

Xinjiang

Principal protagonists



Chinese government; Han (Chinese) immigrants.



Indigenous Muslim groups and separatists. (Flag shown is used by some separatists as flag of putative Republic of Uyghurstan.)

Nature of conflict

Religious and racial differences exacerbated by immigration and land resource exploitation. Regular uprisings up until 1949, sporadic riots since.

☠ Routine oppression of political, separatist and religious dissidents by Chinese state.

☠ Repression of Muslims an issue.

☠ Up to 100 politically motivated executions reported per annum.

☠ Up to 100,000 to Soviet Union, 1951-62. c200 in 2009 rioting.

☠ Potentially very significant unexploited reserves of oil discovered in 1953.

Population/ethnic composition

9.6m. Uyghur 45%, Han Chinese 41% (rising), Kazakh 6.75%, Hui 4.5%.

Territorial extent

Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region: 1,660,000 km².

Timeline

840 AD: Uyghur kingdoms established.

1884: Region annexed to Manchu (Chinese) Empire. Frequent uprisings.

1933-44: Two short-lived independent 'Republics of Eastern Turkestan' established under Soviet influence.

1949: China occupies region. Immigration of Han (Chinese) commences.

1951-62: Large-scale expulsion of Muslim dissidents.

1 Oct 1955: Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region created.

2008: Increased repression reported in lead-in to Beijing Olympics.

Sep 2009: Severe rioting in Urumqi.

Current status

Widespread repression continues.



Although less well known than the situation in Tibet (See 5.04) ethnic stresses in Xinjiang follow a similar pattern: historical claims to independence compounded by mass immigration, resource exploitation and the suppression of religious and cultural rights. Xinjiang, the largest political sub-division of China, covers about one-sixth of the country, and is remote and sparsely populated. The Dzoosotoyn Elisen Desert is the place on the Earth's land surface furthest from the nearest ocean.

Xinjiang is home to a number of Muslim Turkic groups, principally the Uyghurs and the Kazakhs. These peoples are historically and culturally linked to other Turkic peoples, particularly the Uzbeks, in Central Asia and Turkey itself. As in Tibet, large-scale immigration of Chinese Han has destabilized the demographic balance and caused great resentment, as has the emphasis on the use of the Chinese language in government, commerce and education. From 6% in 1949, the Han population has risen to 41% and they are a majority in the capital, Urumqi. Much of the Han immigration is under the auspices of a semi-military parastatal organization, the Xinjiang Production & Construction Corps, which is responsible for the establishment of semi-colonial farms and businesses throughout the region. Land and water pressures between the Han settlers and the indigenous population are a significant source of tension. A major oil pipeline from Xinjiang to Shanghai is under development. The official

figures for Han immigration do not include the large numbers of military personnel and their families purportedly based in the region.

The history of the region is a complex tangle of invasion and counter-invasion between competing regional powers. China first asserted control in around 121 BC when it garrisoned the region and used it both as a bridge to the Silk Route across Central Asia and to establish diplomatic and trading relations with other powers, most notably Persia. Chinese control of Xinjiang has long served the dual role of facilitating trade and protecting the Chinese hinterland from foreign invasion. 'Xinjiang', a term first used in 1768, means 'New Frontier' in Chinese and the name is significant as emphasizing both that Xinjiang is not a core Chinese territory and its status as a buffer state between China and its neighbours. It is not the name used by the indigenous population for the territories; East Turkestan (implicitly linking the

region culturally to fellow Turkic peoples to the west) or Uyghurstan being preferred.

Chinese control waxed and waned over the centuries, depending on the relative strengths of the Chinese state and its neighbours. In 751 AD, Chinese power in the Central Asian region was decisively truncated following their defeat at the hands of the Arabs at the Battle of Talas, northeast of Tashkent. In 840, the Uyghurs, having been driven out their ancestral homes by the Mongols, established kingdoms in what is now Xinjiang, and gradually adopted Islam. In 1884, Turkestan (as it then was) was incorporated into the Manchu Empire. Between 1884 and 1949, over forty armed uprisings took place against the Chinese governors. Two short-lived independent republics were established, under Soviet influence, in 1933 and 1944. Only after the creation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the subsequent occupation of the region was it brought definitively under Chinese control. In subsequent purges, up to 40,000 'pro-Soviet' Muslims were forced to flee the country. The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region was created in 1955. In 1957, in a further move aimed at reducing Russian/Soviet influence, the Chinese authorities banned the use of Cyrillic script for the Turkic languages of Xinjiang. A second mass exodus of Muslims to the Soviet Union took place in 1962. Ethnic riots broke out in 1980 and again in 1982 in the towns of Kashgar and Aksu. In 1997, riots broke out in Yining after the police broke up a peaceful demonstration, and in 1998, Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited the region and called for a "people's war" against "separatist elements."

Even prior to the 9/11 attacks on the US, the Chinese government had consistently raised the spectre of Islamic terrorism as its justification of the suppression of Muslim dissent. In 1998, it announced the destruction of 20 Xinjiang terrorist cells 'linked to Pakistan and Afghanistan'. Immediately after 11 September 2001, the Chinese authorities alleged that Uyghur groups had links to the Taliban in Afghanistan, but failed to furnish any evidence. In the same year, the local authorities announced that the 'Strike Hard' 'anti crime' initiative would have the key aim of striking "strongly against separatist terrorist forces." In March 2008, Beijing announced that it had "smashed" an Islamist terrorist cell and prevented the hijacking of an internal flight to Urumqi. In April the detention of 70 activists was reported. Major rioting erupted in Urumqi in September 2009 in which over 200 people, mostly Han Chinese, were killed. Although details remain unclear, the proximate cause of the violence appears to have been a series of attacks, using hypodermic needles, on Han residents. Following the ensuing Chinese clamp-down, dozens of Uyghurs were arrested and at least nine executed.

Beijing has also applied pressure on Central Asian governments to suppress any possibility of Uyghur separatist groups taking root in neighbouring countries. Central Asian governments, beset with their own fears of Islamic terrorism, have generally required little urging to suppress Uyghur and other dissent in their own territories. In 2001,

the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (an international body linking China with the Central Asian republics and Russia) agreed to the establishment of an 'anti-terrorist centre' in Bishkek with a primary aim of preventing cross-border terrorism. Today, although Uyghur human rights and separatist movements exist in Turkey and the West, they are unable to operate effectively in Central Asia – and certainly not in Xinjiang itself, where restrictions on basic freedoms of movement and association make the public emergence of a dissident movement all but impossible. According to Amnesty International, up to 100 executions of political prisoners take place in Xinjiang each year. The various Xinjiang groups are themselves divided, being organized along ethnic lines. There is little co-operation between groups representing Kazakhs, Uyghurs, Tajikis, etc, in the Xinjiang Muslim diaspora.

Depending on its commercial and political needs, the Chinese government alternatively presents Xinjiang as a stable area for investment, or as a hotbed of Islamic fundamentalism. Harsh repression of ethnic and general political rights is a consistent hallmark of Chinese Communist rule in Xinjiang, and the general culture of oppression shows no signs of lifting.

Minorities in China

Although the Han, China's largest ethnic group, comprise over 90% of the Chinese population, China is home to over 50 ethnic minority groups – many themselves numbering several million individuals. The Chinese government's position on minorities owes much to the traditional 'Great Han' school of thought that holds that all the inhabitants of China belong to one (Han) family and that 'incidental' differences of culture, language and religion should be suppressed. In particular, Beijing routinely claims to be confronted with 'extremist religious forces.' Violations of freedom of religion have increased markedly in recent years. The 2001 'Strike Hard' campaign, purportedly aimed against law breakers, has been widely reported as having a secondary agenda of suppressing ethnic and religious dissent. Courts were 'rewarded' for a high number and speed of convictions, and 'mass sentencing' rallies have been reported. In few cases were the accused allowed a defence.

Faced with an explosive expansion of religious observance, particularly amongst the severely restricted Christian population – purportedly 100 million strong – and the Falun Gong Buddhist movement, which claims 70 million practitioners, the Chinese government response has been one of increased repression. Since 1998, religious leaders and civic groups are required to register with the government, and a condition of registration is unambiguous support for the territorial integrity of the Chinese state and support for the Communist government. Even after registration, groups may be subject to 'rectification drives' if they are deemed to be straying from the government line. Observers report the routine arrest, torture and imprisonment of religious and other dissidents, as well as documented cases of the use of organs from executed prisoners in transplant surgery. It is clear that, regardless of Beijing's moves towards economic liberalism, it remains a highly oppressive regime that is currently incapable of accommodating minority views.