China

Quick Facts

Population: 1,394,015,977 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 9,596,960 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Han Chinese 91.6%, Zhuang 1.3%, other (includes Hui, Manchu, Uighur, Miao, Yi, Tujia, Tibetan, Mongol, Dong, Buyei, Yao, Bai, Korean, Hani, Li, Kazakh, Dai, and other nationalities) 7.1% (2010 est.)

Government Type: Communist party-led state

GDP (official exchange rate): $12.01 trillion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated July 2020)

Introduction

Prior to 1949, China's Nationalist government recognized Muslims as one of the "five peoples" constituting the Chinese nation – along with Manchus, Mongols, Tibetans and Han. The Communist Party of China (CPC) has maintained this recognition and continued to push Muslims toward integration. China, in the words of one official, "allows the practice of religion, but not at the expense of the state."[1] In all, Beijing recognizes ten separate Muslim nationalities, the largest being Uighurs, Hui, and Kazakhs.

The spread of Islam in China, particularly in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region—a sprawling western expanse of inhospitable deserts and mountains—has long been a source of official concern, resulting in numerous laws restricting assembly, as well as religious practices and teaching. These repressive measures have culminated in "reeducation" camps intended to Sinicize minority Muslim detainees. More subtly, the Chinese state has made efforts to dilute Uighur dominance demographically through the transplantation of Han Chinese to the region. This policy has resulted in a material shift in the demographics of the region; according to official estimates, Han Chinese, who made up just 6 percent of the overall population of Xinjiang in 1949, comprised over 30 percent of the provincial total as of 2018.[2]

In 2008, a New York Times journalist described life for Muslims in Xinjiang as living, "an intricate series of laws and regulations intended to control the spread and practice of Islam."[3] Eleven years later, the same outlet reported that "authorities in Xinjiang have detained hundreds of thousands of Uighurs, Kazakhs, and other Muslim minorities in internment camps."[4] Chinese officials ascribe rising social and political tensions in the region to the growing influence of radical Islam – rather than to repressive state policies. As such, they see radical Islam as an external threat to what would otherwise be a peaceful and happy Chinese religious minority.[5]

Islamist Activity

Chinese authorities collectively classify separatism, extremism, and terrorism as the "three forces" that represent a threat to the nation. Chinese authorities divide their struggle against these evils into five phases between 1990 and 2007.[6] During this period, religious radicalism metamorphized, culminating in the rise of groups such as East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), also known as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), or al-Hizb al-Islami al-Turkistani, the East Turkestan Islamic Reform Party, the East Turkestan Democratic Reform Party, and the East Turkestan Justice Party.

The Xinjiang Autonomous Region is the epicenter of concerns about Islamic extremism, and the focal point of China's long-running anti-terror campaign. Xinjiang is China's largest territory, spanning more than 1.6 million square kilometers in the country's extreme west. According to official Chinese statistics in 2017, traditionally Muslim ethnic groups make up nearly 14 million of Xinjiang's population of 23 million. Of these, the largest ethnic bloc is the Uighur, who number over 11 million.[7]

Recently, the Chinese central government has sought to repress and control Xinjiang residents. This campaign is complex, since radical Islamism and Uighur separatism are inextricably linked in the minds of many Chinese officials and citizens. Han Chinese – even those with progressive attitudes toward democracy – often cannot see the difference between a politically active Uighur and a separatist, nor do they acknowledge meaningful differentiation between Muslim identity and extremism.[8]

Uighurs have long lived as *de facto* second class citizens within China, with many denied economic opportunity and political representation – and with little attention paid, at least until recently, to their living standards and economic conditions. Over time, a comparatively tiny fraction of Uighurs, what experts have defined as "a very small minority within the minority,"[9] has become politically active through illegal and/or militant groups. The goal of these organizations is the promotion of Uighur rights and separatist tendencies in Xinjiang.

In December of 2003, China's Ministry of Public Security released a list of organizations deemed to pose a threat to the state. The document listed four distinct groups – the ETIM/TIP, the (ETLO), the World Uighur Youth Congress, and the East Turkestan Information Center – as well as eleven individuals.[10] Of these, only ETIM/TIP and the World Uighur Congress (a merger of the World Uighur Youth Congress and the Eastern Turkestan National Congress)[11] remain active today. The U.S. Department of State designated ETIM as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in September 2002, but declined to designate the other organizations as such despite pressure from the Chinese government to do so. This resistance was due largely to suspicions that the Chinese government blacklisted these organizations because of political considerations, rather than as a result of legitimate security concerns.[12]

The state's increasingly tight controls on speech, movement, and the practice of Islam engendered widespread frustration and anger among Chinese Muslims. A growing resentment of heavy-handed state intervention in religious life solidified the separatist movement and strengthened its grassroots support. This, in turn, catalyzed large-scale and violent Uighur anti-government riots in 2008–2009, and has perpetuated sporadic instances of violence since. These have included, among others, an attack on a train station in Yunnan province in March 2014 in which Uighur militants killed 29 people,[13] a police raid in July 2015 that resulted in the deaths of three purported Uighur terrorists in Shenyang,[14] and an attack on a coal mine in September 2015 in which at least 50 people were killed by alleged separatists.[15]

Over time, this unrest has prompted a change in Xinjiang's Islamist groups – most directly, ETIM/TIP. Following 2009, groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and the al-Qaeda-linked Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) began to exert greater influence over ETIM/TIP's ideology and tactics,[16] with the latter reportedly involved in the training of the group's militants.[17] ETIM/TIP ideology promotes Uighur independence and resistance against the suppression of Islam in Xinjiang. For example, one Uighur separatist publication, Turkistan al-Muslimah (Muslim Turkistan), regularly links Islam and separatism by claiming that ETIM/TIP is "seeking freedom and independence and to be ruled by God's *Sharia*."[18] The Media Center Islam

Avazi reported in 2017 that hundreds of TIP Uighur militants trained not only in military tactics but also in *sharia* law.[19]

Information regarding ETIM/TIP is tightly controlled by the Chinese government, and little is known about the group's current size, strength, and sources of funding. Nevertheless, the organization's increasingly strident Islamist rhetoric in recent years, as well as its surge of attacks against Chinese targets, suggest that the organization continues to constitute a real—albeit limited—threat to Chinese security.

Over the past several years, both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda have begun targeting China with both threats and online propaganda.[20] Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has labeled China an enemy of the Muslim world; so has the leader of the al-Qaeda-affiliated TIP, Abdul Haq.[21] The Islamic State, meanwhile, released a propaganda video in March 2017 highlighting Chinese Uighurs living and training to fight in the Islamic State, as well as depictions of the torture Uighurs suffer at the hands of the Chinese government.[22]

Exact numbers of Uighur foreign fighters are hard to estimate, so verifying the precise figure proves challenging.[23] A 2016 study by the New America Foundation, a Washington, DC-based think tank, noted that ISIS fighters from China were overwhelmingly Uighur in ethnicity, and hailed from Xinjiang. Moreover, these fighters were more likely to be married than other fighters, and in many cases brought their families with them, suggesting that they intended to stay with the Islamic State for the foreseeable future.[24] With the collapse of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, China's worries turned to the effect that these fighters could have on the Chinese Muslim population if they returned home.[25] Given the emergence of new migratory routes flowing through Southeast Asia toward Syria, China has leaned hard on Thailand, Malaysia, and others to repatriate Uighurs back to the PRC. For many Uighurs traveling this path, they seek refuge and ultimately asylum in Turkey, which has introduced complexities to Beijing-Ankara relations.[26]

Islamism and Society

The largest segments of China's Muslim population are Uighurs, Hui, and Kazakhs, which have been formally recognized by the Chinese state since 1949. The Uighurs, a Turkic Muslim minority, populate the rugged, oil- and mineral-rich territory of Xinjiang that constitutes one-sixth of China's total land mass. Uighurs are the largest ethnic group in Xinjiang, accounting for approximately 45% of the region's total population of roughly 24 million as of 2017.[27] Over the past three years, this number has declined as a result of China's sterilization and birth control policies (see "Islamism and the State" section). Uighurs have practiced Sunni Islam since the 10th century, and the faith has experienced a revival among the community in recent years. More recently, in 2019, the Chinese government claimed that there were more than 35,000 mosques throughout the entire country. Recent evidence, however, suggests that provincial officials have partly or totally demolished over two dozen mosques in Xinjiang alone in the past three years.[28] In 2016, the Chinese government reportedly demolished 5,000 mosques throughout the country in the name of public safety.[29] In the midst of China's reeducation campaign of Muslims in Xinjiang, authorities have stripped Islamic crescents and domes from mosques, banned religious schools and Arabic classes, and barred Muslim children from participating in faith-based activities.[30]

The Uighur community has numerous grievances against the Chinese government: restrictions on their religion, language and culture; official policies that encourage Han emigration to Xinjiang to dilute the strength of the Uighur ethnic identity; and common Han discrimination towards Uighurs. China's authorities reject the validity of these complaints, saying Uighurs should instead be grateful for Xinjiang's rapid economic development and targeted investment from the government. Beginning in 2008, these racial and religious tensions fueled Uighur protests against state restrictions on Islam. A simultaneous series of attacks by Uighurs against the authorities and their Han neighbors only precipitated increasingly restrictive countermeasures. Ultimately, this cycle culminated in the mob violence of July 2009 (see "Islamism

and the State" section). Farming remains the primary source of income for approximately 80 percent of Uighurs in the poor southern portion of the region.[31] Many face discrimination in the job market, both over their ethnic and religious heritage. This discrimination is exacerbated by the linguistic barrier between the Uighurs and the rest of China.[32]

Since Uighurs have no real voice in national politics, their political interests are largely represented by the World Uyghur Congress (WUC). The WUC is the most well-known international Uighur political organization. It is an umbrella group of smaller Uighur nationalist organizations formed after the East Turkestan National Congress and the World Uyghur Youth Congress merged in April 2004.[33] The WUC claims to "peacefully promote the human rights, religious freedom, and democracy for the Uyghur people in East Turkistan."[34] Beijing, on the other hand, asserts that the WUC is a front through which Western nations clandestinely channel funds and weapons into Xinjiang and undermine the Chinese state.[35]

The Hui are China's second-largest Muslim ethnic group, with a population of over 10 million scattered throughout China.[36] They are most numerous in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Gansu, Qinghai, Henan, Hebei, Shandong, and Xinjiang. Over time, the Hui have lost their proficiency in Arabic and Central Asian languages and adopted Chinese as their native tongue. Today's Hui are best understood as Sinicised Muslims that (unlike other official Muslim groups) look Han and speak Mandarin or other local dialects. Unlike the Uighurs – whose claim to Xinjiang predates that of the Han – the Hui settled in areas already dominated by ethnic Hans.[37] The Hui today enjoy far more religious freedom than they did in the first decades of Communist rule, when all religion was repressed. However, greater religious freedom has also increased mosque attendance among Hui—a tendency that many Han interpret as clannish.

Finally, approximately 1.6 million Kazakh Muslims[38] reside in the north of Xinjiang, on the border with the Central Asian republic of Kazakhstan. Unlike the Hui, Kazakhs feel a close connection to clans in neighboring Kazakhstan and speak Kazakh rather than the mainstream Mandarin. In Kazakh society, rituals are generally performed in accordance with Islamic tradition, and include prayers, fasting, observance of the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca), and adherence to Islamic burial rites. Similarly, Kazakhs supplement their official legal marriages with traditional ceremonies. Historically, Kazakh Muslims enjoy a comparatively better relationship with the Han.[39] However, in November 2017, the Chinese government increased pressure on Kazakhs by detaining and investigating several hundred of them[40] as part of the government's larger crackdown on ethnic minorities.[41] Government officials in Kazakhstan have downplayed this issue and have suggested that a mere 33 Kazakh citizens were detained in camps, 20 of which the Chinese government returned.[42]

It appears that the Uighur community (rather than the Hui or Kazakhs) is the primary domestic constituency and support base for Islamist movements that call for Xinjiang's independence. *Turkistan al-Muslimah*, for instance, publishes articles on government persecution of Uighurs, but does not mention the plight of Hui or Kazakh Muslims in Xinjiang.[43] The magazine publishes only the names of "martyred" Uighurs, and in its first issue, the journal stated its aim as exposing "the real situation of our Muslim nation in East Turkistan, which is living under the occupation of the Communist Chinese."[44]

Islamism and the State

The Chinese state maintains an intricate system of control over its Muslim minorities. The regional Commission on Religious and Ethnic Affairs (CREA) closely monitors China's Islamic educational institutions, which span grades one through 12. Its teachers and clergy are thoroughly vetted by the parallel Islamic Association to ensure they do not harbor extremist ideas or tendencies. In practice, this has created a series of state-sponsored and tightly-controlled religious schools for Chinese Muslims.[45] This has included the underwriting of academic efforts to "reinterpret" Islamic scriptures so that they are more in keeping with Chinese society and values, as well as the promotion of communist ideas and integration among different ethnic groups (namely, the Uighur and the Han, with intermarriage actively encouraged by authorities).

It has also advocated bilingual education (both Uighur and Mandarin) for the region's residents.[46] China currently has 10 Islamic institutes nationwide, the most prominent being the Islamic Institute of Xinjiang in Urumqi. Now some three decades old, the Institute has 450 students and turns out between 40 and 80 graduates per year. As of September 2016, it had graduated roughly 750 alumni, all of whom have gone on to become *imams*, mostly within China.[47]

Currently, curriculum at the facility is 30 percent academic and 70 percent religious (including Quranic recitation, the study of the hadith, and other subjects). The average course of study lasts five years, and students are nominated to attend the institution by their local communities, with candidacies considered by regional authorities to ensure they are in keeping with the larger ideological bent of religious policy.[48]

Funding for the Institute comes from the country's Islamic Association. This investment is part of a strategy to reduce the exposure of local Muslims to radical ideas and teachings. However, China's Muslims are not hermetically sealed off from divergent ideological strains of the religion. Notably, a small minority receives additional religious education abroad at institutions in Libya or Pakistan, or at Egypt's famed Al-Azhar University.[49] That said, according to local Chinese officials and administrators in Xinjiang, China has developed long-term relationships with these intuitions and they have yet to experience adverse consequences from sending students to these schools.[50]

Limits on religious activity abound. Prior to 2009, propaganda and education controls, coupled with an ample security presence, appeared to suppress Islamist activity within China's Muslim communities. However, as previously discussed, in July of 2009, Xinjiang's capital of Urumqi became the site violent clashes between the local Uighur and Han communities – a culmination of months of simmering regional ethnic and communal tensions. The initial demonstrations and armed counter-protests, left more than 150 dead, marking the largest instance of public violence in China since the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.[51]

The government response to the Urumqi riots was sharp and swift. Among its numerous policies, it suspended all text messaging and Internet services in Xinjiang between July 2009 and January 2010.[52] Authorities in Yining "smashed two violence gangs, and arrested more than 70 suspects," according to Jiao Baohua, secretary of the Yining city CPC committee.[53] Since then, thousands of armed police, special police, and public security personnel began patrolling the Uighur sections of Urumqui and carry out raids.[54] The government issued new ordinances calling on local businesses and residents to register guests with the authorities[55] and temporarily restricting travel after dark.[56]

The state also expanded its propaganda efforts, and increased its control over legal and information services. The former included implementing a "political education" campaign to promote "new model citizens with a modern attitude."[57] The latter encompassed new restrictions on—and warnings to—lawyers,[58] as well as death sentences for some rioters and harsh prison sentences for others.[59] Other policies include limits on the length of sermons, prohibitions on prayer in public areas, and outlawing the teaching of the Quran in private. Muslims are now only permitted to attend mosques in their hometowns and government workers are now prevented from attending mosques.[60]

Two of Islam's five pillars—the sacred fasting month of Ramadan and the *Hajj* pilgrimage—are also restricted. Authorities use propaganda and control of passports to compel Muslims to join government-run *Hajj* tours that deliberately reduce exposure to Islamist teachings.[61] The government has also banned fasting during Ramadan,[62] and indicated that parents or guardians who "encourage or force" their children to be religious should be reported to the police. Though China claims to allow religious freedom, minors are not allowed to participate in religious expression, and there have been crackdowns on covert *madrassas*.[63] The Chinese government has applied a variety of other invasive measures to weaken Uighur communities, including explicitly ordering Muslim restaurant and store owners to sell alcohol and cigarettes, and promote them in "eye-catching displays."[64] Xinjiang has even expanded its policies to encompass bans against traditional names and clothing. In 2017, local authorities banned parents from giving their children

names like "Muhammed" and "Medina"[65] and passed a law that bans veils and "abnormal" beards.[66]

In 2014, a massive contingent of 200,000 Communist Party officials visited 8,000 villages in Xinjiang. During visits they worked to establish a vast network of informers designed to keep tabs on villages throughout Xinjiang.[67] Following the uptick in inter-ethnic violence and terror later in 2014, 3,000 former members of the People's Liberation Army were deployed to Xinjiang communities.[68] The following year, the government enacted an anti-terrorism law. The statute requires that telecommunications and internet providers provide "technical and support and assistance including decryption," bans the dissemination of information about terrorist activities and the fabrication of stories about fake terror incidents, and allows the military to conduct counter-terrorism operations overseas.[69]

Xinjiang's security became even tighter after Chen Quanguo became Party Secretary of Xinjiang in August 2016 following his posting in Tibet. In the first half of 2017, Xinjiang spent $6 billion on security there, which included placing police stations every 500 meters within cities.[70] Shop owners have been forced to use their own money to install metal detectors and security cameras in their stores, and citizens report being stopped on the streets and forced to install an app on their phones called "web cleaning soldier," which checks their phones for illicit files.[71] Between February and June 2017, all drivers in the region were required to install a satellite navigation system in their cars that will allow the authorities to track vehicles' whereabouts.[72] Initially, citizens interviewed by foreign reporters in 2017 claimed that these measures made them safer, but also complained about the extra hassle and expense they cause.[73] In 2019, Han residents in Xinjiang began exiting the territory as the pervasive technological surveillance dampened economic growth and opportunity. In the words of one small businessman in Korla, a large metropolis in Xinjiang, "When you go into a shopping centre you have to scan your face, scan your ID, scan your bag, store your bag in a locker. You have to hand over your ID just to buy something."[74]

In the past several years, the government – in the name of counterterrorism and counterextremism – has embarked on a hardline reeducation program designed to transform Muslim ethnic minorities into a population that is largely secular, integrated into mainstream Chinese culture, and compliant with the Communist Party.[75] The program hinges on barbed wire-ringed compounds and factories labeled as "reeducation" camps by the Chinese government. These camps house possibly more than a tenth of Xinjiang's Uighur population, as well as Huis and Kazakhs,[76] the majority of whom pose no violent threat.[77] Estimating the precise number of interned individuals is difficult, but the United Nations announced in August 2018 that China was reeducating 1 million ethnic Uighurs.[78]

In these camps, Muslims are forced to denounce Islam and pledge allegiance to the officially atheist ruling Communist Party.[79] Leaked Chinese government documents published by the *New York Times* reveal that prisoners are assessed on a scoring system that tracks their daily behavior in the camps and their attendance record at ideological sessions.[80] Reasons for arrest and internment run the gamut, from religious reasons like praying or wearing a headscarf, or for having overseas connections to places like Turkey,[81] to supposedly suspect actions like entering one's house through the backdoor.[82] Xinjiang's technological surveillance apparatus feeds these data into the Integrated Joint Operation Platform, an algorithm that, according to Human Rights Watch, "regularly 'pushes' information of interests and lists of names of people of interest to police, Chinese Communist Party, and government officials for further investigation."[83]

According to Uighurs who have escaped the camps, torture is constant and ranges from electric shocks and pulled fingernails to medical experiments and rape.[84] In June 2020, a report from the Jamestown Foundation revealed a systemic campaign organized and executed by PRC officials to reduce the Uighur population in Xinjiang. Methods of population reduction included mandatory sterilization, forced abortion, and compulsory birth control.[85]

Beyond pacifying Muslims within China, officials in Beijing are also focused on the interpersonal and cultural influence of Muslims in neighboring Belt and Road (BRI) partner states, which could further incite "separatism." The economics of BRI and securing trade routes informs the PRC's policy of widescale

Uyghur repression.[86] The PRC also has designs for Xinjiang as a BRI manufacturing hub, and is compelling interned Muslims there into forced labor. According to a report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a think tank in Washington, DC, China "is in the process of significantly increasing textile and apparel manufacturing in the region through a mix of company subsidies and underpaid workers. Xinjiang will then be an export hub for the Belt and Road Initiative."[87]

Endnotes

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