

Kyrgyzstan Overview

Updated May 2011

- [Environment](#)
- [Peoples](#)
- [History](#)
- [Governance](#)
- [Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples](#)

Environment

The Kyrgyz Republic is a landlocked state in Central Asia bordering Kazakhstan to the north, Uzbekistan to the west, Tajikistan to the south-west and the People's Republic of China to the south-east. Much of the country's southern part is made up of the Tian Shan mountainous region, part of the Himalayan Belt.

Peoples

Main languages: Kyrgyz (state language), Russian (official since 2001), Uzbek

Main religions: Sunni Islam, Orthodox Christianity

Minority groups include Uzbeks (14.2%), Russians (10.3%), Dungans (1.1%), Uighurs (1%), as well as groups of Tatars, Kazakhs, Ukrainians, Germans, Tajiks, Koreans, Jews, and North Caucasians (US State Department, 2005).

Ethnic Kyrgyzs now make up almost 70 percent of the population. Slavs – mainly Russians but also some Ukrainians – were until recently the largest minority in Kyrgyzstan. Unlike in other Central Asian states, a significant proportion of Slavs are rural dwellers. Their numbers have however decreased rather dramatically in the last 10 years: some estimates now put their size at less than 9%, with Uzbeks, who represent perhaps as much as 15% of the current population, constituting the country's largest minority. They are concentrated mainly in the Fergana valley in the west of the country. The vast majority of Germans have also emigrated, mainly to Germany. Jews, once numerous in the capital and respected for their contribution to health care, engineering and culture, are another rapidly disappearing group. The vast majority have emigrated to Israel, others to the USA and Germany.

History

Modern day Kyrgyzstan lies on the historic path of the Silk Road. It was therefore a route followed by population groups as well as invaders, which partially explains its population makeup. For much of its

history after the 13th century the territory of Kyrgyzstan was under the control of Mongol khanates after Kyrgyz tribes were conquered by the son of Genghis Khan, Juche.

They subsequently regained their freedom in the 16th century, only to be overrun in the next century by the Kalmyks, by the Manchus in the 18th century, and the Uzbeks in the 19th century. It was then to be absorbed by Russia in 1876 – and then the Soviet Union – until it declared independence in August 1991. The last two periods of occupation – by the Russians and Uzbeks – and the geographic proximity of Russia and Uzbekistan are reflected by the presence of these large population groups in modern Kyrgyzstan.

Tensions between the majority Kyrgyz and minority groups erupted before independence. In 1990, minority Uzbeks and Kyrgyz violence broke out in the city of Osh, in the Ferghana valley.. These tensions remain since Kyrgyz nationals have sought to confirm their pre-eminence in the new state, increasingly replacing Russians and asserting their dominance by establishing Kyrgyz as the main language of government.

While Kyrgyzstan's first president, Askar Akayev, was seen as a moderate leader in his first term of office, criticisms emerged in the latter part of the 1990s as he began to show increasingly autocratic tendencies and began cracking down on opposition groups.

The increasing prominence of the Kyrgyz language, (though Russian remains as a 'language of inter-ethnic communication') signaled that the Russian-speaking minority were facing growing obstacles accessing rights, for example to employment, and particularly in the civil service. At the same time, there has been no recognition for the use of Uzbek language, speakers of which have surpassed the Russian minority. Tensions therefore have remained high in the Ferghana valley where Uzbeks are concentrated and there have been demonstrations by Uzbeks against the lack of status of their language and the limitations on their economic and employment opportunities.

As for the Russian minority, the diminishing prestige of their language coupled with limited employment opportunities and a sense that Kyrgyzstan was to be – increasingly – the country of Kyrgyzs led many of them and other Slavs to emigrate: perhaps half of the approximately 916,000 members of the Russian minority left the country between 1991 and 2005.

Parliamentary and presidential elections in the 1990s were seen as flawed, while those in 2000 were deemed by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) not to have been free and fair. Pressure from the government on independent media and opposition politicians increased. Further elections in 2005 were again – despite some improvements – deemed not to have been free and fair by outside observers. Large demonstrations on 24 March 2005 led to President Akayev fleeing the country and eventually resigning on 4 April 2005 in what is sometimes known as the Tulip Revolution.

Acting President Kurmanbek Bakiyev won the presidential elections of 10 July 2005 with 88.9% of the vote. His popularity, however, declined amid accusations that his administration was unable to tackle Kyrgyzstan's problems of corruption, and concerns over the assassination of a number of parliamentarians. There were large opposition demonstrations in 2006 and April 2007 in the capital Bishkek accusing the president of not fulfilling his electoral promises to transfer some of his powers to Parliament. In July 2009, Bakiyev returned to office, having reportedly gained 85% of the vote in national elections. The elections were widely criticized by international monitors. In April 2010, deadly clashes erupted between police and thousands of protestors demonstrating against corruption and rising prices. The popular revolts ousted Bakiyev from power and an interim government was formed under the leadership of former Foreign Minister Roza Otunbayeva. A new constitution was passed by referendum in late June 2010, which included provisions to enable the country to transition to a

parliamentary democracy. Parliamentary elections were held in October 2010. Elections were held on 10 October, with 29 parties participating and five winning seats. Although a coalition government was formed in mid-December, state policy towards interethnic relations remained uncertain. Roza Otunbayeva acts as interim president until Presidential elections are held in October 2011.

The instability which followed the overthrow of President Bakiyev saw a rise in interethnic tension in Chuy province, with anti-government protests escalating into attacks against ethnic Uighur and Dungan businesses. Interethnic violence erupted once again in June 2010 in the south of the country, as clashes took place between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Osh and Jalalabad. At least 418 people died in the violence, with some reports suggesting that casualties could be as high as 2000. Most of the victims were ethnic Uzbeks. Destruction of property overwhelmingly, though not exclusively, targeted ethnic Uzbek areas and Uzbek-owned establishments.

Governance

Official policies in Kyrgyzstan have often been described as more ‘minority friendly’ than some of its neighbours. There are a variety of mechanisms in place for consultations of minority groups, and state support is available for various minority organizations. By granting the Russian language a special status as a ‘link language’ under the Constitution, authorities seemed to have demonstrated their desire to be inclusive and encourage Russians and other Slavs to remain in the country.

Problematically, the treatment of the Uzbek minority seems somewhat unbalanced when compared to the Russian minority, in that whilst both groups are close to the same size, only Russian has any sort of official status, which benefits Russian-speakers in terms of access to employment and education. There is no status whatsoever in relation to the Uzbek language despite the large number of speakers. Recent legislation has increasingly reduced opportunities for non-Kyrgyz-speakers – and in particular members of the Uzbek minority in the south of the country where they are concentrated – such as 2004 legislation requiring that certain candidates and public services officials must be proficient in Kyrgyz. Though the law is ‘pending’ until 2015, it has caused considerable consternation and led to calls for it to be dropped altogether. Requests by Uzbek community leaders for Uzbek to be recognized under the new 2010 constitution were not heeded.

Emigration also presents a serious challenge for Kyrgyzstan. It causes a drain of skilled workers, adversely affects the economy and impairs the establishment of stable public institutions which need non-Kyrgyz staff. It can also result in the remaining members of minorities becoming more vulnerable to xenophobia.

Following the ousting of President Bakiyev in April 2010, the interim government held a referendum in June, paving the way for a parliamentary democracy.

Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

The situation for minorities in Kyrgyzstan has not improved significantly in recent years. The country has experienced the departure of large numbers from minority groups, though perhaps to a lesser extent than many of its neighbours. It was until recently the only country in the region to have retained Russian as an ‘official’ language (i.e. ‘language of inter-ethnic communication’).

The growing trend towards a ‘Kyrgyzstan for the Kyrgyz’ has picked up steam in the last few years, however, through language legislation passed by the lower house of parliament in 2004. This legislation seems to pave the way to further disadvantaging minorities such as the Uzbek-speaking minority (about 15 per cent of the population) and Russian-speaking minority (perhaps 11 per cent), especially since the

new language provisions require that candidates for elected office need to demonstrate proficiency in Kyrgyz, as do students wishing to enter or graduate from university. State officials are to use primarily Kyrgyz, though Russian remains as a ‘language of inter-ethnic communication’.

The Uzbek minority, based in the southern parts of the country, in particular may experience this as a way of assuring the dominance of the Kyrgyz majority. The former’s almost complete exclusion from administrative and political positions, despite now constituting the largest minority in the country, may be contributing to the strength of fundamentalist religious beliefs (often officially described as Wahhabist interpretations) among some Uzbeks, and to resulting government crackdowns and suspicion against members of this minority. The long-term effects of the revolution in 2005, which saw then President Askar Akayev deposed, remain difficult to evaluate in terms of improvements for the the treatment of minorities in Kyrgyzstan. One notable effect of the revolution was the upsurge in the number of applications for emigration to Russia since the overthrow of Akayev in 2005, most of who are presumably ethnic Russians. A similar pattern has been observed since the ousting of President Bakiyev in 2010.

In the short term, the effects at least for the Uzbek minority are not positive, with calls for the addition of Uzbek as an official language and demonstrations in support of this have been met by violence and even murders of proponents in Osh and southern provinces.

Demonstrations calling for an official status for the language and for some kind of proportional representation of Uzbeks in state administration in the southern provinces occurred in 2006, and property owned by prominent Uzbek was seized in 2007. In its August 2007 Report, CERD expressed concern for ethnic Uyghurs and Uzbeks, who, the Committee alleges, were forcibly returned to their countries of origin after seeking refugee status or asylum in Kyrgyzstan. Regarding the clashes that had taken place in February 2006 between Kyrgyz and Dungan communities living in Iskra, CERD recommended that the government brought those responsible to justice, provide compensation to the families that had been forced to leave, and adopt measures to promote dialogue and understanding between the two communities.

Tensions remain in the south of the country where there has been increasing conflict over the use of the Uzbek language in the media. In 2008, the government accused two local TV stations broadcasting in Uzbek of breaking the law, a charge which the companies believed was politically inspired pressure on the Uzbek minority at a period approaching elections.

In January 2009, a highly restrictive new law on religion came into force, amid protests from human rights defenders and international bodies. A legal challenge to the law was dismissed in the Constitutional Court in July 2009. The law particularly affected smaller religious communities in the country such as Protestants, Baha’is and Hare Krishnas, who were largely denied the right to re-register their religion with the State Committee for Religious Affairs, one of the principle requirements of the new laws for all religions. The 2009 law also banned the sharing of one’s faith, required state examination of all imported religious materials, and banned all distribution of religious literature and other materials in public places. As of early 2011, it was unclear whether the new coalition government had any plans to rescind this legislation.

In June 2010, violence erupted between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, resulting in up to 2000 fatalities and displacing thousands of Uzbeks. Other ethnic groups were also affected by the June instability (see above). A number of ethnic Tajiks from Batken province reportedly fled briefly with Uzbeks to Uzbekistan. There were also reports in June that many ethnic Uighurs fled to Kazakhstan from northern Kyrgyzstan after receiving threats that they would be the next target of violence.