

Azeris

Profile

Azeris now form Georgia's largest minority, being the only minority group to have increased its proportional share of the population since 1989. In absolute terms, however, numbers have slightly fallen. Azeris are compactly settled in the south-east region of Kvemo Kartli, bordering on Azerbaijan. Azeris in Georgia are overwhelmingly rural. There are also sizeable communities of Azeris living in the capital Tbilisi, the city of Rustavi and in the Lagodekhi region of Kakheti.

Historical context

Like other minority groups, Azeris in Georgia expressed fears regarding Georgian moves towards independence after 1989. A number of Azeri associations were formed in Georgia in the early 1990s, notably the Geyret popular movement, formed in the town of Marneuli. These organizations, however, never advanced overtly nationalist programmes, mobilizing instead for enhanced cultural autonomy and greater representation of Azeris in local government bodies. Cordial relations between Georgian and Azerbaijani heads-of-state (as well as generally positive relations between Georgians and Azeris at the everyday level) and the background context of Azeri–Armenian conflict imposed significant constraints to potential for Azeri mobilization in Georgia.

Current issues

Primary concerns for Azeris in Georgia today are under-representation in central government bodies and the low level of knowledge of Georgian. In the central parliament that sat until 2008, Azeris had three representatives out of 235 seats, or 1.3 per cent of the seats for a population constituting 6.5 per cent of the population. This discrepancy slightly improved for Azeris in 2008, as they continued to hold three seats in the new 150-seat parliament, for a share two per cent.

Until reforms on local governance passed in 2006, Azeris were also under-represented in local administrative bodies in areas where they form a numerical majority, and, apart from a negligible number of symbolic posts, have no influence in government. The problem was especially acute for the Azeris in Kvemo Kartli, where Georgians held all the important positions. Like the Armenians in Javakheti the only point of access to the political life of the republic for Azeris was through local clan structures co-opted into the Georgian state.

Because Azeris lacked access to policy-making, their inability to influence land privatization in the 1990s continued to cause grievances and has led to tension in recent years. According to International Crisis Group, in February 2006, nine protestors were arrested and detained for three months for violating public order during a land demonstration. Police allegedly physically intimidated Baku-based journalists covering the event and confiscated their videotapes.

Azeris have one of the lowest levels of proficiency in Georgian of any minority group in Georgia (15%

in 2002), and have in recent years relied on Azeri teaching materials imported from Azerbaijan. However, in 2006 local broadcasting of mainstream Georgian news media in Azeri began; the Ministry of Education has also implemented programmes with OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) assistance for the creation of Georgian language primers for Azeri-speakers.

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