

China's minority challenge in Xinjiang

Since July 5, Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, has been shaken by the most important interethnic incident in many years in China. It is necessary to go back to 1997 and the events of Kulja/Yining – another city located in north Xinjiang, and even back to the Cultural Revolution, to find turmoil of such a magnitude opposing Uighur and Han in the autonomous region. Although information remains incomplete - and perhaps it will remain so given the control over information exerted by the Chinese authorities - it seems this turmoil arose from the shock caused within the Uighur population by information and images circulating on the Internet of the lynching, by a crowd of Han, of Uighur workers in a toy factory in Guangdong. The silence and the lack of reaction from the Chinese authorities regarding this event were identified by Uighurs as a form of contempt, further exasperating old frustrations. Anger prompted them to organize a protest in front of the regional government's seat in Urumqi.

What exactly occurred after this remains very unclear. No one knows with certainty if there was a spontaneous outburst of violence or if the crowd reacted to particularly forceful action by anti-riot police. Whichever the trigger, the result was an extraordinary explosion of violence which apparently blindingly targeted Han finding themselves amidst Uighur rioters. Consequently, Uighurs were then targeted by police forces, then by vindictive groups of Han civilians. Regardless of the immediate causes, the interethnic violence of recent days reflects the deep divides between Han and Uighur in Xinjiang, despite China's claim of "unity of nationalities".

Confronted with an Islamic revivalism and the rise of a Uighur national sentiment in Xinjiang since the 1980s, Beijing has chosen the iron fist in order to conceal disputes and fight the "separatist tendencies", which it identifies within this population. Indeed, many Chinese political and economic management policies in the area pertaining to Uighur political, religious, and cultural

autonomy claims have been forceful. Control of all Uighur political, religious, even cultural, activities as well as intimidation have continuously been used throughout the 1990s, culminating since 2001 in the context of the "war against terrorism".



After the riots

Far from alleviating increasing frustrations of Xinjiang's Uighur population, the Chinese refusal to engage in dialogue, its mistrust of its own minority and its choice of control and repression has only exacerbated the bitterness of many Uighurs. Political and economic progress, although promised by Beijing to Uighurs, has never materialized. On the contrary, despite the area's economic upturn since the early 1990s, the income disparities between Han and Uighur have never ceased to grow. The continuous surge of Han into Xinjiang within the framework of the area's economic development has only reinforced competition on an already difficult regional job market for Uighurs. Consequently, many Uighurs have the feeling they are being further marginal-ized in their own region, and not benefiting from this growth. From their point of view, this only serves Han interests.

On the other side, many Han resent the privileges given to Uighurs and other minorities (for instance in education through easier access to universities, in family planning through exemption

from the one-child policy). They believe that either it is Han who are discriminated against, or that the Uighurs are ungrateful for the advantages they get. Finally, the latent corruption in the region, the greed of local officials, the arrogance related to the feeling of Han cultural superiority, and also the fear by Han of a minority depicted by the Chinese media as “separatists” and “terrorists”, have all contributed to understanding why a spark was enough to start such interethnic hostilities.

Following the Urumqi violence, the Chinese authorities chose a traditional answer : the quick re-establishment of order and accusations of “foreign hands” to explain the events. This question of an outside role in the unrest is an open one. The precise influence of any outsiders on events in Xinjiang remains opaque. Certainly, we should not trust the claims of the opposition movements based outside China concerning their involvement or lack of it. But the Chinese rhetoric on “foreign hands” need not be taken at face value either. In any event, this answer is undoubtedly not China’s definitive response. This will come later, but it is still too early to come to a conclusion about its nature and to forecast its orientation.

However, the authorities will have to take into account several contradictory constraints. The image of China in foreign countries is one. Beijing

will be held accountable for its management of the crisis and not only by Western opinion but also, perhaps more importantly, by that of the Muslim world. On the other hand, the authorities will also under pressure from their own population. Indeed, many Han believe that the authorities were too weak at the time of the riots and demand a tough response. The Chinese authorities are in this case, to some extent, victim of their own propaganda which identifies Uighurs with “separatism” and “terrorism”. The Chinese media coverage of these events, by stressing Han victims, reinforces the bad image of Uighurs in Han public opinion. This factor is likely to make difficult any attempts at appeasing Uighur demands, which may be necessary for the re-establishment of confidence between Han and Uighurs in Xinjiang. Failure to deal with the discontents would risk the development of a vicious circle of repression-radicalization.

The task of the authorities will be very difficult. If it wishes in the future to avoid other outbursts of violence, Beijing should undertake a re-examination of its policy in Xinjiang. This is in any case an essential for a country aspiring to play a leading role in the international arena.

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