

Strategic Perspectives

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Chinese Discourse on XUAR

Author: Dr. Madhukar Shyam

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Chairman Mao Zedong once mentioned that we say China is a country vast in territory, rich in resources and large in population; as a matter of fact, it is the Han nationality whose population is large and the minority nationalities whose territory is vast and whose resources are rich, or at least in all probability their resources under the soil are rich. It shows that culture indicates the identity of any individual, family or community.

The fundamental question is that how Chinese government managed the Xinjiang region over the period of time? Another point is that, why is the Turkish school preserving the culture of young Uighurs in exile? Why are the Uighurs leaving in exile? This piece highlights the relation between Chinese Communist Party and people of XUAR.

Background

Uyghurs are a Turkic Muslim minority group residing primarily in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in the north-western region of China. XUAR occupies one-sixth of China's territory and is the largest province of PRC.

Uyghurs are the primary community group in Xinjiang, so the region is named XUAR after them. Xinjiang was legitimately brought into China in 1884, during the Great Game era, when the Qing dynasty ruled over China.

Xinjiang is an important region for China to attain its aims because of its abundant natural resources, strategic location as a gateway to Central Asia and Europe as proposed in Belt and Road Initiative, and security issues. After a brief understanding of XUAR, this section points out why Uyghurs are in exile.

Demographic Change: Uyghurs vs Hans

As per the China's official census statistics in 1953, the Uyghur ethnic minority community was around 75 percent, whereas the Chinese Han community made up only 6 percent out of the total population.

However, Uyghurs comprise 10.069 million, accounting for only 0.76% of the total population, according to the 2010 national population census. The XUAR is home to around 10 million Uyghurs and 8.83 million Hans. The Han population relocation to XUAR disrupted the Uyghur people's way of life in every aspect.

Chinese Government vs XUAR

The 1950s was a time of tolerance, during which the Communist Party of China (CPC) created positive relationships with local social and religious leaders. During those years, the Chinese government intervened relatively little in commerce, religious practices, and social traditions.

However, by the mid-1950s, Mao Zedong had promoted several socialist changes in the country and, with the advent of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, reversed the early 1960s move to conservatism.

The Cultural Revolution profoundly impacted XUAR, and by 1976, alienation was daily part of the people of Xinjiang. It happened due to the Central Chinese government's language and cultural programs to eradicate religious beliefs. However, Deng Xiaoping declaration of economic liberalisation in China in 1978 was swiftly followed by significantly tolerant cultural and economic initiatives in Xinjiang, although it was unconnected to political constraints.

Many reports highlight the Hanisation that was taking place in XUAR. Han Chinese was getting well-paid jobs and high-status posts in various corporations or government. For example, the major towns of Xinjiang have publicly highlighted the Chinese government's development schemes for the prosperity of Han Chinese, especially who are technically skilled, young professionals mostly living in the Eastern regions.

The CPC policies and its practice clearly show how it began to change the demographic of the XUAR through the systematic development of internal colonies. There are differences between the Uyghur demand for autonomy and the creation of an independent East Turkistan state.

Since they had previously experienced some degree of autonomy, Uyghurs continue to ask for more autonomy and want their own independent state, "East Turkestan". As an initial response, the Chinese authorized to grant autonomous status to XUAR on October 1, 1955. The Uyghur perceive it as mere eyewash, and Chinese policy continued to be oppressive, that is why Uyghurs are demanding an independent East Turkistan state.

The local Muslim Uyghurs, poses an ethnic-nationalist danger to China's unity and territorial integrity. The demand for a separate state for Uyghurs continued from the last 20 years on the grounds of their religion, Islam.

In this way, an ethnic-nationalist demand has transformed into a religious one. Therefore, PRC, implemented attempts to restrict Islamic religious practices in Xinjiang as Chinese authorities viewed Islam as exacerbating the Uyghur ethnic identity.

The Chinese Central Government currently handles religious matters in the northwest XUAR,

making it evident that it constantly imposes limits on religious and cultural freedom. According to the CPC's atheist stance, fasting during Ramadan has a health concern.

The sceptic CPC began to visit Uyghur households throughout Ramadan and compel them to eat. If they refused, they have to face the allegation of engaging in unlawful activity. Xi Jinping also discussed the "Sinicisation of Islam" in 2015, implying that all ideals could be abandoned in favour of Chinese society and the Communist Party.

According to Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) research, from 2016 onwards, every town, municipality, and county in Xinjiang has witnessed the demolition of between 10,000 and 15,000 mosques and other significant cultural landmarks.

When news broke out that Chinese officials had built an open lavatory on the site of a demolished mosque, the country's campaign against Uyghurs in Xinjiang reached a new low. The event was recorded in the Atush region of Xinjiang, where a mosque in the village of Suntagh was razed in 2018 and rebuilt with a toilet stall two years later.

The governor, Chen Quanguo, was appointed in Xinjiang province in 2016. During his administration, the persecution of Uyghurs was extremely harsh. Numerous ethnic minority members were transported to camps seemingly sprung overnight on the fringes of desert settlements. The name of these camps was "transformation via education" (re-education camps). Detainees were brought there, among other things, for indoctrination.

The Chinese government continues to discriminate against Uyghurs by banning names from the Islamic religion, such as Mohammad, Islam, Haji, Imam and also prohibited "Turk," names such as Turkizat and Turkinaz. The authorities said that the name regulations were put in place to lessen religious zeal.

However, Uyghur nationalism, which is commonly linked to Islamic extremism in China, is routinely condemned by state decisions. In addition, the restriction on babies' names, lengthy beards, face veiling, and body part coverings.

The seizure of passports in 2016 directly calls into question the Uyghurs' fundamental right to freedom. Coercive security protocols in Xinjiang are a source of great resentment and threaten the Muslim population. They perceive that the Uyghur people in China are a lower race. Even though the law protects minority rights, the CCP does not encourage or value local cultures.

China's massive detention facilities in Xinjiang became the focus of worldwide criticism in 2019, following the disclosure of certain classified documents known as "China Cable" by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ). Arrests for crimes have increased dramatically. The inmates at the detention camps have allegedly been subjected to cruel treatment and torture, according to the EFSAS study (2018).

In order to pressure China to stop the crimes committed in these camps, 22 Western nations sent a letter to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the president of the UN Human Rights Council. In contrast, 37 nations, most of which are Muslim, sent a similar statement to the Human Rights Council in favour of China.

These nations backed China's assertion that these camps served as vocational training facilities. They also blasted the West for making the subject of human rights in China political.

The Chinese forcefully control the region and are not ready to accept the culture and tradition of the Uighurs in Xinjiang. This should be one of the reasons for Uighur staying in exile and therefore, Turkish schools are preserving the culture of young Uighurs.

Endnotes

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Dr. Madhukar Shyam is a Research Assistant at Centre for Strategic Studies and Simulation (CS3) at the United Service Institution of India, New Delhi. He specializes in China studies and International politics. He has done his M.Phil. and PhD from Centre for East Asian Studies at School of International Studies, from Jawaharlal Nehru University.

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