

## Finally, a Law I Can Live With

As you are probably aware, the President of Turkmenistan is Saparmurat Niyazov.

Turkmenistan is a tiny nation that sort of slipped between the couch cushions of the old Soviet empire. When the USSR decided it was tired of being communist and wanted to try being criminal instead, Turkmenistan declared independence.

This year, democratically elected President For Life Niyazov accomplished by executive order what we in America have been powerless to do: He banned lip-synching.

Lip-synching has been around for at least as long as, well, lips. A year ago Ashlee Simpson was caught lip-synching her performance on Saturday Night Live, which came close to ending her career as Jessica Simpson's sister. However, the entire disaster was recorded and widely watched on the internet, so now Ashlee Simpson is a big movie star.

She wouldn't get very far in Turkmenistan. Apparently President Saparmurat Niyazov was traumatized at a very young age by people mouthing the syllables of his name as they tried to sound it out. Now that he's in charge, he's banned all lip-synching in his country, which obviously was suffering from a nationwide epidemic of the behavior.

Reaction has been swift. Ashlee Simpson mouthed a protest against the ban, and has arranged for a benefit in support of all the Turkmen lip-synchers. She and many other celebrity siblings will record a music video lip-synching *We are the World*, with the proceeds going to several Turkmen charity middlemen.

But President Niyazov didn't stop there. Working from the capital city of Ashgabat (city slogan: "Ashgabat, Gateway to Yerbent"), he has also issued a prohibition against opera, saying that it is "not in line with the national mentality."

Frankly, I can see his point on this one. Opera consists of warbling out long, frustrated songs at the top of your lungs about every mundane thing that is happening to you, including discovering there is milk on your pizza or that someone has stolen all of your Ashlee Simpson albums.

The people of Turkmenistan, deprived of their opera and their beloved lip-synching, are being urged by their president to enjoy a more traditional cultural pastime: political repression. This has given rise to an underground movement which recently issued its first manifesto, a defiant, 20-minute tape that thumbs its nose at the lip-synching ban by being entirely silent. Upon hearing the tape, many Turkmen men and women marched in the streets, moving their lips in synchronized protest.

Niyazov's response has been brutal: He issued a nationwide crackdown on gold teeth in young people. It's the first time in human history that a dictator has ruled a country by bewildering it. According to an opposition leader, "we want to be free to move our lips and replace our teeth as we see fit, and to enjoy all kinds of music except opera."

When advised that President Niyazov has said anyone caught lip-synching will lose his lips, the opposition leader said fatalistically, "lose lips synch lips."

Ashlee Simpson could not be reached for audible comment.