

Last Updated: Wednesday, 06 June 2012, 12:29 GMT

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Title	State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2011 - Kyrgyzstan
Publisher	Minority Rights Group International
Country	Kyrgyzstan
Publication Date	6 July 2011
Cite as	Minority Rights Group International, <i>State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2011 - Kyrgyzstan</i> , 6 July 2011, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4e16d36a50.html [accessed 6 June 2012]
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State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2011 - Kyrgyzstan

In 2009, ethnic Kyrgyz constituted 68 per cent of the population in the southern provinces of Batken, Jalalabad and Osh, with Uzbeks the largest minority, at 26 per cent. Uzbeks form a much higher percentage of the population in the densely populated fertile agricultural and urban areas of Jalalabad and Osh provinces, and are a majority in some of these areas, while mountainous areas have remained predominantly ethnic Kyrgyz.

Meanwhile, after large-scale emigration to Russia and Europe since the end of the Soviet Union, the north of the country has smaller non-Kyrgyz communities, often concentrated in cities or discrete villages in Chuy Valley. The instability that followed the overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiy in April saw a rise in inter-ethnic tension in Chuy province. On 8-9 April, anti-government protests in the city of Tokmok escalated into targeted riots against ethnic Uighur and Dungan businesses.

On 17 April, six people died when ethnic Kyrgyz squatters attempted to seize land and property from Meskhetian Turkish residents of Maevka village on the outskirts of the capital Bishkek and met armed resistance from homeowners. A Dungan village was also targeted by land-grabbers on 22 April, but the police intervened to prevent escalation. Meanwhile, the Russian Federation also protested about incidents affecting ethnic Russians in April.

The interim government that took power in April committed itself to introducing parliamentary democracy. The approach was initially welcomed by ethnic Uzbek leaders in the south, who mobilized support for the interim government, and called for more Uzbek participation in the country's political life, and enhanced status for Uzbek language. However, a chain of events led to increased tensions and then inter-ethnic violence in Jalalabad in May.

The clashes intensified during the following month. At least 418 people died in southern Kyrgyzstan in June during violence largely between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. Some reports say the true casualty figure could be more than 2,000. Most of the victims identified so far have been ethnic Uzbeks, although there were also many Kyrgyz victims. Destruction of property overwhelmingly, though not exclusively, targeted ethnic Uzbek areas and Uzbek-owned establishments. A National Commission of Enquiry published findings in January 2011 blaming Uzbek community leaders for provoking the violence, in alliance with other provocateurs; the report has been criticized for being poorly researched and overly political. Meanwhile, an International Commission of Enquiry into the events is due to release its findings in early 2011.

Security concerns among the ethnic Uzbek population, including fear of gender-based violence, have become much more prominent since the June events. In August, residents of Uzbek neighbourhoods told HRW that they were leaving their homes as little as possible, fearing attack, arrest, harassment or extortion by the security forces or other authorities. In December, a group of Uzbek community leaders met the mayor of Osh, Melis Myrzakmatov, to discuss their security situation, including ongoing reports of kidnappings. The mayor assured the Uzbek leaders that the Osh authorities would do everything they could to provide security. This meeting was significant, as the role of Myrzakmatov in regard to the ethnic turmoil has been a prominent feature of discussions, given his previous declarations that he is a (Kyrgyz) 'nationalist', and his refusal to step down following the violence, when requested to do so by the interim government.

There are nevertheless concerns that Uzbeks are being disproportionately targeted in efforts to find the instigators of the violence. In the weeks and months following the violence, a series of sweep operations took place in predominantly Uzbek areas in and around Osh. These were

accompanied by human rights violations including arbitrary arrest, illegal detention, torture and ill-treatment of detainees during arrest and in custody. There were also reports of looting and confiscation of property. With regard to judicial processes, as of early November, the overwhelming majority of those tried had been ethnic Uzbeks. According to Amnesty International, the trials have been 'seriously flawed with lawyers being harassed outside the courtrooms, and judges refusing to call defence witnesses or recognize that "confessions" may have been extracted under torture'. Relatives and lawyers of the defendants, as well as the defendants themselves, have been attacked on several occasions both inside and outside courtrooms.

There is also a culture of impunity for low-level attacks and crimes against ethnic Uzbeks in the post-conflict period. Verbal harassment, physical assault and theft are reported to be common in Osh. There are concerns that corrupt officials are taking advantage of the situation to demand more and higher bribes from ethnic Uzbeks for public services or to be released from police custody. In addition, ethnic Kyrgyz human rights activists and lawyers who have revealed abuses against ethnic Uzbeks have been harassed. In July, prominent activist Tolekan Ismailova left the country for several months alleging that death threats had been made against her.

Other ethnic groups were also affected by the June instability. A number of ethnic Tajiks from Batken province reportedly fled briefly with Uzbeks to Uzbekistan. There were also reports in June that hundreds of ethnic Uighurs had fled to Kazakhstan from northern Kyrgyzstan after receiving threats that they would be the next target of violence. However, despite several scares, no large-scale violence broke out in the north of the country.

Despite the June violence, the interim government pushed ahead with constitutional reforms. The draft Constitution, which was put to referendum on 27 June, gave the parliament greater authority. Earlier requests by Uzbek community leaders for state recognition of their language nationally or in majority-Uzbek areas were not reflected in the new Constitution, in which Kyrgyz remains the state language and Russian the official language.

Elections were held under the new Constitution on 10 October, with 29 parties participating and five winning seats. A narrow plurality was won by the then opposition party Ata Jurt, which is strongest among southern Kyrgyz. The party made several coded anti-diversity messages during the campaign. Meanwhile, the parties that came second and third in the election (the Social Democratic Party and Ar Namys) had consciously courted Uzbek votes in the south, and both saw prominent ethnic Uzbeks being elected as parliamentarians. Ar Namys was also popular among ethnic Russians and other minorities in the north.

A coalition government was formed in mid December. The new government's approach to inter-ethnic relations is unpredictable, as it includes both Ata Jurt and the Social Democrats, as well as fourth-placed Respublika, which had several minority ethnic candidates but then became the only party with no minority representation in parliament after two ethnic Russians withdrew from the party list after the election. In total, six Russians, three Uzbeks, one Korean and the first ever ethnic Tajik parliamentarian in Kyrgyzstan took up seats after the elections.

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