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Turkmenistan, Factor 17: Good Governance

Turkmenistan: Effects of a Turkmen Tyrannical Reign

Sixteen-year-old Aida slowly opens her eyes and takes a deep breath in, enjoying the feeling of her lungs expanding with the slow consumption of cool air in her room. This is the only advantage to being in the middle of nowhere. She brings herself up from the small, worn bed, that has been stained yellow, which she shares with one of her younger sisters. Careful not to wake her three other sisters, two brothers, and four cousins that she shares a room with, Aida tip-toes out, slowly. Her parents, aunt, and grandparents are all sleeping together in the next room. This is the new reality of her life. Just three days ago, she lived only with her immediate family in a small house right outside of Turkmenistan's capital, Ashgabat. It had pale, off-white walls. And, while it was small, it was warm. Aida's entire family would sit around and talk, while smiling ear-to-ear. Something, she now understands, that she had taken for granted. Aida takes a look around her family's small, suffocating apartment and drifted off into thought. Since being relocated due to President Berdymukhammedov's expansion of Ashgabat, he had not kept his promise of proper compensation for taking her family's home or her grandparents home as well. Aida remembered the day the officers pounded on the door, almost busting it down, evicting her family with a three days notice. Her Ejem (mother) cried for hours, hysterical and confused. Her parents had made all of their payments, been respectful tenants, supported the expansion that the Great Berdymukhammedov desired of their nation's capital, and she had heard the stories of what had happened to the others. Eventually Aida's aunt and her two sons were evicted as well, with the same amount of notice, yet she had to go through this alone. Her aunt's husband is part of the large group of men, women and children who have mysteriously been taken by the government- never to be heard from again. While Aida's story is fictional, its basis is real and happening everyday in Turkmenistan due to its oppressive and corrupt government.

In Turkmenistan there are 5,411,012 predominantly muslim people ("Central Asia:: Turkmenistan") in a 488,100 sq km area ("United States is About") under the corrupt rule of President Berdymukhammedov. Although the president is elected, and there is a system of checks and balances in place, Turkmenistan is misleading in their claimed democratic systems. For example, the president is elected by absolute vote of the people, but in his most recent election on February 12, 2017 he won 97.7% to 2.3% of "others" ("Central Asia:: Turkmenistan")- raising red flags. This system seems legitimately democratic until you find out that a term is "7 years," but technically there are no term limits as president, and there have only been five presidential elections total in the history of Turkmenistan ("2017 Turkmen Presidential Election"). Some of the political parties in Turkmenistan consist of the Agrarian Party of Turkmenistan, Democratic Party of Turkmenistan, Organization of Trade Unions of Turkmenistan, and etc. An important thing to note is that all parties support the president as of January 2012 due to a new law enacted that requires such in order to be an official party ("Central Asia:: Turkmenistan"). While this system is more like a dictatorship than a democratic one, it was set in motion by the previous president.

The last president, Turkmenbashi, led a bizarre reign until his death in 2006. For starters, his real name was Saparmurat Niyazov until he changed it to Turkmenbashi or "leader of the Turkmen" (Kalder). Turkmenbashi renamed the days of the week after himself and his mother. He also banned the opera and circus, wrote an autobiography called "*Ruhnama*", appointed his dentist as his successor (Berdymukhammedov), put propaganda around the city of himself, had a golden statue of himself erected in the center of the nation's capital and made the phrase "Turkmenbashi made Turkmenistan great" the

opening line of the national anthem (Walker). Turkmenbashi told his people that , “If you read my book [Ruhama] three times, you will go to heaven,” and was on all televisions almost every night giving talks and filtered news reports (Theroux). Also, in order to get a license in Turkmenistan, citizens have to pass a test on Turkmenbashi’s autobiography, insuring that they know everything about him (Walker). Turkmenbashi essentially created a cult in his country, obsessed and obedient to the president, that has now led it to where it is today—where, “nobody questions the president” (Walker). This kind of culture is similar to that of North Korea and their leader, Kim Jong Un, but Turkmenistan has not gotten the same attention as North Korea due to its lack of violence towards other countries. This lack of outward aggression does not mean that Turkmenistan is not an issue for other countries, it means it is only a ticking time bomb and its people are suffering.

Turkmenistan is now headed towards an economic crisis due to the government’s isolationist policies, decline in spending on public services, and currency depreciation- the GDP per capita already low at \$18,200 as of 2017 and continues plummet (“Central Asia: Turkmenistan”). In an interview with one Turkmen who wanted to expose the reality of the financial crisis it was said, “It’s terrible how we live. We have no money.” There was of course a giant elephant storming around the café that I couldn’t help but mention. "Murat," I began, as tactfully as I possibly could. "What good are all these monuments and fountains, that the government has spent billions of dollars on, if hard-working people like you don't have enough money to put food on the table for their family?" Murat paused for a while. Then he said: "As Saparmurat Turkmenbashi said, 'He who works hard will have his rewards'" (Walker). This conversation alone displays that corruption in the government is not only affecting the Turkmen people financially but mentally as well.

The Turkmen people have been taught a certain way of thought, that, “No one questions the president” (Walker). This toxic way of thinking had led to the bigger, and more serious, issue of human rights violations in Turkmenistan. It has now been known as “a source for men, women and children subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking” and is now on the Tier 2 Watch List (“Central Asia: Turkmenistan”). Human Rights Watch has raised a red flag for this country as well highlighting its “extremely repressive” governance and “severe restriction of all fundamental rights and freedoms” (“Turkmenistan”). An article in a CNN report on how to help those taken advantage of in forced labor said, “Skip products made of cotton from Turkmenistan, which is often harvested through child exploitation. (Cotton products from Turkmenistan are actually banned in the United States.)” (Morris). The government also refuses to return a number of citizens who had disappeared after imprisonment in the 1990s and early 2000s (“Turkmenistan”). Most whereabouts are still unknown for these people, even though the government is claiming to be in the process of making amends to the families by returning the disappeared, the few that have been returned are to their families have arrived in a body bag (“Turkmenistan”). Not only have there been exploitation of their citizens, but President Berdymukhamedov has been forcefully evicting citizens without adequate compensation for the building of his new and improved capital of Ashgabat. In some cases, people are only give a few hours notice and denied compensation all together (“Turkmenistan: Homeowners Evicted, Denied Compensation”). With the large amount of sex trafficking, the banning of importing Turkmen cotton in the U.S., concealment of missing persons, and the forced evictions it is evident that the corruption in Turkmenistan is a bigger problem than the world currently recognizes.

Due to Turkmenistan being a closed country, the reports of food scarcity are unreliable. Last year, Turkmenistan reported producing 1.4 million tons of wheat, but the CIA estimated it to actually be around 800,000 tons (Muzalevsky). And while official state reports tell of food abundance, an activist, Fareed Tukhbathullin, from Turkmenistan tells of the horrific reality. The specific article of Tukhbathullin’s knowledge of the Turkmen situation shows that, “government regulated food items like bread, flour,

vegetable oil, and eggs are now in short supply and even in the capital there are queues, and sometimes physical fights break out in queues in rural areas” (Satke). While this is an important issue, like the many others in Turkmenistan, the only way to fix these all of these problems is to attack at their root cause.

When a country is isolated, like Turkmenistan, it can be challenging to come up with enforceable solutions. However, it is not entirely impossible. Primarily, there needs to be a plan put in place to crush the sex trafficking and human rights violations. The CIA and U.S. Embassy in Turkmenistan reports that there is a plan in place in order to lower the persons sex trafficked and exploited for their work: “...continued implementation of its national action plan for trafficked persons, adoption of a new anti-trafficking law in October 2016, amending its criminal code to criminalize trafficking persons, and the government allows free legal assistance to those applying for recognition as trafficking victims” (“Trafficking in Persons Report 2017 Turkmenistan”). While this plan sounds efficient in destroying the issues at hand in Turkmenistan, the government has done a poor job of enforcing these policies. This is where accountability comes into play. Someone has to hold Turkmenistan to its promises. While the UN and ESCR, the Committee of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, cannot use military forces, they can make reviews every few years of a country’s policies, create treaties and make sure those agreements are being followed, as well as provide recommendations to the government on how to help its people. Again, the UN and ESCR only hold a country accountable in the way of reports as it is ultimately up to the government if they will enforce the suggested policies (“Human Rights Enforcement Mechanisms of the United Nations”).

International Justice Mission, IJM, works with victims of violent abuse such as rape, trafficking, slavery, land theft, and police brutality. IJM has a legal team, help with immediate crisis care, connect survivors to stability, provide counseling, support throughout the legal process, and skills training as well as education. They have currently partnered with 17 developing countries and their local authorities to bring justice to victims, these countries include the Philippines, Thailand, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, the Dominican Republic, Bolivia, Guatemala, and South Asia. IJM intervenes with lawyers and social workers in individual cases, as well as prevent criminals from abusing others, and work with governments to truly implement long-term solutions. IJM can only help to solve these problems in a country if the government is willing to have a partnership and has a justice system implemented as well (“IJM”). If Turkmenistan were to partner with IJM, human rights violations would not be nearly as bad as they are now, victims could get justice, and most of the work would be done by an outside organization. IJM has rescued more than 45,000 people from slavery and other forms of violence, as well as helped local authorities put 3,500 suspected slave owners and other criminals behind bars (“IJM”). Concerned outsiders can email IJM and their teams to make them more aware of what is going on in Turkmenistan and urge them to ask the Turkmen government to partner with them. With these statistics in mind, imagine what wonders IJM could have for the innocent people of Turkmenistan.

An outsider can help in many ways. Those who hope to help should not purchase goods, specifically cotton, from Turkmenistan, make others aware of the conditions in Turkmenistan, and bring awareness to the people of Turkmenistan. In 2016, Turkmenistan brought it \$7.1 billion from exported goods like gas, crude oil petrochemicals, textiles and cotton: most exports are products of forced labor or those who have been trafficked into it. The exports of Turkmenistan are so great that they are 95th largest export economy in the world, and brought in \$5.92 billion from Petroleum Gas, \$398 million from Refined Petroleum, \$156 million from Non- Retail Pure Cotton Yarn, and \$150 million from Raw Cotton, and many other exports as well contribute to the overall \$7.1 billion (*OEC*). In 2018, Turkmenistan harvested 1000 480 pound bales of cotton (“Turkmenistan Cotton Production by Year”), and while it is hard to avoid gasoline and petroleum, it is easier to not buy clothing or anything made from cotton from Turkmenistan. Check

labels, go to clothing websites, do research on what companies use cotton from Turkmenistan and do not make those purchases.

It takes minimal effort is to make friends, family, and others aware of what is happening in Turkmenistan. It is easy to begin a conversation with, "Hey, have you heard about that bizarre country, Turkmenistan? No? Oh my goodness, let me tell you how crazy it is!" Once the conversation is started off with the bizarre reality of Turkmenistan, and their attention is captured, by reverting the conversation to the more serious side of things educating others becomes easy. Use the opportunity, and the intrigue, to make them aware of the realities of life for the people of Turkmenistan and let them know how they can help. Outsiders can simply pass on the weird tales of the Turkmen land, send a quick email to IJM, or boycott Turkmen goods. Word of mouth is one of the most powerful ways to spread information, it dates back centuries to how we passed down the history of our communities, concerned outsiders must utilize that in order to provoke change.

One extreme solution, for those who are profoundly dedicated to creating a change, is to travel to Turkmenistan and talk with the people. Educate citizens on the outside world, tell them of freedoms and opportunities, and uncover a deeper understanding of Turkmenistan itself while there. Educating people on the inside will spark questions, which will have a ripple effect. One of these outcomes may be group of people forming to stand up to the government and force change themselves. Expanding one's knowledge of Turkmenistan, especially first hand, also allows outsiders to better educate citizens at home and spread awareness.

Ultimately, anyone can help from anywhere and from any socioeconomic background. Making others aware of Turkmenistan's bizarre and repressive government is the first and easiest step. Other ways to take action are to put Turkmenistan on IJM's radar by emailing them and making your concerns known, as well as knowing what products to avoid when shopping. Travelling to Turkmenistan showing its people the reality of the outside world and bringing their attention to their human rights is a more challenging but most impactful option. All of these things will bring about change. As free individuals, it is a moral obligation to help the broken, hurting and innocent people of Turkmenistan. By continuing to pursue this issue and obtaining the truth, the reality of food scarcity will be revealed and a plan can be implemented. Many people are trafficked (sex and labor), wrongly evicted from their homes, starving, and/or missing. The corrupt government of Turkmenistan is getting away with exploiting their citizens, similar to that of North Korea. These behavioral patterns of the corrupt government in Turkmenistan are also similar to that of North Korea. There is chance, and a choice, to save lives, and to do something that matter and makes a difference. Anyone can help, and there are no excuses.

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