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Uzbeks

Profile

The Uzbeks speak an eastern Turkic language and, like the Turkmen, are mainly Sunni Muslims. They are mainly concentrated in the northern and eastern parts of the country in the Lebap and Dashoguz provinces, on the border with Uzbekistan. They now constitute the largest minority in the country after the waves of emigrants left the Turkmenistan after independence in 1991.

Their total numbers are uncertain: the only certainty is that recent figures from Turkmenistan authorities vastly underestimate their total. The 1995 census showed Uzbeks constituting 9.2% of the country's population: by 2003, they were 'officially' down to 5%, or about 250,000 (Turkmenistan Report to CERD, 2005).

Historical context

Large groups of Turkic tribes started to move in this part of Central Asia following the Mongol invasions of the 13th Century. 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 by 1894.

Until 1924, most settled Turkic populations were known as Sarts by Russian authorities, and only those speaking Kipchak dialects were called 'Uzbeks'. The Uzbek minority in Turkmenistan came about in 1924 with the creation of the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic as one of the 15 republics of the Soviet Union.

The presence of Uzbeks in their traditional areas along the borders with Uzbekistan has largely remained unchanged until independence in 1991. While there were during the Soviet period state schools providing instruction in the Uzbek language and Uzbeks were able to gain employment in state administration and occupy positions of influence at various levels of government in the Lebap and Dashoguz provinces, all this has quickly changed as a result of the country's 'Turkmenisation' policies. These policies have since the mid-1990s resulted in Uzbeks being progressively removed from various categories of employment with the civil service, the police and other areas controlled by the government of President Niyazov, to be replaced by ethnic Turkmen.

From 2000, the government also stopped enrolment of new students in Uzbek-medium education. This has also meant that most Uzbek teachers from these schools have lost their jobs, as most of them do not have the language skills to teach in Turkmen.

The position of the Uzbek minority has apparently become worse following a 2002 failed coup attempt against President Niyazov where it was alleged the government of Uzbekistan could have been involved.

Current issues

The policies of Turkmenisation, many of which are discriminatory, have had particularly adverse effects for Uzbeks in recent years. In addition to having effectively banned the use of Uzbek as medium of instruction in schools, the drive to have ‘full-blooded’ Turkmen as government employees had, by the end of 2004, resulted in virtually all Uzbeks being removed or not employed in high and mid-level administrative positions in areas where they are concentrated, such as the province of Dashoguz. Uzbeks no longer any significant number of positions such as district governor, farm chairperson or school principal, even in areas where they are the majority. As a result, some Uzbek parents have started to bribe officials in order to register their children as ethnic Turkmen so that they may hide their minority background and avoid the more obvious forms of blatant government discrimination, thus permitting them to enter university or to get jobs. Some Uzbeks in Dashoguz are said to be encouraging their daughters to marry Turkmen in order to bear Turkmen last names, and therefore not be targeted for discrimination and exclusion. Uzbeks continue to resent having their children wear traditional Turkmen dress in school instead of their own.

The government is continuing to forcibly relocate mainly Uzbek families from the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan border areas to desert regions in north-western Turkmenistan. Begun soon after the failed 2002 coup attempt, several thousand people have been internally displaced since then. It appears that Uzbeks are being targeted specifically, though not exclusively. President Niyazov has pointed out that people of the Lebap province have a ‘bad spirit’. This is one of three regions, along with Dashoguz and Ahal provinces, which have large Uzbek populations, and it is named in the resettlement decree used for these relocations. In many cases it appears that ethnic Turkmen taking the places of the Uzbek families being relocated, thus showing signs of a small ‘transmigration’ programme.

Most Uzbek imams have been replaced by Turkmen, including the country’s former chief mufti who was an ethnic Uzbek. The chief mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah was jailed in 2004, allegedly for his involvement in the presidential assassination attempt, although his arrest was widely attributed to his opposition to Niyazov’s policies. His release in August 2007 by the new president, and his subsequent appointment to the Council for Religious Affairs, was seen as a positive – if limited – move by the new leadership.

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