

# Turmoil In China's Underbelly

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*["We say that China is a country vast in territory, rich in resources and large in population; as a matter fact, it is the Han nationality whose population is large and the minority nationalities whose territory is vast and whose resources are rich..."]*

*(Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung, Vol. V, Foreign Languages Press, 1977, p. 295)]*

The above observation of Mao, the foremost leader of the Chinese revolution and post-revolution China, is an absolutely correct formulation and has not lost any of its validity even after more than sixty years of the revolution. In fact, the validity is only getting more and more underscored with the drastic material changes that China is undergoing since its incorporation into the global neo liberal economic regime thirty years back. It was the above utterly realistic evaluation of Mao and strategic considerations of securing its western borders and trade routes to Central Asia and Europe that propelled the invasion of the vast so-called minority nationality areas by the predominantly Han Chinese People's Liberation Army immediately after the victory of the Chinese revolution. These invasions were masked by the fig leaf of "liberation" of the poor of these nationalities from the clutches of feudal and imperialist oppressors. Historiography propagating that all these annexed territories and peoples were since long an inalienable part of China was manufactured.

At the time of the Chinese revolution only one-third of present-day China was China proper inhabited largely by the Mandarin-speaking Han Chinese people. All the rest—prominent among them Tibet, East Turkistan, Inner Mongolia and Manchuria—were different national entities with their own ruling systems, languages and ancient cultural, political and economic histories. But the Chinese Communist Party considered them to be minority nationalities which were to be united on an autonomous federal basis with the Chinese republic. In the case of East Turkistan, from its status as an autonomous protectorate within the Chinese Empire, due to its strategic importance on the Silk Route, it was incorporated as a full province after the 1912 Republican Revolution. Rebellions and change of rulers have been endemic in the region for centuries. After its occupation by the Communist regime in 1949 the region was again given an autonomous status but under full control of the Chinese Communist Party. The autonomy conferred to the five autonomous regions of the PRC by its Constitution and Law on Regional Autonomy is largely symbolic. All major policy decisions in the so-called autonomous regions are taken by the CCP; almost all senior posts in the regional and local CCP committees are held by Han Chinese.

It was the annexation of these vast territories and the subjugation of the numerically smaller peoples that created the present behemoth of China. But these annexations could never run smoothly and periodically nationalistic eruptions have shaken the body politic of China. A movement for self-rule has existed in East Turkistan since its annexation in 1912. In 1933 and from 1944 to 1949 independent Republics of Eastern Turkistan were formed twice and had the support of the then Soviet Union. Though they were not able to sustain, they remain a source of inspiration for the nationalist struggle of the Uighurs, who

over the years have often resorted to violent actions giving lie to the so-called peaceful liberation of the region.

The Han Chinese leadership of the Chinese Communist Party by no means underestimated the prospect of the cracking up of the created political structure and accordingly devised long term strategies aimed at obliterating the national identities that were multi-pronged in character- cultural, political and economic.

East Turkistan is predominantly inhabited by Uighur Muslims speaking Turkic. Small groups of Kazaks, Uzbeks, Krygyz, Tajiks, Tartars, and Hui (Chinese) Muslims also live here. After its forcible incorporation into the PRC resettlement of Han Chinese in the region was facilitated by the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (called *Bingtuan* in Chinese), which was established in the early 1950s. The *Bingtuan* is a large militarized administrative and development organisation. It is established along the border and in pockets of territory roughly across the centre of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) and separates the north where most Kazakhs live from the mainly Uighur south. It covers a territory of several million hectares of land and the vast majority of its population is ethnic Chinese. Over the years it has expanded appropriating land whenever required by it. This appropriation of land is happening largely at the expense of the traditional animal husbandry practiced by the Uighurs and Kazakhs. Since the 1990s it is not under the regional government but comes directly under the central Chinese government and has its own police force, courts, agricultural and industrial enterprises. It also has its own large network of labour camps and prisons. The *Bingtuan* serves a dual purpose of developing the region's economy and protecting it from internal and external threats. Its armed police units have taken part in quelling ethnic unrest.

(See Amnesty International: Gross Violations of Human Rights in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. 21 April 1999, p. 7).

Their traditional pastoral nomadic economy was also disrupted. Sheep grazing lands and wheat farms were converted into plantation farms of cotton, sugar beets and grape farming by the Han Chinese. In 1949, the Han Chinese constituted barely 6% of the population, but by 2004 this percentage had spectacularly risen to more than 40. The story has been the same for Tibet, East Turkistan, Mongolia and Manchuria. Lhasa and Urumqi, for e.g., have become Han Chinese majority cities. Official Chinese statements justify these massive migrations by asserting that it is necessary for the economic development of these "backward" regions. Politically, this is seen as colonization by the Han Chinese with the clear cut motive of obliterating these nationalities.

Another strategy is stringent population control. The PLA enforced compulsory family planning measures in the annexed territories where the density of population was always very low and land abundant. Under the official birth control policy, national minority couples are allowed to have three children in rural areas and two in urban areas. But it is said that the authorities in Xinjiang have increasingly exerted pressure on couples to reduce the numbers to two and one. As in the rest of the country pregnancies have to be planned according to the quotas of permitted births allocated to a particular area for a given period. A couple may then be denied permission to conceive for a number of years until the "plan" allows it. Many women who become pregnant "outside

the plan" are reportedly forced to have abortions and those who give birth outside the plan face penalties which often jeopardize the family's livelihoods. Forced sterilization is also reported, though family planning is supposed to function only as a system of rewards and penalties.

Curbing of religious freedom is another policy of the Chinese state. Mosques and madrasahs were closed by the Chinese occupying government. Lands belonging to the religious institutions were confiscated and many religious leaders were jailed and sentenced to hard labour. Chinese schools were established and religious education was forbidden to children under 18 years. In the late 1970s the liberalization and economic reform period initiated by Deng saw a relaxation of control over and repression of religious practices both in Tibet and in East Turkistan. Many mosques were allowed to be reopened and the building of new ones with funds from other Islamic countries was permitted. Muslims were again allowed to travel to Islamic and other countries.

But starting in the late 1980s restrictions began to be imposed again. This was in the background of the breakup of the Soviet Union around this time and the resurgence of fundamentalist religion based nationalism in many Central Asian countries. There was a fear that in Xinjiang too Islam might again provide a base for ethnic nationalism and revive separatist tendencies. In fact, there was an uprising in Baren township in 1990 described as a "counter-revolutionary rebellion" by the Chinese government. Again, mosques and Koranic schools were closed down and the use of the Arabic script was stopped. Clerics deemed too independent or 'subversive' were dismissed or arrested. Muslims working in government offices and other official institutions are prohibited from practicing their religion, failing which they lose their jobs. Since 1996 the government has intensified its campaign against "religious extremists" and "illegal religious activities". It has launched an atheist education campaign to purge grassroots communist party committees and other institutions of Muslim believers. Control over religious affairs is exercised by religion control committees at township, town and village levels.

Social and cultural rights have also been curtailed. Wearing of traditional ethnic clothes is not encouraged. In Ili and other areas a social and cultural forum known as the "meshreps" was banned by the authorities in 1995. The meshreps are traditional parties involving women, men, young people or a mixed group and are held like a play with one person leading the group and giving turns to those assembled to speak, play music, sing songs or recite poems. The Ili Youth Meshrep was organized by some young Uighurs in Gilja at the end of 1994 with the agreement of the city authorities as an attempt to tackle drug abuse which had become widespread among young Uighurs, mostly the uneducated and unemployed. The meshreps also took up other related problems affecting the local Uighur community. They tried to revive cultural and Islamic traditions and a sense of moral values, enforcing rules which prohibited drinking, smoking and drug taking and were successful to some extent.

The movement became popular and spread to other areas in the XUAR and soon there were around 400 meshreps in the region. They became a source of anxiety to the authorities as they reinforced cultural nationalism and there ensued a crackdown with arrest of their leader. The meshreps continued secretly

and arbitrary arrests and numerous executions against their members and followers also increased. On October 24, 1998 an order banning observance of the Haj pilgrimage was issued.

Curtailing of religious and cultural rights, famines due to enforced changes in cropping patterns, economic marginalization and generally deplorable conditions of living facilitated the large-scale migration of these peoples as refugees. Of course, China being a closed society subject to draconian control mechanisms, this migration is much less than what it could have been under a different kind of society. Even then, the number of internally displaced persons and the number of those who could flee the country is by no means small. The internally displaced persons are generally victims of stark livelihood issues, while those who flee the country include the more politically conscious ones.

### **The Western Development Plan**

As Mao correctly observed these vast regions are very rich in natural resources. The traditional name for Tibet is Western Treasure while East Turkistan is called the Ocean of Hope because it is oil and gas rich. It has large coal reserves also-all crucial for energy hungry China. After China opened its doors to transnational capital in the 1980s it was the eastern coastal belt that became the hub of global capital with Shanghai as the nodal centre. The vast majority of the Special Economic Zones which catapulted the Chinese economy to a double digit growth trajectory are located in this belt, but the resources had to come from mainly the western regions. It was this situation that launched what is called the Western Development Plan in 1999. Under this plan giant infrastructural facilities like super highways, railways and airport facilities were constructed in the western and north western regions especially in the resource rich regions of Tibet and East Turkistan, the latter being renamed Sinkiang or Xinjiang (meaning new frontier in Chinese). These developments resulted in a process of rapid urbanization in these regions catering to the high speed economic activities in coastal China. East Turkistan recorded an astounding growth rate of 60% in GDP between 2004 and 2007 and the capital city became a metro within a very short time.

Western China's oil reserves constitute more than 60% of the total oil reserves of the whole of China and the mining operations for oil and other minerals went on at a hectic speed to feed the fast expanding industrialization of the eastern coast. This also marked large-scale migration of Han Chinese workers to these regions. In 1998, 100,000 Chinese displaced by the Three Gorges Project in Central Asia were also relocated to farming communes in the area causing a lot of tension with the local people. One of the major infrastructural investments was the 4000 km long oil pipeline linking the oil fields of East Turkistan in the Tarim Basin to the commercial metropolis of Shanghai. Highways and railroad projects are meant to open direct land trade routes to Europe. As in the case of Tibet, western companies are encouraged to invest in tourist and construction activity, in the development of oil refineries and so on.

In spite of the glittering statistics and skyscrapers the ground level reality is not very positive. Throughout China income inequalities have skyrocketed during the past couple of decades and the same has happened in East Turkistan. But here the inequalities are not only based on class differences but are more

pronounced on ethnic lines. The ethnic Uighurs, who now account for only 40% of the population, as well as the other smaller minorities were sidelined in the new found prosperity, and the gainers are almost completely Han Chinese migrants. Industrialization did not take place on the basis of the traditional nomadic pastoral economic activities and lifestyles so that the indigenous peoples would primarily benefit. Carried out for the purpose of resource extraction for the benefit of the Chinese mainland and by migrant Chinese population newly created better paying jobs went to them making the original people into second class beings doing the worst paid jobs. Even here the employment opportunities were dwindling with the result that the unemployment rate among the ethnic Uighurs soared to around 65%.

It is this dismal state of affairs that encouraged the migration of Uighur youth to the coastal areas of China where they started undercutting the wages of the Han Chinese workers which created in its turn another source of tension involving the two ethnic groups outside East Turkistan. The global recessionary conditions have exacerbated the already highly unequal situation. The ethnic discrimination favoring the Han Chinese is effectively facilitated by the education policy of the Beijing government. For any fairly well paid job knowledge of Mandarin Chinese has been made mandatory and this single stipulation has been enough to marginalize the local people out of the employment market. An identical situation exists in Tibet too. The Uighurs correctly feel that this compulsory imposition of Mandarin in the place of Turkic signifies yet another attempt to erase their cultural roots and destroy their ethnic identity.

### **Repression and Resistance**

Poems, songs, plays and other works by Uighur artists, writers and intellectuals are banned or heavily criticized when they are deemed to arouse nationalist feelings. The conditions have been approaching breaking point over the last several decades and occasional outbursts are common. The Chinese government itself lists about 60 dissident, for it "counter-revolutionary", organizations. In the 1990s many leaders went into exile in Afghanistan, other Central Asian countries and Turkey. In the mountains of this region they have their own government-in-exile and military camps where training is imparted. The most prominent of these groups is the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which believes in fighting for total independence from China. It is a hard-line group advocating pan-Islamism and was put on the global terrorist list by the UN in 2002. The World Uighur Congress has the support of the US. There are other groups also which have developed close relations with Al Qaeda, Taliban, the Chechen rebels and other such organizations. Wahhabism or salafist ideology being followed by many Uighur militant groups is in fact contrary to the centuries old moderate Sufi traditions of the region.

Uighur groups have so far assassinated several Chinese officials and clerics who have been bought over by the Chinese. Bombs have been set off in various parts of the country; police stations, military buildings, post offices and oil installations have been objects of attack. There have been student demonstrations against nuclear testing, birth control and Han migration; and protests against official corruption and discrimination, and refusal of the authorities to tackle crime and other social problems, such as drug addiction and

prostitution. The run up to the Beijing Olympics in 2008 saw frontal attacks by guerillas of ETIM targeting Chinese security forces, and the recent spate of popular uprisings and widespread repression is the logical development of the acute contradictions that have evolved and been perpetrated over a long time. The official Chinese policy, as declared by the regional rulers, is intensification of suppression of the "separatists" and no sort of political solution is being thought about by the Beijing rulers. This can only mean the intensification of contradictions and more bloodshed.

Among those arrested over the years for "nationalist", "splittist/separatist", "terrorist", "religious extremist" and "illegal religious" activities include farmers, students, clerics, business people, Islamic scholars, writers, poets, and teachers. Political prisoners are often held incommunicado for months or even years before they are tried and torture is severe and systematic. Few defendants have access to lawyers, few are given a formal trial hearing and many are sentenced to long terms of imprisonment or even given the death penalty after unfair trials. Show trials have also taken place attended by hundreds or thousands of people during which their sentences are announced. Human Rights groups like Amnesty International have expressed concern about the fact that many of those executed are reported to have been sentenced to death after summary proceedings in violation of international fair trial standards. Uighur political prisoners have been executed in large numbers. The ratio of the death sentences to the population is several times higher in the XUAR than in the rest of China. The riots in July this year led to a massive deployment of security forces and Urumqi's Communist party chief Li Zhi harshly threatened with the death penalty those found guilty of murder during the unrest.

### **The Present Imbroglia**

The dismantling of the commune system and privatization of land from the late 1980s onwards saw an unprecedented uprooting of peasants in China. Reports and studies show that by the beginning of 1990s more than 50 million peasants became vagabonds looking for jobs and these uprooted peasants naturally flocked to the eastern coastal areas and supplied cheap labor for the transnational capital. This was certainly one of the main reasons for the high profitability and high growth of the Chinese economy. Now with global economic recession unemployment in China has become one of the highest in the whole world. Reports show that more than 20 million workers in China have been thrown on the streets since the beginning of the recession. There is little doubt that China is one of the worst affected due to its strong economic integration with global capital; and as recessionary conditions will continue indefinitely social and political tensions will increase in the coming days. Ethnic, national questions in China are by no means dormant and are bound to interact strongly with the fallouts of global recession. In fact, it is this process that is unfolding in the China of today. The intransigence that is being shown by the rulers in the face of popular discontent rooted in strong objective ground realities can at best be termed as ham handedness.

China has the example of the breakup of the former Soviet Union behind it. In fact, during 1989-1991 when the Mujahideen were fighting the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan they were supported not only by the US but also by China. Today,

with the presence of the US in this region the Islamic fundamentalists are targeting it. Religious militancy is a force in all the Islamic countries of the region because of the socio-economic problems that persist in a post-Soviet era.

Chinese communist party leaders vow not to repeat the mistakes of the Soviet Union which led to its breakup. But the entire development of Chinese communism after it came to power in 1949 indicates that it has not really learnt from this experience. There is not much difference in policy towards outlying resource-rich nations, for instance. The classic Marxist-Leninist position on the national question proclaims the right of nations to self-determination up to the right of secession. "Any nation that oppresses another forges its own chains", Marx had famously said. And internationalism was the goal. Lenin's support to national self-determination was conditional and temporary in nature and was subordinated to the goal of proletarian internationalism. As an 'autonomous' nation does not enjoy rights equal to those of a 'sovereign' one, he asserted that only the freedom to secede made free and voluntary union, association, cooperation and in the long term fusion between nations possible.

In practice in many cases the Russian Bolsheviks did not concede the right to secession but used military intervention to retain former dependent nations of the Tsarist Empire within the Union as federated republics. This was the case for Ukraine, Georgia, the Baltic nations and the Muslim nations in Central Asia. Initially promising complete freedom of religious belief and customary usages and the retaining of cultural and national institutions it ended up with attacks against the Muslim religion and its traditions and practices because the national movements of the Muslim peoples were often led by the mullahs. Finally, under Stalin, centrally planned development made these outlying territories again into colonies largely supplying raw materials for industrialization in the Russian heartland. This was accompanied by a wholesale attempt to annihilate their culture and history. The Arabic script was replaced by the Cyrillic, mosques were destroyed and madrasahs closed down. All ties to the pan-Muslim world were curtailed. The nomadic pastoral economy was broken. The way the borders were redrawn by the central Russian dominated government created conflicts among the various ethnic groups. Discriminatory practices and corruption by certain tribal and clan groups that were incorporated into the Soviet regime created vast discontent among the population at large.

When one reads all the above and compares it with the Chinese policies in the countries that it has annexed one can really see no difference. The results are also similar. In fact, the resistance in Tibet and East Turkistan only exposes the bourgeois-imperialist face of the so-called Chinese communists. Under such a regime the national and ethnic question cannot be resolved. The much eulogized Chinese model is indeed in great danger of collapse. What the world is witnessing is a rehash of the Great Game of the 19th century where all the big powers are in search of securing the much needed energy resources for their capitalist industrialization. □□□