

Central Asia

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For the five post-Soviet states of Central Asia, the year 2015 was marked by a steep economic downturn, growing concern about the security situation in northern Afghanistan and frequent public discussion about the reportedly growing influence of Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in the region. Recent events, such as a shootout in Kyrgyzstan's capital involving alleged ISIS members, have invigorated a narrative long promoted by officials in the region – that of a grave threat of terrorist incursion and calls for strict state control over the practice of Islam. The year 2015 saw heads of state take some harsh measures to limit the role of Islam in public life, the clearest example of which was Tajikistan's ban on the moderate Islamic Renaissance Party, previously the only legal Islamic party in the region.

While the five countries of Central Asia have all followed distinct political trajectories since the break-up of the Soviet Union, each government in the region has staked its legitimacy, to a greater or lesser degree, on its image as a guardian and reviver of cultural traditions that are indispensable to the state's survival in the modern world. Though discrimination based on ethnic, national or religious identity may be legally prohibited, in practice appeals to 'tradition' can be used to justify discrimination as well as to protect citizens from it.

Kazakhstan

According to the 2009 nationwide census, 63 per cent of Kazakhstan's population of roughly 16 million identify as members of the titular ethnic group. Of the 37 per cent who identify as members of a minority, ethnic Russians are by far the largest group, making up 23.7 per cent of the population. Also, 2.8 per cent of Kazakhstanis identify as ethnic Uzbeks and 2.1 per cent as Ukrainians, while Uyghurs (1.4 per cent), Tatars

(1.3 per cent) and Germans (1.1 per cent) each make up smaller proportions of the population. Other minorities make up a total of 4.5 per cent of Kazakhstan's inhabitants.

When Kazakhstan became independent in 1991, ethnic Kazakhs and ethnic Russians represented a roughly equal share of the population, though the former were under-represented in major cities. Over the past 25 years, state policy has sought to balance two parallel goals when it comes to cultivating civic and ethnic identity. On the one hand, the state has taken steps to avoid alienating its ethnic Russians, who, according to one standard narrative, are seen as a potential source of separatism. On the other hand, authorities have worked actively to increase the numbers of Kazakhs and rehabilitate their traditions. The state has retained Russian as an official language, while President Nursultan Nazarbayev has spoken consistently throughout the years of Kazakhstan's status as a land of pluralism and tolerance. Yet authorities have also offered subsidies to ethnic Kazakhs living outside of the country's borders who choose to repatriate, in what the United Nations (UN) has described as an effort to 'preserve and develop Kazakh culture'. The state has designated both Sunni Islam, the religion of most ethnic Kazakhs, and Orthodox Christianity, the primary religion of the country's Slavs, as 'traditional' religions, alongside Judaism and Roman Catholicism. Many towns have ostentatious new mosques and Orthodox churches built side by side to symbolize religious pluralism, and Nazarbayev has likened the two religions to 'Kazakhstan's wings', without either of which the country could not 'fly'. On the other hand, the president has said that the titular group has 'a particular responsibility' for the country's development.

Notably, efforts to bolster the majority ethnic group have helped to create what looks at times like a new minority. Over the past 25 years, nearly 1 million so-called Oralman, or 'returnees' – members of the Kazakh diaspora living in countries such as China, Iran, Mongolia, Turkey and Uzbekistan – have elected to take advantage of state programmes that offer ethnic Kazakhs subsidies to repatriate. While many Oralman have integrated successfully and do

not report feeling marginalized, others speak of steep barriers to integration and disillusionment at the state of the ethnic Kazakh language and culture in Kazakhstan. Returnees from countries that were not part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) report that their lack of knowledge of the Russian language impedes their access to work and social services, as many local ethnic Kazakhs do not have full command of the Kazakh language. Meanwhile, authorities – including Nazarbayev – have accused the Oralman community of failing to contribute to the country's economy, and the government even briefly phased out subsidies in 2012. However, subsidies have since been reinstated, and in October 2015 the state passed legislation that expedited the citizenship process for Oralman – a move that some view as an effort by the state to put a more ethnically Kazakh mark on those areas of the country where ethnic Russians are present in large numbers, in light of fears of a Ukraine-type scenario in Kazakhstan.

State officials and prominent media outlets regularly draw attention to the purported dangers of 'non-traditional' Islam – that is, Islamic practice that takes place outside of the state's purview or appears to deviate from those teachings mandated by the state. Even non-violent Islamic organizations that fall outside state-sanctioned boundaries are frequently said to threaten Kazakh ethnic identity. The past few years have seen a crackdown on Tablighi Jamaat, a Sunni organization founded in India in 1926 that identifies as non-violent and apolitical. Kazakhstan banned Tablighi Jamaat as extremist in February 2013. Nine alleged members of the organization were on trial at the beginning of 2016 on charges related to extremist activity, while an additional member is awaiting trial. Meanwhile, 19 alleged members are known to have been convicted of crimes related to extremism since December 2014: eight of these have received prison sentences, with the longest being four years and eight months, while the rest have been sentenced to terms of restricted freedom to exercise their religion or belief. Members of Christian, non-Orthodox congregations also continue to face harassment and charges of extremism – notably, a Seventh Day Adventist was sentenced to two years'

imprisonment in a labour camp in December on charges of 'inciting religious discord' for distributing religious literature.

Kyrgyzstan

According to the 2009 census, almost 71 per cent of Kyrgyzstan's population identify as ethnically Kyrgyz, while the remainder belong to minority groups. Ethnic Uzbeks, who are concentrated in the Ferghana Valley region in the country's south-west, made up 14.3 per cent of the population, while another 7.8 per cent of Kyrgyzstanis, mostly residents of northern urban areas, identify as ethnic Russians. Ethnic Tajiks, Uyghurs and Dungans each make up about 1 per cent of the population, while Turk, Tatar, Kazakh, Azeri, Korean, Ukrainian and German communities are present in smaller numbers.

One key event of 2015 was October's parliamentary elections. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) noted in one of its reports that 'most parties refrained from nationalist rhetoric, and neither anti-minority campaigning nor intimidation of minorities was reported in the course of the campaign'. Nevertheless, national minorities were under-represented on electoral commissions, and, in violation of OSCE commitments, no official election material was available in minority languages – that is, languages other than the state language, Kyrgyz, and Russian, the second official language. Key minority groups were also under-represented among the winners of the election: while ethnic Russians are nearly proportionally represented, ethnic Uzbeks occupy only 2.5 per cent of the seats in the new parliament.

The conduct and outcome of the election is arguably reflective of Kyrgyzstan's gradual and at times uncertain recovery from inter-ethnic violence in the Ferghana Valley region in 2010. In June that year, around 470 people were reportedly killed in attacks lasting several days, almost three-quarters of whom were ethnic Uzbeks. Following the violence, the government promoted a narrative according to which Uzbek community leaders with a separatist agenda had organized the attacks while ethnic Kyrgyz had fought back spontaneously. In keeping with this narrative, about three-quarters of those tried for crimes connected to the violence have been