in terms of controlling the borders, exercising the power in these areas, paying attention to the strengthening the defense force, and violent confrontations. Also, it can be mentioned that Turkmenistan's borders are dangerous for this republic due to their convexity and type of them (especially in the north and east of this country). Because, convex border lines are always tempting and coveted by other states. Therefore, in the case of Turkmenistan, in addition to the mountainous part of the borders, specially with Afghanistan, the shape of the borders should also be added.

These cases bring insecurity and instability and cause a movement towards authoritarianism and increasing power, emphasizing military power, and relying on other powers to overcome these issues, especially for such governments that are at the beginning of the journey and are facing an identity crisis. Overall, the problem and lack of stability in the borders is an issue that has caused more presence of Russia and other countries in this region.

### **Waters and Rivers Network**

Water is one of the main causes of the crisis in the water-scarce region of Central Asia. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are considered downstream countries, and Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are supposed upstream ones in terms of existing water resources and networks; so, in this situation, the use and exploitation of water resources are always one of the challenges (Duarte 2014, 32). As mentioned before, the issue of border rivers and the problems caused by them is one of the potential crises in the region, which exists both in the Central Asian republics and between them and their neighbors. The water and river networks have caused dispute, tension and crisis in various forms and situations in Central Asia. Water in Central Asia and Turkmenistan is practically an important tool and issue for the government. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that the existence of water sources and networks, along with the unevenness, have caused to see the concentration of the population of Turkmenistan (more than 90 percent of the population) in the southern, eastern and northeastern regions of this country, which have better conditions in terms of access to the water network. Additionally, more than 50% of the population of Turkmenistan lives in Ashgabat and its surroundings. This situation has caused, besides the mixing of races and different ethnicities that existed in these areas, and a challenging for Tajikistan's government, other factors such as the proximity of these areas

with Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, and also the exploitation of water in these areas, have increased this challenge and intensify tensions.

## Variable Geopolitical Factors

### Population

In examining variable geopolitical factors, the existence of different minorities alongside a majority of minorities is the most important point that can be made about the population of Central Asia and Turkmenistan, which can always be a factor in creating tension and conflict. The geopolitical changes that took place in Central Asia were a factor that promoted the role-playing position of the population among the geopolitical factors of this region, and by affecting factors such as ethnicity, culture, and religion, highlighted their role and increased their tension generation. It is worth mentioning that the formation of the five political units, which are the symbol of political ethnicities, is based on the ethnic and sectarian index. The texture and demographic structure of Central Asia are such that the politicization of ethnicities and sects can become the basis for the ongoing crisis in the region. The different kinds of minorities and many other ethnic and cultural problems in this region can involve the Central Asian region and its countries in a permanent crisis. Turkmenistan is a clear example of them. The presence of the Turkmen majority minority alongside significant and influential minorities such as Russians, Uzbeks, and Kyrgyz in Turkmenistan has always been a problem for this country and brought many potential and actual challenges for the government of Turkmenistan.

**Table 1: Population composition of Turkmenistan (World Factbook, 2020)**

Nationality	Percentage of the total population
Turkmen	83
Uzbek	6
Russian	5
Other (including: Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Kurdish, Armenian, Tajik, Tatar, etc.)	6

The population of Turkmenistan is about 6 million people. But considering the migration trend, this number is probably too high. Population growth has been offset by emigration in search of permanent employment. (meteojournal, 2021). In July 2021 opposition media reported, based on three independent anonymous sources, that the population of Turkmenistan was between 2.7 and 2.8 million. (rus.azathabar, 2021). According to the leaked results of a survey in 2018, 1,879,413 Turkmen citizens migrated permanently between 2008 and 2018 (Najibullah, 2019; Economist, 2018).

Available figures show that the majority of Turkmen citizens are ethnic Turkmen with significant minorities of Uzbeks and Russians. Smaller minorities include Kazakhs, Tatars,

Ukrainians, Kurds (indigenous people of Kopet Dag mountains), Armenians, Azeris, Baluchs, and Pashtuns. According to reports, the 2012 census counted 58 different nationalities (Всесоюзная переписи население, 1989; Turkmen. News, 2021; Результаты переписи население в Турмеконе”, 2021).

The tribal nature of Turkmen society is well documented. Now, the main Turkmen tribes are Teke, Ýomut, Ärsary, Çowdur, Göklen, and Saryk (Eurasianet, 2021; Najibullah, 2019). The design of the flag includes a symbolic representation of the five major tribes, which gives Turkmen a sense of belonging and equality. These tribes include, Teke, Ýomut, Ärsary, Çowdur, Göklen, and Saryk (letsexport) Tekes are the largest tribe among them (The Economist, 2018).

As can be seen in the table above, about one-fifth of Turkmenistan's population is made up of other ethnic minorities. In this regard, there are some ethnic groups such as Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Tajik, which Turkmenistan's government has had problems with them and has always considered them as challenging ethnicities compared to others. It is also important to mention that the Russian minority has high influence and power in the government and executive bodies of Turkmenistan like before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In addition, minorities such as Tatars and Arabs have always been a problem for them. Overall, it seems that the activity of extremist and terrorist groups such as ISIS in Turkmenistan is caused by this heterogeneous population structure (Lopour, 2015: 5; Snow 2015). Apart from the presence of different minorities in Turkmenistan, another point is that the Turkmen ethnicity is made up of other sub-ethnicities and tribes, each of which has groups and branches; this issue has always created problems for the government of Turkmenistan and the competition between these ethnic groups to gain power, and supremacy has been challenging (Peyrous, 2015: 52).

Also, the method of distributing power between demographic and ethnic groups in different regions of Turkmenistan and benefiting from resources has been one of the issues for the government of Tajikistan. In the last two centuries, the power has mostly been in the hands of the Yamuts and Teke, and other ethnic groups have not played a significant role in the power, politics, and government of Turkmenistan. Additionally, we witness internal localism<sup>1</sup> in Turkmenistan. It means that local interests and affairs are prioritized over national and central government affairs, which is due to the unbalanced development process and unequal distribution of power among ethnic and regional groups. This issue has always created challenges and undoubtedly affects the internal security of Turkmenistan (Peyrous, 2015: 53).

In examining the factor of the population in Tajikistan, poverty and the age composition of the population should also be added. About 90 percent of Tajikistan's population is under 54 years old and nearly half of them are in working age (25-54). However, this country suffers from widespread poverty and does not have good economic conditions (Worldfactbook, 2020). Due to the economic conditions and the lack of job opportunities in Turkmenistan, more than one million of its population work abroad - almost 90% of them is in Russia - (BTI, 2022: 17-24).

In addition to the above, the influence of Taliban Islam in the neighboring countries of Turkmenistan and especially in Afghanistan should also be added which has caused the spread of movements such as Wahhabism and Deviant sects and the threat of Islamic extremism in this country.

It is clear that these issues and problems, which often have historical and old roots, are challenges to the security of Turkmenistan. Also, it pushes the government toward specific policies at the domestic and foreign levels to exercise sovereignty and protect the state.

#### Natural resources

Natural resources are divided into two categories: food resources and mineral resources. By examining this variable geopolitical factor in Turkmenistan, it can be said that Turkmenistan's dependence on other countries in the field of the food supply has led to the presence and expansion of the influence of regional and extra-regional powers in the Central Asian republics.

Turkmenistan is a country where 80% of it is covered by the Karakum Desert. So, the area of arable land is small, and cotton is the dominant product of these lands according to what is left from the former Soviet (Worldfactbook, 2020). Due to this reason, Turkmenistan faces food Shortages, so it has to import part of its food needs from other countries. As a result, the import of food resources alongside the difficult economic conditions in the society causes many challenges for this country.

Energy resources, especially gas, are of particular importance in Turkmenistan. These resources constitute the major part of the natural resources of this country, so Turkmenistan's economy relies on income from them. This is the main reason why energy resources are important for the government and this country is looking for the maximum benefit and exploitation of them (Lopour, 2015: 4). Considering the emphasis on these sources, the government considers them as a source of income and always attempts to control them.

On the other hand, Turkmenistan's technological weakness in exploiting resources, geopolitical position, and being landlocked have made this country dependent on other countries such as Russia. In this way, Turkmenistan has become subject to macro policies which are determined by major powers.

### **The Impact of Geopolitics on Government's Strategy and Policy**

According to what was stated in the analysis of Turkmenistan's geopolitical factors, it seems that they are causes of tension in Turkmenistan, and each of them alone or together with other factors can be problematic and create a crisis. This issue has turned Turkmenistan into a "crisis" region in the literal sense of the word. Of course, geopolitical factors alone may not be the cause of much insecurity and tension, but when they are combined with other factors or conditions, they can create tension. Since geographical and geopolitical factors have been formed gradually and over a long period of time, they leave a relatively stable impact. If we divide the factors causing insecurity and tension in Turkmenistan into stable and unstable factors, geographical factors are part of the stable sources of insecurity and tension, which may not be easily solved.

The sum of these factors shows that in Turkmenistan, geopolitical factors have played a significant role in creating tension and it is very important to pay attention to them. But, the more important point than the tension caused by geopolitical factors is that Turkmenistan is the resulting geopolitical weaknesses, which are considered as constant challenges for the government of Turkmenistan and have pushed this country towards certain policies.

The government of Turkmenistan is a presidential and one-party republic, and the president is the Head of the State and executive power. Saparmurad Niyazov was a Turkmen politician who ruled Turkmenistan as a president from the time of independence until he died in 2006. After his death, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow was the president until 2020, and by preparing the conditions, his son Serdar Berdimuhamedow, has been the president of Turkmenistan since 2022. According to the Constitution of Turkmenistan, the legislative, executive and judiciary of branches government are recognized, but the final decision is taken by the President of the Republic. With the changes in the constitution, the executive power was increased over time, and the president is at the top of the pyramid of power and authority by a significant distance. Moreover, Niyazov gave himself the title of Turkmenbashi, changed the constitution to exempt him from any accountability, extended the presidential term, and made the presidency lifelong and hereditary. These changes were caused official and unofficial institutions to refrain from any investigation into the functioning of the presidency. Therefore, decision-making is at the disposal of the president at all levels. In this country, although there are various institutions such as the parliament, the president is essentially the final decision-maker in Turkmenistan, and other institutes only serves as advisors for him.

According to the constitution of Turkmenistan, the president appoints the officials of the executive and judicial branches and also approves the candidates for the parliamentary elections. Local management is carried out by governors. Based on the constitution, governors are considered as the representatives of the president, work under his supervision, and are appointed or dismissed by the president himself.

Turkmenistan is one of the countries where the head of state is the president who he has extensive powers. The legislature is unified under the control of the president and his party, the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan. However, although the president's party has the majority in the parliament, he does not even tolerate on the few opposite voices from the opposition parties (BTI, 2022: 29).

In the government of Turkmenistan, even if there are influential groups, they have practically zero roles in the political level, decision-making, and administration of the country. Over time, Saparmurad Niyazov adapted a policy of suppressing his opposition parties. Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow and his son are also seeking to change the cultural and identity issues of the people of Turkmenistan, and he does not fail to make any effort to control the power.

It is forbidden to teach the customs and language of the minorities in Turkmenistan (FIDH, 2009). Former Turkmenbashi Saparmurat Niyazov banned the playing of video games, listening to car radios, performing opera and ballet, smoking in public, long hair on men, and even

growing facial hair. It has been speculated that the latter ban was enacted to enforce conformity of appearance (BBC NEWS, 2016). Niyazov ordered the closure of all libraries outside the capital of Ashgabat (Turkmenistan daily digest, 2008). News anchors, both men and women, were prevented from wearing any sort of make-up after Niyazov discovered he was unable to tell the difference between them when the presenters wore it (Osborn, 2006: 12-22).

Turkmenistan's human rights record has been heavily criticized by various countries and scholars worldwide (Freedom House, 2012; Human Rights Report: Turkmenistan, 2008). Since December 2006, under the Government of President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, no significant improvements regarding human rights and civil liberty have been observed by international human rights organizations (Amnesty International, 2007; FIDH, 2007).

Freedom of religion is guaranteed by article 11 of the Constitution of Turkmenistan. However, like other human rights, in practice it does not exist. Former President Saparmurat Niyazov's book of spiritual writings, the *Ruhnama*, is imposed on all religious communities. According to Forum 18, despite international pressure, the authorities severely repress all religious groups, and the legal framework is so constrictive that many prefer to exist underground rather than have to pass through all of the official hurdles (Forum 18 Analyses: Turkmenistan).

According to Human Rights Watch, "Turkmenistan remains one of the world's most repressive countries. The country is virtually closed to independent scrutiny, media and religious freedoms are subject to draconian restrictions, and human rights defenders and other activists face the constant threat of government reprisal." (Human Rights Watch, 2014)

All mass media in Turkmenistan is controlled by the State. In July 2010, President Berdimuhamedow announced plans to allow private newspapers in the country. Once launched, they were expected to focus on successful business stories (Radio Free Europe, 2010).

Newspapers and monthly magazines are published by state-controlled media outlets primarily in Turkmen. Articles published by the state-controlled newspapers are heavily censored and written to glorify the state and its leader. Uncensored press coverage specific to Turkmenistan is provided only by news organizations located outside Turkmenistan: Azatlyk Radiosy, the Turkmen service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty based in Prague; Chronicles of Turkmenistan, the Vienna-based outlet of the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights; Turkmen.news, previously known as Alternative News of Turkmenistan, based in the Netherlands; and Gündogar (Gundogar, 2021).

According to Reporters Without Borders's 2014 World Press Freedom Index, Turkmenistan had the 3rd worst press freedom conditions in the world (178/180 countries), just before North Korea and Eritrea (Reports Without Borders, 2014). It is considered to be one of the "10 Most Censored Countries". Each broadcast under Niyazov began with a pledge that the broadcaster's tongue will shrivel if he slanders the country, flag, or president (CPJ, 2012). While he was president, Niyazov controlled all Turkmen media outlets, and personally appointed journalists. Controversy surrounds the death of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty journalist Ogulsapar

Myradowa, who was apparently tortured to death in September 2006 while in state detention (BBC, 2006).

The freelance journalists collaborating with international media are being closely watched by the state's security departments. Correspondents for Radio Free Europe are under constant harassment and risk their life and liberty (Human rights Watch, 2007). On April 18, 2008, freelance journalist Sona Chuli Kuli was interrogated for several days under physiological pressure and forced to sign a statement agreeing not to collaborate with the international media (FIDH, 2009).

Turkmenistan ranks among the most repressive and closed societies in the world. The Internet is heavily regulated and available only to a small fraction of the population. Censorship is ubiquitous and extensive. Surveillance is significant, and the few citizens who benefit from access to the Internet are closely monitored by state agencies. Self-censorship is common (Opennet).

It has been reported that journalists have been harassed by the government; some have been kept in prison and prosecuted with false accusations and unfair trials. Journalists frequently receive death threats (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Activist Sazak Durdymuradov was detained in 2005 for collaborating with a French TV channel for a report on Turkmenistan. He was sentenced to eight years in jail under the accusation of "illegal acquisition, possession or sale of ammunition or firearms". Amnesty International considers the accusations to be forged (Amnesty International, 2011).

In 2006, Turkmen Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights activists Annakurban Amanklychev and Sapardurdy Khadzhiyev were arrested by Turkmen security forces on espionage charges, later changed to illegal firearm charges (Amnesty International, 2011). Amnesty International considers them prisoners of conscience and named them a 2011 "priority case. (Amnesty International, 2011). Front Line (Front Line, 2008), Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Without Borders, 2009), and Human Rights Watch (Human Rights Watch, 2009) have all described the charges as fabricated. On 11 December 2010, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention also called for their immediate release, stating that their detention was a violation of international law (Freedom Now, 2010).

Websites run by human rights organizations and news agencies are blocked. Moreover, ordinary citizens have no access to the World Wide Web, and instead are limited to the use of the Turkmenet, an online community in Turkmen language, but effectively a censored version of the Internet (Reporters without Borders, 2016). Social networks such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are not accessible through the Turkmenet (New Eurasia, 2010). Attempts to get around this censorship can lead to grave consequences. (Reporters without Border, 2016) However, only Russian social networks Odnoklassniki and Mail Agent Chatting system are available. In addition to this, there is a newly founded (27 March 2012) local Turkmen social network, E-Dostluk, which is currently accessible.

Internet censorship in Turkmenistan was classified as pervasive in the political area and as selective in the social, conflict/security and internet tools areas by the OpenNet Initiative in December 2010 (Opennet). Turkmenistan was listed as an internet enemy by Reporters Without Borders in 2011 (Reporters without Borders, 2016).

Any opposition to the government is considered treason and punishable by life imprisonment. Turkmenistan has many political prisoners, the most well-known of whom are Batyr Berdiýew, Ýazgeldi Gündogdyýew, and Boris Şyhmyradow. They are not granted any access by the International Red Cross, OSCE, or any medical institutions. There have been rumours of their deaths, but these cannot be confirmed, and the whereabouts of most are unknown.

Gulgeldy Annaniyazov, an opposition leader to Niyazov's government, was arrested in 1995 and released in 1999 after a presidential amnesty decree. He moved to Norway to live with refugee status. Back in Turkmenistan, he was arrested in June 2008 and sentenced to 11 years in jail following a closed-door trial; the charges against him are unknown (NHC, 2008). Similarly, Ovezgeldy Ataev, former Speaker of Parliament, and Akmurad Redzhepov, former head of the State Security Council, had closed-door trials and remain in prison. Amnesty International suspects that the reason for the imprisonments lies in the fact that both were potential political rivals of the current President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow (Amnesty International, 2009).

Andrey Zatoka, environmentalist and activist, citizen of Turkmenistan and Russia, was arrested on false charges for 46 days from December 2006 to January 2007 (Crude accountability, 2011). Due to international pressure, Andrey was released and the sentence was canceled (Crude Accountability, 2008). In June 2008, Andrey wrote a statement reporting that his and his friends' liberty could be in danger. He was being monitored and followed by the Turkmen authorities. (Zatoka, 2009). On October 20, 2009, Andrey was arrested for the second time and sentenced to 5 years in prison for assault. In November 2009, after international pressure from environmental and human rights organizations and Russian authorities,) Eurasianet, 2009). Zatoka was released upon payment of a fine, relinquishing his Turkmen citizenship and immediate emigration from Turkmenistan (Yanovskaya, 2009; Crude accountability, 2009).

Arbitrary arrests and mistreatment of detained persons are common in Turkmenistan, as is torture to obtain confessions. In 2004, border guards shot and killed six people who were allegedly illegally crossing the border from Iran. There are reports of prisoners dying after having food and medical care withheld (U.S. Department of State, 2005). Ogulsapar Myradowa, a journalist and human rights activist, died violently in prison in September 2006.

In 2018's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices by the US State Department, Turkmenistan was condemned for "alleged torture", arbitrary arrests and detentions, involuntary confinement, imprisonment of political prisoners, severe corruption, lack of free

and fair elections, and restrictions on freedom of religion, assembly, and movement (Radio Free Europe, 2019).

Arbitrary actions against religious leaders and opponents are not only unacceptable but also dangerous, as it radicalizes those who are marginalized from society. In other words, stability cannot be achieved through the suppression of opponents and intellectuals, and this goes against international human rights standards. The governing style of the presidents of Turkmenistan has effectively reduced the involvement of opposition stakeholders and political parties in government affairs. The main role of the military is mostly summarized in how to execute government orders and the president, not in decision-making (BTI, 2022: 10-17).

Authoritarianism and power-oriented government have been normal in Turkmenistan and correspond to the atmosphere of this country. According to Oliker and Szayna in the book "Faultlines of Conflict in Central Asia", the countries of this region are identified by two characteristics: a- monarchist regimes and b- state faces challenges. Personal rule, military rule based on fears, rewards, corruption, autocracy, suppression, and confrontation of weak institutions and powerful leaders can be seen to varying degrees in most of these regimes.

One of the characteristics of these governments is their authoritarianism through internal suppression. This hegemony is applied through violence against subordinates or appears in the form of a declaration of war (Houghton, 2014: 88). The government, and in other words, the president in Turkmenistan, does not allow any opposition to its decisions. Niyazov and Berdyev have always emphasized the need to strengthen their military power (Fars News, 2022). Because, according to the equipment of the army, they can be prepared to suppress any action against them.

These governments and leaders practice hegemony internally and submit to foreign powers. Submissive is a person who is under the influence of a foreign power (Houghton, 2014: 88). The government and the authoritarian president of Turkmenistan accept the dominance of a foreign power in order to prove their authority and to remain in power, just as some of this country's neighbors have such an approach towards Russia.

Based on the mentioned above, it can be stated that the geopolitical weaknesses of Turkmenistan have made it face constantly fearful of various threats. As a result, the government of this country is concerned about its own security, and this is evident in the behavior of the government of Ashgabat that has moved towards authoritarianism. This is because, in practice, due to its geopolitical weaknesses and limitations, it has no other options and it has taken this path to address its security's issues. It is evident that every government in Turkmenistan, given the durability and influence of geopolitical factors over time, is faced with such issues and consequently will move towards authoritarianism.

## Conclusion

Based on the presented points, it can be concluded that Turkmenistan faces multiple geopolitical weaknesses. These weaknesses have exposed the government of this country to numerous

domestic and foreign challenges and put it in a situation of insecurity. In addition, geopolitical factors can create tension within Turkmenistan and between this republic and other countries (especially their neighbors). Although each of these factors may not be a security threat on its own, when combined with other threatening factors, they can become a source of insecurity and tension. Therefore, the capacity of geopolitical factors to create a crisis causes the creation and continuation of tension, instability and insecurity in this country. When feeling insecure and threatened, such a government will adopt a more aggressive and power-seeking approach and will also add dependence and submission to major powers to its approach due to this sense of insecurity and fear, which will ultimately cause the presence and influence of these powers in Turkmenistan.

In other words, geopolitical factors are considered a source of weakness and threat for this republic. The threats and challenges resulting from these geopolitical factors have caused the government in Turkmenistan to always be faced with fear and anxiety, and to deal with these threats, it moves towards authoritarianism and centralization. This can be seen clearly in the behavior of each of its presidents. Therefore, in Turkmenistan, we have witnessed governments and leaders who are authoritarian and monopolistic. After gaining power, they try to change social institutions for their own benefit, eliminate political opponents, and pursue authoritarianism. Undoubtedly, given the validity and reliability of geopolitical factors and their effects, it seems that this approach will continue in the behavior of the Turkmen government.

#### Footnotes

1. The existence of Russian and Uzbek minorities is one of the reasons that Uzbekistan and Russia have always used as an excuse for their presence and interference in Turkmenistan.

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## تأثیر ژئوپلیتیک بر رفتار دولت در ترکمنستان

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## چکیده

عوامل ژئوپلیتیک با توجه به مانایی و پایایی اثراتشان، همواره نقش قابل توجهی در عرصه سیاست و رفتار دولت‌ها دارند؛ در ترکمنستان نیز با توجه به ویژگی‌های ژئوپلیتیکی این کشور، بررسی و توجه به این عوامل و تأثیرات آنها، نقش بسزایی در شناخت و پیش‌بینی سیاست‌ها و رفتار دولت این کشور داشته و طبیعی است که این مهم، با توجه به همسایگی و اشتراکات فراوان این کشور با جمهوری اسلامی ایران، اهمیتی مضاعف نیز می‌یابد. لذا نظر به این مهم، در اثر پیش‌رو با هدف تحلیل سیاست و رفتار دولت ترکمنستان، پرسش پژوهش بر این مبنا شکل گرفته که ژئوپلیتیک ترکمنستان چه تأثیری بر سیاست و رفتار دولت این کشور دارد؟ در مقام پاسخ، استدلال می‌شود ویژگی‌های ژئوپلیتیکی ترکمنستان در کنار وضعی که غالباً از آن برخوردارند، عواملی تنش‌زا نیز هستند که به‌طور مستقیم و غیرمستقیم با ایجاد تهدید و مواردی مانند تنش، بی‌ثباتی و ناامنی بر سیاست و رفتار دولت ترکمنستان اثر داشته و باعث اقتدارگرایی و تمرکزگرایی دولت شده‌اند و با توجه به مانایی و پایایی عوامل ژئوپلیتیکی، این روند در آینده نیز ادامه خواهد یافت. این پژوهش با روش توصیفی-تحلیلی انجام شده و روش گردآوری اطلاعات کتابخانه‌ای می‌باشد.

**کلیدواژگان:** ژئوپلیتیک، ترکمنستان، دولت، سیاست، اقتدارگرایی.

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