



State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2016 - Uzbekistan

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Events of 2015

Uzbekistan is Central Asia's most populous country, with more than 30 million inhabitants. While no census has been conducted since 1989, authorities estimate that ethnic Uzbeks are 82 per cent of the population. Ethnic Tajiks are estimated to make up 4.8 per cent of the population; otherwise the largest minority groups are ethnic Russians (2.6 per cent of the population), ethnic Tatars (0.7 per cent) and ethnic Koreans (0.6 per cent). While the nominally autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan occupies 37 per cent of the country's territory, ethnic Karakalpaks represent about a third of the Karakalpakstan's population, and a very slight proportion of the country's total population.

The ethnic Tajik population is widely thought to be much greater than official statistics indicate, given that many Tajiks and Tajik speakers may classify themselves as Uzbeks to improve their career opportunities: while state law prohibits discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, members of ethnic minorities are generally under-represented in prominent public and private sector positions. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) raised concerns in 2014 regarding the shrinking opportunities for children from ethnic minorities, particularly ethnic Tajiks, to study in their native languages. The Committee also suggested that minority Tajik language and culture were increasingly casualties to the tensions between the governments of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

CERD has also highlighted the decreasing use of the Karakalpak language in Karakalpakstan, as well as concerns 'at the inability of some members of the Karakalpak ethnic group to maintain their culture, their livelihoods and their traditional lifestyle'. The Aral Sea ecological crisis, along with state concerns about separatism – the region has produced several independence movements – both

contribute to this. As a result of poorly conceived Soviet-era agricultural practices, some of which persist to this day, Uzbekistan's portion of the sea has gone from being a drainage basin for the region's largest rivers to a toxic desert. Fishing and cattle ranching, traditional sources of income for Karakalpaks as well as for members of other ethnic groups living alongside them, now range from unsafe or unprofitable to impossible. Meanwhile, the region sees few of the profits from the newly thriving oil and gas industries. Karakalpaks claim that key government posts in the province are dominated by ethnic Uzbeks, many of whom are from the national capital, Tashkent.

The Uzbek state restricts the public and private conduct of its citizens in ways that observers frequently say violate basic human rights. Many of these restrictions govern traditional practices, or practices, which the state sees as threatening tradition. Restrictions on religious practice are widely seen to be particularly intrusive and far-reaching. Along with requiring religious bodies to register according to a stringent procedure that is particularly onerous for smaller groups, authorities are known to regularly harass members of religious minorities and interfere with their religious practice. For example, in November authorities issued an order stating that ethnic Uzbeks who are non-Muslims needed to specify burial arrangements in their wills – a requirement that does not apply to other demographics. The order followed an incident in July in which authorities allegedly obstructed burial rites for a member of a Jehovah's Witness family and stopped mourners from entering the family's house, threatening hefty fines.

The limitations placed on Muslims whose practices the state regards as 'non-traditional' can be even more severe, especially when their practitioners may be critical of official policy. Restrictions take many forms, from police ordering women wearing the *hijab* to remove their scarves or re-tie them at the back of their neck in keeping with more widespread Uzbek custom, to arrest and imprisonment. Forum 18 estimates that there may be thousands of Muslims in jail on dubious charges of extremism. The Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan estimates that at least 300 Muslims were arrested and convicted on charges of religious extremism in 2015.