

Other Cases of Government Control over Languages

In 2004, Tetovo University in the Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia was legally allowed to teach Albanian, the language of one of the country's minorities, for the first time since it was founded 9 years previously. At the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa, Afrikaans-speaking students petitioned the university not to reduce the teaching of Afrikaans, traditionally its main language. In Nepal, insurgents set fire to Mahendra Sanskrit University in protest of the government policy to require the teaching of Sanskrit in all government schools.

The situation in the Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia is similar to the case of Kurdish in Turkey. Here, the Albanians are an unlanded minority nationality within the borders ruled by the Skopje government. Again, a government attempted to weaken the nationalist language of a minority nationality by refusing to allow it to be taught in a university until the ban ceased to be politically tenable.

The situations in South Africa and Nepal are different. Afrikaans is the language of the Afrikaner minority that ruled the country until the end of apartheid in the 1990s. Presently, South African officially recognizes 11 languages, including nine indigenous African languages like isiXhosa and siPedi, as well as the two colonial languages, Afrikaans and English. Somewhat like the colonial languages used as official languages in other African countries to the north, English has a relatively neutral value, since it is not associated with a major indigenous nationality, nor is it so closely associated with the old regime as Afrikaans is. Hence, it has been increasingly adopted as a language of higher education in South Africa under majority rule, for both nationalist (there is more educational material published in it and teachers trained to teach in it than is the case for the nine indigenous languages or even Afrikaans) and weakly nationalist reasons (it does not have quite the stigma for the majority that Afrikaans does, and it is not symbolic of any of the indigenous social groups). But for Afrikaners, Afrikaans is certainly a symbol of their nationality, so naturally they are motivated to resist the perceived decline in its importance as English replaces it at universities like Stellenbosch.

Nepal is a country with scores of languages and numerous ethnic groups, at least some of which may be nationalities in Fishman's sense. Caste is a strong factor in social organization. Sanskrit is a classical language, like Latin or Classical Greek, with very few speakers. Government-supported schools in Nepal are required to teach it, and this offends many from lower-caste groups, because of the identity overtones of Sanskrit. Sanskrit is traditionally associated with the high-caste Brahmins, making it seem to the insurgents that children are being forced to study a language associated with a status they cannot have, in place of subjects that might directly benefit them. This is what motivated insurgents to attack Mahendra Sanskrit University, a symbol—from their point of view—of the oppressor's language.