Response to “Islamic Fundamentalism: An Ignored Specter in the Xinjiang Riot”

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China Beat has run several pieces recently on the Xinjiang riots. On October 2, we featured Rian Thum’s “The Ethnicization of Discontent in Xinjiang,” which argued that the riots had raised ethnic tensions in the region. A few days later, we published “Islamic Fundamentalism: An Ignored Specter in the Xinjiang Riot,” written by Liang Zheng. Zheng argued that the foreign media had ignored indications that the riots were instigated by fundamentalists from southern Xinjiang, an argument that preserves the notion of ethnic harmony in Urumqi itself.

Today we run a response to Zheng’s argument from Mark Elliott, Professor of Chinese and Inner Asian History at Harvard University. Further responses may be sent to thechinabeat <AT> gmail.com.

By Mark Elliott

With great interest and no little concern I read the recent post by Liang Zheng (“Islamic Fundamentalism: An Ignored Specter in the Xinjiang Riot,” 6 October), arguing that Islamic fundamentalism is behind the violent protests that took place in Urumqi this past July. If Mr. Zheng’s claims were true, that would indeed be cause for alarm on more than one level. Yet, because this is such a contentious point — dovetailing as it does rather neatly with the government’s line on discontent generally in Xinjiang and the justification given for “striking hard” against Uyghur dissent — the evidence should be examined extremely carefully. As far as I can tell, the evidence presented by Mr. Zheng seems to be little more than hearsay.

Disregarding the argument that Xinjiang’s shared border with Afghanistan and Pakistan is prima facie evidence of fundamentalist influence, the assertions in the post regarding the spread of Islamic extremism to Xinjiang and the July violence are based mainly on the comments of the journalist and blogger Gheyret Niyaz, quoted in an interview in the August 2 issue of Yazhou zhoukan (English translation here). Gheyret says first that during one street protest in Urumqi he heard slogans being shouted for the imposition of Shari’a law and the establishment of an Islamic state. One would like to have independent verification of these claims, and to know whether similar calls were made at other locations. I myself am unaware of any confirmed accounts that this was the case, but perhaps other readers of China Beat have information they can provide? Gheyret goes on to say that since these goals coincide with those of Hizb ut-Tahrir (Islamic Liberation Party, or ILP), that organization must have helped to organize the protests. This seems to be mere inference. As further evidence of this involvement, he points to the fact that the people in the crowd of one hundred he observed that day were all wearing tennis shoes; that “they came together and dispersed in unison, in a highly organized way”; and that they spoke with accents identifying them as coming from Kashgar and Khotan. On this last point he is tentative, since, as he says, “I could not see if they had knives” (!). None of this seems convincing to me as evidence of a link to outside fundamentalist organizations. (A perusal of ILP’s UK website turns up no indication of any special interest in events in Xinjiang or support for the Uyghur cause. Quite the contrary: it approvingly reports the Pakistani president’s praise of the Chinese government’s handling of the unrest.)

It is well known that people often resort to conspiracy as a way of explaining how otherwise inexplicable and terrible events come to pass. That earlier in the same interview Gheyret alleges that Rebiya Kadeer was also involved in helping to organize the protests (this, of course, being another claim made by the government, which so far also lacks independent confirmation) demonstrates, I think, his susceptibility to this very tendency. I will say that I have heard, but cannot confirm, that a broadcast on Radio Free Asia’s Uyghur language service shortly before the violence included remarks by Rebiya that might be characterized as provocative. Even if this were so, it is hardly proof that she or those around her helped organize the protests; indeed, had she been so directly involved, it seems unlikely that she would have taken the trouble to advertise the fact on the radio.

Mr. Zheng also cites local witnesses among his friends and acquaintances to the effect that there were a lot of people from Kashgar (or elsewhere in Altishahr) in Urumqi at the time. I suspect that others
may also have heard these rumors. But as Mr. Zheng must know, there are always many people from
the southern part of Xinjiang in Urumqi at any given time. Who is to say if the number was higher
than usual? Assuming it were, how are we to know whether these people were there in response to a
call from fundamentalist imams to take to the streets, protest the treatment of Uyghur workers in
Guangzhou, and exact a bloody retribution? If many of Urumqi’s Uyghurs deny involvement in the
violence, this is to be expected. For one thing, doubtless relatively few indeed were involved; for
another, it would make sense for them to shift the blame to people from outside (“It wasn’t us!”). All
these considerations encourage skepticism of reports that Urumqi was secretly infiltrated by organized
columns of extremist Kashgarliks in early July.

While Mr. Zheng is doubtless well-informed as to the situation generally in Xinjiang, his observations
on the July unrest as reported in China Beat appear to be based on unconfirmed reports and second-
hand information. He does not seem to have been in Urumqi when the events occurred or to have
witnessed anything firsthand. While the post is largely sympathetic to the plight of Uyghurs, it seems
to me that it serves also as a Trojan horse for a more sinister interpretation of the situation in Xinjiang
and the “danger” there of Islamic fundamentalist influence and terrorism, an interpretation that
ultimately only facilitates government policies of repression.

No one approves the violence, obviously. One can concede the likelihood that there has been some
increase of fundamentalist beliefs in segments of Xinjiang society. But spreading unsubstantiated
stories about the ties of fundamentalist organizations to the July demonstrations adds nothing to our
understanding of events. On the contrary, for the reasons stated here, I see it as quite harmful. In my
view, this post falls short of the usual high standards maintained by China Beat.

Tags: riot, Uyghur, Xinjiang