



# Mongolian Kazakhs: from **Bayan-Ulgii** to the World





## MONGOLIAN GEOPOLITICS #16

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Aisholpan Nurgaiv is the brave teenage girl from Bayan-Ulgii Province of Mongolia who became a world star after featuring in the documentary “The Eagle Hunters”. She is well-liked on YouTube and Facebook and has been the subject of many news stories, including by the BBC.<sup>1</sup> At age 10, she learned horseback eagle hunting, a traditional hunting method of Kazakh nomads. Competing in this male-dominated sport, she has inspired her female friends and elevated her hometown—Ulgii, which is the provincial centre—and Mongolian Kazakh culture to the world’s attention. She is one of 121,000 Mongolian Kazakhs.<sup>2</sup>

Kazakhs in Mongolia are an ethnic minority with their own language, religion and culture. And they fear losing that culture and their social status. Mongolians in overly Kazakh-dominated places (such as Bayan-Ulgii Province) complain about marginalization and Islamic cultural takeover. Some Mongolians quietly question the trustworthiness and credibility of Kazakhs towards Mongolia and have even made derogatory comments in social media that were offensive or demeaning to Mongolian Kazakhs. Another issue for this portion of the Mongolian population is external in nature: The Kazakh people represent Mongolia’s connection to China’s Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, Kazakhstan and the Russian Kazakhs and Tuvans. Some Mongolians even suspect Kazakhs could be connected to the Islamic extremist groups or support the cultural push of Turkey and Kazakhstan into Mongolia. With these sensitivities in mind, this paper looks at Mongolian Kazakhs and their role in the country’s foreign relationships.

The brief overview is divided into three sections: The first section looks at the why, when and how Kazakhs migrated into Mongolia and integrated into its society during the socialist period. The second section discusses

how Mongolian Kazakhs enjoyed political and civic rights—practising their religion and travelling abroad. The final section highlights the importance of the Kazakh ethnic people in promoting Mongolia's link with China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, Kazakhstan, Turkey and beyond.

### Choosing Mongolia as homeland, enduring the socialist period

#### *Getting the homeland*

The Kazakh migration dates back to the late nineteenth century. During the Manchu-ruled Chinese Qing Dynasty, Kazakh nomads wandered freely over the Altai Mountain range in search of good pasture and convenient weather under the Treaty of Tarbagatai between the Qing Dynasty and Tsarist Russia.<sup>3</sup> Since then, there have been three major influxes of Kazakh migrants into Mongolia.

The first occurred during the Dungan Revolt (1862–1877), in which Muslims rioted against the Qing authority and inflicted massive atrocities between different ethnic groups residing in the Chinese north-western region. After fierce, costly military campaigns, the Qing re-established their control over Xinjiang but imposed repressive measures and taxes. Fleeing from violence, taxing and famine, Kazakh nomads sought and received permission from Mongolian nobles to settle in their territories.

The second influx followed the Chinese 1911 Revolution (Xinhai Revolution), which ended the Qing Dynasty and resulted in the founding of the Republic of China. Around 400 Kazakh families fled from the new Chinese administration policies and the pillages and violence between warlords. They requested citizenship from the Bogd Kingdom of Mongolia in 1912.<sup>4</sup>

In November of that year, Bogd Khaan issued a decree to recognize Kazakhs in western Mongolia as subjects of the kingdom. Interestingly, in 1913, the Mongolian military provided protection for the return of Mongolian Kazakhs who fled to Russia because of the brutal treatment of Noyon Khutagt Dambiiijantsan (known as Ja Lama).<sup>5</sup> Many of these Kazakhs participated in the 1921 People's Revolution, and many fought against fleeing White Russian military units and bandits in Mongolia. In 1922, Kazakh tribal leaders in western Mongolia requested the new government to take Kazakhs as citizens and provide them somewhere to settle. The government granted them citizenship and designated territory for Kazakhs and Tuvans in western Mongolia.

The last major influx occurred in the 1930s and 1940s, when China was caught up in a civil war between the Kuomintang government and the communists. During this period, Central Asian regions, including Xinjiang, became a battleground between powerful geopolitical competitors—China and the Soviet Union—and multiple local warring factions. Again, Mongolian leaders protected Kazakhs and Mongols in the western region from cross-border armed bandits and warlords. The State Small Khural established a Committee for Minorities in 1930 and issued a resolution to improve the socioeconomic conditions of ethnic minorities (Kazakhs and Tuvans). In 1940, the State Small Khural approved a new province for the Kazakhs, although they included Uriankhai Mongols as well and they became an ethnic minority in the Kazakh-dominated province named Bayan-Ulgii.<sup>6</sup>

Although the migrating Kazakhs' dream of a homeland was accommodated, Mongolian Kazakhs suffered from the brutality of the revolutionary period and Stalinist purges. Between 30,000 and 40,000 Mongolian

Taiji (most of them nobles who were descendants of Chinggis Khaan), intellectuals, monks and many ordinary Kazakhs became victims of the communist purges in the 1920s and 1930s, and their religious institutions (mosques and Islamic texts) were destroyed and prohibited.<sup>7</sup> Kazakh scholars argue that these Kazakhs were mostly wealthy and religious people (such as mullahs) and were executed during 1937–1938.<sup>8</sup>

### *Enduring the socialism*

Mongolian Kazakhs experienced the socialist period just as other Mongolians did. A criterion during this period for all citizens was ideological alignment with the Communist Party's doctrine and statements. Any dissenting views were marginalized and resulted in persons losing political and social benefits, including education, promotions and state awards. The Mongolian authorities adopted Soviet-style internationalization along with the Soviet guidelines for building a multi-ethnic society.

Starting from the 1921 revolution, the Communist Party recruited politically aligned Kazakhs while allowing Kazakhs to participate in the decision-making process of its organizations as well as the People's Great Khural, which ensured their representation. From 1942, the Party's schools accepted Kazakh students and even organized courses in the Kazakh language for Kazakh women.<sup>9</sup> By 1947, all Mongolian universities were open to the Kazakh minority. The government implemented literacy programmes in the Kazakh language and established the first Kazakh school in 1933, where Kazakh children were educated in their native language, which continues to this day.

Kazakh-language newspapers (from 1941), journals (1942) and later radio

and television services were provided to Kazakh nationals. In other words, Kazakhs were included in the socialist political process and entitled to education and information in their native language.

After establishing Bayan-Ulgii Province, the government allocated a budget greater than what other provinces received to set up their administration, public services (medical facilities, schools, power plants), light industries along with animal husbandry. Given the cultural proximity, Mongolian Kazakhs established a special connection with the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (KSSR). The Soviet Union began sending doctors, veterinarians and teachers from the KSSR to Bayan-Ulgii Province immediately upon its formation in 1940.<sup>10</sup> From 1943, Mongolian Kazakh students began to study in universities, institutes and vocational schools in the KSSR. Although the name changed, Mongolia has had a relationship with Kazakhstan, a successor independent State of the KSSR, dating from the 1940s. Kazakhs were provided with the same opportunities to study in the Soviet Union and other Socialist Bloc countries only after passing the same criteria expected of Mongolian citizens. However, all graduates from the national and foreign universities and vocational schools were assigned to the Mongolian countryside and transferred out only by the decision of the Party's Central Committee and respective ministries in the different sectors. But this was the case for Mongolian graduates also. As well, all Kazakh males aged 18–25 at that time were required to complete a three-year compulsory military service and to remain in the reserve until age 45.<sup>11</sup>

Because of the government work assignments and policies of the Soviet-type integration of the society, Kazakhs were integrated into Mongolian society. Many Kazakhs sought employment opportunities in major cities due to the lack of jobs in the western region. Although the Kazakhs were



concentrated in Bayan-Ulgii Province (78–80 per cent of the total population) and Khovd Province (at 10 per cent), Kazakh communities were also established in the capital, Ulaanbaatar, and in the major industrial and mining centres of Erdenet (copper and molybdenum), Chandagana (coal), Nalaikh (coal) and Sharyn Gol (coal). By 1991, Kazakhs constituted 72 per cent of the community at the Chandagana coal mine, 60 per cent of the Nalaikh population and 30 per cent of the Sharyn Gol mining town. Kazakh nationals established communities in these cities for one reason that is common to ethnic minorities: to support each other and to preserve their culture. As a Kazakh expert (requesting anonymity) explained, “There [is] always such fear and mistrust of ethnic minorities, even though Kazakhs were not marginalized or harassed during the socialist period; therefore, Kazakhs prefer to live close [together] even within a large city.”<sup>12</sup>

The Kazakh population grew significantly during the socialist period. Bayan-Ulgii has long ranked among the provinces with a high birth rate, mostly due to the cultural factor. For instance, Kazakh nationals numbered 36,700 in 1956, 62,800 in 1969 and 120,500 from 1989 until now. These numbers are considered accurate because there was no need for Kazakhs to hide their ethnic identity, unlike Chinese nationals, or to register with the popular Khalkh identity, as many Mongolian ethnic people did during the socialist period. Kazakhs were allowed to retain their ethnic culture and lifestyle. In addition to preservation of the Kazakh language, traditional costumes and celebrations (such as Nauryz) were maintained. Even Kazakh burial sites were established separately from Mongolians. Only the religious practice was prohibited during the socialist period, which was closely controlled by the State. But this was true for other popular religious practices, such as shamanism and Buddhism.

According to Kozgambaeva, in the 1960s, Kazakh intellectuals and non-intellectuals alike expressed such discontent when the Mongolian government tried to introduce the Mongolization of Kazakhs.<sup>13</sup> In 2001, a well-known Mongolian Kazakh statesman and scholar, Zardykhan K., argued that Kazakhs in Mongolia had never experienced any political purge or social pressure after 1940 but, rather, succeeded in all sectors of the government.<sup>14</sup>

### Exercising civic rights and freedom to travel

#### *Civic rights*

Kazakhs gained political and economic freedom along with all Mongolians in 1989–1990. As the political and economic reform process intensified in the country, as it did in the other socialist countries and in the Soviet Union, Kazakhs actively participated. Kazakh intellectuals and party officials, such as Zardykhan, joined with 15 scholars who wrote an open letter calling the democratic reform in the party newspaper, *Unen*, on 23 February 1989.<sup>15</sup> Kazakhs joined in the democratic movement and later in the new political parties. In December 1989, a branch of the Mongolian Democratic Union was established in Bayan-Ulgii Province. A few months later, chapters of the Mongolian Democratic Party and the Mongolian Social Democratic Party were established in the province. In June 1990, youth along with Mongolian Democratic Union members staged a sitting protest, calling for the resignation of provincial party leaders.<sup>16</sup> During the democratic revolution, Kazakhs joined in the nationwide demonstrations for democratic transitions as well as branches of the democratic movements and parties. Zardykhan was appointed as Deputy Speaker of the State Small Khural and Kh. Khuzkey was appointed Deputy Chairman of the People's Great Khural in 1990. Both the State Small Khural and the People's Great Khural

were the key political institutions to draft and pass the 1992 Constitution of Mongolia. Kazakh intellectuals and delegates were elected to the People's Great Khural and Small Khural, which adopted the Constitution.

At that time, Kazakhs began to call for religious freedom. The Kazakh Language and Cultural Association (later renamed the Mongolian Muslim Association) was established in 1990. In October of that year, the first mosque opened in Ulgii, where Kazakhs could practise their religion openly and, from 1991, the mosque began to run the first madrasa (Islamic secondary and higher educational centre) for the first cohort of Islamic students. As a result of the religious freedom, around 20 Kazakhs made the first-ever pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia.<sup>17</sup> For the revival of the Islamic religion, the Mongolian Muslim Association took on the important role of establishing cooperation with religious organizations and schools in Muslim countries (Kazakhstan, Turkey, Pakistan and the Arab States) to send students, seek funding and donations, and for pilgrimage. Nowadays, according to the Mongolian Muslim Association, there are 40 mosques, 10 Islamic schools and about 3,000 students. The national census for 2020 found that Kazakh people were more religious than Mongolians, with 84.7 per cent of the Kazakh people identifying as religious and 81.9 per cent of them were Muslim.<sup>18</sup>

### *Freedom to travel*

As a result of the democratic transition, Kazakhs (as well as Mongolians in general) gained the freedom to travel and to choose a place to work and live within and beyond Mongolia without any special approval from the State, other than the passport. Although there are no reliable statistics on how many Kazakhs have travelled abroad because border officials do not

collect data on travellers' ethnicity, Kazakhs have never had any restrictions on their travelling abroad.

One specific migration pattern deserves a bit more explanation, however, and that would be the Mongolian Kazakhs migrating to Kazakhstan. The first group (about 72 people) moved by way of bilateral labour contracts from Mongolia to Kazakhstan in March 1990, six months prior to it becoming an independent state.<sup>19</sup> Following independence in 1991, the Kazakh authorities adopted a series of measures to welcome the return of ethnic Kazakhs to their historical homeland. Despite differing statistics, between 1991 and 1995, it sees around 90,000 Mongolian Kazakhs migrated to Kazakhstan in hopes of economic opportunities. As Zardykhan pointed out, many of these migrants followed their "ethnic consciousness" to contribute to the establishment of the independent Kazakh State.<sup>20</sup> According to current statistics, experiencing difficulties such as discriminatory treatment of migrants and the tough socioeconomic conditions in Kazakhstan, about 30,000 Mongolian Kazakhs returned to Mongolia within the first years. Because Mongolian Kazakhs had kept their culture and language well, they were distinct from the Russified Kazakhs in central and northern Kazakhstan and religious Kazakhs in the south-west.

With more than 60,000 Mongolian Kazakhs now living in Kazakhstan, they constitute the largest Mongolian diaspora community abroad. During official visits between Mongolia and Kazakhstan, both governments have highlighted the bridging importance of the cultural and ethnic ties through the Mongolian Kazakhs. But this relaxed migration causes immigration challenges for the Mongolian and Kazakh authorities. Many Kazakhs hold dual citizenship, which is unlawful in both States, avoid the citizenship obligations (such as the compulsory military service and taxes) while enjoy-

ing political rights (voting) and social welfare benefits. Also, many Mongolian Kazakhs become undocumented immigrants in Kazakhstan because they must live in government-designated locations a part of the process to obtain their citizenship or residency in Kazakhstan.

### Role of Mongolian Kazakhs in Mongolia's foreign policy

Mongolian Kazakhs represent a bridge in the country's link to China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, Kazakhstan and Turkey because they share similar cultural roots. They can help the Mongolian authorities, businesses and public engage their counterparts and ameliorate the unproven fear and mistrust about the Islamic takeover or the spread of extremism.

Less than a century ago, Mongolia's link with Xinjiang was raised between the United States and Soviet Union when Taiwan blamed the Soviets and Mongolians for aiding East Turkestan militants. One of the tasks for US Vice-President Henry Wallace when visiting Mongolia in 1944 was to hear out the Government's explanation regarding China's allegation that the Soviets and Mongolians were conducting military operations in Xinjiang Region.<sup>21</sup> Now, Xinjiang has re-emerged as a hot topic in global politics, and all the great powers remain concerned about religious extremism, ranging from South Asia to Eurasia and Europe. At the same time, China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region offers a new international link for the people of the Mongolian western provinces and Russia's landlocked and isolated people of the Tuva Republic. Mongolian Kazaks should be encouraged to engage in trade and people-to-people exchanges to tap the vast potential of economic cooperation. With the assistance of the Asian Development Bank, Mongolia began to serve as a China–Mongolia–Russia international link, which easily extends to

Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan is an important country for Mongolia's foreign policies. It is a large populous State sharing the similar geopolitical challenge of being in the sphere of influence of two expansionist Great Powers. Despite the presence of the Mongolian Kazakh communities in Kazakhstan and the slow but steady cross-border trade between the Mongolian western region and Kazakhstan, the actual trade turnover is not promising. The main challenge is that Mongolia does not border directly with Kazakhstan, and there is no infrastructure (air or rail) to facilitate a two-way trade. However, the two governments need to work together to take care of Mongolia's diaspora community in Kazakhstan. The people-to-people connection could promote bilateral relations in all spheres of cooperation, just like Mongolian diasporas in the Republic of Korea or Europe. Both States could work together to promote and preserve the shared nomadic culture. In another sense, both governments need to collaborate to resolve immigration-related issues, starting from the undocumented Mongolian Kazakhs in Kazakhstan and the dodging of citizenship obligations on both sides. This requires the Mongolian authority to develop a comprehensive, long-term strategy to use Mongolian Kazakhs to develop economic and cultural ties with Kazakhstan, drawing on the ties that date to the 1940s. In return, they can strengthen the Mongolian Kazakh identity and heritage. The only difference now is that both Mongolia and Kazakhstan can do this without the Kremlin's guidance and control.

Another bridging role for the Mongolian Kazakhs is with Turkey. Recognizing the historic and cultural ties, Turkey has been paying special attention to Mongolian Kazakhs and the Kazakh-dominated Bayan-Ulgii Province over the past three decades. In 1994, a Turkish-style high school opened in Bayan-Ulgii to provide opportunity for mostly Kazakh nationals to ob-

tain Turkish-standard secondary education. Thus began opportunities to study in Turkey and other developed countries. Since 2004, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency initiated developmental and cultural projects, about 60 per cent of which have been exclusively devoted to the Kazakh communities. Although not at a great scale, there are some Turkish business interests in Bayan-Ulgii (such as Turkish restaurants). Like some Russians, some Mongolians are suspicious of the Turkish ambitions to extend the Turkish-led cultural sphere of influence strategy (Turkic world) into Central Asia, Eurasia and Mongolia.<sup>22</sup> Although Mongolia is rarely included or related in the discourse on the Turkic world, Turkish activities contribute to the doubts or suspicions among Mongolian scholars, experts and the general population. Therefore, both governments should work together to have open, candid policies that will increase the role of Kazakhs in developing bilateral ties and to reduce the fear and doubts over the bilateral activities.

In a nutshell, Mongolian Kazakhs have demonstrated the potential for increasing ties with China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, Kazakhstan and Turkey. However, the ties need to be based on open and transparent policies to prevent misunderstandings and misperceptions. The government should encourage Mongolian Kazakhs to attract economic investments from Kazakhs around the world to enrich its landlocked, less-developed western region.

### *Concluding thoughts*

The Mongolian government has pursued flexible, inclusive policies since the beginning of the Kazakh migration into the country. There are many problems between the two communities that wane and wax depending

on various factors. The most known is the discriminatory treatment of Mongolian minorities in the Kazakh-dominated Bayan-Ulgii Province. And Kazakhs make similar complaints about Kazakh minorities in the adjacent Mongolian-dominated Khovd Province.

Some Mongolians are worried about the quality of Mongolian language teaching in the Kazakh secondary schools, and there are rumours of a Kazakh conspiracy to take over Bayan-Ulgii and then merge it with Kazakhstan. Some Mongolians are wary of the growing link to Muslim countries and that the spread of the Islamic schools and teaching could be exploited by religious extremist groups. These feelings and perceptions are not so different from any other ethnic minority cases, especially those co-ethnic groups that reside on the different sides of the border, maintain long-lasting historic linkages and have shared cultural values.

These issues will never disappear but require careful, transparent policies to ease the tensions and to promote common understanding and tolerance. To strengthen the centuries-long co-existence of the two cultures, the Mongolian Kazakh identity—which is an inseparable part of Mongolia's society and development—should be promoted through cultural celebrations, academic discussions and co-ethnic projects. One such project could be the Mongolian tourist camps that are inclusive of Kazakh and Tuvan *gers* and culture along with Mongolian *gers*. In this way, Mongolian Kazakhs would maintain their centuries-long nomadic culture while investing in an important global connection via Kazakhs, who are an ethnic people spread around the world, from China, Russia and Central Asia to Iran, Turkey and beyond (diasporas in Europe and North America).

Aisholpan Nurgaiv has made both Mongols and Kazakhs proud of her and



the traditional hunting sport demonstrated at the annual Golden Eagle Festival in Bayan-Ulgii. Her bravery is contagious and could introduce the country's exemplary policy towards ethnic minorities to the world and welcome more Mongolians and international guests to learn and understand the beauty of Kazakh games on horseback. Bayan-Ulgii Province has begun to attract interest from international donor organizations and tourism because of its scenic nature, unique lifestyle of the Kazakh people and the growing Muslim culture.

## Endnotes

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- 2 According to the 2020 Population and Housing Census, 120,999 Kazakh ethnic people registered and they constitute 3.8 per cent of the population of 3,174,565. The National Statistics Office of Mongolia, *2020 Population and Housing Census of Mongolia*, 2020.
- 3 Русско-Китайские Отношения (1689–1916) [Russo-Sino Relations (1689–1916)] (Москва, 1958), pp. 34–40; А.Жамбал, Ислам шашин [The Islamic Religion] (Ulaanbaatar, 2005), p. 61.
- 4 The archival documents (Х-А3. Д-1. ХН-342), The Mongolian National Central Archive; Монголын нэгдсэн улс байгуулахын төлөөх тэмцэл (1911–1915) [Fight for the establishment of Mongolian Unified State], (Ulaanbaatar, 2014), pp. 48–50.
- 5 Noyon Khutagt Dambijantsan, well-known Ja Lama, was a ruthless warlord, who fought against the Qing Dynasty in western Mongolia in 1890–1922. Because of his brutality against Kazakhs, many Mongolian Kazakhs fled to Russia and China.
- 6 Хүүхэд-залуучуудын нэвтэрхий толь – I [*The Youth Encyclopedia* I] (Ulaanbaatar, 1983), p. 83.
- 7 Although the numbers are significantly disputed, in 1921–1941, nearly 100,000 people were executed by the Soviet and Mongolian secret police. Families, relatives and friends of these people were also marginalized from the society and remained under the government surveillance. See S. Sandag, and H.H. Kendall, *Poisoned Arrows: The Stalin-Choibalsan Mongolian Massacres, 1921–1941* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), p. 173.
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18 National Statistics Office of Mongolia, 2020 Population and Housing Census of Mongolia (Ulaanbaatar, 2020), p. 6.

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22 For example, see Grigory Lukyanov, Artemy Mironov, Nubara Kulieva, “Turkey's Policy in Central Asia: Are Ambitions Well-Founded?” 25 February 2022. Available at <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/turkey-s-policy-in-central-asia-are-ambitions-well-founded/>.

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