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JWAC Lesson Plan

Turkmenistan: A Case Study on Dictatorships

By: Emma Sheean, September 2017

Warm up: *Are you familiar with the country of Turkmenistan? What do you know about the history of Turkmenistan and the region of Central Asia?*

Fast Facts:

- Turkmenistan boasts a nearly 100% literacy rate, coming in around 99.7%
- Home to the "Door to Hell," a crater filled with burning natural gas
- Majority Muslim country; 89% of the country is Muslim

Discussion: Like many other countries in Central Asia, Turkmenistan is a former Soviet Union republic which gained independence in 1991 with the dissolution of the USSR. Before the Soviet Union, the country was part of many great empires and was along the path of the Silk Road. Although the "stan" countries are often lumped together, they all are home to unique ethnic groups and languages. The majority ethnicity of Turkmenistan's population is Turkmen, with small minorities such as Russian and Uzbek ethnicities. An authoritarian government runs Turkmenistan under President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, who has been in power since February of 2007. He is both chief of state and head of government.

Case Study: The Niyazov and Berdimuhamedov Presidencies

Background: From 1991 to 2006, Turkmenistan was ruled by Saparmurat Niyazov, an eccentric dictator who kept the country under strict control. Niyazov wrote a combined autobiography-cultural guidebook called the *Ruhnama*, which became compulsory curriculum in schools and even became a part of the driving test. Niyazov dubbed himself the "Turkmenbashi," renaming a city and the month of January the same, while also renaming the month of April and the Turkmen word for bread after his mother. The dictator went on to ban beards, gold teeth, and smoking in public. While these may be eccentric laws, they are on the lighter side of a repressive dictatorship. The state controlled and continues to control all press, and independent journalists are frequently harassed and assaulted. Freedom of religion is almost nonexistent. After Niyazov's death in 2006, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov took over the office, recently winning reelection by 97.7% in what was deemed an undemocratic election. With no presidential age or term limits, Berdimuhamedov has essentially become president for a life term.



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Activity: Watch the following video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KNJS2-Zv-Tc>

Discussion:

How might the legacy of late president Niyazov's cult of personality affect human rights in Turkmenistan today? Why do you think dictatorships and human rights violations often go hand in hand? What are the consequences of suppressing free speech and press? Do you think Berdimuhamedov will develop his own cult of personality, or do you think the country is on a better path?

Recap and Reaching Further: Since its creation in 1991, Turkmenistan has maintained Soviet tendencies toward cults of personality and repressive dictators. After years under outlandish President Niyazov, when the population was subject to his random prohibitions and whims, current President Berdimuhamedov's administration continues to control all press and restrict the freedoms of the population. Freedom House gave Turkmenistan a score of 3/100 on its 2017 ranking of political rights and civil liberties; Turkmenistan was outranked by only Syria and Tibet, and shared the same score as North Korea. *How might Turkmenistan's recent history have shaped its future? Can a population with extremely limited access to independent press ever rise up against a dictatorship?*

The ability to criticize our government may be something Americans take advantage of. It is easily forgotten that in many countries around the world, doing so could get you imprisoned and tortured. Turkmenistan is not alone—the Economist Intelligence Unit reports 51 authoritarian regimes in the world. North Korea is at the forefront of international press as a dictatorship, but lesser-known countries such as Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Equatorial Guinea, Chad, and others are still under the rule of brutal regimes.

Call to Action: The best way to help the people of Turkmenistan is to stay informed. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty is one of the only independent news sources reporting in Turkmenistan. Regularly checking their articles and staying up-to-date is the best way to be educated on Turkmenistan. Check out their website here:

<https://www.rferl.org/z/669>

Human Rights Watch maintains a page on human rights in Turkmenistan, with articles and videos. Find the page here: <https://www.hrw.org/europe/central-asia/turkmenistan>



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Works Cited

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