



UIGHUR ETHNIC IDENTITY UNDER THREAT IN CHINA

The ethnic identity of Uighurs in western China is being systematically eroded. Government policies, including those that limit use of the Uighur language, severe restrictions on freedom of religion, and a sustained influx of Han Chinese migrants into the region, are destroying customs and, together with employment discrimination, fuelling discontent and ethnic tensions. The government has mounted an aggressive campaign that has led to the arrest and arbitrary detention of thousands of Uighurs on charges of “terrorism, separatism and religious extremism” for peacefully exercising their human rights.

Uighurs are a Turkic speaking, mainly Sunni Islamic ethnic group with a long history at the heart of central Asia. In China, they are concentrated in the western region of the country, an area historically claimed by competing empires, warlords and ethnic groups. In 1949, the region was integrated into the People’s Republic of China.

In 1955, the People’s Republic of China established the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR), in recognition of the Uighurs’ predominance in the region, a status which according to the Chinese Constitution entitles ethnic minorities to organs of self-government in order to exercise autonomy.

According to the latest Chinese census in 2000, there are more than 18 million people living in the XUAR, of whom 47 per cent are Uighurs, 40 per cent are Han Chinese and 12 per cent are other ethnic groups, including Kazakhs, Kyrgyzs, Tatars, Uzbeks and Tajiks. The Han Chinese population has increased significantly from an estimated 6 per cent in 1949 due to central government policies that include providing financial incentives to Han Chinese who migrate to the region.

REPRESSION IN THE NAME OF THE ‘WAR ON TERROR’

The post-Mao era in the 1980s brought liberalizing policies throughout China that allowed citizens greater freedom, including freedom of religion and expression, and strengthened legal protections, policies which extended to the XUAR. However, in the mid to late 1990s, Uighurs in the region experienced a sharp reversal in policy,

Nurmuhemmet Yasin, a 32-year-old Uighur writer and poet, is serving a 10-year prison sentence for writing the short story “Wild Pigeon”. The Chinese authorities consider the story a veiled indictment of its rule in the XUAR. “Wild Pigeon”, or “Yawa Kepter” in the Uighur language, is the first-person narrative of a trapped young pigeon - the son of a pigeon king - that commits suicide in captivity. He kills himself rather than sacrifice his freedom. “Now, finally, I can die freely. I feel as if my soul is on fire - soaring and free.”



as the authorities embarked on an aggressive campaign against the “three evils”: “terrorism, separatism and religious extremism”. As a result, increased numbers of Uighurs have been subjected to arbitrary arrests, unfair trials and torture, and their economic, social and cultural rights have been slowly eroded. This has worsened since the attacks in the USA on 11 September 2001 as the authorities cast Uighur discontent within the framework of international terrorism, claims that many academics and other observers consider unsubstantiated.

In 2008, the authorities used a series of violent incidents, allegedly carried out by Uighur separatist groups, as a pretext for launching a sweeping crackdown on the Uighur population in the XUAR. According to official media, almost 1,300 people were arrested during 2008 on state security charges that included terrorism, separatism and religious extremism, and 1,154 were formally charged and faced trials or administrative punishments. On 14 August, Wang Lequan, Communist Party Secretary of the XUAR, announced a “life and death” struggle against Uighur “separatism”.

LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL IDENTITY AT RISK

Language: The Chinese authorities continue to pursue a language policy that purports to make the school system in the XUAR “bilingual” but which is in fact making Chinese the sole language of instruction. The policy began in the 1990s with the elimination of Uighur as a medium of instruction at the university level. Today, at Xinjiang University, only Uighur poetry courses are taught in Uighur. In 2006, the authorities initiated policy measures that are making Chinese the primary medium of instruction at the pre-school level.

Contradicting the spirit of true “bilingualism”, Uighur children and teachers from a town in southern XUAR reported that they would be fined if they said one word in Uighur while on school premises.

Uighurs are acutely aware of the dramatic impact this policy has had on the ability of Uighur youth to speak their own language and the consequent impact on their cultural and ethnic identity. According to one young Uighur man in his 20s:

"If the children don't learn the language [Uighur] they won't know the culture, they won't know the religion then they won't be Uighur. They'll have become Chinese. They [the Chinese authorities] are destroying us through language..."

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has called on China to "ensure that all teaching and learning materials for the primary and secondary level are also available in ethnic minority languages and with culturally sensitive content."

Religion: The authorities maintain tight control over mosques and religious clergy, intervening in the appointment of local imams, stationing police within and outside mosques, and closely monitoring all religious activities. Government employees in the XUAR, including teachers, police officers, state enterprise workers and civil servants risk losing their jobs if they engage in religious activity. The Chinese authorities have also put many obstacles in the way of Uighurs attempting to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, known as the Hajj, which is a requirement for all practising Muslims.

Children under the age of 18 are not allowed to enter mosques or to receive any sort of religious education. Many young Uighurs are afraid that if they do enter a mosque, or are found to be praying at home, they will be expelled from school.

LAWS AND STANDARDS VIOLATED

As a state party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, China is obligated to guarantee the rights of everyone to take part in cultural life and to take steps including those necessary for the conservation, development and diffusion of culture to achieve the full realization of this right. China is also a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which guarantees the right to freedom of expression and freedom to hold and manifest religious beliefs. Article 27 of the ICCPR states that ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their own group, to enjoy their own culture, to practice their own religion, or to use their own language.

Chinese domestic law, including its Constitution, and the 1984 Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law (REAL), also gives ethnic minorities the right to protect, preserve and promote their culture. The REAL states that "(s)chools (classes) and other educational organizations recruiting mostly ethnic minority students should, whenever possible, use textbooks in their own languages and use these languages as the medium of instruction." Article 4 of the Chinese Constitution states that "Regional autonomy is practised in areas where people of minority ethnic groups live in compact communities... All ethnic groups have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages and to preserve or reform their own ways and customs."

Ablikim Abdiriyim, the son of human rights activist and former prisoner of conscience Rebiya Kadeer, is serving a nine-year sentence for "separatism" in the XUAR No. 4 Prison. Despite reports that he was originally detained for alleged financial irregularities in his business, official Chinese media stated that Ablikim confessed during his trial in January 2007 to having "spread secessionist articles over the internet, turned the public against the Chinese government and written articles which distorted China's human rights and ethnic policies." There are strong suggestions his confession was extracted through torture.

Amnesty International considers both **Nurmuhammet Yasin** and **Ablikim Abdiriyim** prisoners of conscience and calls for their immediate and unconditional release.

Many also report that it is only on Fridays, the most important prayer day of the week for Muslims, that schools force students to stay at school for lunch in order to prevent them from going home to pray.

FUEL FOR DISCONTENT

The Chinese state has failed to protect Uighurs from employment discrimination which has resulted in extremely high rates of unemployment among Uighurs in the XUAR and fuelled discontent. Many Uighurs report seeing “Uighurs need not apply” signs posted by employers at job fairs demonstrating the state’s inaction in enforcing anti-discrimination laws. Even university graduates who speak fluent Chinese have difficulty finding employment.

The XUAR is the only area of China where the general population (non-prisoners) is systematically subject to a government policy of forced labour. Under a system referred to as “hashar”, farming families are fined if they fail to send a family member, sometimes several times each year, to labour on agricultural, infrastructural and other public works for up to two to three weeks at a time. The individuals are given no compensation for their labour, no room or board, and are expected to pay their own transportation costs. Many describe sleeping out in the open and eating nothing but instant noodles for days while doing hard labour. Families that do not have an able-bodied young man to send are not exempt - men and women as old as 70, and children as young as 12, are reported by Uighurs to have participated.

The systematic erosion of Uighur ethnic identity by the Chinese authorities is characterized by repression and human rights abuses. The Chinese authorities must immediately reverse policies that limit use of the Uighur language and severely restrict freedom of religion and Uighurs’ ability to enjoy and replicate their culture.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations to the Chinese government

- Immediately and unconditionally release all those detained solely for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and freedom of religion, or in other ways for peacefully exercising their human rights.
- Respect and protect the right of Uighurs to enjoy their own culture, to practise their religion, and to use their own language.
- Immediately abolish the practice of “hashar”, a form of forced labour.
- Make a clear distinction between activities that involve the peaceful exercise of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights and those that would be internationally recognized as criminal acts.

April 2009
Index: ASA 17/010/2009
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