

State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2012 - Tajikistan

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Tajiks comprise the largest ethnic group in the country, accounting for 79.9 per cent of the population. Other groups include Uzbeks (15.3 per cent), Russians (1.1 per cent) and Kyrgyz (1.1 per cent). Only two of the 63 parliamentarians in Tajikistan are ethnic Uzbeks. Uzbeks primarily live in the west of the country, near the border with Uzbekistan. Tajikistan's plans to build a major hydroelectric dam at Rogun have aggravated relations with neighbouring Uzbekistan and have reportedly led to the Uzbek minority facing increasing pressure inside the country.

One barrier to political empowerment for the Uzbek community is the government's language policy. Though the Constitution guarantees linguistic plurality, media reports reveal that in practice the use of anything besides Tajik in public discourse is discouraged, and few radio or television broadcasts are in Uzbek. In addition, civil servants are required to speak Tajik. Language policy also inhibits upward mobility for Uzbeks. University applicants must be fluent in Tajik. Although schoolchildren study the Tajik language for two hours a day, for many rural Uzbeks this is not enough to master reading and writing.

Non-nationals of Tajikistan wanting to marry local citizens have been hit by new legislation passed in January, which requires foreigners to have lived in the country for a year before they can marry locals and to sign pre-nuptial agreements committing them to providing housing for their spouse. Reportedly, the changes target two specific groups – male Afghan citizens and ethnic Uighurs from China – some of whom are suspected to enter into marriage with local women to secure residence rights and accelerate acquisition of citizenship. There are fears within Tajikistan that immigrants from China will fill the vacuum caused by the mass migration of Tajik citizens seeking employment in the Russian Federation. Fears of an influx from China were raised in the media following the decision of Tajikistan to lease 2,000 hectares of land to China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in January 2011.

Ethnic Kyrgyz women in Tajikistan are increasingly falling victim to bride kidnapping, which is widespread in Kyrgyzstan. Media reports suggest that some of their ethnic Tajik neighbours in the north-eastern Jyrgatal district have begun to copy the practice.

In March, Forum 18 reported that all religious activity independent of state control, by Muslims, Christians, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious believers, has continued to be targeted by the state. Violations perpetrated by the government include: demolitions and closures of mosques, churches and the country's only synagogue; a ban on all religious activity without state permission; arbitrary jailing of Muslims and criminal charges against Jehovah's Witnesses; limitations on the right to share beliefs; and tight government censorship. The government justifies the imposition of these controls by the impact of extremism and Islamization on national security. In 2011, it continued to carry out military raids against alleged Islamist militants who had been hiding in areas that were opposition strongholds during the civil war in the 1990s, particularly the Rasht Valley, home of the Garmi community.

In a visit to Tajikistan in October, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton suggested that recent steps to control faith could drive 'legitimate religious expression underground' and fuel extremism.

A law passed in August to ban children under 18 who are not receiving state-approved religious education from places of worship, appeared in October to be targeting mainly independent Muslims. Members of other religious groups continued to face legal problems, including a Jehovah's Witness with Uzbekistan citizenship, who was deported to Uzbekistan in September despite having a legal right of residence in Tajikistan.

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