

# The Urumqi Riots and China's Ethnic Policy in Xinjiang

SHAN Wei and CHEN Gang\*

*The Urumqi riots revealed deep-rooted ethnic tensions in China and called into question Beijing's ethnic policies. Ethnic minorities in China enjoy preferential policies in education, family planning, judicial treatment and other areas, but they also face heavy regulations in religious activities. These policies, in combination with economic inequalities between the Han and other groups, have manifested grievances and resentment within the religious minorities.*

**ON 5 JULY 2009**, the Urumqi riots, the deadliest ethnic violence in decades, revealed deep-rooted ethnic tensions intertwined with religious issues in this region of China and called into question the underlying principles of the Party's "ethnic policies" (*minzu zhengce*). Urumqi is the capital city of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, the largest provincial jurisdiction in China. Among the 21 million residents in Xinjiang, around 46% are Uyghurs, 39% are Hans, and seven percent are Kazaks; the other 44 ethnic groups take up the rest at eight percent. Most Uyghurs and Kazaks are Muslims. In the city of Urumqi, the majority is Han Chinese (73%), while the Uyghurs only account for 12.3% of the total population.

---

\* SHAN Wei is Visiting Research Fellow at the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore. CHEN Gang is Research Fellow at the same institute.

The 2009 Xinjiang riots were sparked off by an earlier small-scale fight between Han and Uyghur workers in late June and thousands of miles away in Shaoguan, Guangdong province. The incident later snowballed into an unprecedented outbreak of large-scale communal riots and ended with a death toll of 184, according to the figure released by the Chinese government on 11 July 2009. The ripple effect shows the power of modern communications, such as cell phones and Internet, and its employment by anti-government agents, both inside and outside China, to instigate and aggravate sensitive events. Official figures showed 137 of the victims belonged to the dominant Han ethnic group, and the rest included 46 Uyghurs, and one man of the Hui Muslim ethnic group. The riots, called by some Chinese commentators as the Chinese version of “9/11,” had taken Beijing by surprise and shocked the top leadership, so serious and crucial that President Hu Jintao had to cut short his Europe tour and cancelled his participation at the G8 summit.

Such an abrupt change of a paramount leader’s diplomatic activities is rare in history, implying that other leaders including Premier Wen Jiabao and heir-apparent Xi Jinping are incapable of handling the crisis without Hu, the only leader empowered to mobilise and coordinate civil security and military forces.

Domestically, the communal riots have seriously called into question China’s major policies towards ethnic minorities, the goal of building a “harmonious society” and the much publicised western development strategy.

Although China’s ethnic policies have made several achievements, they do not function well in Xinjiang where local ethnic groups have their own languages and cultural identities and religions. Evidently, Beijing has learned a lesson from its handling of the aftermath of the Tibet riots in March 2008 and has developed a more sophisticated, multifaceted public relations strategy. Subsequent to the Tibet riots in spring 2008, the government immediately banned the entry of foreign reporters but was slow to shut down cell phones and Internet services. This time, the Chinese government opened the restive region to foreign media but censored online sources of information and suspended cell phone services in Xinjiang.

The western media continued its biased reports on the Xinjiang riots but refrained from China bashing this time. To many westerners, Tibetan Buddhists, represented by their spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, are peace-loving people repressed by the Chinese government. The “East Turkestan Independence Movement” by some Muslim Uyghurs, however, has often been linked to terrorism and extremism in central Asia.

---

**The riots, called by some Chinese commentators as the Chinese version of “9/11,” had taken Beijing by surprise and shocked the top leadership, so serious and crucial that President Hu Jintao had to cut short his Europe tour and cancelled his participation at the G8 summit.**

After the American “9/11” Beijing succeeded in getting the recognition from the United States that some Xinjiang separatists are connected to jihadist terrorism, but the World Uyghur Congress led by Rebiya Kadeer, who advocates non-violence protests and is accused by Beijing of instigating the riots, was funded by the bipartisan National Endowment for Democracy sponsored by the US Congress.

The Muslim-related riots have affected China’s relations with Islamic countries, with which China has been cultivating good relations for years due to their large influence in third world countries and strategic importance to China’s energy security. Turkey, a country where many Uyghurs have sought refuge, has asked the UN Security Council to discuss ways to end ethnic violence in Xinjiang. China rejected the call immediately, saying the incident was an internal affair. Iran has also voiced concern over the clashes in Xinjiang. In a telephone conversation with Secretary General of the 56-nation Organisation of the Islamic Conference Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki voiced Iran’s support for “the rights of Chinese Muslims”.

China’s ethnic policy is a combination of imperial legacy and Chinese style affirmative action. Ethnic minorities enjoy a number of preferential policies in education (i.e., priority in college admission), family planning (i.e., more than one child), legal issues (i.e., lenient treatment in litigations) and special quota system (i.e., overrepresented seats in congress and government). Ironically, those supposedly favourable policies and arrangements which were designed to promote national integration have exacerbated the rift between the Han and other ethnic groups. Rapid economic growth has widened income gaps (as in other parts of China) across ethnic groups and caused disgruntlement among minorities. To solve the unemployment of Uyghur youths, the government has made efforts to bring some of them to factories in coastal areas, but the effort has backfired and became the direct cause of the riots. Also, the tight restrictions on religious practice further alienate ethnic minorities in Xinjiang.

Yet there is still room to address ethnic relation problems, even after the Urumqi riots. The Uyghurs have a strong ethnic identity as well as a high level of Chinese identity, which means they would be willing to be Chinese if their ethnic culture and identity are respected.

Beijing may need to adjust its ethnic policy. Measures should be taken to help minorities foster the Chinese identity, while allowing them to preserve their own languages, religions and cultures. Some of the preferential policies, which caused tensions between Hans and minorities, have to be changed. The government needs to enhance efforts in narrowing economic inequalities across ethnic groups and make the economic growth benefit all groups equally. In the long run, China may need to learn from the Singaporean model of “community bonding” and promote harmonious co-existence of ethnic groups with different languages, different values and different beliefs.

## **China’s Ethnic Policy in Xinjiang**

Xinjiang officially became a Chinese province during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). Under the Republic of China (the Kuomintang government) rule, with secret aid from Britain, rebellions led to the establishment of a short-lived Turkish Islamic Republic of

East Turkestan (1933–1934). After winning the Chinese civil war in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party and its army reasserted control of Xinjiang region. In the early days, General Wang Zhen (1908-1993), a famous CCP hardliner, was assigned to establish Chinese control over Xinjiang. He subdued the area with harsh measures. With a population of 105,500, the first army corps and the 22<sup>nd</sup> army corps under his leadership were later converted into a production unit (The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, *xinjiang shengchan jianshe bingtuan*), ushering a new wave of massive migration of Hans in Xinjiang.

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region was established in October 1955, occupying 1.66 million square kilometres or one sixth of China’s total territory. During the radical Cultural Revolution period (1966-76), many injustices were done against ethnic minorities, and their religions and ethnic cultures got suppressed. The late 1970s witnessed the start of more open policies, and since then, the Chinese government has relaxed restrictions on religions.

The pillar of China’s current ethnic policies is regional autonomy for ethnic minorities (*minzu quyu zizhi*), which allows ethnic minorities to occupy top administrative and legislative posts and many official slots in autonomous areas. Yet some radicals criticise such “autonomy” as a sham because in most autonomous regions, the No. 1 power holder, namely the Party Secretary, is still a Han Chinese.

Beijing takes the view that economic development can eventually reduce Uyghur’s inclination towards independence and solve Xinjiang’s ethnic problems. Since the 1980s the state has adopted a set of favourable economic policies such as tax exemption and reduction in autonomous regions. For instance, new ethnic enterprises in these areas are exempted from tax in their first three years of operation. Since 2003 Xinjiang’s GDP growth has been higher than that for China as a whole.

The Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law that was first promulgated in 1984 guaranteed a number of preferential policies for ethnic minorities, including more than one child for each couple, priorities in college admission, and a special quota system in political representation. In criminal and civil cases authorities throughout the country tend to adopt a more lenient attitude towards ethnic minorities for the sake of preserving ethnic unity. In 1984 the government announced the famous Two-Restraints-and-One-Leniency policy (*liangshao yikuan*). It requires law enforcers to “go easy on minority criminals

---

**Ironically, those supposedly favourable policies and arrangements which were designed to promote national integration have exacerbated the rift between the Han and other ethnic groups. Rapid economic growth has widened income gaps (as in other parts of China) across ethnic groups and caused disgruntlement among minorities.**

by being restrained in pursuing and prosecuting crimes committed by minorities and treating them leniently”. This policy has discouraged local police from taking immediate action when they encounter minority suspects, and consequently fostering rampant crimes committed by certain ethnic groups and angering the Han Chinese.

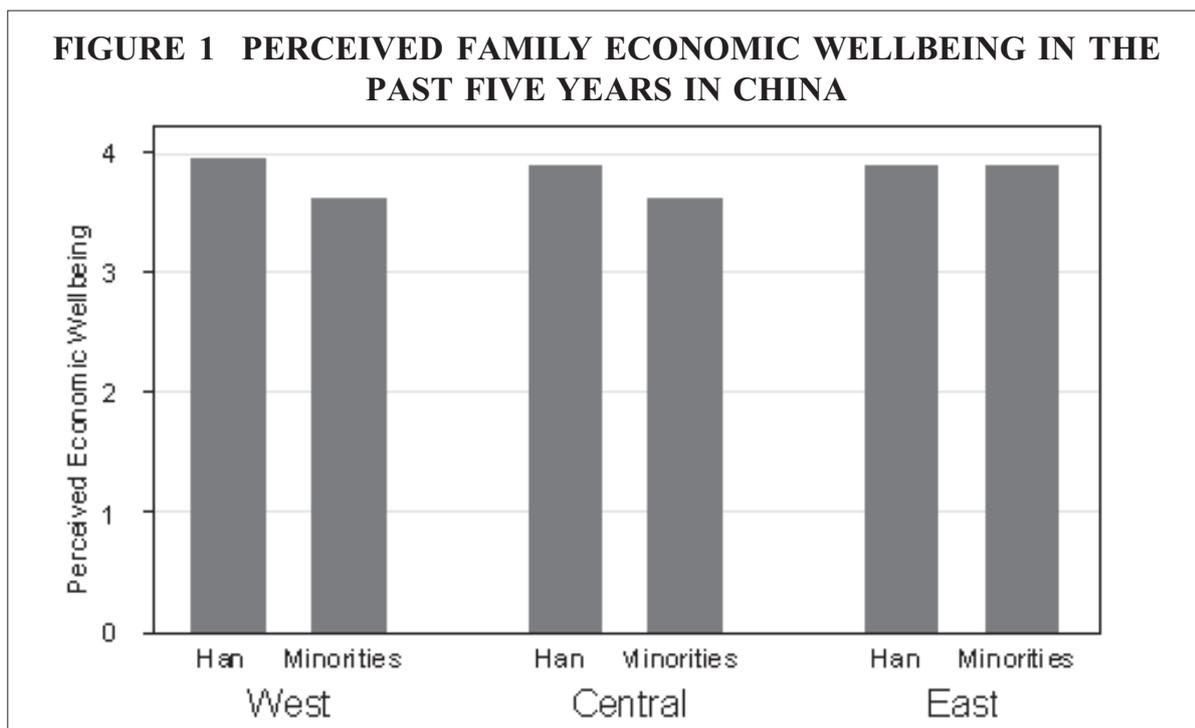
Although China’s Constitution recognises the freedom of such religions as Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism and Buddhism, the atheist government has imposed a lot of *de facto* restrictions to tightly regulate religious activities. According to governmental rules in Xinjiang, the imam’s sermon at Friday Prayer must run no longer than a half-hour, and prayer in public areas outside the mosque is forbidden. Government workers and Communist Party members are prohibited from attending services at the mosque. Some students in public institutions were banned from fasting during Ramadan.

## Beijing’s Dilemmas

### *Economic Inequalities*

The unprecedented violence in the July 5th riots calls into question China’s ethnic policies. The first problem is economic inequality. While the Chinese government has invested a lot in Xinjiang in the past decades to improve the minorities’ economic wellbeing, it fails to diminish the income gaps across ethnicities.

Figure 1 reports how the Han and minorities in different regions of China evaluate their family economic conditions in the past five years. The question in the survey is “in comparison with five years ago, what is the economic situation of your family?” The answers provide a 1-5 scale of measure: much better (5), better (4), not changed (3), worse (2), or much worse (1). The figure shows that there are evidently perceived gaps between the Han and minorities (the gaps in the central and west regions are statistically



Source: Asian Barometer, 2008

significant). The Han from all regions reported that the economic situation of their family was better off than five years earlier. The minorities in the Central and Western regions (where Uyghurs and Tibetans live), in contrast, perceived fewer gains in welfare than their Han counterparts, though they also felt better off than five years earlier.

At the early stages, economic growth always brings about widening income inequalities. In Xinjiang, however, such inequality runs across the ethnic cleavages. The modern industries brought by the Han depressed many traditional Uyghur handicrafts industries and commerce. Culturally, the Han people are more enterprising than the Uyghurs in the market economy. As the Hans are inclined to conduct business through personal social networks, it is not easy for minorities, who are largely outside the social networks, to acquire business opportunities or employment in the Han-dominant market.

Hence, in the perception of the Uyghurs, rapid economic growth only benefits the Hans and they are victims of Han exploitation. While the government has spent billions of dollars in Xinjiang on infrastructure and welfare projects, and a huge amount of fiscal subsidies from Beijing have gone to the minority areas to support those projects, the Uyghurs tend not to perceive them as beneficial. They believe that those projects only bring about the influx of more Han people who will take up new job opportunities and become rich, while the wealth should belong to them (the Uyghurs) and not the incomers.

The fact is that Xinjiang is a landlocked province. Regional development is difficult without linkage to the rest of the country. Its natural resources cannot benefit the

natives if they are not able to bring the resources to market. The Uyghur need to establish a good relationship with the Han in order to achieve economic prosperity.

### *Preferential Ethnic Policies*

Beijing has practised preferential policies in favour of minorities in a number of areas. In education, minorities receive priorities in college admission; in family planning, minorities are allowed to have more than one child; in legal affairs, minority suspects receive lenient treatment. These preferential policies have heightened the ethnic consciousness of the minorities and the Han, sharpening the ethnic divide.

---

**While the government has spent billions of dollars in Xinjiang on infrastructure and welfare projects, and a huge amount of fiscal subsidies from the Beijing have gone to the minority areas to support those projects, the Uyghurs tend not to perceive them as beneficial. They believe that those projects only bring about the influx of more Han people who will take up new job opportunities and become rich ...**

These preferential policies have failed to produce their intended results. Minorities are generally not happy with their treatment, and the Han complain about “reverse discrimination.” Due to preferential employment (the government requires 15% of the employees, including management positions, in state-owned enterprises to be ethnic minorities in Xinjiang), many Uyghurs do not even need to show up for work but still get paychecks. Because of the preferential education policy, many Han youths lose their chance of college education to minority students who have lower scores in college entrance examination.

The Two-Restraints-and-One-Leniency policy has been a source of resentment among the Han Chinese. Under this policy, many Uyghurs have behaved irresponsibly and treated their Han neighbours roughly. For instance, many Hans in Xinjiang have been forced to buy products from Uyghur vendors, otherwise, these vendors would use violence against them without legal ramifications. As a result, the Han have developed some racial profiling of the Uyghurs.

### *The Policy towards Religion*

The CCP’s religion policy in Xinjiang has manifested grievances within the Uyghur community. Muslims take offence at any attempts by the government or other ethnic groups to constrain their religious practices such as fasting. But the CCP has been adamant about controlling religious activities, especially in Xinjiang and Tibet.

Even though the government has relaxed its control over religions in the past decade, its religious policies are still too restrictive. Because of its atheist ideology, the CCP is essentially anti-religion. Hence Party leaders do not fully appreciate the centrality of religious life for some ethnic groups. Their anti-religious attitudes have been enhanced by their perception that religious organisations are often involved in separatist activities instigated and organised by exile leaders abroad, posing a major threat to China’s national security.

Heavy-handed restrictions on Islam have radicalised many Muslim Uyghurs, as some scholars argued. Because of the restrictions, many Muslims join underground Koran study groups, where the imams teach the divine scripts as well as the political blueprints of an independent East Turkestan. In turn, the government takes it as a justification for more harsh control over religion.

## **Beijing Needs to Adjust Its Ethnic Policy**

What is abundantly clear is that China will never allow Xinjiang to become independent. However, as there are 46 ethnic minority groups which occupy more than 60 percent of the population, Beijing needs to find a way to promote a harmonious relationship between the Han and the minority groups in Xinjiang.

Although there are such massive tensions between the Hans and Uyghurs, a reconciliation is not inconceivable. It is true that the Uyghur have a strong ethnic identity associated with their religion and language. However, some academic researches revealed that they also have a relatively high level of Chinese identity, even higher than the American identity of Latinos in the United States and the Russian identity of Tartars in Russia.

Moreover, the Uyghurs and the Hans can be good friends. According to one survey, 70.1% of the Uyghurs have Han friends and 82.3% of the Hans have Uyghur friends.

Clearly, if and only if their ethnic identity (i.e., their own language, their religion and their lifestyle) could be preserved, Uyghur people in Xinjiang would not refuse to establish a Chinese identity. The question now is how to assure them that after all these violent riots, being a Chinese does not conflict with being a Uyghur.

In the short term, Beijing needs to restore order in Xinjiang, ensuring both the Uyghurs and Hans that they can live and work safely. Offenders during the riots must be brought to justice regardless of their ethnic statuses.

In the long run, however, Beijing may need to fundamentally adjust its current ethnic policy. First of all, the CCP will have to change its ideological prejudice against religion and allow ethnic minorities to practise their religions freely.

Beijing may also want to make greater efforts to reduce the income gaps between the Hans and other ethnic groups. More resources are needed to promote employment and improve the education of minority youths. The government should do more to encourage minorities to learn Chinese and speak Mandarin for them to work in the public sector and to go into modern sector employment.

At the same time, the Beijing leadership should modify its social policy towards ethnic minorities. While encouraging minorities to speak Mandarin and accept national laws to achieve national integration, accommodating minority languages, values and customs should also become one of the basic principles of its public policy. The school curriculums in the minority areas need to include extensive content of ethnic languages and cultures.

Substantial efforts need to be taken to restrain the Han people's open prejudice against minorities, perhaps through formal education or legislation. The majority Han should learn to respect people from different cultures and with different ways of life, and learn to be sensitive to behavioural codes and customs of other ethnic groups.

All these policy adjustments require Beijing to take a thorough reflection on the system of regional autonomy for ethnic minorities. While this system has guaranteed some of the political and economic rights of minorities in the past decades, it has also sharpened the distinctions between different ethnicities. To make it worse, as many

---

**It is true that the Uyghur have a strong ethnic identity associated with their religion and language. However, some academic researches revealed that they also have a relatively high level of Chinese identity, even higher than the American identity of Latinos in the United States and the Russian identity of Tartars in Russia.**

scholars noted, with clearly defined population and geographic sphere some minorities have succeeded in nurturing their ethnic consciousness as well as a predisposition to ethnic independence.

China may want to learn from the Singaporean experience to promote “community bonding” among all ethnic groups. The focus should be on promoting national integration and establishing an identity of the Chinese Nation (*Zhonghua Minzu*). Ethnic status should only be culturally important and have no political significance. Preferential policies that give minorities certain political and social privileges must be revised. All social members, regardless of racial or ethnic or religious backgrounds, should be equal citizens within the country, comply with the country’s constitution and laws, and display mutual respect. Only in this way can all ethnic groups with different languages, different values and different beliefs live in harmony and peace within the multi-ethnic state of the Chinese nation. ☐