

## Uzbekistan Overview

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### Environment

The Republic of Uzbekistan borders Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to the south-east, Turkmenistan to the south-west and Afghanistan to the south. North-western Uzbekistan consists of the Karakalpak Autonomous Republic (165,600 square kilometres), which includes part of the Aral Sea. Uzbekistan borders Kazakhstan to the north and west.

### Peoples

Main languages: Uzbek, Russian, Tajik, Kazakh, Tatar

Main religions: Sunni Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Judaism

Minority groups include Russians (6%), Tajiks (4.8%), Kazakhs (4%), Tatars (1.6%); other minorities include Karakalpaks, Koreans, Meskhetian Turks and Jews (National Census, estimate for 1998).

Uzbekistan is made up of a number of traditional populations of Turkic (Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Karakalpaks), Semitic (Bukhara Jews), and Iranian origins (Tajiks), as well as more recent minorities which arrived in the country during the Russian and Soviet domination (Russians, Crimean Tatars, Meskhetian Turks, Koreans and some Jews).

Since 1991 however, there has been a two-way flow of population which is continuing the dramatic change to the country's demographics. While there are thousands of ethnic Uzbeks who had been working outside of the country have been returning to Uzbekistan from Russia and other neighbouring countries, other minorities which are of more recent origin such as the Russians, Crimean Tatars and others have also been emigrating in large numbers.

### History

Large groups of Turkic tribes started to move into this part of Central Asia following the Mongol invasions of the 13th Century which saw the disappearance or absorption of many of the native Iranian peoples. Their language derived from Chagatai, an extinct Turkic language which acted for a time as a *lingua franca* in Central Asia. Other tribes arriving in the 15th and 16th centuries were to coalesce into

what would become known as 'Uzbeks', forming for a while their own state ('Uzbekistan') which would break up into three parts and eventually be absorbed into the Russian empire during the mid to late 19th Century when the Emirate of Bukhara and the Khanate of Khiva became Russian protectorates in the period after the Tsar's conquest of Tashkent in 1865. Few Russians settled in Uzbekistan during the Tsarist period, but many of the millions of Russians and Ukrainians who settled throughout Central Asia under the Soviet regime ended up in this country.

Until 1924, most settled Turkic populations were known as Sarts by Russian authorities, and only those speaking Kipchak dialects were called 'Uzbeks'. What are today the borders of modern Uzbekistan are for the most part the result of the creation in 1924 of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic which would become independent after the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991. It was also in 1924 that the Soviets abolished the term 'Sart' and that all of the settled Turkic speakers would be known as Uzbeks.

Some of Uzbekistan's minorities are from ethnic groups such as Koreans, Meskhetian Turks, and Crimean Tatars were exiled here en masse under the directive of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin during World War II.

During perestroika, Uzbekistan was a scene of serious inter-ethnic violence. In 1989 bloody clashes occurred between Uzbeks and Meskhetian Turks in the Ferghana valley, and further interethnic tensions arose when fighting broke out between Kyrgyz and Uzbek populations of the Osh Oblast (Kyrgyzstan) in 1990. Border crossings were sealed to prevent up to 15,000 armed Uzbeks joining their co-nationals in Kyrgyzstan to retaliate. A state of emergency was declared in the Andijan oblast, bordering Osh in Kyrgyzstan.

Uzbekistan declared independence on 31 August 1991. Islam Karimov, a former first secretary of the Uzbekistan Communist Party, was elected President. Russian-speaking minorities supported Karimov, seeing him as capable of restraining the nationalist opposition. During 1992 Karimov's rule became increasingly authoritarian. More than 1 million may have left the country since then, a majority being Russians and other minorities. It is thought that throughout 1991-2000 from 85,000 to 150,000 people left Uzbekistan every year, almost entirely minorities: as a result, out of perhaps 600,000 Germans living in Uzbekistan perhaps more than 95% have emigrated. Part of these migratory trends are also connected to Russia's relative economic prosperity and accessibility continuing to be a powerful magnet for many workers from Uzbekistan.

Opposition movements and Muslim groups were suppressed and dissidents prosecuted. The most recent parliamentary elections in December 2004 were seen by the OSCE as flawed, despite some notable improvements, because of the restrictions on the political parties allowed to participate in the elections, and the similarities in their platforms which deprived the electorate depriving voters of a genuine choice. A referendum in 2002 resulted in President Karimov's term being extended by an act of parliament to December 2007.

## **Governance**

Uzbekistan is an authoritarian regime with one of the world's worst human rights record. While there are in theory a series of provisions in the constitution and other types of legislation guaranteeing a series of human rights, the practice has been generally repressive towards opposition figures, the independent media, and non-governmental organisations. This has increased dramatically after the 2005 massacre in Andijan.

The Committee to Protect Journalists considers Uzbekistan as a leading jailer of journalists, using the

war against terror as an excuse to crackdown on independent media; it has added the country as one of the '10 Most Censored Countries' in the world in 2006 because of strict government control and harassment and intimidation.

Elections and referenda in Uzbekistan are not considered to be free and fair: international observers refused to participate in the 2002 referendum. No truly independent opposition parties were able to participate in the 2002 elections for a new two-chamber parliament. While the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe did have a limited observation mission for that election, it concluded the elections were flawed and did not meet international standards. Some political parties were clearly formed with government approval. Independent political parties that do exist usually find they are refused registration. The overall oppressive climate has led to the arrest of several prominent opponents and for others to flee the country.

Even international non-governmental organisations have felt the wrath of the government for their reporting of events during the Andijan massacre (see below ) with a court suspending for six months in 2006 the activities of Freedom House for violating laws on non-governmental organizations for 'providing free Internet access to Uzbeks and hosting unregistered organizations, including human-rights defenders and political parties.'

Torture and abuses appear widespread, and the government deals particularly severely with those it suspects linked with the banned Party of Islamic Liberation (Hizb ut-Tahrir).

It is in this context of control and oppression that minorities are also tightly controlled, with the state-directed Assembly of Peoples of Uzbekistan created at least partially for this purpose.

There are more recently some interesting signs in the efforts of the Uzbekistan government to comply with its international human rights commitments, with more than 10 periodic reports being submitted since 2004. Among the entities that may now deal with human rights in this country are the Parliamentary Commissioner for Human Rights (ombudsman), the Constitutional Court, a National Human Rights Centre, and the Parliamentary Institute for Monitoring Legislation. The government proudly indicated in a 2006 report to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination that it had not received a single complaint of violations of a right involving discrimination since around 2001.

However, an independent expert was appointed by the UN Commission on Human Rights to conduct a human rights assessment in response to numerous reports on serious human rights violations from international NGOs in 2005.

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

Minorities have left Uzbekistan in very large numbers, partly as a consequence of the repressive regime of President Islam Karimov, but also because of the limited opportunities for minorities often linked to discriminatory practices by authorities in favour of the Uzbek majority. By some estimates, almost a million of the Russian-speaking minority had left the country by 2006. The largest single minority, the Tajiks, probably comprise close to 8 per cent of the population, but they remain largely excluded in many areas of public life, with the regime of President Karimov seen as targeting Tajiks.

Thousands of individuals are detained for political or religious reasons, including human rights activists. The position of minorities in the country is thus similar to that of others who experience the difficulties of living in a repressive regime. The Russian language is still widely used by state authorities in daily

activities, however, despite the Uzbek language being the only official language. The fight against terror and fundamentalism has in Uzbekistan an ethnic dimension which has severely impacted on the Tajik minority, with the forcible resettlement in 2000 of thousands of mostly ethnic Tajik families from southern mountain villages in the Sariasinsky district to locations further inland such as the Sherobad district, burning and bombing of mainly Tajik villages, and the destruction of their homes and fields because of allegations that Islamic militants had infiltrated these villages.

Because of a special autonomy arrangement granted to the Republic of Karakalpakstan, the Turkic-speaking Karakalpaks have in legal and practical terms much greater protection of their rights and in the use of their language, though they comprise less than 2 per cent of the population. They remain threatened for environmental reasons with the severe degradation of the Aral Sea.

The status of other minorities, and the use of their languages, are significantly less, and in the case of Tajik almost non-existent outside of some localities - and in particular the important Tajik cultural centres of Bukhara and Samarkand - despite their being present in greater numbers than Russians.

### **Andijan Massacre**

The repressive regime took a particularly bloody turn in 2005 following the Andijan massacre. Hundreds of unarmed people protesting in the eastern city of Andijan, perhaps as many as 750, were killed on 13 May 2005 by Uzbek government forces. The protest started when a group of armed people freed a group of 23 local businessmen accused of Islamic extremism and took officials hostage in the local government building. The protest then grew into a rally of thousands of mostly unarmed people who voiced their anger against government corruption, repression and growing poverty in the region.

The massacre led to widespread condemnations - including European Union sanctions in 2005 - though these still seem surprisingly muted given the massive numbers of unarmed civilians, including women and children, who were killed by security forces. The US military was 'ejected' from Uzbekistan for its criticisms, though officially it was claimed that the move was undertaken because of the threat the presence of a U.S. military air base represented to Uzbekistan's internal and external security of Uzbekistan. Russia has been supportive of President Karimov's actions and indeed increased its presence and conducted joint military exercises with the Uzbek military in September 2005.

Overall, the situation of minorities has seen no improvement since 2005, and indeed their lot could be said to have worsened with the increasing repression of dissent and opposition which many groups and individuals have experienced in 2005 and 2006. For religious minorities, reports following the Andijan massacre suggest there is a further tightening of that country's repressive religion policy. In addition to members of the Tajik minority who may be tagged as 'fundamentalists', religious minorities such as Hare Krishna, Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestants in Karakalpakstan (where all activities of this latter minority have been banned) show an increase in restrictions and prohibitions. Indeed, the repressive nature of the government restrictions on religious activities, including from non-government-sanctioned Islamic groupings, may breed further resistance in the next few years.

According to Forum 18, a total ban on activities of Protestants in north-west Uzbekistan remains, while Christians in other parts of the country face severe persecution, including in some instances children being made to denounce their religion. In October 2007 the Uzbek police put out a nationwide 'wanted' announcement for a Pentecostal Christian. When Forum 18 inquired why there was a search for him it was said that a police officer had accused him of breaking the law by gathering people at his home for religious activities.

In north-west Uzbekistan 20 Protestant congregations and Jehovah's Witness congregations have

arbitrarily been refused registration, Forum 18 reported. Under Uzbek law, unregistered religious activities are considered illegal and liable for prosecution. In August 2007 two members of the Peace Protestant Church in Nukus were fined a year's average earnings because they were unregistered.