

Ajarians

Profile

Ajarians are essentially Muslim Georgians who speak a dialect of Georgian influenced by Turkish and who adhere to the Hanaifi rite of the Sunni branch of Islam. Ajarians have not been counted as a separate ethnicity in Georgian demography since the 1930s, nor have they mobilized for identification as a separate group. Adherence to Islam today is largely confined to mountainous areas in the region.

Historical context

Ajaria historically formed a borderland between the Russian and Ottoman empires, subject to cultural and political influences from both. Islamized during the region's period under Ottoman domination, Ajaria's population was incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1878. Georgian independence in 1918 was greeted with resistance in Ajaria. Local Ajarian units carried out sabotage activities and conducted guerrilla warfare in support of the Turks, and in 1920 a 'South-West Caucasian Republic' was proclaimed under the leadership of a Georgian Muslim, Jihangiradze Ibrahim Bey, with Turkish support. After incorporation into the Soviet Union, the Ajarians were accorded separate status as an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1922. Rebellion against anti-religious campaigns and collectivization in the late 1920s led to punitive measures, and large numbers of Ajarians were deported to Central Asia. Recognition of Ajarians as a separate ethnic group was withdrawn and they have been considered a Georgian subgroup ever since. However, in deference to the religious differences between Ajarians and Georgians, the status of the autonomous republic was retained.

Ajarians expressed disquiet at attempts at Christianization under the Gamsakhurdia regime in 1991 and a movement to preserve Ajaria's autonomy was formed in response to the threat of its removal by the president. The Ajarian leader, Aslan Abashidze, attempted to steer a delicate path in relations with the central authorities, seeking to maintain a large degree of political and economic autonomy. He resorted to increasingly authoritarian methods to stay in power.

Ajaria is one of the more prosperous regions of Georgia, benefiting from control of the border with Turkey and having avoided violent conflict in the 1990s. Under Aslan Abashidze, however, Ajaria acquired a reputation for authoritarian rule and human rights abuses. Abashidze's regime was one of the first casualties of the 2003 Rose Revolution, and he was forced to leave Ajaria for Russia in May 2004 following six months of confrontation with the new administration in Tbilisi. Ethnic or religious issues played no role in this confrontation, however. Following Abashidze's removal his post was abolished and there was some discussion in Tbilisi on the prospect of abolishing Ajaria's autonomy. This move was rejected probably on account of what signals such a move might send to minorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Current issues

In elections to the Ajarian assembly after the Rose Revolution, Saakashvili's party won 28 of the 30

seats. Their campaign promises included working to improve living standards and stamp out corruption. There were allegations of vote-rigging from the Republican Party, after they won less than 15 per cent of the vote.

Legislation passed by the Georgian Parliament after the elections gives the assembly powers over local affairs. It states that the head of the region's government is nominated by the Georgian president, who also has powers to dissolve the assembly and government, and to overrule local authorities on issues where the constitution of Georgia is contravened.

Adherents to Georgian Orthodoxy elsewhere in Georgia sometimes express doubt as to the compatibility of Georgian identity with Islam. However, in practice for the majority of the population in Ajaria, an Ajarian identity is probably no stronger than other regional Georgian identities. In highland areas, however, some anthropologists have noted small-scale Islamic revival.

[top](#)