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The Urumchi Unrest Revisited

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The violence in Xinjiang took place almost a month ago, but it continues to generate interesting commentary (see, for example, this thoughtful essay by Pallavi Aiyar). The early July events have also recently had two reverberations in Australia, as Jia Zhangke and two other Chinese filmmakers pulled out of a Melbourne film festival where a documentary expected to present a sympathetic view of one of the people Beijing blames for the unrest was to be shown, and then hackers attacked the festival’s website to protest that film’s inclusion in the line-up. In light of this, we asked James Millward, a leading specialist in the history of Xinjiang who has written about related issues for us before, to share with the readers of China Beat his take on what happened in early July and how it should be understood.

By James Millward

The ugly mob violence that roiled the western Chinese city of Urumchi in Xinjiang on July 5th was rather quickly suppressed, and Urumchi is now quiet. Thanks to an unprecedented degree of openness to the international press, moreover, we have a better idea specifically what happened than we have for other such incidents in China.

Students who are members of the Uyghur minority—a largely Muslim, Turkic-language speaking group who are natives of the Xinjiang region in far northwestern China—demonstrated on Sunday, July 5 to call for a more thorough investigation into a deadly brawl among Uyghur and Han workers that had occurred at a factory in Guangdong province the previous week. The demonstration turned violent, possibly while it was being repressed by security forces, and thousands of Uyghurs went on a rampage, attacking Hans and destroying property. By Monday, July 6, mobs of Han—the majority ethnic group in China—took to the streets armed with clubs, meat-cleavers and other makeshift weapons, seeking revenge. Police eventually calmed the situation with batons, tear-gas, firearms with live ammunition, curfews and mass arrests. At least 192 people died, and some 1000 were injured. Though we know the broad outlines of what happened, why it happened remains in dispute. The official story from the Xinjiang regional and Chinese authorities is that the riot was instigated by Rebiya Kadeer and the World Uyghur Congress, an umbrella group made up of overseas Uyghur organizations in Europe, America and Central Asia that claims to represent Uyghur interests internationally. (A Uyghur economist and outspoken blogger, Ilham Tohti, has also been blamed by Xinjiang authorities for inciting the riot, and has apparently been detained.) The PRC routinely claims that the WUC and Kadeer—a charismatic spokeswoman for the Uyghur cause who enjoys sympathy in the US Congress and EU parliament—is surreptitiously engaged in separatist and even terrorist activity. Some of the commentary in Western media has harkened back to the issue of alleged Uyghur jihadism, involvement with Al Qaeda, and terrorist plots—issues much discussed with regard to the Uyghurs who wound up in Guantanamo.

When it comes to the recent Urumchi riots, however, terrorism and even separatism are red herrings. China’s control over Xinjiang is not threatened by these demonstrators or even the handful of jihadi Uyghurs outside of China who espouse terrorism or militancy. No government internationally has ever challenged the PRC’s sovereignty in Xinjiang or officially sympathized with calls for an independent Eastern Turkestan state. The mainstream Uyghur exile groups—World Uyghur Congress and Rabia Kadeer’s Uyghur American Association among them—do not call for an independent Uyghur or East Turkestan state; rather, these groups lobby for cultural autonomy, legal rights, equal employment opportunity and similar issues—they could not lobby for an independent state without losing their access to members of Western governments or, in the case of Rabia Kadeer’s Uyghur American Association, jeopardizing funding from the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy. But most telling
of all is the fact that the Uyghur students in their initial demonstration marched under the flag of the People’s Republic of China, explicitly sending a non-separatist message of loyal dissent.

What Urumchi experienced was what Americans, recalling our own troubled history, might call a race riot. The reasons underlying it were likewise familiar: mundane prejudice including easy use of racial slurs by both Han and Uyghur about the other; a widespread perception by the minority Uyghurs, with some justification, that the political, legal and economic system, especially job opportunities, are stacked in favor of the majority Hans; and a simple lack of understanding or empathy for the different cultures of fellow citizens.

Diversity in the US is the result of the colonization of North America by northern Europeans, our proximity to parts of the Americas first colonized by Spain, subsequent migration from other parts of the world, and of course the African slave trade. Though China is of continental dimensions and has long been diverse, the most pressing ethnic issues today largely stem from the 17th and 18th century expansion of the Qing empire which brought Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia and Taiwan under Beijing’s rule. Regardless of the different historical background, however, China shares with the US, and, for that matter, with India, Great Britain, France, Canada, Australia, Russia and other large nations, the strengths and challenges of an ethnically diverse population. Economic growth, urban development, political evolution, globalization and other processes can exacerbate tensions among ethnic communities in any country.

The proximate cause of the Urumchi troubles was labor migration, both of Uyghurs from Xinjiang to Guangdong, and of Han from other parts of China to Xinjiang, all associated with China’s super-charged market economy and state program to develop western parts of the country. But the deeper problem is essentially the same as that in any large, modern state: how to incorporate ethno-cultural diversity into the national vision. Chinese official rhetoric and policies in the past—especially in the early 1950s and late 1980s—were directed at this goal, but more recent approaches have too often depicted Uyghurs and Tibetans as ungrateful “others,” and even as threats to security. Both Uyghurs and Han have absorbed this message from state media. It has fueled Uyghur frustration and violence, and instilled in Hans a sense of grievance against minorities, their fellow Chinese.

China faces problems of interethnic tension and civil rights all too familiar to other countries in the world. Chinese leaders could enjoy international sympathy and support should they address these issues directly. But claiming that all ethnic problems at home arise from the conspiracies of exiles or machinations of foreigners will only elicit more international sympathy for Chinese minorities and criticism of China’s human rights record.

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