

## Mongolia Overview

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### Environment

The world's largest landlocked country in Central-East Asia wedged between China and Russia, Mongolia is mainly made up of arid steppes in its heartland and the Gobi Desert in the south. More than a quarter of its population is nomadic or semi-nomadic, though this is diminishing because of changing climatic conditions and growing urbanisation. Its location at the door of Central Asia's steppes means that Mongolia has at various times been a major transit – and starting – point for different peoples throughout history.

### Peoples

Main languages: Mongolian (incl. regional dialects), Russian, Kazakh.

Main religions: Buddhism (majority), traditional Lamaism, Sunni Islam, Christianity

Minority groups include Kazakh (103,000), Durbet Mongol (66,700), Bayad (50,800), Buryat Mongol (40,600), Dariganga Mongol (31,900), Chinese and Russian (less than 8,000) (Source: National Statistical Office of Mongolia Census 2000)

Mongolia is a fairly homogenous, sparsely populated country of less than three million people (Source: Mongolian National Statistical Office Bulletin, December 2006). While some 85 percent of the population is of Mongol background, mainly Khalka (90 percent), Durbet, and other Mongols (Source: National Statistical Office of Mongolia Census 2000), there is a fairly substantial (about 4 percent) Kazakh-speaking Muslim minority (Source: National Statistical Office of Mongolia Census 2000) concentrated mainly in the northwest corner of the country in the western province of Bayan-Olgii. There are a number of other Mongol groups with distinct dialects and cultures such as the Durbet, Bayad, Buryat and Dariganga Mongols, though whether they are dialects or distinct Mongolian languages from the official Khalka variety of Mongolian used by the government and spoken mainly in the central parts of the country is something of an open question.

There are in addition to Kazakhs some other small groups of Turkic-speaking minorities in the western and northern parts of Mongolia (Uyghurs, Uzbeks, Tuvinians, Urianhais and Hotons). It is however one of Mongolia's smallest minorities which has garnered perhaps the most international attention in recent

years. Numbering some 200 individuals in the whole country, the indigenous Tuvianian-speaking Tsaatan (also known as Dukha) reindeer herders survive in the Sayan Mountains around Lake Hovsgol in northern Mongolia. Another indigenous group are the Evenk who speak a Tungusic language. There are also clusters of Russian and Chinese residents, mainly in the cities, but most of the Russians appear to have migrated after the collapse of the Soviet Union

Muslims are the most significant religious minority in the country, followed by Christians and animists. A large number of people also consider themselves to be atheists.

## **History**

Though various groups have been historically present in what is now Mongolia, the ancestors of today's ethnic Mongolians would become predominant – and remain so – from about the 10th Century. One development which was to affect the shape of the country's population is the conversion of the Mongolian ruler Altan Khan to Tibetan, or Vajrayana, Buddhism in the early 17th Century. Most Mongolians today still follow this faith. Despite being ruled by the Manchus ruled by the Qing Dynasty for some 200 years, the ethnic composition of Mongolia has not altered dramatically. Mongolia remains one of the world's more homogenous countries culturally and linguistically.

They did not however supplant or absorb all ethnic groups already established in the region or prevent population movements from neighbouring countries into what is today Mongolia, as shows the continued presence of small indigenous peoples such as the Tsaatan and Evenk and the eventual presence of a large Kazakh minority.

The world's second communist country when it gained independence in 1921, with the assistance and under the protection of the Soviet Union, Mongolia's ethnic makeup was not to change dramatically for decades. Other than Kazakh schools in place since the 1940s, ethnic minorities were largely unseen and unknown in terms of actual government-supported policies.

The collapse of the socialist block did lead to some demographic changes with the departure of large numbers of Soviet soldiers and various workers and advisers, most of whom left after the fall of the Soviet Union. They were not however the only members of a minority after 1989: perhaps 70,000 Kazakhs also left the country by the end of 2000, partially in response to the strong economic situation in Kazakhstan and from that government's call for ethnic Kazakhs to 'come home', as well as to Mongolia's own economic difficulties.

It is also assumed that more Kazakhs and other minorities in the western part of the country may have more recently emigrated after the disastrous winters of 2001 and 2002 when extreme cold weather destroyed six million heads of cattle, bringing much of the country on the edge of famine, with one report identifying an upsurge of families migrating to Kazakhstan in 2004.

## **Governance**

Mongolia has increasingly moved towards strengthening its human rights credentials after it started to move away from its highly centralized Marxist past in 1990 and became in 1996 a full-fledged democracy with the first elections of a non-Communist government. The country began adopting in 1999 various legislative provisions prohibiting different types of discrimination in its labour laws and went on from 2000 to 2002 to ratify more human rights treaties such as the optional protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts and on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, the Convention against Torture and Other

Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. It also established in 2001 a National Commission for Human Rights in Mongolia.

There has traditionally been in Mongolia a tendency of viewing the country as only containing ethnic Mongolians and of denying or not acknowledging the presence of minorities. Despite the 1992 Constitution recognising ‘the right of national minorities of other tongues to use their native languages in education and communication and in the pursuit of cultural, artistic and scientific activities’, and the 1995 Basic Principles of Education and Education Law stating that citizens ‘shall be provided with conditions to learn in his or her native language’, there is in fact no implementation mechanism or process in place to ensure that these rights are recognised and exercised in practice.

There is no clear government policy on mother tongue or bilingual education for minorities, despite the noble principles enshrined in the Constitution. So widespread is the view within government that Mongolia is made up almost exclusively of ethnic Mongolians that it has until recently almost consistently omitted to include in its reports to various human rights bodies any mention or statistic on the existence or treatment of minorities within its borders.

Its policies cannot however be described as only involving benign neglect. As the Mongolian language in its Khalka variety is the state’s only official language and has been for all intent and purposes in that position since the creation of independent Mongolia, there has been a tendency – with the exception of the Kazakh language, mainly in the area of primary education and then transiting towards a greater proportion of instruction in Mongolian in later years – to ignore any other possible use of minority languages in state schools or services, even where minorities might be present in substantial numbers. Even in relation to Kazakh-language state schools, the government’s tolerance is not what it seems: until 2005, teachers in Kazakh schools were only provided textbooks and teaching materials in Mongolian, even if the language of instruction was Kazakh. Furthermore, in areas with mixed populations authorities tend to refuse providing instructions in Kazakh. It is sometimes suggested that one reason for the authorities’ unresponsiveness is Mongolia’s limited financial resources.

The language policies of state authorities in the western province of Bayan-Olgii where the Kazakhs are concentrated (85 per cent of the population) could also be deemed to be discriminatory and explain why Kazakhs are so underrepresented in terms of employment in government positions. As employment in these jobs is linked to fluency in Mongolian – and many Kazakhs in the province tend to be less fluent than native Khalka speakers – the refusal to apply some form of official bilingualism in the province results in far fewer opportunities for this minority.

Other policies have been greatly impacted on the livelihood of indigenous peoples by restricting if not prohibiting completely their traditional hunting or reindeer breeding activities. In combination with schooling which did not permit the teaching of the languages of the Evenks and Tsaatan, these policies have for the most part continued unabated until now. As for the treatment of religious minorities, it has been largely one of non-interference and of respect for freedom of religion in the last decade.

### **Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples**

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and government of Mongolia have collaborated on a number of initiatives that have reformed the administration of the country in the 1990s, the Programme for Governance and Economic Transition and the Management Development Programme, which appear to have had a beneficial impact for minorities. Though not sanctioned in legislation, the decentralization of public administration under these programmes has apparently led to a greater use of

minority languages by local authorities, who now have more autonomy and responsibilities. Previously, the highly centralized Mongolian administration meant an almost exclusive use of the Mongolian (Khalka) language, to the exclusion of minority languages. Government documentation, school textbooks and other teaching or official materials continue not to be produced in any other language. The only exceptions have started to occur in 2004 and 2005, partially as a result of the concern expressed by international bodies who have noted that Mongolian authorities have failed to demonstrate sufficient attention and care in the implementation of their legal obligations in relation to the rights of minorities.

It is mainly after remonstrations and requests for clarifications from entities such as the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) that the Mongolian Ministry of Education began a schedule in 2004 to translate and publish for the first time primary school textbooks in the Kazakh language. This plan does not extend to other teaching and reference materials, or even to a Kazakh-Mongolian dictionary.

It is also in 2005 – once again after direct inquiries from UN bodies such as CERD and following the publication of a study on the indigenous Tsaatan minority by the National Human Rights Commission of Mongolia – that the Mongolian government adopted a ‘Tuva Language Study Programme’ aimed at supporting the efforts to preserve their cultural heritage.

Unfortunately, Mongolian authorities still tend to turn a blind eye on the situation and needs of their minorities, and continued not to report on their position in its periodical reports. Both the CERD in its 2006 Concluding Observations and in those of the CRC in 2005 on Mongolia’s compliance with its specific treaty obligations decried the almost complete absence of any concrete and detailed data on minorities, the lack of concrete measures to ensure full respect of the right of minority children to education in their native tongue (and to learn effectively the official language), or of clear legislation to ensure the respect for the rights of minorities, including in some areas the prohibition of discrimination.