Central Asia Today

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?

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.
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.
**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.

**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.

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**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.

**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.
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.

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**Section 3 Assessment**

**Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and Places**

1. 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?

2. 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**

3. **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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Economy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
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<td>Kazakhstan</td>
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**Focus on Viewing**

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