

State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2014 - Uzbekistan

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With just under 30 million inhabitants, Uzbekistan is Central Asia's most populous country. While ethnic Uzbeks make up approximately 80 per cent of the country's population, Russians and Tajiks each make up a significant proportion of the population. Other minority groups include Karakalpaks, Kyrgyz and Tatars. Since 1989, President Islam Karimov has held power in the country, consistently attracting criticism from human rights organizations for his harsh suppression of dissent. Karimov's authoritarian leadership, while purporting to protect minorities by ensuring peace and order, has produced a largely inhospitable environment for members of ethnic and religious minority groups.

While the law provides for non-discrimination on the basis of ethnicity and national origin, officials reportedly reserve key positions in government and business for ethnic Uzbeks. Opportunities for ethnic minorities to study in their native languages have shrunk steadily since the fall of the Soviet Union. At the same time, methods for remedial Uzbek-language instruction remain underdeveloped, leading to narrowed academic opportunities for non-native speakers of Uzbek.

The status of Tajiks, Uzbekistan's largest non-Russian minority, is generally considered precarious, due in part to tensions between the leadership of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Some observers link this hostility to the dramatic reduction over the past decade of Tajik-language schooling in and around the cities of Samarkand and Bukhara, where Uzbekistan's Tajik population remains concentrated. Overall, the number of Tajik-language schools in Uzbekistan has fallen from about 318 in 2001 to 256 in the 2012-13 school year.

The status of religious minorities is notoriously complex. Uzbekistan is officially designated a Country of Particular Concern by the US State Department, having long employed repressive tactics that have recently become widespread in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. Smaller religious sects are suppressed by burdensome registration requirements, while some are targeted for prosecution and harassment on the basis of a broad definition of extremism. According to a 2013 Forum 18 report, state-run media regularly incite religious intolerance and hatred. Hundreds of political prisoners remain incarcerated, including scores of people imprisoned on religious grounds.

A handful of highly publicized incidents of ethnically tinged hate speech have occurred in the past few years. One of these took place in 2012 in the town of Chirchik, roughly 30 km outside the capital Tashkent and about 20 km from the border with Kazakhstan. An ethnic Uzbek college student composed a song insulting ethnic Kazakhs, who make up about 40 per cent of the town's population, which he then disseminated among the student body with the help of mobile phones. This provoked Kazakh and Uzbek students to allegedly plan a large-scale fight, involving hundreds of people on both sides. Police were informed of the plan and patrolled student areas heavily for five days – a move observers credit with staving off violence. Several people were arrested and charged with inciting inter-ethnic hatred.

Most well-publicized cases of alleged incitement are less clear-cut. As in neighbouring countries, those accused of incitement of inter-ethnic hatred are often outspoken critics of the government, while powerful officials may make inflammatory statements with impunity. In April 2012, journalist Elena Bondar was fined over US\$2,000 for allegedly inciting inter-ethnic hatred through a series of comments on internet forums of which she denied authorship. Human rights groups say the charges were fabricated in order to punish Bondar for her independent reporting on issues such as the rights of Uzbekistan's ethnic and linguistic minorities. Bondar fled the country in early 2013, claiming she had been subject to threatening phone calls and harsh treatment by law enforcement, and was granted refugee status by the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Kyrgyzstan in May.