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MINORITIES AND MAJORITIES
IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND ASIA



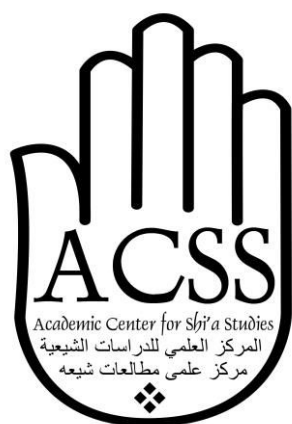
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Uyghur Separatism: A Fight for Cultural or Religious Identity?¹

Marko Jovanović²



Abstract:

In this paper we will focus on the Uyghur question in China and the demands for the secession of the autonomous region of Xinjiang. We will endeavor to clarify which factors incite separatism of the Uyghur national minority, which also differs from the majority by its religious affiliation. The main issue we intend to investigate is whether, in this case, it is a matter of cultural or religious identity preservation. To answer this question, it is necessary to determine how the concept of nation is understood in China and in what way the state policies and changes in the social and political system have influenced the accumulation of discontent within the Uyghur national minority and instigated the strengthening of nationalism and religious extremism.

Keywords: Uyghurs, Xinjiang, China, minorities, cultural identity, Islam, separatism, religious extremism

Introduction

More than 20 million Muslims live in China. Although that is a rather large number, they still constitute less than 2% of the entire population (The World Factbook 2016). Chinese Muslims are not ethnically homogeneous, with the two largest groups being Huis, who are not constrained to any specific territory, and Uyghurs, who inhabit the western part of the country, the Xinjiang autonomous region (Israeli 2012: 251).

Even before the 8th century, a host of nomadic steppe tribes known as Uyghurs lived in the Tarim Basin of the Central Asia. With the advent of Islam in these areas, the name was gradually disappearing, resulting in no mention of Uyghurs from the 15th to the 20th century. The Islamization of these tribes was not a brief process. It started in the 10th century and lasted until the

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² **Marko Jovanović** holds a BA and a Ma degree from the Department of Oriental Studies, Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade. He is currently pursuing a PhD in within the same Department, a MA degree within the Department of International Politics, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade, as well as a PhD in Iranian History and Culture within the Shahid Beheshti University, Iranology Foundation in Tehran. As one of the top two hundred doctorate students in all of Serbia as of 2014, he has been awarded a scholarship from the Serbian Ministry of Education and thus became an associate with the Institute of Social Sciences, where he works on a research project funded by the Ministry..

17th century, when even those Uyghurs who had been the most devout followers of Buddhism, up to that moment the most dominant religion in the region, converted to Islam (see Gledni 2002).

The identity of the people presently known as Uyghurs is of a relatively recent date and closely connected with the struggle between the Chinese and Soviets for supremacy in Central Asia (Gledni 2002: 489).

China conquered the Tarim Basin in 1760, when the Manchurian dynasty Qing seized the territory (Gladney 2003: 456). It was then that the region was named Xinjiang which in translation means “the new border.” The Qing dynasty was deposed in the Revolution of 1912, the monarchy was abolished and the republic established in its place, and the Kuomintang Nationalist Party came to power. Its rule lasted from 1912 to 1949, and in that period the Xinjiang region was governed by a succession of military commanders (Trailović 2012: 273).

The first Chinese president Sun Yat-sen, as it happens so often after any revolution, wanted to redefine the existing concept of the Chinese nation, proposing instead a concept of the “Five races under one union”. His was the idea of ‘all races in China being equal, and they should be a part of a free and united China.’ Not everyone was satisfied with this principle since the status of races was given only to the Han Chinese, Manchus, Mongols, Tibetans, and Hui Muslims, seen as one race which encompasses all Chinese people who practice Islam, disregarding vast ethnic differences among them (Gladney 1995: 2).

This region suffered from political interference from abroad, mainly from the Soviet Union, which, in order to further its own interests, incited the rise of nationalism in ethnic groups which populated these areas. It gave the best results with Uyghurs. The consequences of such politics manifested themselves at the Congress of Regional Delegates in Tashkent in 1921, when, with Soviet approval, it was decided to reintroduce the old ethnic name Uyghurs and use it for Turkic ethnic groups that permanently reside in the Tarim Basin (Gledni 2002: 491).

All of this led to numberless conflicts between Muslims (Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and others) and the central government, which resulted in the proclamation of two independent ‘Muslim’ republics, the First, short-lived, East Turkestan Republic, whose capital was Kashgar and which existed from 1933 to 1934, and the Second East Turkestan Republic, slightly longer one, in existence from 1944 to 1949, with the capital in Yining (Gulja) (Gladney 2003: 456).

The First East Turkestan Republic was indeed temporary, but, nevertheless, the Chinese authorities decided, upon the renewal of the control over the territory, to proclaim Uyghurs a new

official Chinese nationality so as to eliminate the causes of the dissent by the local population (Gledni 2002: 490-491).

After the victory over the Kuomintang in the civil war (1945-1949), the Communist party established the People's Republic of China and its sovereignty over all of China's mainland territory, including Xinjiang (Dillon 2004: 34).

Minority Policies after the Communists Seized Power

In the newly formed People's Republic which introduced a new social system, Communism, it was necessary to redefine the concept of the Chinese nation in such a way that every potential cause of dissent among the population was eliminated.

The ruling Communist party, true to its ideology, decided to use Marxist-Stalinist criteria for assigning a status of a national minority. This meant that only those ethnic groups that had their own language and inhabited a certain territory could be recognized as minorities (Gladney 1998: 109). Only 41 ethnic groups fulfilled these criteria, which is an extremely low number bearing in mind that over 400 of them had been taken into consideration. The number of recognized national minorities was being gradually increased until 1982 when it stopped at 56 officially recognized. Those groups that did not manage to attain the status were mostly identified with the majority Han people or, in a smaller number of cases, with some other nationality with characteristics similar to theirs (e.g. the same religion) (Gladney 1995: 4).

The Chinese authorities saw the recognition of the identity of the national minorities as a merely interim solution. They believed in the Marxist concept of social development according to which in a communist social system, first classes, and then nationalities would be eliminated. By accepting the communist ideology national minorities would shed "the burden" of national identities. The ultimate goal was the creation of a unified Chinese national identity, with the new Chinese nation (Zhonghua Minzu) representing a family of all 57 nationalities inhabiting China (Jenner 2004: 252).

On the path to development of a unified national identity, in order to secure the preservation of a territorial and political unity of the country and prevent potential internal unrests induced by nationalistic aspirations, parts of China with mainly minority population were given a status of autonomous regions by the 1954 Constitution. Those were mostly border territories crucial to national security and stability. That applies to Xinjiang too, mainly inhabited by Uyghur population (Trailović 2012: 271).

Xinjiang – Region of Social Cleavages

The autonomous region of Xinjiang, situated in the northwest of China, spanning 1,646,900 square kilometers, accounts for the sixth of the entire Chinese territory. This region abounds in natural resources. With 25% of the overall country reserves, it is leading in the production of natural gas, while in the exploitation of oil it takes the fourth position. There are, also, significant coal reserves in this area (Trailović 2012: 270-272).

Although it encompasses a huge area, Xinjiang is notably sparsely populated. According to the latest 2010 census results it has a population of 21, 8 million, i.e. merely 13.2 inhabitants per square kilometer (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2011). However, today in this area live six times more people than immediately after the end of the civil war in China when the population of this territory was only 3.6 million (Trailović 2012: 275). To realize how great an increase we are discussing, it should be mentioned that in the whole territory of China population rose for ‘mere’ 2.3 times (Orleans 1957: 565).

The population growth caused significant changes in the proportion ratio of the two biggest ethnic groups inhabiting this autonomous region, those being Uyghurs and the Han Chinese, the largest ethnic group in China. In 1949, Uyghurs constituted over 82% of total population of Xinjiang, while the Han contributed with less than 6%. Today that gap is drastically narrowed, with 46.1% of Uyghurs and almost 40% of Han people (Howell and Fan 2011: 122-123).

Such radical changes could not be attributed only to a high population growth, but also to migrations of the population to this region, in the first place the Han majority. Although this process started as early as the mid-20th century (Trailović 2012: 250), there are still scientific debates over whether it was a state-organized movement of people with the aim of altering the ethnic structure of the region or spontaneous immigration prompted by the industrial and economic development of this region replete with natural resources. Whatever the reason, the consequences are evident in a series of changes in the demographic picture of Xinjiang (Trailović 2012: 275).

The question then arises as to how these changes impacted the stability of the region. The section of Uyghur population that advocates the idea of a broader autonomy or even secession, cites increased presence of the Han people as the main reason for their discontent, and therefore destabilization of the region (Trailović 2012: 277).

That is to say that the two largest ethnic groups in Xinjiang do not mix and interact. The traditional Uyghurs primarily inhabit rural areas and southern parts of the region, while Hans live in

the north and urban communities. Thus, in the capital Urumqi which is located in the north, and its surroundings, Hans constitute 73% of the population. On the other hand, the city with the highest percentage of Uyghurs, around 90%, is Kashgar, in the south of the autonomous region. The same applies to the city surroundings (Dillon 2004: 25).

The data provided are clear indicators of the segregation in Xinjiang. The cause lies in various cultural, religious, ethnic, socioeconomic, and other social cleavages, present in this region, between the two largest ethnic groups, Uyghurs and the Han Chinese.

According to the theoretical model of social cleavages defined by Nenad Zakošek, which represents a specific integration of Lipset-Rokkan hypothesis and the model provided by Herbert Kitschelt, social cleavages in Xinjiang can be divided into three main models (see Trailović 2012: 269).

The first one is the territorial-cultural model based on the center-periphery cleavage which has pitted the dominant national cultures against minorities (ethnic, religious, and linguistic) in the peripheral regions. In China, this cleavage is manifested through two conflicts: a unitary state (the Han Chinese) – independents (Uyghurs); and center (Beijing, Ürümqi – the Han people) – periphery (Kashgar – Uyghurs). The latter can be classified as complex and evident through territorial and ethnic disparities. The territorial cleavage, yet, exists on two levels, the state one where the center is represented by the developed China, broadly speaking Beijing, while Xinjiang is periphery, and another one which is internal and transpires through a division in the autonomous region itself, with the capital Ürümqi, mostly inhabited by Hans, as the center, and Uyghur Kashgar as the periphery.

The next cleavage model is the socioeconomic one, based on the struggle over resources. The cleavage, then, happens when it is needed to decide how the resources will be distributed, according to the principle of market allocation, favored in this case by Uyghurs, or the principle of state redistribution, preferred by Hans.

The third and the last cleavage model is, perhaps, the most interesting for analysis. It is the ideological-cultural cleavage caused by diverse concepts of sociocultural identities. Here divisions along the lines: dominant culture (Han) – subculture (Uyghur); modernist (Han people) – traditionalist (Uyghurs); and secular (Han people) – religious (Islam - Uyghurs), becomes prominent (Trailović 2012).

Such opposed positions lead to the utterly different perception of certain ongoing processes in Xinjiang. Therefore, for instance, what from Uyghur point of view represents the fight for freedom, for central government is separatism manifested as extremism and terrorism. From Uyghur

standpoint, immigration of Hans to this region constitutes an example of colonization, while, on the other hand, the state sees it as a matter of freedom of movement and residence. Consequently, what for one side is exploitation of natural resources that Xinjiang possesses, for the other is an attempt to achieve economic growth and development at a state level.

The most sensitive issue on which there is no consensus is undoubtedly the state minority policy towards the region, which is perceived by Uyghurs as a religious, ethnic, and social discrimination with the purpose of weakening cultural identity, and finally accomplishing compulsory assimilation. The state deems these accusations unfounded and its treatment of the region sees as a policy of fostering cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity of a unified multi-ethnic Chinese nation, and sovereignty and territorial integrity preservation within its internationally recognized borders (Trailović 2012: 274).

Causes to these clashes of views and intolerance should not be sought in the distant past. A series of events on the international scene has led to the eruption of discontent among the Uyghur minority in China (Trailović 2012: 250). This is, thus, a part of a global process which has led to the strengthening of nationalism and bringing the religious identity to the forefront.

Nevertheless, none of that would have been possible if in China itself certain preconditions had not already been created. Namely, after communists seized the power, the new state policy brought a range of social changes that widened social cleavages between the Han people and Uyghurs.

Creation of Preconditions – Cultural Repression

The period from the proclamation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 to the early seventies and political opening of China to the rest of the world is particularly interesting from a historical perspective and is characterized by an enormous impact of political events on the cultures of all ethnic groups in China (see Janssen 1979). Thus, Uyghur traditionalism came under fire, too.

Years before coming to power, in his renowned *Talks at the Yan'an* (1942), Mao Zedong discussed the purpose of art and literature. Namely, he advocated a stance that art forms should serve workers, peasants, and soldiers, with the purpose of advancing social reforms. In compliance with that, with the ascent of communists, the traditional, to a higher or lesser degree, was assigned a new function (Spence 1991: 473). These fundamental changes affected both the majority people and all of the minority groups, including Uyghurs.

Not only did the communist rule bring changes in art but also the way of life and lifestyle of Chinese people underwent certain reforms. In 1958, the Great Leap Forward, a five-year plan by which China was to get abreast with and overtake Great Britain in the production of iron, steel and other industrial goods per capita, was introduced. The yearly production of steel was forecast to double, and in order to achieve that, everywhere in the country, makeshift smelters, where metal scrap was melted into steel, were established (Janssen 1979: 211).

In order to implement this plan, five hundred million rural inhabitants all over China, inspired by the agitators' slogans, more or less "voluntarily" joined people's communes, leaving behind their previous occupations and applying themselves to the jobs the state had flagged as priorities. Ninety million people were "mobilized" solely for the steel production (Janssen 1979: 211). It soon became clear that their sacrifice was in vain. The steel production program was cancelled as the homemade metal proved not to be good enough even for the production of tools. It transpired that ordinary people, who bore the greatest burden of the Great Leap Forward and completely unnecessarily worked for ten, twelve, or even fourteen hours per day, quite often until they collapsed from exhaustion (Janssen 1979: 214).

It is needless to say what kind of changes this absurd reform program brought to Uyghurs who lived in rural areas and traditionally engaged in cattle breeding (Trailović 2012: 284).

Due to the failure of the Great Leap Forward, Mao Zedong was forced to resign as the president of the People's Republic of China in December 1958 (Janssen 1979: 215). Aided by the army, he started rising to power again in the mid-sixties. That is to say that, with the help of his old comrade-in-arms, the illustrious general Lin Biao, then the Minister of Defense, Mao transformed the People's Liberation Army into an armed force that was able to provide for itself, partly an army, partly a workforce, whose soldiers planted the crops, and bred pigs on their own, sewed their uniforms and made their shoes in the Army's workshops. It was a true communist utopia.

It was this success that Mao Zedong used as a firm basis for further reforms. In August 1966, Mao exploited his renewed influence to obtain from the Central Committee an official proclamation of the outbreak of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, which should have brought a definitive distancing from the traditional (Janssen 1979: 223-232).

During the Cultural Revolution, the art in China was reduced to merely few genres that Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, deemed suitable (Janssen 1979: 230-231). She took upon herself to put into effect Mao's war-time directives on proletarian art. Jiang Qing, a former actress, believed that, for instance, dramatic art should be relieved of the burden of the past. All existing theatre plays were

substituted by eight highly politicized operas which had as the main theme the revolutionary struggle against both foreign enemies and domestic bourgeoisie. By the time the Cultural Revolution ended this number increased to eighteen. These works glorified the bravery of the People's Liberation Army and ordinary people, while Mao Zedong was depicted as the most deserving of the triumph of socialism in China. On the stage, instead of classical heroes, there had to be Red Army soldiers, workers, and peasants as positive characters, as opposed to landowners, anti-revolutionaries, and urban scoundrels. These operas, along with their motifs, quickly spread all over China, finding its way into gramophone records, comic books, posters, postcards, vases, cigarette packs, calendars, etc. In the following 5-6 years, these eight operas were the only art form that 800 million Chinese people could enjoy (see Mittler 2010).

In other words, people were practically deprived of freedom in their cultural and artistic expression. The most affected were the minority groups that even without such severe restrictions often had the impression that their culture was in an inferior position.

Bearing in mind the above-mentioned, Uyghurs found themselves at a disadvantage to the majority of other ethnic groups in China. This is due to their religiosity, i.e. the fact that Islam represents a fairly important component of the Uyghur identity and plays a significant role in their way of life (Trailović 2012: 285). Since communism is incompatible with religion, Uyghurs found themselves in a highly unfavorable situation (Bukharin and Preobrazhensky 2001).

Calls for Secession

Preconditions for the outbreak of conflict had been therefore already provided in the Mao era. Those, along with the processes in the eighties on the global level, made it possible for a single spark to cause tensions to emerge.

A whole series of unrests was initiated in 1989 by the so-called "Chinese Rushdie scandal" (see Gladney 1994). Those were triggered by the texts of some Chinese writers that Muslims considered sacrilegious and blasphemous. The demonstrations organized by Han Muslims started first on the streets of Beijing, spreading then to Xinjiang. Until 1990, the discontent of Chinese Muslims faded everywhere but Xinjiang, where it transformed into calls for the liberation of the East Turkestan (Israeli 2012: 261).

When former Soviet Central Asian republics gained independence in 1991, the calls for the secession of Xinjiang became even louder. It was aided by the fact that Uyghurs share with the neighboring Central Asian nations not only religion but common ethnic and linguistic origin (Gledni

2002: 495-496). That origin is Turkish and therefore, in the light of the processes of transnationalization and ethnic homogenization, present-day Turkey sees as its moral obligation to protect their “endangered brethren” in China (Gledni 2002: 501-502). Thus, for example, the current Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, while he still was a prime minister, went to such lengths in his statements that he likened the Chinese treatment of Uyghurs to genocide (Tanasković 2010: 63).

It should be mentioned that around 300,000 members of Uyghur ethnic group live in Turkey. Having that in mind, it should not come as a surprise that in this country several Uyghur separatist movements exist. They enjoy tacit support from the Turkish government and act unhindered (Tanasković 2010: 63). As Pan-Turkism is a common occurrence in the Turkish society, it is not surprising for Turks themselves to organize protests in support of their Uyghur “brethren”, and as a form of protest burn Chinese flags in front of the Chinese embassy in Istanbul or even physically attack Chinese tourists in the city (BBC 2015).

Still, as the present-day Turkey is distancing itself evermore further from Kemalism, ethnically motivated support gradually gains religious dimension and morphs into Islamic solidarity (Jevtić 2011: 295-296).

Uyghur separatist movements in emigration do not act solely from Turkey. Besides those located in Ankara or Istanbul, there are the ones in Almaty, Munich, Amsterdam, Melbourne, and Washington (Gledni 2002: 492). Although all of them have the same goal, there is no consensus among them on the methods of its achievement. They are divided into those who propose militant approach and use of force and those who advocate secession through peaceful and political means. There is no consensus either over whether Xinjiang upon eventually gaining independence should be a secular state or attain a certain level of Islamic governance (Fuller and Starr 2004: 24).

It should be emphasized here that even on the matter of independence there is no consensus among Uyghurs, as there are those who want to remain a part of PRC, but with broader autonomy (Fuller and Starr 2004: 25).

Religiously motivated separatism adds a new dimension to the issue. It becomes transnational, including the other Muslims that live in the region. When we add Kazakhs, Huis, Kyrgyz, and the others, we reach the number of around 11 million Muslims in Xinjiang (Trailović 2012: 271). Even more importantly such movements are also supported by various extremist Islamist organizations from all over the world, including Al-Qaeda which, the Chinese authorities claim, has trained for combat over a thousand Uyghur separatists (Israeli 2012: 262). Chinese estimates may be

exaggerated, but it is an undeniable fact that only in Guantanamo prison there were 22 Uyghur terrorists captured in the fights in Afghanistan (Jevtić 2011: 297).

In order to cope with this problem, China introduced certain restrictive measures. People under 18 are prohibited from visiting mosques (Trailović 2012: 282), while in several cities in Xinjiang access to government institutions and use of public transport is denied to women wearing burqas and niqabs and men wearing long beards (Styles 2013).

In the report of the state news agency Xinhua the decision to ban wearing burqas is justified by the fact that a similar ban also exists in several European countries, such as France and Belgium. “Burqas are not traditional dress for Uyghur women... The regulation is seen as an effort to curb growing extremism that forced Uyghur women to abandon their colorful traditional dress and wear black burqas,” states the agency report (Mengjie 2015).

As the main cause of Uyghur discontent the Chinese state nowadays pinpoints the unfavorable economic situation, because the poorest parts of Xinjiang are at the same time the most ardent strongholds of political and religious extremism. The authorities perceive investments and economic development as a solution. Their aim is, through economic growth, to pacify and integrate better and stronger Xinjiang in the unified Chinese state (Trailović 2012: 282).

Although it is an internal matter, China has to be cautious about tackling these problems, as such measures are not perceived favorably by Muslim countries, therefore any potential worsening of the situation might not only reflect on the economic ties that China has with the Middle Eastern Muslim countries, but, for example, also erode good-neighborly relations with Afghanistan or Pakistan (Gledni 2002: 492-493).

Conclusion

Uyghur dissatisfaction stems from the internal policy conducted by the Communist Party after the end of the civil war and establishment of the People’s Republic of China. In an ideologically inspired transition process towards a completely different social system and adoption of new social values, both majority and minority population had to make some sacrifices that official state policy imposed on them.

Despite the fact that government moves were not directly aimed at the minority population, they still instigated accumulation of discontent among Uyghurs. Social cleavages between them and the majority Han population were created, the deepest of which sprang on the ideological-cultural level. Uyghurs are under the impression that their culture is in submission and that they are under

pressure to be assimilated into the majority population and renounce their traditional identity. Furthermore, the secular system of government hampers Islam which is highly influential on the Uyghur way of life.

However, is Islam really at the core of the problem? The first protests of Uyghur population started actually as a support to the demonstrations that Huis, the largest Muslim population in China, organized in Beijing. It was a religiously motivated revolt, as Huis sprang to the defense of their religion. However, their protests ended as soon as the threat to Islam ceased to exist. It was not the same with Uyghurs. Their dissatisfaction with the Chinese rule that came to prominence at that occasion developed into still present demands for secession and resulted in numerous riots and terror attacks.

Thereupon, we can reach a conclusion that Uyghur separatism is not religiously motivated, but at its foundation has the official state policy that has inhibited religious identities of each and every ethnic group present in PRC. Religious dimension, certainly, is noticeable, but not decisive. It appears that Islam is merely the means for the Uyghur separatism to be expressed through, in order to enable the preservation of the endangered Uyghur cultural identity.

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