

Tajiks

Profile

The Tajiks are an Iranian people who speak a variety of Persian, an Indo-Aryan language. Most of them are Sunni Muslims and they made up officially at the last census in 1998 4.8 percent of the population of Uzbekistan, or more than 1.1 million people, though this is almost certainly an underestimate since some Tajiks have started to claim Uzbek ethnicity after independence in order to avoid being discriminated against in access to jobs and government benefits. There are some claims that there may be between 4 and 6 million Tajiks in the country.

Unlike most other minority groups in Uzbekistan, Tajiks are indigenous to the region and have nowhere else to go, given the instability and economic situation in Tajikistan. Some Tajiks in Uzbekistan are rural-dwellers; but most are concentrated in the regions around the cities of Bukhara, closer to the border with Turkmenistan, and Samarkand, adjacent to Tajikistan.

Historical context

The area of Uzbekistan which Tajiks currently occupy was for much of its more recent history within the sphere of the Persian empire. The region fell to the Mongolian invasion of the 13th Century, but unlike the situation in other parts of Central Asia, the Tajiks continued to speak Iranian languages. The minority fell to Russian control after the Tsar's conquest of Tashkent in 1865. The creation of a Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1924 from the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, and its status of a constituent republic of the USSR in 1929 had the result of leaving a substantial Tajik minority in the entity which would become Uzbekistan with independence in 1991.

The Tajiks have long been present in the eastern parts of Uzbekistan, and they also tend to be concentrated in two large cities which are also seen as important cultural and historical Tajik centres, Samarkand and Bukhara. The artificial boundaries between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan which were imposed during the Soviet era left these important Tajik cultural centres outside of Tajikistan, and the existence of territorial disputes between the two republics during Soviet rule led to serious inter-ethnic conflicts in the period immediately following the establishment of independent Central Asian republics. While at independence the Tajiks were possibly the country's second largest minority, they are now clearly the largest following the exodus of large numbers of Russians and their Slavs.

While there was an active separatist Tajik movement soon after 1991, this seems to have largely faded away as the nationalist groups were suppressed by President Karimov in the decade following independence, though a number of the claims of ethnic Tajiks remain in areas of language use, education and access to employment that continue to be perceived as discriminatory. Many of these claims remain barely audible or visible, as the events of Andijan show, since open and direct challenges to the government tend not to be possible. A number of Tajik schools were closed when the relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were at a low point in 1992.

Tajiks have tended since at least 2000 to be perceived by authorities as overly sympathetic or amenable to what the government perceives as radical Islamic groups, in particular the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Hizb ut-Tahrir. This has resulted in increased government repression of the Tajiks, including it appears, the forceful evacuation and resettlement of large numbers of Tajiks in 2000 living along the Tajikistan-Uzbekistan border, as well as the arrest of large numbers of them suspected of complicity with the militants.

As part of a campaign - based at least partially on a 13 May 1998 Cabinet of Ministers resolution and a 2000 instruction from the Ministry of Education - to purge schools of pre-1993 books that did not adhere to the national ideology, reports in 2000 surfaced of large numbers of books and textbooks in Tajik being destroyed in the towns of Samarkand and Bukhara. 90 percent of a reported 2,000 books destroyed in one Samarkand school were in Tajik. Even works of literature in school libraries such as Shakespeare and Pushkin which were in Tajik were reportedly destroyed.

Current issues

Some Tajik cultural centres continue to have their registration rejected by authorities: for example, the Tajik Cultural Centre in Samarkand lost its registration status in 1993 and continued in 2006 to operate without it. There are complaints that books and other publications from Tajikistan are not allowed into the country. This ties in with complaints on the shortage of textbooks in Tajik, and to claims to discrimination in access to university level education as the entrance tests are exclusively in Uzbek. For Tajiks, the continuing low level of recognition of the Tajik language - despite their now constituting the country's largest minority - means that many parents opt not to enter their children in Tajik-language schools, as they know that access to higher education and public employment will more likely be denied to them because of their non-Uzbek associations. It is partially for this reason, and the belief that government and other employers actively seek to hire ethnic Uzbeks as part of the country's Uzbekisation efforts, that many Tajiks register themselves as Uzbeks in the hope of hiding their ethnicity and thus not be excluded from employment and educational opportunities.