

Central Asia Today

SECTION

3

If YOU lived there...

Your country, Kyrgyzstan, has just had an election. You listen to the radio with your brother, anxiously awaiting the results of the election. When the radio announcer says that the same president has won again, your brother is very angry. He says the election was unfair, and he is going to protest outside the president's palace. He expects there to be a big crowd.

Will you join your brother? Why or why not?

BUILDING BACKGROUND Political protests have been fairly common in some Central Asian countries in recent years. Political instability is just one of the challenges facing Central Asia today as the region learns to deal with independence.

Central Asia Today

A history of invasions and foreign rule has made an impact on Central Asia. Because of years of fighting and changes in the region, today many countries of Central Asia face similar issues in building stable governments and strong economies.

Afghanistan

The situation in Afghanistan today is in many ways a result of a long war with the Soviet Union in the 1980s. The Soviets left in 1989. However, turmoil continued under an alliance of Afghan groups. In the mid-1990s a radical Muslim group known as the **Taliban** arose. The group's leaders took over most of the country, including the capital, **Kabul**.

The Taliban used a strict interpretation of Islamic teachings to rule Afghanistan. For example, the Taliban severely limited the role of women in society. They forced women to wear veils and to stop working outside the home. They also banned all music and dancing. Although most Muslims sharply disagreed with the Taliban's policies, the group remained in power for several years.

What You Will Learn...

Main Ideas

1. The countries of Central Asia are working to develop their economies and to improve political stability in the region.
2. The countries of Central Asia face issues and challenges related to the environment, the economy, and politics.

The Big Idea

Central Asian countries are mostly poor, but they are working to create stable governments and sound economies.

Key Terms and Places

Taliban, p. 253

Kabul, p. 253

dryland farming, p. 255

arable, p. 255

TAKING NOTES

As you read, use a chart like the one below to help you take notes on governments, economies, and challenges in Central Asia today.

Afghanistan	
Kazakhstan	
Kyrgyzstan	
Tajikistan	
Turkmenistan	
Uzbekistan	

Reforms in Afghanistan



Some reforms have taken place in Afghanistan since the end of Taliban rule. However, the country still faces many challenges.

ANALYZING VISUALS What opportunities might education create for this girl?

Since the End of Taliban Rule ...

- Afghanistan has a new constitution and an elected president.
- Many people are registered to vote.
- Afghanistan's rules are written and accessible to citizens for the first time.
- New clinics and trained doctors provide more people with access to health care.
- Women can work outside the home.
- Girls can attend school.

Eventually, the Taliban came into conflict with the United States. Investigation of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., led to terrorist leader Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda network, based in Afghanistan. U.S. and British forces attacked Taliban and al Qaeda targets and toppled Afghanistan's Taliban government.

Since the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan's government has changed in many ways. The country has a new constitution. Also, all men and women age 18 and older can vote for the president and for the members of a national assembly. Some members of the assembly are appointed by the president, and the constitution requires that half of these appointees be women.

Many Afghans hope their government will be stable. However, political factions, or opposing groups, disagree with some of the recent changes. These groups threaten violence, which may make Afghanistan's new government less stable.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan was the first part of Central Asia to be conquered by Russia. As a result, Russian influence remains strong in that country today. About one-third of Kazakhstan's people are ethnic Russians. Kazakh and Russian are both official languages. Many ethnic Kazakhs grow up speaking Russian at home and have to learn Kazakh in school.

Kazakhstan's economy was once tied to the former Soviet Union's. It was based on manufacturing. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the economy suffered. However, due to its valuable oil reserves and quick adaptation to the free market, Kazakhstan's economy is now growing steadily. The country is the richest in Central Asia.

Kazakhstan also has one of the more stable governments in Central Asia. The country is a democratic republic with an elected president and parliament. In 1998 Kazakhstan moved its capital from Almaty to Astana, which is closer to Russia.

FOCUS ON READING

What is a restatement of *factions*?

Kyrgyzstan

The word *kyrgyz* means “forty clans.” Throughout history, clan membership has been an important part of Kyrgyzstan’s social, political, and economic life. Many people still follow nomadic traditions.

Many other people in Kyrgyzstan are farmers. Fertile soils there allow a mix of irrigated crops and **dryland farming, or farming that relies on rainfall instead of irrigation**. Farming is the most important industry in Kyrgyzstan. However, it does not provide much income for the country.

Although the standard of living in Kyrgyzstan is low, the economy shows signs of strengthening. Tourism might also help Kyrgyzstan’s economy. The country has a Muslim pilgrimage site as well as the beautiful Lake Issyk-Kul.

Kyrgyzstan’s government is changing. The country has been fairly stable for some years. However, protests in 2005 over what some people thought were unfair elections could signal that times are changing.

Tajikistan

Like other countries in Central Asia, Tajikistan is struggling to overcome its problems. In the mid-1990s the country’s Communist government fought against a group of reformers. Some reformers demanded democracy. Others called for a government that ruled by Islamic law. The groups came together and signed a peace agreement in 1997. As a result, Tajikistan is now a republic with an elected president.

Years of civil war damaged Tajikistan’s economy. Both industrial and agricultural production declined. Even with the decline in agricultural production, Tajikistan still relies on cotton farming for much of its income. However, only 5 to 6 percent of the country’s land is **arable, or suitable for growing crops**. Lack of arable land makes progress there difficult.

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan’s president holds all power in the country. He was voted president for life by the country’s parliament. He has used his power to name a month of the year after himself, and his face appears on almost everything in Turkmenistan.

The Turkmen government supports Islam and has ordered schools to teach Islamic principles. However, it also views Islam with caution. It does not want Islam to become a political movement.

Tajikistan’s economy is based on oil, gas, and cotton. Although the country is a desert, about half of it is planted with cotton fields. Farming is possible because Turkmenistan has the longest irrigation channel in the world.

FOCUS ON CULTURE

Turkmen Carpets

Decorative carpets are an essential part of a nomad’s home. They are also perhaps the most famous artistic craft of Turkmenistan. Carpet factories operate in cities all through Turkmenistan, but some women still weave carpets by hand. These weavers memorize hundreds of intricate designs so they can make rugs that look the same. Each of several different Turkmen tribes has its own rug design.

Analyzing Why are carpets good for a nomadic way of life?



Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan has the largest population of the Central Asian countries. It also has the largest cities in the region. Two cities—Bukhara and Samarqand—are famous for their mosques and monuments.

As in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan's elected president holds all the political power. The United States has criticized the government for not allowing political freedom or respecting human rights.

The government also closely controls the economy. Uzbekistan's economy, based on oil, gold, and cotton, is fairly stable even though it is growing only very slowly.

READING CHECK **Drawing Inferences** How does physical geography affect the economies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan?

Issues and Challenges

As you have read, the countries of Central Asia face similar issues and challenges. Their greatest challenges are in the areas of environment, economy, and politics.

Environment

One of the most serious environmental problems is the shrinking of the Aral Sea. Winds sweep the dry seafloor and blow dust, salt, and pesticides hundreds of miles. Also, towns that once relied on fishing are now dozens of miles from the shore.

Another problem is the damage caused by Soviet military practices. The Soviets tested nuclear bombs in Central Asia. Now people there suffer poor health because of radiation left over from the tests.

Challenges for Central Asia

Most countries in Central Asia face environmental, economic, or political challenges. How the Central Asian countries face these challenges will shape their future.

Environmental

Industrial waste from old factories pollutes the air and groundwater.

 THE WORLD ALMANAC Facts about Countries			
	TVs (Per 1,000 People)	Radios (Per 1,000 People)	Per Capita GDP (U.S. \$)
Afghanistan	14	132	\$800
Kazakhstan	240	395	\$7,800
Kyrgyzstan	49	113	\$1,700
Tajikistan	328	143	\$1,100
Turkmenistan	198	289	\$5,700
Uzbekistan	280	465	\$1,800
United States	844	2,116	\$40,100

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Another environmental problem has been caused by the overuse of chemicals to increase crop production. These chemicals have ended up ruining some farmlands. Instead of increasing crop production, the chemicals have hurt the economy.

Economy

Many of Central Asia's economic problems are due to reliance on one crop—cotton. Suitable farmland is limited, so employment in the cotton industry is limited. Also, the focus on cotton has not encouraged countries to develop manufacturing.

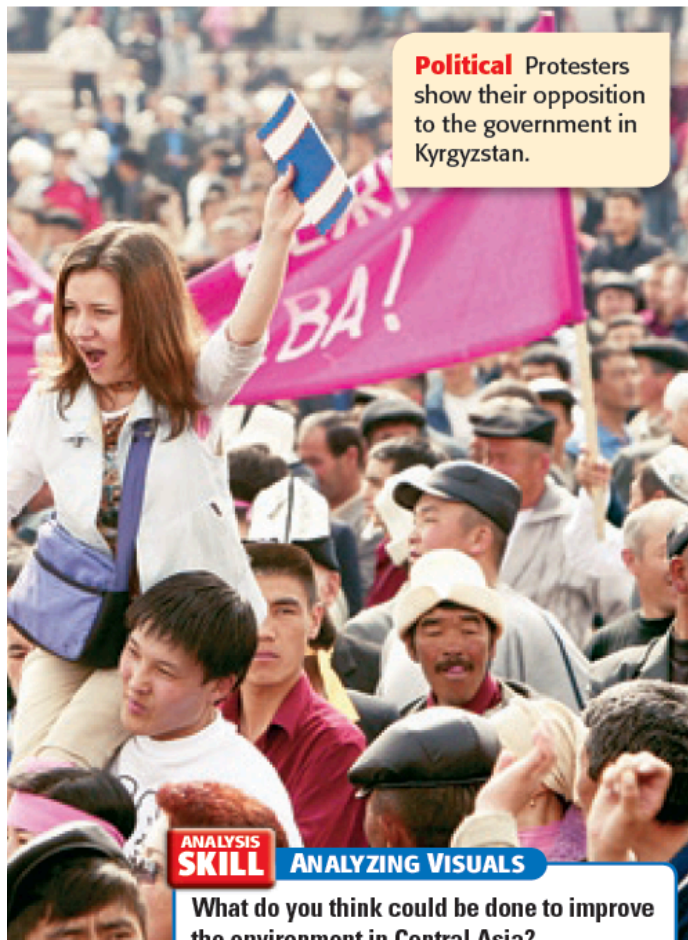
Some countries have oil and gas reserves that may someday make them rich. For now, though, outdated equipment, lack of funds, and poor transportation systems slow development in Central Asia.

Politics

The other main challenge in Central Asia today is lack of political stability. In some countries, such as Kyrgyzstan, people do not agree on the best kind of government. People who are dissatisfied with their government sometimes turn to violence. These countries today are often faced with terrorist threats from different political groups within their own countries.

READING CHECK **Summarizing** What environmental challenges does Central Asia face?

SUMMARY Central Asia is recovering from a history of foreign rule. The region is struggling to develop sound economies and stable governments.



Political Protesters show their opposition to the government in Kyrgyzstan.

ANALYSIS SKILL

ANALYZING VISUALS

What do you think could be done to improve the environment in Central Asia?

Section 3 Assessment

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Online Quiz

KEYWORD: SK7 HP10

Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and Places

- a. Describe** How did the **Taliban** affect Afghanistan?

b. Contrast What are some major differences between Afghanistan and Kazakhstan?

c. Elaborate What is one way a country might create more **arable** land?
- a. Identify** What three types of challenges does Central Asia face today?

b. Make Generalizations Why does much of Central Asia face political instability?

Critical Thinking

- Categorizing** Using your notes and a chart like the one here, categorize your information on each Central Asian country. You will have to add more lines as needed.

	Government	Economy
Afghanistan		
Kazakhstan		

FOCUS ON VIEWING

- Describing Central Asia Today** Write notes about each country in Central Asia. Which countries will you suggest listeners visit? What details will encourage them?