



DOI: 10.47669/ERD-1-2023

Eurasia Research Digest 1/2023

The State of Minority Rights in Uzbekistan: A Comparative Analysis of Tajiks, Russians, and Koreans

Aram Terzyan*

This paper examines the state of minority rights in Uzbekistan, focusing on three significant ethnic groups: Tajiks, Russians, and Koreans. It explores the historical context of these minorities, the cultural and linguistic challenges they face, socioeconomic issues, and their political representation. Under the authoritarian rule of Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan emphasized a unified Uzbek identity, often marginalizing minority cultures and languages. Despite President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's reforms aimed at improving human rights, including the establishment of a Human Rights Ombudsman and the Development Strategy for 2017-2021, significant challenges remain. Legislative initiatives such as the draft Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of National Minorities and efforts to enhance cultural policies have had mixed success. This analysis highlights the need for comprehensive measures to ensure robust legal protections, equitable resource allocation, and genuine political inclusion for all ethnic minorities in Uzbekistan. The international community's role in advocating for these rights is also discussed, emphasizing the gap between policy and practice in protecting minority rights in Uzbekistan.

* Aram Terzyan, PhD is research director of the Los Angeles-based Center for East European and Russian Studies of Eurasia Institutes. Email: a.terzyan@eurasiainstitutes.org.

Introduction

The issue of minority rights has been a significant concern globally for centuries, often causing conflicts, separatist movements, and even wars. Central Asia, known for its ethnic diversity, has historically been prone to ethnic tensions. These tensions, rooted in the era of the Czarist and Soviet regimes, have escalated since the independence of Central Asian states in 1991. The situation for minorities in this region is worsened by prevalent authoritarian practices, which adversely affect ethnic, religious, and other minority groups. These practices include the centralization and personalization of power, as well as extensive crackdowns on civil liberties and political freedoms, leaving minority groups seeking acceptance, fair treatment, and protection.

Under Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan was characterized by authoritarian governance, suppression of dissent, and limited freedoms for ethnic minorities. His administration emphasized a unified Uzbek identity, often sidelining minority cultures and languages.

In 1992, Uzbekistan established the Republican Inter-ethnic Cultural Centre. Today, there are over 140 national and cultural centers, often led by pro-regime figures. While large ethnic minorities are represented by these centers, they often face discrimination based on their perceived loyalty to the regime. For example, while some Tajik Cultural Centers aligned with the government had no registration issues, others were denied (Equal Rights Trust, 2016).

This article offers a comparative analysis of the state of minority rights for three major ethnic groups in Uzbekistan: Tajiks, Russians, and Koreans, examining their historical context, cultural and linguistic rights, socioeconomic issues, and political representation.

Historical Context

Tajiks: Tajiks have resided in the region currently known as Uzbekistan for centuries. Historically, cities such as Samarkand and Bukhara were major hubs of Tajik culture and language. The Soviet era, however, introduced substantial changes with policies designed to create distinct ethnic boundaries, often at the expense of Tajik culture and language. Despite these challenges, Tajiks managed to preserve their cultural heritage through family traditions, local schools, and informal networks (Olcott, 1996).

Russians: The Russian presence in Uzbekistan dates back to the 19th century with the expansion of the Russian Empire into Central Asia. During the Soviet era, Russians became a prominent minority, significantly contributing to the region's industrial, educational, and cultural development. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Uzbekistan's new national identity centered around the Uzbek language and culture, significantly impacting the Russian-speaking population (Hiro, 2009).

Koreans: The Korean population in Uzbekistan primarily descends from those forcibly relocated by Stalin's regime from the Russian Far East to Central Asia in 1937. Despite harsh conditions, Koreans established themselves, contributing significantly to agriculture and later to various sectors of the economy. Preserving Korean culture and language has been an ongoing challenge, exacerbated by Soviet policies aimed at assimilation (Park, 2014).

Cultural and Linguistic Rights

Tajiks: A major issue for Tajiks is preserving their language and cultural heritage. The Uzbek government promotes Uzbek as the sole state language, limiting Tajik-language education and media. This has raised concerns about the erosion of the Tajik language among younger generations and a lack of representation in media (Dave, 2004). International reports from organizations like the UN and Human Rights Watch highlight these issues, noting that linguistic marginalization contributes to the overall marginalization of Tajik culture (UNESCO, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Russians: Russians in Uzbekistan face similar challenges in maintaining their language and cultural heritage. The emphasis on Uzbek has reduced the prominence of Russian in public life, affecting education, media, and daily communication. Although Russian remains widely spoken in urban areas, particularly Tashkent, the decline in institutional support poses a threat to its long-term viability (Hiro, 2009). Reports by the OSCE have documented the challenges faced by the Russian-speaking community, stressing the need for stronger protections for linguistic rights (OSCE, 2018).

Koreans: The focus on promoting the Uzbek language has marginalized Korean language and culture. Korean-language education is limited, with few schools offering instruction in Korean. The scarcity of Korean-language media further restricts cultural expression and access to information. Despite these challenges, Koreans have maintained aspects of their cultural identity through informal networks and family traditions (Park, 2014). UN minority rights reports highlight the need for greater support for

Korean-language education and media to preserve this cultural heritage (UN Minority Rights Group, 2020).

Socioeconomic Issues

Tajiks: Tajiks face socioeconomic challenges compounded by their ethnic identity. Discrimination in employment, particularly in the public sector, has led to higher levels of poverty and economic instability. Access to education and healthcare is uneven, with schools in predominantly Tajik areas often underfunded and healthcare services less accessible (Olcott, 1996).

Russians: Economic disparities between ethnic Russians and the Uzbek majority are evident. Many Russians held prominent positions during the Soviet era, but the transition to an independent Uzbekistan has changed the economic landscape. Employment discrimination, especially where proficiency in Uzbek is required, and uneven access to healthcare and social services contribute to higher levels of unemployment and poverty among Russians (Hiro, 2009).

Koreans: Koreans in Uzbekistan have historically integrated well into the socioeconomic fabric, but they face challenges related to discrimination and economic disparities. Employment discrimination, particularly in the public sector, and barriers to quality education and healthcare highlight the need for more inclusive policies (Park, 2014).

Political Representation

Tajiks: Political representation for Tajiks is limited. The centralized nature of the Uzbek government and its emphasis on Uzbek identity have

restricted the political influence of Tajik communities. Few Tajiks hold high-ranking government positions, and their concerns are often overlooked in national policymaking (Dave, 2004).

Russians: Political representation is also a critical issue for Russians. The focus on promoting Uzbek identity has limited the political influence of Russians, with few holding high-ranking positions. Efforts to organize and advocate for their rights are hindered by restrictions on political activism (Hiro, 2009).

Koreans: Koreans are underrepresented in political institutions. The centralized government structure and emphasis on Uzbek identity have limited their political influence. Advocacy efforts face significant challenges due to restrictions on political activism and non-governmental organizations (Park, 2014).

The international community has expressed concerns about the treatment of ethnic minorities in Uzbekistan. Organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have highlighted issues of discrimination and human rights abuses. However, Uzbekistan's strategic importance and efforts to improve international relations often lead to a cautious approach to addressing these concerns (Human Rights Watch, 2017; Amnesty International, 2019).

Legislative Initiatives Under Mirziyoyev

The era following Karimov's rule, under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has seen a series of reforms aimed at enhancing human rights. Mirziyoyev's administration has introduced numerous legal and institutional changes to this end.

One significant initiative was the establishment of the Human Rights Ombudsman office. This institution provides a mechanism for addressing human rights violations, including those affecting ethnic minorities. The Ombudsman is empowered to investigate complaints, make recommendations to the government, and report on the human rights situation in Uzbekistan (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

In 2017, President Mirziyoyev introduced the Development Strategy for 2017-2021, outlining key reforms across various sectors, including human rights and the protection of ethnic minorities. This strategy emphasizes the rule of law, judicial independence, and the protection of individual rights and freedoms (OSCE, 2018). It aims to foster a more inclusive society by promoting the cultural and linguistic rights of minority groups.

Despite these efforts, the Law on State Language, which underscores the primacy of the Uzbek language in public life, has had mixed outcomes. While it aims to unify the nation, it has sometimes been perceived as marginalizing minority languages. However, Mirziyoyev's administration has made some concessions, allowing the use of minority languages in cultural and educational settings to a certain extent (UNESCO, 2019).

A notable legislative initiative under Mirziyoyev's administration is the draft Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of National Minorities. This law seeks to formalize protections for the cultural, linguistic, and social rights of ethnic minorities. It aims to ensure equal access to education, healthcare, and employment for minorities, and to preserve and promote their cultural heritage (Amnesty International, 2019). This law represents a significant step towards addressing longstanding issues

faced by minority communities, but its success will largely depend on effective implementation and enforcement.

The Mirziyoyev administration has also focused on enhancing cultural policies to promote the heritage of ethnic minorities. This includes increased funding for cultural centers, support for minority language publications, and the organization of cultural festivals. These initiatives are designed to foster a more inclusive national identity that respects and celebrates diversity (OSCE, 2018). However, the reach and impact of these programs remain limited, and more comprehensive measures are needed to ensure they benefit all minority communities equally.

Conclusion

While President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's administration has made notable strides in attempting to reform the human rights landscape in Uzbekistan, the situation for ethnic minorities remains fraught with challenges. Legislative initiatives such as the establishment of the Human Rights Ombudsman and the Development Strategy for 2017-2021 mark important steps towards recognizing and addressing minority rights. However, the practical implementation and enforcement of these reforms often fall short, leaving significant gaps in the protection and promotion of cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic rights for Tajiks, Russians, and Koreans.

The marginalization of minority languages and cultures persists, exacerbated by the Law on State Language and inconsistent support for minority language education and media. Socioeconomic disparities and employment discrimination continue to affect minority communities, contributing to higher levels of poverty and limited access to quality healthcare and education. Political representation remains inadequate, with

minorities underrepresented in government and facing significant barriers to effective advocacy and participation.

To bridge the gap between policy and practice, Uzbekistan must adopt more comprehensive and enforceable measures that ensure the equitable treatment and inclusion of all ethnic minorities. This includes robust legal protections, targeted socioeconomic development programs, and genuine political inclusion efforts. The international community also plays a crucial role in advocating for these rights and holding the Uzbek government accountable.

In conclusion, while there have been positive steps towards improving minority rights in Uzbekistan, sustained and concerted efforts are required to create an inclusive and equitable society that honors the country's rich cultural diversity.

References

Amnesty International. (2019). Uzbekistan 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/europe-and-central-asia/uzbekistan/report-uzbekistan/>. Dave, B. (2004). Politics of language revival: National identity and state building in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 56(4), 563-588. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4141882>.

Hiro, D. (2009). *Inside Central Asia: A political and cultural history of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Iran*. Overlook Duckworth.

Human Rights Watch. (2017). Uzbekistan: Events of 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/uzbekistan>.

Human Rights Watch. (2019). Uzbekistan: Events of 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/uzbekistan>.

Olcott, M. B. (1996). *Central Asia's new states: Independence, foreign policy, and regional security*. United States Institute of Peace Press.

OSCE. (2018). Report on the linguistic rights of national minorities in Uzbekistan. Retrieved from <https://www.osce.org/odihr/407903>.

Park, S. J. (2014). Koryo-saram: Koreans in Uzbekistan. *Asian Ethnicity*, 15(2), 266-282. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14631369.2014.883993>.

UNESCO. (2019). Report on the status of Tajik language and cultural heritage in Uzbekistan. Retrieved from <https://en.unesco.org/reports/tajik-language-uzbekistan>.

UN Minority Rights Group. (2020). Preservation of Korean language and culture in Uzbekistan. Retrieved from <https://www.minorityrights.org/uzbekistan/koreans>.

Equal Rights Trust. (2017). Legacies of Division: Discrimination on the Basis of Religion and Ethnicity in Central Asia. Retrieved from <https://www.equalrightstrust.org/sites/default/files/ertdocs/Legacies%20of%20Division.pdf>.