

Uzbeks

Profile

Probably now representing around 15 per cent (the US State Department 2006 Country Report for Kyrgyzstan refers to 14.2% from official statistics) Uzbeks are concentrated mainly in the south and western parts of the country, especially the Ferghana valley and the three administrative provinces of Batken, Osh, and Jalal-Abad. The Uzbeks speak an eastern Turkic language which is closest to Uyghur. They are predominantly Sunni Muslim of the Hanafi school: they are descended from Turkic-Mongol invaders with strong Iranian influences. Despite their large numbers and geographic concentration, including in Osh province where they are a majority, they have tended to be excluded from exercising political power since Kyrgyzstan's independence.

Historical context

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. 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.

Until 1924, most settled Turkic populations were known as Sarts by Russian authorities, and only those speaking Kipchak dialects were called 'Uzbeks'. The current existence of an Uzbek minority in Kyrgyzstan flows from the creation in 1924 of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic and Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic which would become independent states after the breakdown of the Soviet Union. 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.

Uzbeks were able to share a quota of the administrative and political posts within Kyrgyz SSR under the Soviet Union, but these began to be put aside as Kyrgyzstan moved towards independence in 1991. Clashes between Uzbeks and ethnic Kyrgyz in 1990 in the city of Osh resulted in some 300 people dead, according to some reports. The spark to the conflict appeared to be claims of discrimination by the Kyrgyz-controlled Osh City Council (despite an Uzbek majority population) which announced in June 1990 the construction of a cotton processing plant on land under the control of an Uzbek-dominated collective farm.

Following an agreement signed in 1991, Uzbeks were to receive a share of the positions in the municipal administration. Tensions have remained high between Uzbeks and state authorities as Kyrgyzstan has increasingly moved towards asserting the 'Kyrgyz' nature of the state and enhancing the prominence of the Kyrgyz language from a legal and political point of view.

Current issues

The disenchantment of the Uzbek minority has continued as the Kyrgyz authorities still refuse to acknowledge any increased use of or state for the Uzbek language, despite Uzbeks now surpassing Russians as the country's largest minority. While there are Uzbek language schools operating in Kyrgyzstan, there has not been clear and unmitigated support from education authorities: textbooks and other materials in the Uzbek language continue to be lacking or unavailable, and various other obstacles remain in place preventing parents for ensuring their children are instructed in their language.

Despite being used in some official areas, the Uzbek language does not have any official status, even in the Batken, Osh, and Jalal-Abad provinces. This has indirectly led to the continued under-representation and even absence of Uzbeks employed in government offices. 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 have been held in 2006. A former governor of the Osh province alleged that he was removed from his position by President Bakiyev because of his Uzbek ethnicity. Tensions between the Uzbeks and Kyrgyz remain high, as does resentment among the Uzbeks about the control of many of the state structures and administration by the latter. These factors may also be behind the October 2006 murder of the head of the Center of Uzbek Culture in Osh.