ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



Episode #56
Turkmenistan
21st May, 2020

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Transcript

[00:00:05] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English, the show where you can listen to weird and wonderful stories and learn fascinating things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:23] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about Turkmenistan.

[00:00:31] It is an **authoritarian**[1] country in central Asia, ruled by an **eccentric**[2] president who recently changed the **constitution**[3] so that he could rule for life.

[00:00:44] Human Rights Watch called it "one of the world's most isolated and **oppressively**[4] governed countries", and it is just a very weird, weird place as we are going to find out today.

[00:00:59] But before we get right into this episode, this is just my chance to remind those of you listening to the podcast on Spotify, iVoox, Apple Podcasts or wherever you may be listening to it, that you can get all of the bonus episodes plus transcripts, key vocabulary and more over on the website, which is Leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:22] From bonus episodes on things like the Royal family and member only Q&A sessions, the next one is coming up on Wednesday the 27th of May by the way, there

[1] controlled by leaders who have total power and allow people little freedom

[2] strange and unusual in behaviour

[3] the set of basic laws that say how a country must be governed

[4] in a cruel and unfair way that takes away people's freedom

has never been a better time to become a member and join our growing group of curious minds.

[00:01:41] So if you want to find out more about that, and I certainly hope you do, then the link to go to is Leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:50] Okay then, let's talk about Turkmenistan.

[00:01:55] I guess you have probably never been to Turkmenistan.

[00:02:00] Very few tourists have, and a combination of the fact that it is so hard to get to and the fact that it has this strange or **authoritarian** rule has meant that it is pretty unknown to the outside world.

[00:02:17] It's a relatively small country with under 6 million people, but it is only slightly smaller than Spain in terms of size, of landmass.

[00:02:30] And if you'd have a hard time figuring out exactly where it was on the map, it's directly to the north of Iran, and has a border with Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Kazakhstan.

[00:02:46] So it's firmly in this central Asian block of countries that all gained independence from the USSR after the breakup of the Soviet Union, and Turkmenistan got full independence in 1991.

[00:03:05] Since independence, which is what we'll be mainly talking about in today's episode, it has remained a weird, isolated country.

[00:03:17] It was initially governed by a man called Saparmurat Niyazov, who was a North Korean style leader.

[00:03:26] He had a proper **cult of personality**[5] and complete, **supreme**[6] control over the country.

[00:03:35] With this control he created some **downright**[7] bizarre laws for Turkmenistan.

[00:03:44] Some of these might sound completely crazy, but it is worth talking about them in a bit more detail here to give you a bit of an understanding of quite how strange life in this country was under his rule.

[00:04:00] Firstly, Niyazov, the president, was apparently worried about the development of music in Turkmenistan, so he **outlawed**[8], he forbid, **lip-synching**[9], which is when someone at a concert or on TV pretends to speak, and then the real audio track is played in the background.

[00:04:23] He was not a fan of **lip-synching**.

[5] a situation in which a leader is shown as a hero and almost worshipped by the people

[6] highest and greatest; total

[7] completely; totally

[8] made illegal

[9] moving your lips as if singing or speaking while a recording plays

[00:04:26] He also **banished**[10] all dogs from the capital.

[00:04:30] He said that they weren't allowed into the city because, and I quote directly here, of "their **unappealing**[11] smell".

[00:04:39] In short, he didn't like the way that dogs smelled, and so he decided that none should be allowed in the capital city.

[00:04:48] He had to quit smoking because of a heart condition, but rather than just quit himself, he banned smoking in all public places and said that all government employees also had to quit.

[00:05:06] And finally, he was a very good son, a **doting**[12] son, you could say.

[00:05:13] I say this because it seems clear that he loved his mother very much because he got rid of the Turkmen word for bread and replaced it with his mother's name, Gurbansoltan.

[00:05:29] And he wasn't just content to have changed the word for bread to his mother's name - he also changed the word for the month April to his mother's name as well.

[10] officially sent away and kept out

[11] unpleasant; not attractive

[12] showing great love and care, sometimes too much

[00:05:41] There was even a golden statue of Niyazov that rotated throughout the day to always face the sun, which **allegedly**[13] cost $12 million to make.

[00:05:56] Quite something, right?

[00:05:58] He ruled Turkmenistan with **an iron fist**[14] until his sudden death in 2006.

[00:06:07] When he died, there was a bit of a **scramble**[15] for power.

[00:06:12] Unlike in North Korea, for example, where it is clearly a family affair, Niyazov hadn't **designated**[16] a successor.

[00:06:24] However, shortly after his death, his deputy prime minister, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow took over power, and if you, or even if the Turkmen people were expecting a return to normality, then unfortunately that was not to arrive with the rule of Berdimuhamedow.

[00:06:47] The era of the new president, Berdimuhamedow, has proved to be equally strange, albeit in slightly different ways.

[00:06:58] Firstly, we should mention horses, and in particular a special **breed**[17] of horse called the Akhal-Teke.

[13] according to what people say, although it has not been proved

[14] a very strict, harsh and controlling way

[15] a hurried, disorganised struggle between people to get something

[16] officially chosen or named

[17] a particular type of animal, developed by people over time

[00:07:07] This breed of horse plays a big role in the life of Berdimuhamedow.

[00:07:13] He is completely mad about them; he has written and published poetry about them and apparently he personally has a collection of 600 different Akhal-Tekes, which is 10% of the world's population, of this particular kind of horse.

[00:07:33] He has even given himself the **nickname**[18] " The people's horse **breeder**[19]".

[00:07:37] A horse **breeder** is someone who raises horses.

[00:07:41] And just in case people didn't know how much he loved horses, he, like his **predecessor**[20] decided to build a huge gold statue of himself on a horse that sits on top of a 20 metre high white marble statue in the capital of Turkmenistan, Ashgabat.

[00:08:05] You may have heard his name because he was in the news last year, in 2019, as there were reports that he had died.

[00:08:15] He hadn't been seen for a few weeks, and **rumours**[21] were circulating that he had suddenly died.

[00:08:24] So what did the state TV do to prove to the people that their president had not died?

[18] an informal name used instead of someone's real name

[19] a person who keeps animals in order to produce young ones

[20] the person who had the job before him

[21] stories passed from person to person that may not be true

[00:08:33] You might think, well, they probably just did an interview with him or something like that to make it clear that he was alive and well, but that will be far too normal for Turkmenistan and for Berdimuhamedow.

[00:08:50] Instead, state TV broadcast clips of him doing very strange things, including driving a **rally car**[22] around a burning hole in the ground, firing a gun while riding a bike, and of course, riding a horse.

[00:09:09] Pretty strange, right? Now, it's **all well and good**[23] to just talk about the slightly ridiculous things that the leaders of Turkmenistan have done, and are still doing, but there are a few slightly more serious topics that are worth mentioning here.

[00:09:29] Firstly, it's how Turkmenistan as a country makes money and what this means for its people, specifically right now.

[00:09:41] Turkmenistan is home to the fourth largest natural gas reserves in the world, and it also has a large amount of oil, yet it's still a poor country - the average salary is around $400 per month, and male life expectancy is just under 65, female life expectancy is a little bit higher.

[00:10:05] Like many countries with a large amount of natural resources, it has struggled to turn this into **prosperity**[24] for its people.

[22] a fast car built for racing on roads and rough tracks

[23] fine, but not the whole story

[24] money, success and a good standard of living

[00:10:15] And this is, as you may know, pretty common with countries that have large amounts of natural resources, and is called 'the resource curse' or 'the **paradox**[25] of plenty'.

[00:10:29] It's a really interesting idea and something that's definitely deserving of its own episode, but the theory goes that for lots of countries, they find that having large amounts of natural resources actually ends up hurting them and harming their development in the long run.

[00:10:49] And it would seem that Turkmenistan is **no exception**[26] - it has not managed to turn its **wealth**[27] of natural resources into any significant increase in standard of living for its people.

[00:11:04] And in the past few months, things have got even tougher for Turkmenistan and for the Turkmen people.

[00:11:12] When there was the big drop in the oil price in March this year, this had a **knock-on effect**[28] for the price that Turkmenistan could get for its natural gas.

[00:11:25] It reduced significantly.

[25] a situation that seems impossible because it contains two opposite facts

[26] not different from the others

[27] a large amount

[28] an indirect result caused by something that happened first

[00:11:28] Because of this, Turkmenistan suddenly didn't have nearly as much money coming into the country, it was running out of foreign currency, of dollars and rubles.

[00:11:41] So the government implemented some pretty **drastic**[29] measures and said that all companies had to sell all of their foreign currency to the government at the official rate.

[00:11:55] Now, **note**[30] the use of the word 'official' here because Turkmenistan, like several other central Asian countries, has two exchange rates: the official exchange rate and the black market rate, and there is often a big difference between the two.

[00:12:15] In Turkmenistan, if you have a dollar and you exchange that at the official rate, you will get 3.5 of the local currency, the manat.

[00:12:27] But if you find someone who will exchange manat with you on the black market, you can normally get more than 20, so you can get about six times more on the black market.

[00:12:41] The result of this is that these businesses that have to give up their dollars to the government do so at the official rates of course, and they get about a sixth of what they're actually worth, which of course is not popular with the businesses.

[29] extreme and having a strong, sudden effect

[30] pay attention to

[00:13:01] And on another **topical**[31] note, Turkmenistan is one of a **handful**[32] of countries that have not, as of May the 20th, reported any cases of COVID-19, of coronavirus.

[00:13:16] Now, whether that is due to excellent preparation or the fact that it is one of the most or **authoritarian** countries in the world, rated third worst in terms of freedom of the press, that is something that I will leave you to make up your own mind about.

[00:13:34] But it does seem pretty unlikely.

[00:13:38] One final point about Turkmenistan and its leader that is firstly just an interesting story to end on, and secondly, just makes you think quite how bizarre the world can sometimes be is related to the Guinness World Records.

[00:13:56] Now, we actually recently did an episode on the Guinness World Records, it was Episode 52, so if you're interested, then you can go and listen to that one.

[00:14:06] But how this is related to Turkmenistan is that the Guinness World Records makes a lot of money through allowing companies and organisations to pay to get records to promote their products or services.

[31] connected with something in the news at the moment

[32] a small number

[00:14:23] But they also allow countries to pay large amounts of money to get records, and it turns out that the president of Turkmenistan, Berdimuhamedow, is a huge fan of the Guinness World Records.

[00:14:39] The result of this is that Guinness World Records is very happy to take the money to promote Turkmenistan breaking all sorts of really, really strange records.

[00:14:55] These records are so weird that you probably couldn't even imagine them if you tried, but they include the record for the largest architectural image of a star, which is basically just a huge star.

[00:15:11] Then the world's largest statue of a horse head, obviously, because the president loves horses, and the weirdest one for me, which I just can't really believe deserves to be a record, is for the most people in a cycling awareness lesson.

[00:15:30] So a lesson about how to ride a bike safely.

[00:15:34] And it was 3,246 people in that lesson, if you're asking.

[00:15:40] I did have a look at the Guinness Records website, but unfortunately it doesn't say whether they all actually learned anything at this record breaking lesson.

[00:15:51] Of course, that wasn't the point, and I'm sure that Berdimuhamedow was just very happy to have another record to add to his collection.

[00:16:01] It also doesn't say how much Guinness World Records got paid for promoting it, but no doubt it was pretty significant.

[00:16:11] Okay then that is it for this little look at one of the strangest places in the world.

[00:16:20] It doesn't really get much attention, mainly because it isn't very threatening, it's famously **neutral**[33], and so it is just left to be strange and unique on its own.

[00:16:33] But it is quite fascinating to think that there is this entire country, almost the same size as Spain, with a not insignificant population that just exists in this weird, unbelievable state.

[00:16:49] So if you have ever been to Turkmenistan, I would love to know what you thought.

[00:16:55] I've actually been to Uzbekistan, next door, which is quite strange, but I'm told that Turkmenistan is an awful lot weirder.

[00:17:05] So if you have ever been there or even if you haven't, I would love to hear from you.

[00:17:11] The email is hi hi@leonardoenglish.com.

[33] not taking sides in conflicts between other countries

[00:17:16] And as a final reminder, if you would like all of our podcasts episodes, that's twice as many as you get on the podcast apps and transcripts, key vocabulary, member only Q&A sessions and more then the place to go to is Leonardoenglish.com.

[00:17:35] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:17:40] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Authoritarian	controlled by leaders who have total power and allow people little freedom
Eccentric	strange and unusual in behaviour
Constitution	the set of basic laws that say how a country must be governed
Oppressively	in a cruel and unfair way that takes away people's freedom
Cult of personality	a situation in which a leader is shown as a hero and almost worshipped by the people
Supreme	highest and greatest; total
Downright	completely; totally
Outlawed	made illegal
Lip-synching	moving your lips as if singing or speaking while a recording plays

Banished	officially sent away and kept out
Unappealing	unpleasant; not attractive
Doting	showing great love and care, sometimes too much
Allegedly	according to what people say, although it has not been proved
An iron fist	a very strict, harsh and controlling way
Scramble	a hurried, disorganised struggle between people to get something
Designated	officially chosen or named
Breed	a particular type of animal, developed by people over time
Nickname	an informal name used instead of someone's real name
Breeder	a person who keeps animals in order to produce young ones
Predecessor	the person who had the job before him
Rumours	stories passed from person to person that may not be true

Rally car	a fast car built for racing on roads and rough tracks
All well and good	fine, but not the whole story
Prosperity	money, success and a good standard of living
Paradox	a situation that seems impossible because it contains two opposite facts
No exception	not different from the others
Wealth	a large amount
Knock-on effect	an indirect result caused by something that happened first
Drastic	extreme and having a strong, sudden effect
Note	pay attention to
Topical	connected with something in the news at the moment
Handful	a small number
Neutral	not taking sides in conflicts between other countries

Language spotlight

1. Cult of personality

- **Meaning**: A situation in which a leader uses propaganda and the media to be seen as a hero who is admired and almost worshipped by the public.
- **Synonyms**: hero worship, idolisation, personality worship
- **Antonyms**: public criticism, open scepticism, anonymity
- **Examples**:
    - The dictator built a **cult of personality**, with his portrait hanging in every school and office.
    - Some critics worry that the singer's fans have created a **cult of personality** around her.

2. Rule with an iron fist

- **Meaning**: To control a country, organisation or group in a very strict and harsh way, allowing no opposition.
- **Synonyms**: rule harshly, rule with a rod of iron, dominate completely
- **Antonyms**: rule gently, govern fairly, give people freedom
- **Examples**:
    - The old headteacher **ruled with an iron fist**, and no student dared to break the rules.
    - Her grandfather **ran the family business with an iron fist** for over forty years.

3. All well and good

- **Meaning**: Used to say that something is acceptable or pleasant as far as it goes, but that there is a problem or something more important to consider.
- **Synonyms**: fine up to a point, fine as far as it goes, acceptable but not enough
- **Antonyms**: completely satisfactory, the whole story, entirely sufficient
- **Examples**:
    - It's **all well and good** making plans, but somebody has to actually do the work.
    - A cheap flight is **all well and good** until you have to pay extra for your luggage.

4. Be no exception

- **Meaning**: To be the same as the others in a particular situation, following the same pattern or rule.
- **Synonyms**: be no different, be typical, follow the pattern
- **Antonyms**: be the exception, stand out, be unusual
- **Examples**:
    - Prices have gone up everywhere this year, and our local café **is no exception**.
    - Most teenagers love their phones, and my son **is no exception**.

5. Knock-on effect

- **Meaning**: An indirect result of an event or action, which in turn causes other things to happen.
- **Synonyms**: ripple effect, chain reaction, side effect
- **Antonyms**: isolated event, direct result, contained effect
- **Examples**:
    - The train strike had a **knock-on effect** on traffic, as more people drove to work.
    - Closing the factory will have a **knock-on effect** on shops and restaurants in the town.

Quiz

Listening Comprehension Multiple Choice Questions

1. Why is Turkmenistan pretty unknown to the outside world?

a) It is difficult to reach and has a strange, strict government

b) It does not allow any of its citizens to travel abroad

c) It changed its name after leaving the Soviet Union

d) It has only existed as a country for a few years

2. Why did Niyazov ban dogs from the capital?

a) He was afraid of being bitten by them

b) He did not like the way they smelled

c) He believed they spread serious diseases

d) He wanted more space in the city for horses

3. How did Niyazov show his love for his mother?

a) He built a golden statue of her that turned with the sun

b) He made her birthday a new national holiday in Turkmenistan

c) He named the capital city and its main square after her

d) He replaced the words for bread and April with her name

4. What did state TV do when there were rumours that Berdimuhamedow had died?

a) It broadcast a normal interview with him at home

b) It announced that he had been ill for a few weeks

c) It showed clips of him driving, shooting and riding

d) It ignored the rumours and did not mention him at all

5. What happened to businesses that had to sell their foreign currency to the government?

a) They got about six times more than on the black market

b) They got about a sixth of what it was really worth

c) They got the same amount as on the black market

d) They were allowed to keep half of their dollars

True or False

6. Turkmenistan got full independence in 1991. (True/False)

7. Niyazov quit smoking himself but allowed government employees to keep smoking. (True/False)

8. Berdimuhamedow apparently owns about 10% of all the Akhal-Teke horses in the world. (True/False)

9. Turkmenistan has the largest natural gas reserves in the world. (True/False)

10. As of 20th May, Turkmenistan had not reported any cases of COVID-19. (True/False)

Fill in the Blanks

11. He ruled Turkmenistan with an iron _____ until his sudden death in 2006.

12. When he died, there was a bit of a _____ for power.

13. Niyazov hadn't _____ a successor.

14. He hadn't been seen for a few weeks, and _____ were circulating that he had suddenly died.

15. When there was the big drop in the oil price in March this year, this had a knock-on _____ for the price that Turkmenistan could get for its natural gas.

Vocabulary Practice

16. What does "**eccentric**" mean in the description of Turkmenistan's president?

a) Strange and unusual in behaviour

b) Very rich and powerful

c) Elected by the people

d) Old and in poor health

17. What does "**banished**" mean when Niyazov did this to all dogs in the capital?

a) Bought and cared for

b) Counted and listed

c) Officially sent away

d) Trained as guards

18. What does "**predecessor**" mean when talking about Berdimuhamedow's gold statue?

a) The person who takes over next

b) The person who had the job before

c) A close adviser to the leader

d) A powerful political rival

19. What does "**drastic**" mean in the government's measures on foreign currency?

a) Gentle and gradual

b) Secret and hidden

c) Fair and popular

d) Extreme and severe

20. In the podcast, what does "**handful**" mean?

a) A small number

b) A large majority

c) A group of neighbours

d) A complete list

Answers

1. a) It is difficult to reach and has a strange, strict government
2. b) He did not like the way they smelled
3. d) He replaced the words for bread and April with her name
4. c) It showed clips of him driving, shooting and riding
5. b) They got about a sixth of what it was really worth
6. True
7. False
8. True
9. False
10. True
11. fist
12. scramble
13. designated
14. rumours
15. effect
16. a) Strange and unusual in behaviour
17. c) Officially sent away
18. b) The person who had the job before

19. d) Extreme and severe

20. a) A small number