

State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015 - Kyrgyzstan

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About a quarter of Kyrgyzstan's 5.6 million inhabitants are members of minority ethnic groups. Ethnic Uzbeks make up the most sizeable minority, at roughly 14 per cent of the population, and primarily live in the southern regions of Osh and Jalalabad. The second largest ethnic minority is Russians at 8 per cent of the population, primarily in the capital Bishkek, and the surrounding area in the north. Dungans (Han Muslims known as Hui in China), Meskhetian Turks, Tajiks and Uyghurs each make up around 1 per cent, with dozens of other ethnic groups also making up smaller proportions. All the groups remain politically marginalized, though the country has an ethnic German vice-prime minister and an ethnic Russian minister of finance.

There is acknowledgement at the national level of the need to invest in building inter-ethnic harmony, particularly in light of the violence that occurred between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in June 2010 in southern Kyrgyzstan that left several hundred people dead, primarily ethnic Uzbeks. The *Concept of Development of National Unity and Inter-Ethnic Relations*, published by the government in 2013, has the stated aim of promoting a common civic identity, developing multilingual education to increase knowledge of the official Kyrgyz language among all citizens while at the same time fostering language diversity by ensuring that citizens can preserve and study their native languages without facing language-based discrimination. The *Concept* has been characterized as a rare achievement by the 'moderates' allied to the president against nationalist politicians, who since 2010 have used ethnic politics as a convenient and effective tool to gain support among ethnic Kyrgyz. Meanwhile, the Department of Ethnic, Religious Policies and Interaction with Civil Society in the President's Office and the Agency for Inter-ethnic Relations are attempting to establish an early warning and conflict-prevention system at a local level.

However, progress at a policy level is not matched on the ground. Minorities are still excluded from policy discussions relating to inter-ethnic relations, and are inadequately represented in state structures and law-enforcement bodies. This is particularly true of ethnic minorities living in the south, such as Uzbeks and Tajiks. In the face of the ethnic discrimination that was aggravated by the violence in 2010, many members of the ethnic Uzbek community are reportedly adopting documents stating they are ethnically Kyrgyz in an attempt to keep career and social opportunities open. In addition, Uzbek-owned small businesses in southern Kyrgyzstan continue to face disproportionate checks by the authorities, sometimes leading to business closure or disruption. This reportedly intensified in the summer of 2014, and was seen by some Osh residents to be in

retaliation for the shutting off of gas supplies to southern Kyrgyzstan by Uzbekistan – an example of how international tensions can have a negative effect on minority communities.

The judicial response to the 2010 violence has largely targeted members of the ethnic Uzbek community, even though they comprised the majority of victims. Courts continue to sentence ethnic Uzbek community leaders *in absentia* for inciting inter-ethnic hatred and organizing clashes between ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in 2010. In November 2014, Kadyrjan Batyrov and Inom Abdurasulov, two of these leaders, were given life sentences, while a third, Karamat Abdullaeva, received a 16-year jail term. This followed the Kyrgyzstan's Supreme Court rejection in September of an appeal by Azimjan Askarov against his conviction for creating mass disturbances, inciting ethnic hatred and complicity in murder. The detention of the ethnic Uzbek political activist, who prior to his arrest had worked for years documenting police abuses, has been condemned by Human Rights Watch (HRW), Amnesty International and other rights organizations.

The government also continued to crack down on minority activists and human rights organizations during the year. In September, a criminal case was opened against an NGO researching minority rights in southern Kyrgyzstan. The complaint, from the Kyrgyz National Security Service, alleged that the research 'could again ignite inter-ethnic conflict' and that it was acting in its capacity 'to prevent intelligence and subversive activities by foreign special services and organizations'. Though charges were rejected by the prosecutor in early December, the case highlighted the dangers faced by human rights activists working on minority issues. Mahamatjan Abdujaparov, another activist working on police torture and extortion of ethnic Uzbeks, was attacked in his office in Jalalabad on 4 September.

Under Article 10 of the Constitution, Kyrgyz is the state language and Russian is an official language. Russian-language education continues to be relatively popular among all ethnic groups, including many Kyrgyz. There is a common perception that Russian-medium schools are stronger, and that the language will be useful to users at home and potentially as labour migrants. However, in much of the country the number of Russian-speaking teachers is declining. This has particular implications in ethnically mixed areas such as the border province of Batken, where tensions over disputed territory between the Kyrgyz government and neighbouring Tajikistan are ongoing. While residents in this area have in the past been able to communicate by using Russian as a lingua franca, many ethnic Kyrgyz and Tajik children now only speak mutually unintelligible languages in adjacent villages, increasing the potential for future disagreements between the two communities.

The challenges faced by the country's Uzbek speakers are particularly acute, however. While Uzbek had been used relatively widely in education and local government in areas with high proportions of ethnic Uzbeks, since 2010 the space for Uzbek language in official life has been shrinking. From 2014-15, university entrance examinations will only be available in Kyrgyz or Russian. This is part of a broader context in which the educational aspirations of ethnic Uzbeks appear to be reducing. A January 2014 report highlighted sharp declines in the number of Uzbek students moving on to high school and completing school in Osh city.

The reasons for dropping out include financial pressures on families, the need for extra income and favouritism in the allocation of the limited state funds available. Another factor may be the increasing prevalence of child marriage among girls from families affected by the 2010 violence. Local experts interviewed by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) suggested that the increase was linked to rapes committed during the violence. Meanwhile, the total number of Uzbek-

medium schools has halved in recent years, from 133 in 2009/10 to 65 in 2013/14. The reduction has been particularly prominent among urban Uzbeks in the city of Osh, which lost two-thirds of its Uzbek-language schools between 2010 and 2013. Most have been converted into mixed-medium, Kyrgyz or Russian-language schools.

There has also been a rise in prominence of Kyrgyz nationalist youth groups. In January 2015 one of these groups, Kyrk Choro, issued a manifesto calling for foreigners to be allowed to stay only in hotels, and for ethnic Uyghur traders to be barred from the Madina, Bishkek's largest clothing market. They also conducted a high-profile vigilante raid in which they filmed local women who had allegedly been engaged by Chinese migrant workers in commercial sex work. Kyrk Choro appears to have at least tacit support for its actions from government bodies, including security forces. It is unclear where these groups draw most of their supporters from, but most of their activities have taken place in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's capital and major urban centre.

A Uyghur community organization held a congress in October 2014, after several meetings had reportedly been prohibited in recent years. HRW has expressed concern that Kyrgyz authorities too often target Uyghurs with trumped-up terrorism charges, allegedly as a result of pressure from China as bilateral ties have strengthened between the countries. Uyghur community leaders in Kyrgyzstan do not express support for Uyghur separatism, but some have reportedly raised concerns that the lack of a Uyghur-language school in the country violates their language rights.

The government took a number of steps during the year to increase its control over religious expression, particularly in the case of Ahmadi Muslims, Bahá'í, Hare Krishna, Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestants and other 'non-traditional' groups. In January, the government also announced that it would be revising its Religion Law. Though details of the changes were not confirmed, remarks by the head of the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA) have suggested that part of the focus would be on state registration of religious organizations. Yet registration for many religious organizations has been met with official obstruction or denial. For example, the arrest of two Jehovah's Witnesses in 2013 in Osh (the accused were finally acquitted in October 2014, though they remained under house arrest for a number of months afterwards while the prosecutor appealed the verdict) was seen by members as a reprisal for the group having recently renewed its application for official registration. The Ahmadi community, who, since being stripped of their registration in 2011 have been unable to meet for worship, launched an appeal at the Supreme Court to appeal against two previous court refusals of registration. In July, however, the Supreme Court upheld the previous rulings against them.

Another recurring issue of religious discrimination is the difficulty experienced by some non-Muslims in the burial of their dead, particularly in rural areas. A number of incidents were reported during the year of discrimination in funeral and burial arrangements for Protestants, with local imams obstructing burial of the deceased in village cemeteries. Burial denial has reportedly been supported or overlooked by police on many occasions and has also been enabled by Article 16 of the Religion Law, which contains a provision stipulating that certain aspects of cemetery use shall be 'governed by regulations of local municipalities'. An April 2014 draft of the government's *Concept on State Policy in the Religious Sphere 2014-20* acknowledged the problem, but failed to highlight the complicity of authorities in failing to protect the victims. Though manifesting as local prejudice, these incidents reflect the broader context of state discrimination and have not been confined to rural areas, but have also occurred close to the capital, Bishkek. Authorities have themselves continued to target religious minorities in Bishkek. During 2014, for example, repeated

inspections were conducted on various places of worship in the city, including the Hope Baptist Church, which was reportedly visited by state agencies several times and threatened with eviction. The State Property Fund also attempted to confiscate the property of the Protestant Church of Jesus Christ by seeking to annul the 1999 contract it had previously signed with the Church. Some community members have speculated that the authorities may be motivated by the high value of the site, situated in a prime area of Bishkek, and that the land may be earmarked for a private developer. Though the Economic Court approved the annulment in January 2014, an appeal by the Church was granted by Bishkek City Court in April. However, the State Property Fund subsequently launched a further action to claim the property in the Supreme Court. The case was still unconcluded at the end of the year.

Urbanization in general, particularly in the country's southern cities, has been one of the primary causes of ethnic tension in Kyrgyzstan. In Soviet times, the vast majority of ethnic Kyrgyz lived in rural areas, with a wide range of minority ethnic groups predominant in the cities: Bishkek (then Frunze) was primarily Russian-speaking, after several waves of settlement mainly from European parts of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union over a 150-year period, while Osh, Jalalabad and Uzgen cities in the south also had long-standing Uzbek-speaking populations. As the Soviet system began to break down in the 1980s, living conditions became increasingly untenable in rural areas, and many ethnic Kyrgyz moved to the cities. Pressure on land in the cities led to a number of violent outbreaks in the south in 1990, resulting in several hundred deaths in Osh and Uzgen. Many ethnic Kyrgyz formerly engaged as farmers or nomads in the countryside were forced by lack of livelihood or poverty to move to the cities, where they often struggled to establish viable livelihoods for themselves in the urban economies, where the largely Uzbek mercantile class were dominant. This rapid and troubled process of urbanization has been identified as one of the factors behind the outbreak of the June 2010 violence.

As many ethnic Kyrgyz rural-urban migrants face overcrowding and sub-standard living conditions, the state's failure to provide land or adequate housing has generated acute resentment. At key flashpoints in recent years this anger has also been directed towards urban minority communities, particularly those such as Osh's Uzbek business owners with property in the city. Similarly, during previous moments of political instability in the country, minorities have been targeted for their assets. For example, after President Kurmanbek Bakiyev was removed from power in April 2010, Meskhetian Turks in the village of Maevka, just outside Bishkek, were targeted and their homes burned to the ground: the clashes resulted in at least five deaths and 28 injured.

Land and housing shortages remain unresolved and continue to affect inter-ethnic relations in many urban areas. In Osh, for instance, a number of incidents have flared between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek residents due to the continued failure of authorities to provide sufficient housing to accommodate the growing population of rural migrants, many of whom live in the city as squatters. In turn, many ethnic Uzbek businessmen have been forced to emigrate from the country due to financial difficulties in the wake of the 2010 conflict.

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