

# **The Impact of Internal and External Factors on Human Rights Conditions in Xinjiang, China**

Roy Anthony Rogers

Lecturer

Department of International and Strategic Studies

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

University of Malaya

In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took control of Xinjiang from the Koumintang (KMT ) and declared that Xinjiang was to be an autonomous region in 1955. However, major decisions were still made by the CCP led by the Han Chinese and not the Uyghurs from Xinjiang. The CCP implemented aggressive assimilation policies in the 1960s especially during the Cultural Revolution during which the Uyghurs were subjected to serious abuses. In 1978, Deng Xiaoping took over the leadership of China after the demise of Mao Zedong. It brought about dramatic changes in the human rights situation in China. These included freedom for the Uyghurs to practice their religion, culture and language. Hence, there was an improvement in human rights in Xinjiang. However, in the late 1990s the CCP reverted to harsh policies once again. This study examines the internal and external factors that have influenced China's policies on the human rights condition in Xinjiang. The aim of this study is to analyse the changes in the human rights condition in Xinjiang under the different administrations and the factors that have caused the changes.

## **Introduction**

This paper examines the internal and external factors that have influenced China's policies on the human rights condition in Xinjiang. The objective of this paper is to analyse several pertinent issues regarding human rights in Xinjiang, particularly the role of internal and external factors. The paper focuses on the timeframe between 1978 and 2007 because during this period there was an improvement in the human rights condition in Xinjiang after Mao Zedong's repressive policies such as the Cultural Revolution. It was during Deng Xiaoping's administration when the People's Republic of China demonstrated an interest in human rights by ratifying many international human rights treaties and became a member of Human Rights Commission in 1982.<sup>1</sup>

In the late-1990s subsequent Chinese leaders like Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao have reverted to harsh policies such as the ‘Strike Hard’ policy which has worsened human rights conditions in Xinjiang. Besides reporting on the struggle of the Uyghurs in maintaining their cultural and religious identity this paper also examines the internal and external factors which have influenced China’s policy towards the human rights conditions in Xinjiang. This paper also hopes to provide a fresh look towards research relating to minorities in China.

### **Background of Xinjiang**

Xinjiang or Sinkiang is situated at the northwest of China about 4000 km from Beijing. Xinjiang is also the largest province in China, covering about 617, 800 square miles (1, 600, 000 square km) or 1/6 of the total Chinese territory. Although, Xinjiang is considered as one of the most isolated regions in the world, its location is in one of the most strategic areas in terms of China’s security and defence as it shares its borders with eight countries. These countries are Mongolia and Kazakhstan to the northwest, Russia to the north, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to the west and Afghanistan, India and Pakistan (Jammu Kashmir) to the southwest. There are no other provinces in China that has as many international borders as Xinjiang. Hence Xinjiang is an important province in terms of its role in China’s security.

Ethnicity in Xinjiang can be divided into two main categories: the Turkic people who are natives of Xinjiang and non-Turkic people such as the Han Chinese, Russians, Manchurians and Indians. The Turkic people are made up of the Uyghur, Kazakh, Kirghiz, Uzbek and Tajik with the Uyghurs being the largest. The Uyghurs in Xinjiang are Muslims and they share a common heritage, language and religion with the other Turkics living in Central Asia. They are not confined to Xinjiang but they are scattered throughout Central Asia

in countries like Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and parts of Russia. The Turkics are the same ethnically although they may be divided politically and physically.

Xinjiang is located on the ancient 'Silk Road' which was a popular route used by traders and travellers such as Ibnu Batuta and Marco Polo between the East and the West. It became a Chinese territory during the Ching dynasty (1644-1911) in the mid-eighteenth century and was administered by the military. In 1884, it was declared a Chinese province and was the last area to be permanently occupied by China. The Ching dynasty named the province 'Xinjiang' which means 'New Borders' in Chinese.

However many western explorers such as Sir Aurel Stain and Sven Hedin referred to the area as 'Chinese Turkestan' or East Turkestan. Despite the fall of the Ching dynasty in 1911, Xinjiang remained part of the Republic of China under the Koumintang Party (KMT). The Uyghurs who settled in the Tarim Basin, Xinjiang were introduced to the Islamic faith in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. In fact, Islam had reached Central Asia as early the mid 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D through Arabic merchants and Islamic teachers who used the Silk Road to travel to China.

The local leaders in Xinjiang launched several revolts aimed at separating Xinjiang from Chinese rule and establishing an Islamic sultanate. However, these attempts were unsuccessful as they were defeated by Chinese troops. One of the most popular Turkic revolts against Chinese rule occurred in Xinjiang during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was by Yakub Beg that lasted for 13 years (1864 to 1877).

After the 1911 Revolution, there was a transition in the Turkic separatist movement because revolts were no longer organised by Muslim religious teachers but Turkic nationalist

who received their education in the Soviet Union (USSR). The Turkic nationalists attempted to separate the province from Chinese control by establishing the Turkish Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkistan Republic (TIRET) in 1933-34 and the East Turkestan Republic (ETR) in 1944-1945.

In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took control of Xinjiang from the KMT and declared that Xinjiang was to be an autonomous region in 1955. Ever since then the province has been known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). However, major decisions were still made by the CCP led by the Han Chinese and not the locals from Xinjiang. The CCP implemented aggressive assimilation policies in the 1960s especially during the Cultural Revolution during which the locals were subjected to serious abuses at the hand of the authorities.

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping took over the leadership of China after the demise of Mao Zedong in 1976. There was an improvement in human rights in Xinjiang. However, in the late 1990s the CCP reverted to harsh policies once again. They declared the policy of 'Strike Hard' which sanctioned the use of torture and arbitrary detentions it brought about dramatic changes in the human rights situation in China.

According to the Census of China in 2000, the total population of Xinjiang is 18,459,511. The Uyghurs comprised 45.5 percent and the Han comprised 40.6 percent with the Muslim Kazakhs at 6.7 percent of the total population of Xinjiang. The census also estimated that the population of Xinjiang will increase to 19.63 million by 2004.<sup>2</sup>

## **Human Rights Conditions in Xinjiang Prior to the 1978 Reforms**

The human rights conditions in Xinjiang during this period can be divided into two periods:

First was between 1949 till 1959, which was considered as the ‘accommodative’ years followed by the second which was the ‘repressive’ period which started in 1960 till 1978. In September 1949 the Koumintang (KMT) forces under Commander Tao Zhiyue surrendered to the PLA.<sup>3</sup> The initial task of the PLA and CCP was to establish a new administration in the province by gaining internal support from the various parties including the Uyghur nationalists and the disbanded KMT forces. At that moment the CCP adopted a tolerant policy with the aim of creating a ‘united front’.

Gaining internal support was the major concern of the CCP during the early years of its administration in Xinjiang. The CCP wanted to appease the non Han peoples by granting autonomy to the provinces who were then the majority living; this included Xinjiang, Tibet, Ningxia, Kansu and Qinghai. Therefore in October 1955, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR or *Xinjiang Weiwuer zizhiqu*) was established.<sup>4</sup> The establishment of the XUAR has given the non-Hans the opportunity to govern in the lower levels of administration with positions such as the chairmen of counties, districts and prefectures. Hence the Uyghurs during this period were enjoyed certain rights such as eligibility for special representation in an autonomous area, right to use their language and maintain their cultural and religious identity.

However, the situation began to change when the CCP consolidated its position in the province by the mid-1950s. The CCP introduced the Land Reform policy which prohibited

the Islamic authorities from owning *waqf* lands. The lands were taken over by the government and later redistributed. This was part of the Marxist and Maoist development programme which promoted collectivisation of resources.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the CCP also prohibited the Islamic authorities from collecting *zakat* and the *shari'ah* legal system was discontinued. Local leaders or *ahungs* were sent away to *longhai* or labour camps. Apart from that, the Xinjiang Muslims were stripped of their rights to travel; especially to go on hajj. All Muslim holidays which had been formerly acknowledged were withdrawn.

Beginning from the 1960s, the CCP started introducing repressive policies which replaced the gradual and accommodative policies. Both internal and external factors have contributed to the change of policies. Among the internal factors were the failures of the 'Hundred Flowers Movement' and the Great Leap Forward to achieve their objectives.

Following the failure of the Great Leap Forward and criticism of the Hundred Flowers Movement in 1965, Mao Zedong wanted to reconsolidate his position in the government. He blamed the failure of the Great Leap Forward on party leaders who were liberal minded. In the following year, Mao Zedong launched the 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution'. It was a political campaign to purge all those whom he considered as 'liberals', such as Deng Xiaoping.

As a result Mao encouraged Chinese youths to establish militia groups known as the 'Red Guards'. Their aim was to monitor party members and punish those whom they considered as liberals. They also regarded religion and traditions or anyone associated with such things including academics, writers, poets, artists as feudalistic and anti-revolution who need to be purged and 'rehabilitated'. Very often they will be demoted, sent to *longhai* for

rehabilitation, publicly humiliated, had their houses ransacked, physically assaulted and even killed.

In Xinjiang, the situation was not better than other provinces. Once the Red Guards from Beijing arrived in Xinjiang in 1966, they started to persecute local leaders including Wang Enmao, the First Secretary of the Xinjiang Communist Party and commander of the Xinjiang Military Region.<sup>6</sup> He eventually was removed from these positions and transferred to Beijing. During the Cultural Revolution, the red guards were opposed to the policies of accommodation and local autonomy, therefore many Uyghurs were deprived of their jobs in the government. In 1962, there were 111,500 Uyghurs working for the provincial government holding various posts such clerks, polices, district and county chairmen. However, in 1975, there only 80,000 non-Hans left working in the government.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, the CCP has always been suspicious of Islam and the Uyghur traditions which they considered as feudalistic and anti-revolution. Hence they were convinced that the influence of Islam and Uyghur traditions should be wiped out through the implementation of harsh policies. In addition to the Sino-Soviet rivalry, the CCP also intended to eliminate the Soviet influence in Xinjiang especially among the Uyghurs.

The external factors included the Sino-Soviet rivalry which influenced Beijing to adopt harsh policies. The CCP wanted to eliminate Soviet influence in the province and the CCP feared the Soviet may interfere into the internal politics of Xinjiang as part of its plans to attack China. The CCP had increased the Chinese military presence in the province. This had resulted to the militarisation of Xinjiang. The aim was defend the province against any possible Soviet invasion at all cost. The political turmoil between China and the Soviet Union

encouraged the CCP to adopt repressive policies which resulted in a decline of human rights conditions.

### **Internal Factors in Influencing Human Rights Conditions Xinjiang since 1978 Reforms**

The internal factors are characteristics that shape China's policy on human rights in Xinjiang on the domestic level. This paper identifies three internal factors. They are the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) perspective on human rights, the CCP's policies toward Xinjiang since 1978 and the security condition of the province which played a role in shaping the human rights condition in Xinjiang.

This paper argues that the internal factors serve China's interest in Xinjiang. This includes territorial integrity and security of the province, protection of the Chinese Han presence and continuous economic development of Xinjiang. Although the Chinese government has granted certain rights to the minorities since the early 1980s it would do whatever it takes to protect its interest which includes never tolerating any secessionist attempts in Xinjiang.

#### **i) Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s Perspective on Human Rights**

China adopted the human rights norms not because it was convinced by them nor felt morally obligated to adopt them instead it was motivated by its national interest. It must be noted that China prefers to define human rights based its own understanding as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s perspective on human rights plays an important role in shaping the



human rights condition in Xinjiang. The core elements of the CCP's human rights policy can be divided into two points.

Firstly, the CCP stresses that economic development of the state should be given top priority at the expense of human rights. According to the CCP it is imperative that a suitable national condition for economic growth exists over observing and promoting any civil or political rights.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, the CCP is convinced that human rights should be based on its own national characteristics which include its level of development, political systems, culture and history. Hence it must be made clear that the human rights condition in Xinjiang is influenced by the CCP's understanding of human rights.<sup>9</sup>

The CCP started to give emphases on human rights or *renquan* during Deng Xiaoping's administration when the People's Republic of China demonstrated an interest in human rights by ratifying several international human rights treaties.<sup>10</sup> There has been an improvement in the human rights condition in China when compared to Mao Zedong's repressive policies such as the Cultural Revolution. China has always argued that it is not against human rights norms as long as these norms serve national interest and integrity. For example, since the early 1980s China has granted more freedom to the minorities, such as granting them rights to practice their religion and culture openly.

In the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping shaped the CCP's ideas on human rights based on Marxism and Chinese nationalism. In fact, he openly declared that the Chinese understanding of human rights was different from those advocated in the West. Deng pointed out that it wasn't fair to judge China's human rights record based on the 'western' values which he considered as biased and incompatible to Chinese values. According to Deng, "our concept of

human rights is in essence, different from that of the Western world, because we see the question from a different point of view.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, China has been using propaganda to convince its fellow citizens that criticism from the international community, such as Amnesty International (AI) and the United States regarding its human rights records in Xinjiang or Tibet can be considered as interfering in their national sovereignty.

Instead, China prioritises the right to peace and development as being far more important than human rights. Therefore, in the case of Xinjiang the stability of the province is crucial in ensuring its economic development to the extent of sacrificing human rights. Since the Deng Xiaoping’s administration China has always argued that economic development supersedes human rights norms. Hence, Deng advocated the idea that ‘development is the absolute principle’ in which the state’s primary duty is to develop its economy. This is because it is only by developing its economy can a necessary material foundation be laid for a comprehensive guarantee of human rights.<sup>12</sup>

Deng Xiaoping’s ideas on human rights managed to influence the CCP and its leaders even after he retired from the political scene in 1992. Following his death in 1997, China still regarded him as the chief architect of China's economic reforms and China's socialist modernization. Hence subsequent leaders continued Deng’s approach to the issues related to human rights although they have made some minor modifications. Deng Xiaoping’s ideas have influenced the CCP leaders in Xinjiang such as Wang Enmao and Wang Lequan that the stability and prosperity of the province was their primary concern. Whereas, ensuring human rights norms being observed, was secondary. In fact if the position of the CCP was threatened by separatists they were willing to forsake human rights norms.

ii) The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s Policy toward Xinjiang since 1978

In 1976, the demise of Mao Zedong, marked the end of an era of ideological narrowness in China and ushered in a period of reorientation and restructuring based on economic development. New pragmatic leaders such as Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang knew that for China to progress economically it required the support of all the minorities including the Hui Muslims and the Uyghurs. In Xinjiang, the CCP adopted liberal policies for minority nationalities with the aim of resolving the problem of ethnicity and creating a common identity through economic development. For example the 1978 Constitution emphasised the importance of national minorities. It guaranteed freedom for the minorities to maintain their language, customs and representation in the government.<sup>13</sup>

It is noteworthy to mention that the primary aim of the liberalisation of policies was to gain the support of the Uyghurs in order to develop China's agriculture, industry, science and technology and defence. The ultimate aim was to serve China's national interest by providing some basic freedoms to the Uyghurs so as to seek their cooperation in developing Xinjiang's economy. The CCP was aware that the Han Chinese cannot achieve this without Uyghur support.

During the Fifth National Congress of the People's Republic of China in 1982, the Constitution of the People's Republic of China adopted several provisions aimed at ensuring the basic rights of the minority nationalities.<sup>14</sup> Among them was the declaration that all nationalities in the PRC were equal and any discrimination against any nationality was prohibited.

Subsequently in the mid-1980s, economic development in minority areas such as Xinjiang became a major concern of the CCP. Its aim was to integrate the economy of its western region with central China. The CCP has initiated several affirmative actions for the Uyghurs. These included financial assistances, recruitment and promotion of Uyghurs in government departments, admission of Uyghur youths into public schools and universities and improvement in the public infrastructures in areas populated by Uyghurs.

The Constitution of 1982 also ensured some religious freedoms on condition that it did not disrupt the stability of the state. Religious sites in Xinjiang were restored and the use of Uyghur language in local schools was allowed. However, the schools were still government controlled. In 1980, the CCP of Xinjiang permitted the use of the Arabic script for the Turkic language<sup>15</sup> and in the same year, the Xinjiang Islamic Association (XIA) was given permission to reintroduce the Arabic script for the Uyghur and Kazakh languages. In 1984, 15,000 *imams* were trained and 150,000 copies of the Quran were published in Xinjiang.<sup>16</sup> As a result more than 23, 000 mosques were built and Uyghurs were allowed to perform their *Haj* pilgrimage. The numbers of *Haj* pilgrims from China have increased from 260 in 1985 to 2,000 in 1995. Gou Chengzhen, the Deputy Director of the Department of Muslim Affairs claimed in 2006 there were 7,000 Chinese Muslim performing their *Haj*.<sup>17</sup>

The reform and opening-up of policies advocated by Deng Xiaoping, brought mixed reactions. On the one hand, the CCP placed great importance on the construction of basic communications, power generation and telecommunication facilities.<sup>18</sup> Hence, from the 1990s onwards, Xinjiang enjoyed further economic development especially after the disintegration of the USSR. With the demise of the Soviet threat, the Chinese government was able to develop the northwest region and attract more foreign investments. On the other hand,

economic development has further contributed to the influx of Chinese Hans into the province and alienated the Uyghurs from mainstream development.

### iii) Political Violence in Xinjiang and the Uyghurs Separatism

Another internal factor which influences the human rights conditions of Xinjiang is its security. Since the mid 1990s the outbreak of political violence has been so serious that the province can be considered to be in a state of emergency and human rights norms have been ignored. The primary concern of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been to ensure China's control and stability of the province.

It is noteworthy to mention that China is even willing to adopt policies that violate human rights in order to subdue any secessionist attempts by the Uyghurs especially when the safety of the migrants Hans living in Xinjiang is threatened. The PRC administration in Xinjiang has been encountering opposition from the Uyghurs from the beginning. They considered the CCP to be a foreign entity who has taken over their homeland. Moreover they wanted the CCP to stop the policy of mass migration of Hans into Xinjiang.

As a result, there were several waves of rebellions against the CCP. It must be noted that every ten years the province will experience a major rebellion. The objectives of these rebellions were to separate the province from China and establish an independent republic. This has caused the Chinese authorities to be sceptical in granting more freedom and rights to the Uyghurs. They fear such actions will future enhance their demands and spirit for independence.

Political violence and separatist activities in the province have increased in the 1980s and 1990s despite some conciliatory measures which were undertaken by the CCP during the Deng Xiaoping administration. These have led to the revival of Islam and the Uyghur identity. The resurgence of Uyghur nationalism was contributed by the opening up of borders as part of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms which tolerated religious and cultural freedom.

Hence, in the late 1980s these liberal policies were halted due to the fear that Islam might provoke Uyghur nationalism in Xinjiang. Since the 1980s and 1990s the Uyghurs resistances have turned more violent by using methods such as bombings, burning down government buildings and the, killing of government officials. Another important feature of the resistance was the rise of religious militants and the use of small arms like machine guns, hand grenades and dynamites in their attacks. Therefore it future convinced the CCP to impose more stringent laws regardless of human rights norms.

The struggle between the Chinese authorities and Uyghur separatists continued into the 2000s. The latest demonstration was on 5 July 2009 where at least 1000 Uyghurs protested and attacked the Han Chinese. Police attempted to quell the rioters with tear gas, water hoses, armoured vehicles, and roadblocks; as a result the government imposed a curfew in most urban areas. Two days later, on 7 July, the Han retaliated against the Uyghurs. According to the authorities 197 people were killed and 1,721 were injured. In addition to the loss of lives, many vehicles and buildings were destroyed.<sup>19</sup>

The Chinese were caught in a Catch-22 situation. This was because if they were to grant further freedoms to the Uyghurs, they would be more content with the government but

would also increased their ethnic and religious identity which leads to Uyghur separatism and apathy toward the Han Chinese. The crucial issue for the CCP is not whether the human rights conditions in Xinjiang has improved; instead ensuring the safety and security of the province and the Han Chinese living in Xinjiang takes precedence.

### **External Factors in Influencing Human Rights Conditions in Xinjiang**

The external factors consist of issues and events that have taken place abroad that influences China's (state) policy toward human rights conditions in Xinjiang. Since the 1990s, several like minded states and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) such as the Amnesty International (AI), Human Rights Watch (HRW) and, groups representing the Uyghur diasporas have published reports on human rights abuses in Xinjiang. These reports, and the opinions of these organisations on the human rights conditions in Xinjiang are believed to have influenced Beijing's policies towards that region.

It focuses on how international issues and reports by international organisations have influence the development human rights in Xinjiang. In addition it analyses the human rights networks who are interested in the conditions in Xinjiang. They consist of state and non-state actors. They may differ in their approaches but they share similar objectives, which is to influence China to improve its human rights policy in Xinjiang.

i) Disintegration of the Soviet Union

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 enabled the five Central Asian republics achieve independence and helped to promote awareness regarding the Pan-Turkic and Islamic identity among the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. The Uyghurs were envious of their fellow Turkics living in the former Soviet republics in Central Asia. Their envy inspired the Uyghurs to achieve political sovereignty and cultural autonomy in Xinjiang.

The independence of the Central Asian republics and a resurgence of Islam have led to an increase in separatist activities by Uyghurs wanting to establish 'Uyghuristan' in Xinjiang. Many of them were disappointed with the CCP as they had an impression that the disintegration of the USSR will led to independence or at least increased autonomy in their own province. Besides that the opening up of borders has increased the contacts between the Uyghurs and other Muslims living in Pakistan, Central Asia and the Middle East, which have exposed them to radical ideals.<sup>20</sup> Therefore this has resulted in an increase in public criticism by the Uyghurs throughout the early and mid-1990s that ranged from university protests to ethnic and civil unrest. In spite of this, the Uyghurs living in Central Asia have established several political organisations to gain support for the independence of Xinjiang.

The Chinese authorities responded by stepping up efforts to counter protests led by the Uyghurs. These efforts include making a series of arrests and new policy announcements. In April 1997, the 'Strike Hard Maximum Pressure' campaign was launched. The primary aim of the campaign was to clamp down on crime and corruption; however the campaign was also used to restrict religious and political activities which were deemed as being critical of the CCP. This included having prayers in 'illegal' or unregistered mosques during the fasting



month and organising peaceful gatherings to discuss the political and social condition of the province.

ii) The ‘September 11 Attack’ and Global War on Terror

Another major external factor that has influenced the human rights conditions in Xinjiang is the global war on terror. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the United States, the Chinese government made use of the tragic attacks to blame the Uyghurs solidarity groups as part of Al Qaeda.

It is important to note that prior to the September 11 attacks, the Chinese government denied the involvement of external terrorist groups in the separatist movement in Xinjiang. Chinese propaganda has always painted the Xinjiang separatists as an internal problem and did not require any foreign interference. However, since the September 11 attacks, Beijing has initialised its own war on terrorism. They accused the Uyghurs groups of having connections with Osama bin Laden’s global terrorist network to fight for an independent East Turkestan. They even blamed the actions of the separatist movements in Xinjiang during the 1990s as ‘terrorist activities’.

This has resulted in an increase in the crackdown of armed separatist group, non-aggressive Uyghur solidarity groups and all Muslims living in Xinjiang whom they suspect as terrorists. On 21 January 2002, the Chinese government declared that “*terrorist forces* in Eastern Turkestan would not escape punishment.”<sup>21</sup> On 1 February 2002 the Xinhua News agency announced that the Chinese authorities had identified 50 terrorist organisations in

Xinjiang whereas previously it has never admitted that the province was facing any threat from terrorist groups.<sup>22</sup> Since January 2002 the Chinese has even organised exhibitions in major cities of Xinjiang to demonstrate to its people and foreigners that the Uyghur groups are linked to terrorist networks.<sup>23</sup>

China made use of the incident to increase penalties on those found guilty of being in any way ‘connected to terrorist organisations’. AI reported that in March 2002 the repression in Xinjiang has intensified. According to the AI report the Chinese authorities has imposed new restrictions in Xinjiang, especially on the Islamic religion, by closing down ‘illegal’ mosques and subjecting Uyghur Muslim religious teachers to close scrutiny and ‘political education’.<sup>24</sup> Repressive policies were also targeted on all opposition activities in the province including peaceful expression of views via pamphlets, books, magazines, speeches, songs, poems and the internet.

### iii) Transnational Human Rights Network on Xinjiang

The outbreak of violence in Xinjiang and human rights abuses in the 1990s led to the formation and mobilisation of domestic opposition, which were interested in promoting human rights norms and in linking up with international groups. It also brought about the development of international solidarity groups on Xinjiang thus moving the issue to a new phase of internationalisation. Other than the non-governmental organisations, there are also pressures from like-minded states such as the United States to take a harder stand on China in regards to its human rights policies.

The human rights network on Xinjiang can be generally divided into three major categories consisting of international non-governmental organisations, inter-governmental organisations and like-minded states such as the United States and Turkey. They may differ in their approaches but have expressed deep concerns about the sequence of serious human rights violations which occurred in Xinjiang and are working to pressure China to improve its human rights policies.

The international non-governmental organisations are human rights solidarity groups established by both the Uyghur Diasporas such as the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) and the Uyghur American Association and non-Uyghurs Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Human Rights in China. It must be noted that not all of them advocate the independence of Xinjiang but they have committed themselves to work for civil, political, social and economic human rights of the peoples of Xinjiang as well as the right of self-determination and of the integrity of the environment. It is also important to mention that most of them do not condone acts of terrorism and violence in order to achieve their aims.

It should be mentioned that Rebiya Kadeer<sup>25</sup> has also played an important role in internationalising the plight of the Uyghurs and seeking international pressure on China. The detention of Rabiya Kadeer received international attention. The AI and Human Rights Watch (HRW) publicised her case and campaigned for her release. In 2000, the HRW awarded Rabiya Kadeer with its highest human rights award. Similarly, in 2004, the Norwegian Rafto Foundation awarded her the Rafto Award.<sup>26</sup> Finally, after four years of international campaigning, she was released on 17 March 2005, three days prior to the official visit by Condoleezza Rice, the US Secretary of State to Beijing. She was granted permission to go to

the US in order to be with her husband. However, her children were not allowed to leave the country. In fact two of her sons, Alim and Ablikim Abdulreyim have been sentenced to jail for ‘crimes against the state’.

It should be noted that despite China being a major power, it does give in to international pressure in order to maintain its position and for its own interests. Since her release in 2005, Rabiya Kadeer has been actively campaigning for the human rights of the Uyghurs. Rabiya Kadeer has travelled abroad to meet with heads of state and leaders of non-governmental organisations as part of her effort to internationalise the plight of her people. In July 2008, on the eve of the Beijing Olympics, Rabiya Kadeer met with President George W. Bush at the White House with four other human rights leaders to discuss the human rights situation in China.<sup>27</sup> President Bush has expressed his concern for the Uyghurs’ quest for human rights and he said he would raise the human rights issues with the Chinese leaders during his visit to Beijing. According to Rabiya Kadeer, President Bush had specifically expressed concern regarding the detention of her sons. Kadeer said “his decision to meet with us at this time will send a powerful message to the Chinese government that it does not have a free hand to commit human rights abuses.”<sup>28</sup> In fact she had previously met with President Bush in Prague in June 2007 where he delivered a speech at a conference on democracy. During his speech President Bush praised her as a defender of human rights.

Similarly, in November 2007, Rabiya Kadeer was invited by the US Congress to address the Congressional Human Rights Caucus (CHRC) regarding the problem of Uyghur women trafficking in Xinjiang. The CHRC was co-chaired by Congressman Tom Lantos and Congressman Frank R. Wolf. Rabiya was able to gain the attention from some representatives who were present.<sup>29</sup> Among them was Ambassador Mark P. Lagon, Director of the Office to

Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons at the US State Department. Ambassador Lagon acknowledged the problems faced by the young Uyghur women mentioned by Rabiya Kadeer. Representative Chris Smith of New Jersey was critical towards the Chinese policies that seek to assimilate the Uyghur by force. In 2007, Rebiya Kadeer the president of WUC was the recipient of the Congressional Gold Medal. This demonstrates that the WUC has been able to attract attention from the US Congress in their struggle for human rights in Xinjiang.<sup>30</sup>

The United States has also expressed its concern over the human rights conditions in Xinjiang. The US has been actively campaigning for the plight of the Uyghurs since the 1990s. The US State Department has released several reports on the human rights conditions in Xinjiang, but the Chinese government has categorically denied the allegations of human rights abuses mentioned in these reports. However, the reports have caused international embarrassment for the Chinese and they were made aware that the ways they treat the Muslim minorities are being monitored by the international community. On 17 September 2007, the US House of Representatives passed *House Resolution 497* by a voice vote; this resolution demanded that the Chinese government release the children of Rebiya Kadeer and Huseyin Celil, a Canadian citizen.<sup>31</sup>

Since the 1990s, American presidents have made a point to meet with several Uyghur leaders in Washington DC as part of the US effort to demonstrate its solidarity to the Uyghur community. For example, President Clinton and President Bush invited Uyghurs leaders to the White House to discuss conditions in Xinjiang. Among them were Rabiya Kadeer and Anwar Yusof.<sup>32</sup> Although the meetings triggered protests from the Chinese government,

Washington wanted to signal that the US is concerned with the plight of the Uyghurs and it may consider imposing sanctions against China if the condition worsened.

In the aftermath of the July Riots, 2009, the US State Department has again expressed concerns over the human rights conditions in Xinjiang. It has called on the Chinese authorities to practice restraint and be transparent in its trials on those who were detained during the riots. Philip Crowley the spokesman of the US State Department said “the US will continue to urge China to handle their detention and judicial processes in a more transparent manner.”<sup>33</sup>

It is important to note that since September 11 tragic events the US State Department has adopted a ‘dual’ policy regarding the Xinjiang issue. Its counter-terrorism office has been sympathetic toward China’s position. It has even praised China for taking actions against terrorism and separatism. Although the US has warned Beijing not to use the 11 September incidents to persecute the Uyghurs<sup>34</sup>, it has succumbed to the Chinese persuasion and listed the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) on its list of terrorist groups.<sup>35</sup> This was a positive point for China as it provides international support for the Chinese to adopt harsh policies in the name of security and counter terrorism. It has also welcomed China’s action to impose sanction on the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Party<sup>36</sup> whom the Chinese authorities alleged as being part of the Al Qaeda network. The human rights section of the US State Department, on the other hand, continued to condemn discrimination and human rights abuses in Xinjiang.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper has shown that during Deng Xiaoping's administration in the 1980s, the CCP emphasised human rights or *renquan* when the People's Republic of China demonstrated interest in human rights by ratifying international human rights treaties.<sup>38</sup> Therefore the human rights conditions in most parts of China improved, including Xinjiang, when compared to the Cultural Revolution period during Mao Zedong's administration. It is essential to note that since the early 1980s, the CCP has amended some of its harsh policies in Xinjiang in order to gain the support and cooperation of the Uyghurs.

This paper has found that China prefers to define human rights based its own understanding. It is noteworthy to mention that it has always argued that it is not against human rights norms as long as these norms serve the national interest and integrity. However, international human rights non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and like-minded states such as the United States and other western European states have condemned China for not practicing human rights in accordance to their interpretation.

The Chinese government has acknowledged international criticism against its human rights policies although it refuses to admit these allegations. The primary concern of China is its image, therefore it has adopted propaganda strategies such as publishing white papers like the *White Paper on Human Rights in China*, *White Paper on History, Development of Xinjiang*, *White Paper on Freedom of Religious Belief in China* which aimed at informing and educating the cadres, masses as well as providing justification to the international community on the human rights condition.

In view of this, China will most likely continue to defend its rule in Xinjiang at all costs even to the extent of violating international human rights norms. With the number of Hans almost equalling the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, China will surely not let Xinjiang be independent. It can be safely concluded that in the next two decades or so, the number of Hans would have surely outnumbered the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, thereby making this province more Chinese and less Uyghur. Hence, with the passage of time and the influx of more Hans, Xinjiang would surely resemble a typical Chinese province such that perhaps one day nothing would be Uyghur about Xinjiang!



- 
- <sup>1</sup> Ann Kent, *Between freedom and subsistence China and human rights*, (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993), 103.
- <sup>2</sup> *Xinjiang statistical yearbook*, (Beijing: Beijing Information Press, 2005).
- <sup>3</sup> James A. Millward, *Eurasian crossroads a history of Xinjiang*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 237.
- <sup>4</sup> June Teufel Dreyer, *China's forty millions: minority nationalities and national integration in the People's Republic of China*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 104.
- <sup>5</sup> Donald McMillen, *Chinese communist power and policy in Xinjiang*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979), 131.
- <sup>6</sup> June Teufel Dreyer, *China's forty millions: minority nationalities and national integration in the People's Republic of China*, 214.
- <sup>7</sup> James A. Millward, *Eurasian crossroads a history of Xinjiang*, 270.
- <sup>8</sup> *Xinhua*, (2 March 1994). See also, "Qian Qichen's speeches in the United States," *Hsin Wan Pao*, (28 September 1991).
- <sup>9</sup> Zhou Wei, "There study of human rights in the People's Republic of China," edited by James T.H. Tang, *Human rights and international relations in the Asia Pacific region*, (New York: Pinter, 1995), 83-96.
- <sup>10</sup> Michael Dillon, *Contemporary China an introduction*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 90.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> Zhu Majie, "Deng Xiaoping's human rights theory," edited by Yu Xintian, *Cultural impact on international relations*, Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change Series III, Asia, Vol. 20, (Washington D.C: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2002), 79-89.
- <sup>13</sup> June Teufel Dreyer, *China's political system: modernization and tradition*, (London: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1976), 206.
- <sup>14</sup> *Constitution of the People's Republic of China*, (Beijing: Fifth national congress of the People's Republic of China, 1982).
- <sup>15</sup> Cuiyi Wei, "An historical survey of modern Uighur writing since the 1950s in Xinjiang, China," *Central Asia Journal*, vol. 37, no. 4, (1993), 270.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> Mahesh Ranjan Debata, *China's minorities ethnic-religious separatism in Xinjiang*, (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2007), 87.
- <sup>18</sup> *Beijing review*, (13-19 February 1994).
- <sup>19</sup> Peter Leonard, "[Kazakh Uighurs hold mass protest](http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=8121182)," *ABC News*, (19 July 2009).  
<http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=8121182>.
- <sup>20</sup> Roy Anthony Rogers, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation China and the new great game in Central Asia," *Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 3 (2007), 93.
- <sup>21</sup> *Xinhua*, 21 January 2002.
- <sup>22</sup> *Xinhua*, 1 February 2002.
- <sup>23</sup> "Special report about the human rights situation in eastern Turkistan for the period of January-May 2002," [http://uyghur.org/enorg/h\\_rights/report\\_may\\_2002.html](http://uyghur.org/enorg/h_rights/report_may_2002.html).
- <sup>24</sup> "China's 'war on terrorism'-brutal repression of ethnic unrest in Xinjiang," <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2002/aug2002/chin-a08.shtml>.
- <sup>25</sup> Rabiya Kadeer is a mother of eleven children and a businesswoman cum philanthropist who originated from Xinjiang. Initially, she intended to assist her people by cooperating with the Chinese government. In 1992 she was appointed as a member of the Political Consultative Congress by the CCP. Since then, she has been actively involved in empowering Uyghur women to start their own businesses and in 1995 she was part of the Chinese delegation for the United Nation's Fourth World Conference on Women. In 1997, she started the 'Thousand Mothers Movement' as part of her efforts to empower Uyghur women in the province. However, relations between Rabiya Kadeer and the CCP deteriorated as her husband Sidik Rouzi criticised the CCP for mistreatment of his people. He eventually had to leave the province for the US. Rabiya Kadeer took over from her husband and began criticising Chinese treatment of the Uyghurs during the National People's Political Consultative Conference in March 1997. She accused the CCP of discrimination against the Uyghurs. She also condemned the ways the CCP and PLA handed the demonstration in Ghulja city a month earlier. She alleged that the Chinese government violated the human rights of the Uyghurs. Matters worsened when the CCP terminated her membership in the Political Consultative Congress and denied her request to visit her husband in the US. In August 1999, she was detained on her way to meet a member of the US Congressional Research delegation who was visiting China. She was charged for revealing states secrets to foreigners and sentenced to eight years in prison.

- 
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid
- <sup>27</sup> <http://www.uyghuramerican.org/articles/1936/1/Rebiya-Kadeer-meets-with-President-Bush>.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> <http://www.uyghuramerican.org/articles/1191/1/Rebiya-Kadeer-addresses-PRC-trafficking> .
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> House of Representatives calls on the People's Republic of China to release Rebiya Kadeer's children and Uyghur-Canadian, 18 September 2007.
- <sup>32</sup> <http://www.uyghuramerican.org/articles/1936/1/Rebiya-Kadeer-meets-with-President-Bush>.
- <sup>33</sup> "US seeks China transparency in Xinjiang trials," <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/asia/166826/>.
- <sup>34</sup> Kerry Dumbaugh, *China-U.S. relations: Current issues and implications for U.S. policy*, Report RL33877, (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2007), p. 22.
- <sup>35</sup> Colin Mackerras, "Why terrorism bypasses China's far west," <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/FD23Ad03.html>.
- <sup>36</sup> "US sanctions on Xinjiang terror leader welcomed," [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-04/22/content\\_7701496.html](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-04/22/content_7701496.html).
- <sup>37</sup> Kara Miriam Wortman and Kerry Dumbaugh, *China's Xinjiang-Uighur autonomous region: Developments and U.S. interests*, Report RS20476, (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2007), p.5.
- <sup>38</sup> Michael Dillon, *Contemporary China an introduction*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 90.