

Understanding the disturbances in Xinjiang

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The underlying factors behind the events of July 5, 2009, in Urumqi include cultural, economic and political dimensions. Urumqi (a city of 2 million people) is the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in People's Republic of China. The Uyghur speak a Turkic language, use a modified Arabic Script, and are Sunni Muslims. Their cultural identity is quite distinct from the ethnic Chinese, the Han. Over 75% of the city's population is Han. In contrast, Xinjiang is 46% Uyghur and 40% Han. (These are the official figures and do not include the floating population of migrants). Xinjiang is economically and geopolitically important to China. Xinjiang is the number three oil producer in China. Xinjiang is one-sixth of China's territory and borders onto Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Given the significance of oil and the role of China in Central Asia, stability in Xinjiang is key to the Chinese state.

There are historical precursors to the current disturbances. On December 12, 1985, all Uyghur students from Xinjiang University boycotted classes and some 5000 students from all colleges marched to People's Square in Urumqi. Similar demonstrations occurred across Xinjiang. The demands articulated in the demonstrations included: no nuclear testing in Xinjiang, no resettlement of criminals in Xinjiang, more support for education for minority nationalities, and no one-child-policy for Xinjiang minorities. After the demonstration, all students were required to attend extra sessions of political study. The school authorities also received criticism from the regional leaders. A similar march happened on December 22, 1985 in Beijing. Government officials explained in meetings with Beijing students that testing was done in Lop Nor as it was uninhabited, that reform through thought inmates would be sent back upon completion of their sentences and that family planning policy is not applied to minority nationalities. This political demonstration occurred during the heady days of reform after the Cultural Revolution and before the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989. The tactics of the students were those of intellectuals and political expression. This was a non-violent protest.

On July 5, 2009, several thousand Uyghur students and workers also marched toward the downtown. How was this march different? The demands this time revolved around the prosecution of those responsible for the harassment of Uyghurs working in Guangdong, in particular those who killed two Uyghur workers. The response was also different. This time, the police forces required the crowd to disperse and then used force to disperse the crowd. The students and workers fought back and over 150 people (including Han and Uyghur) were killed in the ensuing chaos. By July 8, more police and army forces poured into Urumqi (and other cities in Xinjiang) to enforce the equivalent of martial law. However, the underlying issues (cultural, religious, economic and political) have not been resolved.

Cultural issues are very strong points as these go hand in hand with Uyghur identity. Language usage and education policies affect the daily life of the Uyghur population. Uyghur is the lingua franca in Xinjiang for Uyghurs but also other minority groups. Uyghur is commonly used at home, in the market, at work, in the media and (previously) in schools. The fear within Uyghur society is that Uyghur is less readily utilized as the Chinese language is now the dominant one. The issue here is Sinicization as each succeeding generation is less fluent in Uyghur, which is the medium for cultural transmission.

The bilingual system of education (of Han and Uyghur schools) has changed. Before 1984 Chinese was offered beginning in middle school. In 1984 Chinese was compulsory beginning in the third grade, today Chinese instruction begins in the first grade. The rationale is that the minority languages, in the words of the Xinjiang Communist Party

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leader “contain only limited amounts of information and cannot express some more advanced knowledge.” By 2004 the *Xinjiang Daily* reported that the government decided that ethnic minority schools must merge with ethnic Chinese schools. Teaching would be conducted in Chinese. Today instruction is in Chinese and the Uyghur language is taught as a second language. All classes at college are now in Chinese, even Uyghur poetry classes. The long term impact will be a college educated elite who have less familiarity with their ancestral language and more familiarity with Chinese; by extension, more fluency in Chinese culture than in Uyghur culture. These policies are packaged as part of the ‘develop the west’ campaign.

Related to the cultural issue is religious expression. The People’s Republic of China has effective state control of religious institutions. All imams are to be state trained and sanctioned. So the bizarre situation is one where an atheistic state is in charge of religion. The Koran is approved by the state Islamic Association of China. Unlike other parts of China, entry of children in to the mosque is forbidden. Protests have advocated for the right of freedom of expression. The state has a general policy to prevent fasting during Ramadan. People have been arrested for getting up before dawn to eat. Schools and institutions make sure cafeterias are open for lunch and that all students eat. Muslim restaurants were required to remain open for Ramadan in 2008. The state also limits and vets participants on the Haj to Mecca through passport control. Uyghurs who do get passports have to pledge they will not go on the Haj to Mecca.

Economic issues have also been a focus of protests. A key element here is the realization that the migration of Chinese from other parts of China in the 1950s and 60s with the Production Construction Army Corps and in the present with the floating population is job related. There are many Uyghurs looking for jobs as well. Employers may well prefer to give jobs to Han over Uyghurs. With the ‘develop the west’ campaign, more jobs are promoted to improve the economy. While the economic level of many Uyghurs has risen since the 1980s the relative economic gap between Han and Uyghur has increased. So the view is one of Uyghurs not being able to get jobs and Han immigrants taking jobs. There are employment kiosks across Urumqi and other cities offering jobs to floating population. Similarly Sichuan peasants are brought in to pick the Xinjiang cotton harvest. Part of the dissatisfaction is the economic challenges faced by Uyghur since the 1980s and the economic competition that has ensued throughout China. A recent plan is to move 10,000 households from earthquake stricken areas in Gansu to Xinjiang, “which has vast areas of undeveloped land.” Another recent example is that of Shanghai Ocean University offering graduates 2000-6000 yuan subsidy if they have a job contract in Xinjiang or Tibet as well as Gansu, Yunnan, or Guizhou. More jobs in Xinjiang may help to combat unrest in the region. The large Han population of Urumqi is seen as a result of government efforts to increase Han population in Xinjiang. Similarly the large Han population in the Production Construction Army Corps is also accepted as proof of the central government’s efforts to dilute the numbers of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. These are a sampling of reports on population and migration into Xinjiang. The ‘develop the west’ campaign is viewed as a Han population migration policy.

The particularly political nature of the “Strike Hard” Campaigns, instituted since the 1990s, cause stress among the Uyghur population. The campaigns target property crimes and, drug rings and the like, but a special emphasis in Xinjiang is also on thought crimes. Much effort in political study meetings is directed toward the proper doctrine. What in the past was labeled nationalism or separatism is since 2001 labeled Terrorism. People have been sentenced for passing out flyers, hanging an East Turkistan Flag, making fun of a Mao statue, or for protesting the head scarf ban. The state takes a hard line against these activities. The Xinjiang Communist Party Leader has said that “terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism are the three greatest challenges to security”. These ‘three evils’ are conflated together. Any one with a different voice or perspective than the state in Xinjiang is dealt with harshly, more so than in other parts of China. Imprisonment may include harsh deprivations and torture. Re-education of prisoners through labor is also common. The ‘Strike Hard’ campaign as it widens to include thought crimes has enflamed the feelings of people and thus increased the amount of demonstrations and protests, driving some to commit violent acts.

In sum the source of Uyghur protests have been state actions on the cultural (including religious), economic, religious and political fronts. In a chapter written before 9-11-2001, the political scientist Minxin Pei indicated that repression has proved to be more explosive rather than calming. Until these cultural, economic, and political issues are resolved, people in Xinjiang will still face difficulties.

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