

Dictator Is Urged To Free Jailed Minister

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By Ahmed Rashid/ Lahore

The maverick dictator of Turkmenistan is facing mounting pressure from Russia and the West to release a former foreign minister jailed for life last week for allegedly plotting to assassinate him.

President Sapurmurat Niyazov, who prefers to be called Turkmenbashi or Father of the Turkmen, runs one of the most ruthless and quirky regimes in the world.

He has banned opera and ballet, run down the educational system so that children can read only his writings and renamed months of the year after his mother and himself.

Russian and European officials are due to arrive in Turkmenistan in the next few days to try and obtain the release of the former minister, Boris Sheikmuradov.

One of the few international stars among the dour politicians who dominate the five Central Asian republics, Mr Sheikmuradov was sentenced to 25 years in jail on Dec 29 after a one-day trial, but the National Assembly increased this to life.

"We are trying to mobilise international pressure to free Boris Sheikmuradov and the hundreds of others who have been arrested," said a close relative who is exile in the West.

Until he resigned last year, Mr Sheikmuradov was highly respected by the world's powers as someone who was trying to reform the isolationist regime from the inside.

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