Islamic Fundamentalism: An Ignored Specter in the Xinjiang Riot

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By Liang Zheng

It’s been three months since the city of Urumqi was plunged into chaos and terror by the deadliest ethnic bloodletting in the history of the People’s Republic. The riot on July 5th this summer erupted right after a mostly peaceful demonstration organized by Uyghur youths in Urumqi called to demand the government thoroughly investigate a brawl in southern China, which had left two Uyghur workers dead and dozens more injured. At that point, no one anticipated the demonstration would be followed by a horrible massacre in Urumqi that took at least 197 innocent lives, most of them members of the Han ethnicity (a group to which the vast majority of PRC citizens belongs). There have been scores of headline-grabbing stories about these events and a variety of different kinds of explanations, but an important dimension of the massacre of Han Chinese—the role that Islamic fundamentalism played in it—has been ignored so far by both the Chinese government and most of those writing for the Western press.

Demonstrations are not uncommon in China today. The country’s breakneck economic growth and rampant corruption involving ignorant and greedy local officials combine to create a breeding ground for local discontent, which usually targets economic marginalization, environmental degradation and acts of official malfeasance. However, attributing the root cause of this violent crime in Urumqi to the same mix of grievances is to miss a crucial part of the real situation on the ground. This misleading generalization also reinforces a simple government versus the people dichotomy (very popular in the West), which neither helps us fully understand the situation in Xinjiang nor contributes to the effort to find meaningful solutions to the problems there.

Xinjiang today is facing the same problems as other provinces, problems generated by the modernization drive that features mass migration of peasant workers, pollution of the environment, and economic marginalization of the socially vulnerable, problems that have been critical ones for China since the 1980s. Uyghurs living in Xinjiang not only have to deal with the downsides of the modernization drive; they also suffer from a systematic discrimination in employment and obstacles placed in the way of practicing Islam. These real issues, too, cause upset among Uyghurs in Xinjiang. As citizens of the PRC, Uyghurs certainly are entitled to speak out, have their voices heard and their concerns addressed. However, the killing of innocent people should not be justified as a way to express discontent or anger. The unfair state policy and the indiscriminate killing of innocent people are matters of entirely different natures, and the loss of innocent lives can’t be justified by any political arguments.

July 5th shocked Urumqi, the most prosperous city in Central Asia. Organized riots broke out at the same time in 50 different places across the city, according to the Chinese police emergency 110. Local residents, who live in apartment buildings along the streets, recorded those bloody moments with their cell phones and cameras. Those images and videos have yet to make it to the world simply because all communications with the outside have been cut off since the riot, especially the Internet. Those who have witnessed violence or watched the video clips taken by surveillance/personal cameras are seriously traumatized and some had to seek counseling to get to sleep. People have to ask who could actually commit such horrific crimes.

One Uyghur interviewee on television suggested that people on the street that day sounded different because they spoke Uyghur with the accents of southern Xinjiang. This suggestion is confirmed by many of my Uyghur friends, who believe that the Uyghurs of Urumqi could never have committed acts like decapitation, throwing pregnant women off overpasses, or setting innocent people on fire, because the Uyghur and Han of Urumqi had lived together peacefully for decades. Another Uyghur interviewee told a reporter that rioters not only beat up and killed Han Chinese, they also behaved in a way that suggests their fundamentalist beliefs when they roughed up Uyghur women merely because those women were wearing skirts and sleeveless shirts.
In an interview with a Hong Kong newsweekly *Yazhou Zhoukan*, Heyrat Niyaz, a Uyghur journalist and AIDS activist from Urumqi, suggested that the terror on July 5th showed the fingerprints of *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, an Islamic fundamentalist organization that is active in Central Asia. As a witness of the violence, Heyrat also notes the strong Kashgar accent of rioters and that they were chanting slogans like "Kill off all Hans" and "We want an Islamic State; we want Sharia Law."

Several days before the riot, many Urumqi taxi drivers also reported a sudden increase of new arrivals from cities in southern Xinjiang like Kashgar and Hotan at the Urumqi transportation center. Round-trip tickets to Urumqi were found in pockets of many detained suspects after the riot, according to local police.

Looking at a map of Central Asia, southern Xinjiang shares a border with Pakistan and Afghanistan, hotbeds of Islamic fundamentalism. Extremists have been trying to infiltrate southern Xinjiang for decades to widen their influence and recruit young operatives. It is highly likely that the disillusioned youths in southern Xinjiang took example from their counterparts across the border. When it comes to the Urumqi riot, this dimension has been downplayed or ignored by both the Chinese government and Western media. As an authoritarian government, the top priority of the Chinese government is to maintain social stability and multi-ethnic unity and in turn its legitimacy. Two days after the deadly riot, the state media was mobilized to propagate stories of how Uyghurs saved Hans from killers and at the same time to ignore the threat of fundamentalism. On the other hand, Western media continued reporting the event as a confrontation between a repressive government and members of an oppressed minority who lost out in a rapidly changing economy. Two months after the riot, the Chinese government is still imposing an information blackout and only letting government-sanctioned stories out, which renders it impossible to know what really happened. The Western media’s own ideological frameworks, coupled with the Chinese government’s information blackouts, illustrate the limits of the international media’s ability to clearly and accurately portray the July events.

Based on some of the indicators I have mentioned above, it does not appear that the vicious killers in Urumqi were local. The indiscriminate killings of Hans (usually non-Muslims), the crimes committed against skirt-wearing Uyghur women, and the appeal for an Islamic state with Sharia Law appear to be messages from fundamentalists. When China is battling against the infiltration of Islamic fundamentalism on its western-most border, the background of this riot is certainly not as simple as "government versus the people", and further investigations are seriously needed to ascertain the role of Islamic fundamentalism in the Urumqi riot. Uncovering such dimensions is critical not just to the security of China but to that of the diverse peoples of Xinjiang, Han and Uyghur alike. As one of my moderate Uyghur friends said at a dinner party, "When they kill off all Hans in Xinjiang, they will come after us."

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