

## Report

# Muslims in China and their Relations with the State

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## Abstract

The article explains why the Uyghurs (sometimes spelt Uighur) are under China's harsh restriction and analyzes the future policies the People's Republic of China (PRC) will adopt and possible reactions from the Uyghur side. The recent rise of violent incidents in Xinjiang further entailed Beijing to adopt austere regulation on Uyghur's religious right, which causes great concern in the global Muslim community. As is well known, Muslims in China account for less than two percent of the population, and most of them belong to the two ethnic groups: Hui and Uyghur. The context of the analysis is the two ethnic groups' responses to assimilation policies. Hui people exhibit a greater level of assimilation to the majority Han people in language and culture, and such Sinification is reflected in greater degrees of indigenization of the Islamic faith. By contrast, the Uyghur people resist assimilation to the majority Han people and submission of their Islamic identity to China's state nationalism.

## Introduction

According to the 2010 official census data (as shown in Table 1),<sup>(1)</sup> among 1.3 billion population, China's fifteen-five minorities altogether are composed of only 8.4 percent population, in which the number of Muslims accounts merely for 1.7 percent.<sup>(2)</sup> The ten Muslim minorities include Hui, Uyghur, Kazak, Dongxiang, Kirgiz, Salar, Tajik, Uzbek, Bonan, and Tatar. Except for Hui and Uyghur, both of which have a significant population of over ten million, each of the other eight minorities have only 0.1 percent or fewer in the total population. However, those Muslims are concentrated in the vast Northwestern region (30% percent of the overall territory), including three provinces (Shaanxi, Gansu,

Qinghai) and two autonomous regions (Ningxia, Xinjiang).(3) Hui people are distributed widely in the Northwestern region and some of them also reside in China's inland provinces. Uyghur people mostly live in Xinjiang, especially the southern area. Kazak, Kirgiz, Tajik, Uzbek, and Tatar are all minority groups who live in Xinjiang's border areas and share the same ethnicity to the people of neighboring countries, such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, and Afghanistan. Dongxiang, Salar, and Bonan are all Muslim peoples with their own ethnic identity, but they are usually conceived as part of the Hui people. Donxiang and Bonan mostly reside in Gansu Province and Salar concentrates in Qinghai. Other ethnic groups, including Han Chinese, also have a small number of the Muslim population. They are distributed all over China, relatively more in some provinces like Yunan and Henan, together having around one million Muslims.(4)

**Table 1 Muslim Population in China**

Total Population	1332810869	100.0%
Han	1220844520	91.6%
Non-Han (55 Minorities Combined)	111966349	8.4%
Muslims	23142104	1.7%
Hui	10586087	0.8%
Uyghur	10069346	0.8%
Kazak	1462588	0.1%
Dongxiang	621500	Less than 0.1%
Kirgiz	186708	Less than 0.1%
Salar	130607	Less than 0.1%
Tajik	51069	Less than 0.1%
Uzbek	10569	Less than 0.1%
Bonan	20074	Less than 0.1%
Tatar	3556	Less than 0.1%

Data Source: China's 2010 Census Data, National Bureau of Statistics of China  
<http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/pcsj/rkpc/6rp/indexce.htm>

To understand the current state of the Muslim minorities and their relations with the PRC governing elite, China's policy towards ethnic minorities and religious faiths must be explained. This is an important dynamic since Muslims account for only 20% of the minority population and that Han Chinese and the other forty-five minorities also have Muslims. The difference between the ethnic groups with Muslim majority populations and those who follow the religion of Islam regardless of their ethnicity must be distinguished. While China's official ideology by communist tenets is atheism,(5) many religious faiths have attracted followers, including the traditional five religions (Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism) – in addition to new religious creeds.(6) In view of the large number of ethnic groups and religious faiths, the PRC central government has stipulated a set of general guidelines for managing minority and religious affairs.

## China's Minority and Religious Affairs Policy

Since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established the PRC power structure in 1950, its minorities policy can be characterized by three principles: (1) All ethnic groups belong to the great Chinese nation, which includes 56 peoples, and its political unity is inseparable. (2) Under the grand Chinese nation, all ethnic groups have equal status. The 'equal status' refers to all kinds of rights and obligations regardless of ethnic difference, language, religion, customs, etc... (3) Due to different historical, geographic, climatic, and other conditions, the central government should adopt preferential measures in economic, cultural, social, educational, and other arenas to increase the well-being of those underprivileged minorities.<sup>(7)</sup>

China's general policy in religious affairs, on the other hand, can be summarized into the following five principles: (1) CCP party members and PRC government officials should stick to Marxism-Leninism and adhere to atheism (2) All PRC citizens have the right to believe or not believe in organized religion (3) All legal religions have equal status, and their purposes should all promote national unity. (4) All religious organizations and activities should be domestically organized under state regulation, and any form of foreign influence in religious activities is strictly forbidden. (5) Religions should be separate from education and politics. Under no circumstance should anyone use religious causes to influence education and politics.<sup>(8)</sup>

State regulation is carried out by the specific authority in all levels of government, central/federal, provincial, and local. At the level of the central government, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission and the State Administration of Religious Affairs, under the command of the PRC State Council, are the highest agencies in the running of minority and religious affairs, respectively. At the provincial level and below, the administrative units of minority and religious affairs are combined, which indicates that the PRC central government keeps the two administrative areas closely related, and hence, executes minority and religious policies with the same administrative unit.

Under the above principles, China claims to embrace all-encompassing religious freedom for all citizens but stresses that state regulation must be strictly enforced to secure law compliance, particularly to prevent challenges against state authority the regime or threats to national unity. This inevitably constrains the way organized religion evolves. That is, a religion should not develop a political identity competitive to the grand-Chinese identity; all religious organizations and activities should be under state regulation; and religious leaders should not build transnational religious and political networks; religion becomes a privatized matter because the state authority ensures all citizens' freedom to practice religion or reject it, regardless of ethnic background. Finally, religious traditions or activities are subject to suspension if they contradict the higher

national goals, for instance. This policy is designed to maintain political stability and suppress secessionist activities.(9)

### **Ethnic Groups under Austere Regulation**

Among the fifty-five minorities in China, the Uyghurs and the Tibetans are the two minorities who constantly face austere state regulation that disturbs their daily life, including the religious sphere. In fact, the PRC authorities seem to remain on alert in their governing of Xinjiang and Tibet for their history of independence movements. This must be understood against the background of ongoing political unrest since 2009. Violent attacks in Xinjiang and self-immolation protests in Tibet have resulted in Chinese authorities crackdown, in the form of intensified security measures in both regions and imposition of significant constraints on religious activities(10) (e.g. restriction on Ramadan Fasting(11)). The crackdown aims to prevent the rise of any forms of political opposition, specifically those that could potentially develop through religious networks.(12) This contrasts the accommodative policy China applies to other religions (Protestantism, Buddhism, and even Islam in Hui residential areas).The key reason for such policy difference is that the authorities flagged no significant security concerns in these areas.

A deeper reason for restriction of the Uyghurs' and Tibetans' religious autonomy stems from the central government's lack of political trust and confidence. This associates with a distinguishing phenomenon which the state authorities never encounter in other parts of China. Both the CCP and the state failed to embed their intelligence apparatus in the Uyghur and Tibetan societies. Thus, the party and the state seem to be unable to fully penetrate deep into the social fabric and exert total control. This is largely due to the lack of social integration between Han Chinese and the two minority peoples, so the state adopts peremptory security measures to maintain political order. In a nutshell, it is not only religious faith that determines China's austere and draconian regulation of religious minorities, but it is also the history of independence movement along with the failure of social control that seem to dictate the state's reliance on military strategies. In other places where ethnic minorities are adherents of Islam or Tibetan Buddhism, (13) China does not resort to such restrictive policies as it does in Xinjiang and Tibet, for none of the two security concerns are flagged by the authorities.

### **How do Muslims and the State View Each Other?**

The Muslim community in China is not coherent, and in fact, even within the Hui people, there are conflicts between different sects.(14) However, we can categorize the ten Muslim minorities into four groups: Hui, Uyghur, the minorities sharing the same ethnicity with the main group in neighboring countries, and other Muslims who have

their own identity. Among these four groups, the relation between the former two and the state is more consequential because they account for 89.2% Muslim population and both form the largest minority in the Northwestern region. Therefore, the following discussion focuses only on Hui and Uyghur.<sup>(15)</sup>

The Hui people is the largest Muslim group, whose ancestors immigrated into China between Tang and Yuan Dynasty (between the 7th and 13th century) from the Arab and Persian Empires.<sup>(16)</sup> As a result of lengthy acculturation, the Hui people use Chinese language. Today they practice Islam with translated materials in Chinese. Such Sinification is equally reflected in the 'indigenization' of the Islamic faith. While most Hui people are Sunni Muslims, their Islamic faith shows a distinct feature of Sufism. Old mosques are usually Sufi mausoleums, which have strong Chinese architectural characters. Due to the greater level of Sinification, the Hui people view their Islamic identity mostly in a cultural rather than political sense, and they have experienced numerous changes of dynasties or governments.<sup>(17)</sup> The PRC central authorities do not view their Islamic faith as a potential hazard to the government because most of them primarily identify themselves as Chinese. That is the reason why fewer religious constraints are imposed on the Hui people.

The Uyghurs is another large group, whose ancestors were ancient Xinjiang residents, a mixture of Turks, Mongols, and indigenous tribes.<sup>(18)</sup> Although the Uyghurs lived in Xinjiang for a long time, they were not under Chinese rule until the mid-eighteenth century. None of the Chinese rulers,<sup>(19)</sup> during more than 250 years, have succeeded in their bid to assimilate the Uyghur people. That is, to turn them into Chinese. Most of the Uyghurs do not speak Chinese and this is a major difference between them and the Hui people.. Unlike their fellow-Muslims the Hui, the Uyghur seldom intermarry with Han Chinese. The tension between the Uyghurs and Han peoples often runs high. Friction between the two is not limited to ethnic difference.<sup>(20)</sup> History has shown that Han Chinese, who make up the PRC's leadership and dominant governing group at the provincial level, usually apply repressive means to secure their supremacy in Xinjiang, for instance.<sup>(21)</sup> This further alienate the Uyghurs from the idea of belonging to a grand Chinese nation. From the Uyghur people's perspective, the recent conflict in Xinjiang is a reaction to continuous infringement on their religious rights, and more or less punishment against their protest of Han chauvinism. From the Han leadership's viewpoint, those violent attacks associated with religious extremism are the greatest threat to the national interest and have to be stopped. Lack of trust between the two peoples intensifies existing ethnic antagonism not just between Uyghur activists and the Han officials, but also between ordinary Uyghur and Han publics, more generally.

## The Rise of Religious Extremism?

It is undeniable that the scale and the number of violent incidents have been on the rise after 2009. Many of these incidents involve terrorist attacks by Uyghurs.<sup>(22)</sup> They differ from extremist attacks in the 1990s and early 2000s, many of which were not planned and executed directly by well-known pro-independence organizations such as East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Rather, they were carried out by voluntary groups associated with underground religious networks.<sup>(23)</sup> While the Chinese government alleged that pro-independence organizations masterminded those violent attacks, the evidence showed those incidents were largely spontaneous acts, initiated by religious preachers and followers of 'underground' Islamic schools.<sup>(24)</sup> There was a lot of evidence from extremist video footage that promoted Jihad against the Han rule,<sup>(25)</sup> but much less proof about any direct relationship between those attacks and terrorist organizations. This indicates that religious extremism does exert certain influence at the grassroots level of the Uyghur community, and that it is not about foreign terrorist organizations (e.g. Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Al-Qaeda) or pro-independent organizations (e.g. ETIM ). It is primarily about Uyghur's opposition to the regime.

In this context, Beijing tends to choose more suppression of the Uyghurs, specifically of religious activities, in the name of China's anti-terrorist campaign as well as the quest for stability. However, this policy only inflames matter, provoking anger among the Uyghur people, and creating fertile soil for further religious extremism. A more compelling argument to make is that most opposition groups in the Uyghur community is a direct response to Beijing's inability to improve Uyghur's living standards, respect Uyghur's Islamic identity, and to resolve ongoing ethnic antagonism between Han Chinese and the Uyghur. Similarly, Beijing's failure to stop the negative effects caused by the state's predatory development plans and policies.<sup>(26)</sup> Beijing seems to be either unwilling or unable to solve long time overdue problems. What makes things worse is Beijing's use of brutal methods in dealing with the Uyghur people who have legitimate grievances crying for the governing elite's serious attention.

In short, China does have a reason to fear religious extremism. However, the central authorities today should fear is not the Islamic State or other foreign terrorist organizations, but those angry Uyghur people who are infuriated by Beijing's brutal repression and seemingly willful ignorance.<sup>(27)</sup> However, the central authorities might insist that their policy responses are legitimate, being based on the same minority and religious policies that apply to all peoples equally in China. Moreover, in defence of state policy, officials would suggest that the PRC's scale-up security measures do not specifically target Uyghurs or Islam; and that such measures can be applied to any places or any groups until the threat of national security is removed.

## International Factors

The Uyghur problem in Beijing's view involves three issues: the independence movement, terrorist attacks, and national integration. Beijing stands tough on the first two issues and insists no foreign intervention in China's domestic affairs is to be tolerated. The issue of national integration is the most difficult problem that troubles the central authorities, because it comprises all kinds of policies related to ethnic, religious, and other socioeconomic affairs. The ultimate goal is to make Uyghurs prioritize their political identity as members of the grand Chinese nation. In this regard, thus far Beijing has had little or no success.

Of all three issues, international factors play an important role that affects China's foreign policy towards key Muslim countries such as Turkey. Regarding the first issue of Xinjiang's independence movement, Beijing believes that Turkey<sup>(28)</sup> and Western countries (namely, the US through the National Endowment for Democracy, which supports the so-called World Uyghur Congress<sup>(29)</sup>) all give support for overseas separatist groups. Turkey illustrates this point. Beijing recently condemned the anti-Chinese protest in support of Uyghurs in Turkey. Chinese officials reacting to the Turkey protest, claimed that allegations of widespread discrimination against Uyghurs such as curtailed religious rights were unfounded.<sup>(30)</sup> Beijing also exerted its political influence over Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Erdogan stressed Turkey's respect for China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, stating that he "will not allow anyone to use Turkey's territory to do anything to harm China's national interests and security."<sup>(31)</sup>

With respect to the second issue about anti-terrorism campaign, China indeed seeks greater cooperation with the international community, including the Arab world, Iran, Russia, and Western countries. This explains why China tries to make a case that Xinjiang's recent violent incidents are directly linked to terrorist organizations such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, ETIM, Al-Qaeda, and ISIL.<sup>(32)</sup> The intention is to set the tone that the Uyghur problem is about separatism and terrorism, and not about the many governance issues associated with claims about the Uyghur's underprivileged status, including in the area of human rights.

The last issue is the one Beijing seems to be most unwilling to touch, for fear it could turn out to be a Pandora's box for the PRC, by creating tension with the world's Muslim community. In Beijing's point of view, assimilation of Uyghurs into the grand Chinese nation requires a certain level of Sinification, featuring at least three characters: first, Islam should be confined to the cultural sphere; second, Islamic identity should be always secondary to the tenets and ideals of Chinese nationalism; and third, religious practices and customs should be adjusted if they are contradictory to state policies. For instance, state policy bans fasting for communist cadres, teachers, and students, because CCP members should be atheists and secular education is the universal rule



which cannot be broken by religion. Both are the fundamental principles of China's general policy in religious affairs. The conflict between secular minority policy and thriving Islamic consciousness is today the very reason accounting for Uyghur's opposition against the PRC central government. This conflict stirs up deep concern in the Muslim world about the infringement of Uyghur's religious rights and underprivileged ethnic status in China.

### **China's Potential Policies in the Future**

In light of the current situation, Beijing will continue tightening security measures to maintain social stability and uproot terrorism. This unavoidably involves imposition of harsh policies of repression on Uyghurs in Xinjiang. These policies will further restrict Muslims' religious rights and specifically focus the state's control measures on religious networks in order to prevent Uyghur people's opposition activities. However, China is less likely to enforce all-inclusive regulation on religious activities, because that will have unnecessary repercussions for China's politics in Xinjiang. What Beijing intends to show the world is that application of all those harsh policies is a must in fighting terrorism by separatists and religious extremists, and that those restrictions are all legitimate and in accordance with the constitutional provisions concerning the general minority and religious principles. China enforces strict news regulation and censorship in Xinjiang, particularly for reports on events related to the Uyghur opposition. It is therefore unclear how many Uyghurs were killed or detained during any specific period of time. From the limited evidence that is available evidence, we can learn that China adopts a retaliation policy that intends to kill Uyghur's attackers in the violent incidents, and that also detains a significant number of Uyghurs who are suspected of being involved after these incidents.<sup>(33)</sup>

Unfortunately, the above policies are not likely to stop the Uyghurs' opposition against the PRC regime, unless Beijing is able to win this Muslim minority's hearts and minds by resolving the many issues that anger them, including the youth who lead many anti-Chinese protests in Xinjiang. The first and foremost concession China should consider is to respect the Uyghurs' Muslim identity not only in the cultural but also in the political sphere. Such a concession could pave the way for granting more autonomy rights by lifting the state control on local governance. Next, Beijing should elevate the Uyghurs' underprivileged status by improving their living standards, promoting Islamic values, and employing extensive preferential policies. The long-term purpose Beijing should work on is not to assimilate the Uyghur people, but to construct an equal, respectful, and harmonious interethnic relationship between Han Chinese and the Uyghur minority. Such policies would in the long run improve relations between the PRC and the Uyghur people, and it could prove to be Beijing's winning card for hitting two birds with one stone: prevention of terrorism and winning over the Uyghur people. For now, such a

change of policy does not seem to be on the PRC's political agenda. For such reconciliatory and inclusive measures to be introduced and implemented, a democratic political institution is needed. Right now, that is part of the problem of dealing with Muslim minorities in China. Specifically, the policy-makers in charge of managing relations with the Uyghur people's simply lack the political trust and imagination to draft new policies aimed at appeasement, inclusiveness and reconciliation.

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