

State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2013 - Uzbekistan

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Only 11 members of the 150-seat strong lower chamber of government and 11 of 100 seats in the lower chamber are occupied by ethnic minorities. Furthermore, officials reserve senior government positions for ethnic Uzbeks despite laws prohibiting employment discrimination based on ethnicity or national origin.

The US State Department 2012 human rights report cites widespread restrictions on religious freedoms, including harassment of religious minority groups. The report also highlighted a government crackdown on international NGO activity and further suspicion of unregulated Islamic and minority religious groups. For example, in March security cameras were installed in more than 30 mosques in the religiously conservative Ferghana Valley. Authorities claimed that cameras were installed in order to prevent theft, but locals argue it is to ensure preachers toe the party line.

Uzbekistan remained a 'country of particular concern' according to the USCIRF 2013 report. Persecution of unregistered Christian groups was commonplace throughout 2012. For example, in December a group of Protestants were charged for discussing their faith and singing Christian songs; they also had their songbooks confiscated and fingerprints taken. In November, leaders of some registered Protestant churches were gathered in Tashkent and instructed to re-register within one month. They were also warned against missionary activity. Baptist congregations have made similar reports.

The state-run media encouraged intolerant views towards Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and other groups, sometimes equating their practices with extremism.

In the autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan – with a mainly Karakalpak population – only Muslim and Russian Orthodox religious communities have been registered, making the activity of more than 20 Protestant and Jehovah's Witness congregations 'illegal'. Most churches are now closed and there have been reports of Hare Krishna and Protestant students being expelled from

university. Members of the South Korean-based Unification Church have been told that they cannot contact members in other countries.

Many citizens arrested for alleged religious extremism continue to end up in prison. In July 2012 ethnic Kazakh Ermek Qosmaghambetov was charged with attempting to smuggle 'materials propagating religious extremism' into Uzbekistan on his laptop. Most arrests for extremism affect members of banned religious groups Hizb-ut-Tahrir and Nur (a movement founded by theologian Said Nursi, who died in 1960), whose members comprise the majority of political prisoners in Uzbekistan. Pressure to break up 'extremist' cells has led to police and security services to use measures such as detention and mistreatment of accused persons' family members and attaining confessions through torture.

Trials rarely meet international standards and once they are incarcerated prisoners report religious discrimination. The US State Department 2012 report highlights the case of an imprisoned Jehovah's Witness reaching the end of his term and being told to renounce his beliefs or face trial once again. Also, despite periodic presidential amnesties to mark public holidays, political and religious prisoners remain ineligible.

Large numbers of prisoners are sent to the infamous Jaslyk Prison in the autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan. The institution is colloquially known as the 'House of Torture' or 'Place of No Return'. It became a destination for those charged with religious extremism after bombings in 1999 that were blamed on Islamist groups. HRW now places the number of inmates at between 5,000 and 7,000. It is well known for housing prominent dissidents and political prisoners.

As in other Central Asian states, simply being in prison in Uzbekistan is detrimental to prisoners' health. The WHO has launched a prevention and treatment programme in prisons to stop the spread of tuberculosis as well as HIV/AIDS.

The Uzbek government claims that conditions in the jail are improving. However, a letter from an inmate – published by French human rights group Association for Human Rights in Central Asia (AHRCA) – tells of being beaten for something as minor as not showing interest in nationalist books written by President Karimov.

Sokh enclave

Sokh is a small pocket of Uzbek territory almost completely surrounded by Kyrgyzstan's Batken province in the Ferghana Valley. It is home to an estimated 60,000 people, with the vast majority ethnic Tajik and other minorities.

Ethnic tensions have simmered in the small region amid border disputes since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have a strong security presence and strict border checks.

Territorial disputes have hampered local development and the region remains one of the poorest areas in Kyrgyzstan. The Sokh enclave has been targeted by the Uzbek authorities as a suspected breeding ground for Islamic extremism. As a result large numbers of residents have emigrated, particularly to Russia.

In January 2013 ethnic violence erupted as Sokh residents attacked Kyrgyz guards erecting electricity poles in disputed territory. The ensuing riots, which spilled over into Kyrgyz territory, led to the destruction of Kyrgyz property – mainly vehicles – and almost 40 Kyrgyz were taken hostage, among them women and children.

The enclave border was sealed and barbed wire fences erected along some borders. The residents, mainly ethnic Tajiks, were cut off from the rest of Uzbekistan. Aid agencies were initially prevented from entering the enclave although restrictions were relaxed by the end of January.

Talks between the governments of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to solve the crisis quickly broke down, although Uzbekistan did agree to pay compensation in some instances to Kyrgyz citizens for damage to their property. Tajikistan also has long-standing territorial claims in the region.

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