

Exploring Asia: Human Rights

Join us for an exploration of contemporary human-rights issues in Asia. This five-part series runs Thursdays through June 2.

among all nations, racial or religious groups ...”

After the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, fifteen new nations emerged, their borders dividing ethnic groups and leaving nascent governments with the challenge of balancing the rights and desires of minorities within their new states. In Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan’s first president granted ethnic minorities and other sub-national groups education, the freedom to organize and the right to join associations within the state. However, the new constitution recognized Kyrgyz as the official language — even though ethnic Kyrgyz constitute only two-thirds of the population, alongside Uzbeks, Russians and other minorities.

The constitution of Kyrgyzstan upholds universal human rights and specifically defines citizens’ rights to education. It then goes one step further, guaranteeing “preservation, equal and free development and functioning of the Russian language and all other languages which are used by the population of the republic.” Education is recognized as a human right, but the Declaration of Human Rights does not specify that education should be in one’s native language. While the state outlined civil rights to include preservation

of mother tongues, its ability to protect this right has been weak. Kyrgyzstan’s Uzbek minority lacks official representation and the state lacks funds, so the

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national-cultural orientation in Kyrgyzstan favors the Kyrgyz, not the Uzbeks or other minorities.

In the southwest of Kyrgyzstan, where ethnic Uzbeks comprise more than a third of the population, schools that combine Russian, Uzbek and Kyrgyz instruction are common, but equitable distribution of materials is not. Nor is student attendance, since ethnic riots in Osh and Jalalabad Provinces left more than 400 people dead and caused hundreds of thousands of the minority ethnic Uzbeks to flee their homes in June 2010.

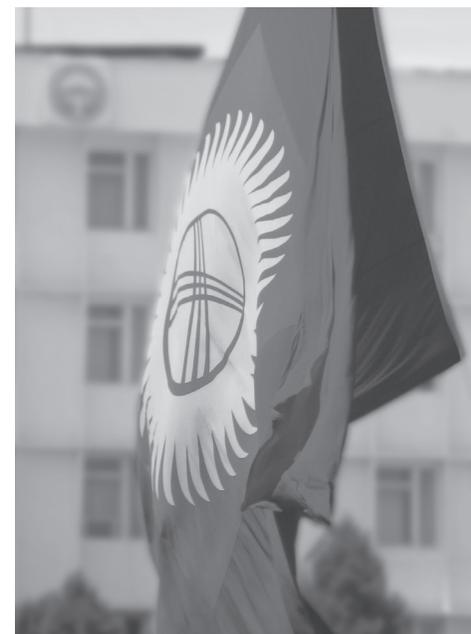
Uzbeks in this region feel Kyrgyzstan is their homeland and that education is very important. Members of this community have fought to make Uzbek an official language, to print more Uzbek textbooks and to teach more Russian (the language of international communication) in Uzbek schools — reforms that the impoverished Kyrgyz state fails to support. Is it a viola-

tion of human rights if a person’s right to education is hindered by fear of violence or by language barriers? Can a country be held responsible for not providing the civil rights it claims to guarantee?

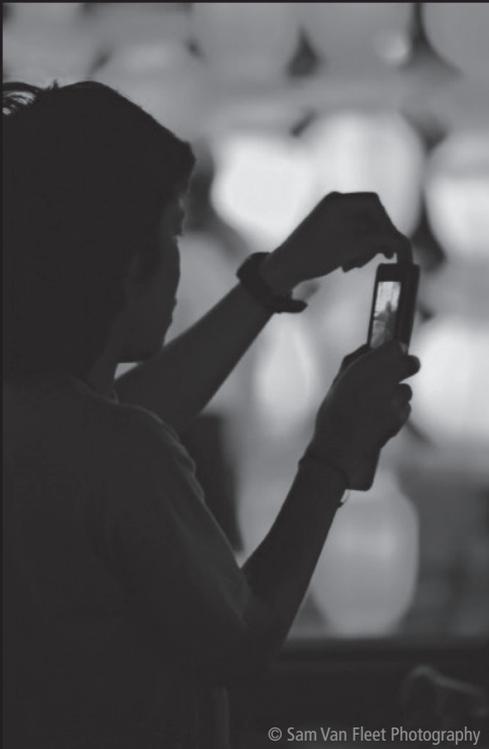
After the unrest, a new constitution was ratified in Kyrgyzstan, and we have yet to see how it will affect education and the nation’s minorities. Five months after the June 2010 unrest, many residents still had not returned to their homes. Sadly, diversity breeds anxiety in Osh today. Schools opened in September 2010, but with 12 percent fewer students in preschool through grade 11 than the preceding year.

The story of Osh Province, where school-children of diverse backgrounds interconnect, demonstrates the importance of prioritizing education in Central Asia. But how can it be done with respect for both human rights and the civil rights of minorities?

And how can the international community help Kyrgyzstan live up to the commitments it has made to its people?



Flag of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan.



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Chapter 4

Language, Education and Human Rights in Central Asia

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“Everyone has the right to education,” avows Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That education shall be free, at the elementary level and “directed to the full development of the human personality ... it shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship



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Next week:
Liu Xiaobo, the Nobel Peace Prize and Human Rights in China.