

THE UNITED STATES AND TURKMENISTAN – SIGNIFICANT PARTNERSHIPS

CATERPILLAR, JOHN DEERE AND OTHER U.S. COMPANIES SUPPORT THE TURKMENISTAN DICTATORSHIP THROUGH BUSINESS VENTURES

*Leading U.S. companies like **Caterpillar**, **John Deere** and **Boeing** are courting the repressive government of Turkmenistan for multimillion-dollar business deals, often in disregard of the companies' own **ethical guidelines**. In addition, the **U.S. government** maintains its support for Turkmenistan's dictatorship due to the Central Asian country's vast natural gas reserves and its strategic location on the borders of Afghanistan and Iran. Turkmenistan is still rated as one of the worst countries in the world in terms of human rights and free speech. Moreover, according to a recent Amnesty International report, politically motivated harassment, detentions and imprisonments continue unabated under the country's new leader, **Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov**.*

The Ruhnama: The Propaganda Book Supported by Caterpillar and John Deere

In the past, U.S. companies have flattered the Turkmen autocracy by showing their support for **the Ruhnama**, the infamous propaganda text by Turkmen dictator **Saparmurat Niyazov**. **Zeppelin**, the official dealer for **Caterpillar** in Turkmenistan, was responsible for the German translation of **the Ruhnama**. Similarly, **John Deere** representatives have praised Niyazov and the Ruhnama in public statements, and have requested a signed copy of the book for the company archives.

Caterpillar and John Deere have followed a pattern that the Turkmen government set many years ago for multinationals seeking to do business in Turkmenistan. In order to receive contracts from the government, corporations have needed to give support to the Ruhnama and the government in public statements. During the Niyazov regime, the Ruhnama was the centerpiece of the government's propaganda system. International experts have repeatedly stated that the book has been at the heart of the suppression of free speech and the destruction of the educational system in Turkmenistan. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Open Society Institute, the United Nations, the European Union and the U.S. Government have all acknowledged that a serious human rights crisis has existed in Turkmenistan for many years.

Multinationals like John Deere have tried to praise the Ruhnama in Turkmenistan while hiding or downplaying their support when speaking to the rest of the world. Through official Turkmen media outlets, Deere and Zeppelin (again, as Caterpillar's official dealer) have made extraordinary statements lauding both the Ruhnama and the Turkmen autocracy. They have engaged in a deliberate effort to give the Turkmen people the impression that the outside world admires and respects the Turkmen leadership, in order to help the government maintain its system of oppression. At the same time, these companies refuse to discuss their statements supporting the government and the Ruhnama when approached by the non-Turkmen media, and refuse to engage in any open discussion or acknowledgment of the human rights crisis in the country.

The New Dictator: Berdymuhammedov and the Continuing Human Rights Crisis

Turkmenistan now has a new dictator, and the nation's human rights crisis continues along with the corrupt international business activities of the past. In 2006, Niyazov died. The new dictator, **Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov**, swiftly took control of the country through false elections that were universally denounced as non-democratic by independent observers. Berdymuhammedov was a loyal follower of Niyazov for many years, and oversaw Niyazov's disastrous dismantling of the nation's healthcare system.

Upon taking power, Berdymuhammedov pretended to institute a series of reforms. It has become increasingly clear, however, that he is either unwilling or unable to change the systematic abuses of human rights in the country. For instance, Berdymuhammedov has outlawed satellite television dishes, one of the few possible ways for Turkmen to access uncensored information from the outside world. While some superficial improvements have been made in the educational system, the government's grip on the media and its willingness to imprison activists and stifle dissent have grown worse than ever, aided in many cases by more sophisticated Internet and surveillance technology. Far from improving in any significant way, the human rights situation shows little sign of disappearing. Indeed, Amnesty International has just issued a new report detailing the government's continuing abuses. Similar reports can be found

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from Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders (which continues to rank Turkmenistan as one of the worst countries in the world in terms of free speech) and many other independent sources.

Despite this, however, American multinationals still work with the Berdymuhammedov regime and support the government exactly as they did before. John Deere, Caterpillar and Boeing are only three of the many U.S. companies that maintain close relations with the Turkmen government. As before, these corporations refuse to discuss the human rights crisis in the country, and maintain their pattern of silence and obfuscation on their collaboration with one of the most oppressive regimes in the world today.

Corporate Ethical Guidelines: A Smokescreen for Corruption

Most U.S. companies have **ethical guidelines** or advocate ethical practices that would, under a commonsense interpretation, prohibit them from working with a government that engages in such flagrant, widespread and systematic abuses of human rights. In practice, however, the companies are content to pander to the Turkmen government, signing billion-dollar contracts with the nationalized oil, gas and construction interests without regard for the way that these contracts help finance and prop up the corrupt leadership. Rather than being followed in good faith, the corporate ethical guidelines help the multinationals create the illusion that they are giving serious consideration to voluntary ethical standards when instead these standards are being blatantly ignored. Because of this, the current voluntary ethical guidelines function less as a good faith attempt to make ethical decisions than as a smokescreen hiding the lack of genuine interest in such decisions.

Shadow of the Holy Book, the documentary directed by Arto Halonen, has initiated wide-ranging public discussion in many countries on whether governments should exercise their right to issue ethical guidelines for companies, or whether instead the responsibility should be left to companies themselves. In Finland, for instance, the government has recently published a report on the need for outside supervision of corporate ethical guidelines in relation to countries like Turkmenistan. The authors of the report expressly stated that the report was made because of the public response to ***Shadow of the Holy Book***. In addition, Halonen and his co-screenwriter Kevin Frazier have written a book detailing all of their allegations against the multinationals collaborating with the Turkmen government, and addressing more generally the need for outside supervision of foreign corporations' activities in nations with autocratic leaderships.

The U.S. Government: Turning a Blind Eye

The **U.S. government** largely indulged Niyazov's human rights violations throughout the term of his dictatorship. **President George W. Bush** considered Niyazov an ally in the war on terror, and needed to use Turkmenistan's airspace for the war in Afghanistan. The friendly policies of the U.S. have strengthened with Berdymuhammedov, since the U.S. supports the **European Union's** attempts to gain access to Turkmenistan's massive natural gas resources. Traditionally, Turkmenistan has worked with **Russia's Gazprom** and Gazprom's partners to supply gas to the world. The new Berdymuhammedov regime has opened up the possibility of Turkmenistan working more closely with other countries as well. This has led to a new Great Game in Turkmenistan, with governments and corporations all competing for a piece of the action.

Barack Obama is also keen to promote relations with Turkmenistan. Upon being elected, Obama received a letter of congratulations from Berdymuhammedov. Obama responded: "I am confident that we can work together in a spirit of peace and friendship to build a more secure world during the next four years. I look forward to working with you in that effort and in promoting good relations between our countries." It remains to be seen whether Obama will carry on the Bush policy of ignoring Turkmen human rights abuses, or will make a more genuine effort to address these issues.

Turkmenistan's foreign policy under its new president appears to be shifting from the neutrality Niyazov sought to cultivate, and rumors of military involvement with NATO have been touted since Berdymuhammedov assumed power in 2007. These rumors were bolstered by Berdymuhammedov's attendance at the **NATO Bucharest summit** in April 2008. In the wake of Russia's military incursions into **Georgia** last year, competition for Turkmenistan's natural oil and gas reserves has intensified, with U.S. diplomacy in the region particularly focused on the **Trans-Caspian Pipeline** project, which would allow the routing of Central Asian oil and gas to Europe through Turkey via the proposed **Nabucco pipeline**.

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<http://www.neurope.eu/articles/70923.php>

John Deere: *“Turkmen Grain Growers Get American Combines”* (March 28, 2007)
http://www.turkmenistan.ru/?page_id=3&lang_id=en&elem_id=9691&type=event&sort=date_desc

Caterpillar: *“Turkmenistan, US, German Companies to Expand Cooperation”* (March 9-15, 2007)
<http://www.eurasianet.org/turkmenistan.project/index.php?page=wnb/editor/wnb20070319&lang=eng>

“Turkmenistan: Where Roaming Will be Free, But TV Won’t Offer an Escape” (January 17, 2008)
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<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav090508a.shtml>

“Turkmenistan: Nato Finds New Partner in Central Asia” (May 30, 2008)
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<http://www.eng.rpi-inc.ru/conferences/items/conf/?c=4>