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The Ethnicization of Discontent in Xinjiang

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By Rian Thum

One of many disturbing long-term effects of the recent violence in Urumqi is an increased ethnicization of anger on all sides. Ethnic tensions are of course nothing new in Xinjiang, and ethnically targeted state policies have long made it difficult to distinguish between anti-government and ethnic discontent, but until now Uyghur resistance has been aimed at the state. The recent Urumqi uprisings represent a significant redirection of anger along more clearly ethnic lines.

The interactions between Uyghur and Han citizens vary with the uneven demography of Xinjiang. In the provincial capital, Urumqi, Uyghurs are a minority. This means that Urumqi Uyghurs frequently encounter intense racism, but also that they deal with the Han in a wide variety of contexts, many quite friendly. Uyghurs in Urumqi often draw clear distinctions between grievances against the Han and the government. However, it is important to remember that most Uyghurs do not lead the daily lives of minorities. In Southwestern Xinjiang, where most Uyghurs live, Uyghurs constitute the majority. In rural Uyghur areas, the sight of a Han person is rare, outside of interactions with officials and police who have been sent from elsewhere to implement state policies. It is not surprising then, that in the traditionally Uyghur areas of Southern Xinjiang, the line between anti-government and anti-Han discontent is thoroughly blurred. When expressing grievances, it is not uncommon for Uyghurs in the South to name the Han (khänzulär), the government (hökümat), or even the Communists (komunistlär) interchangeably as the targets of their anger.



Parade of Han soldiers in Kashgar, with banners promoting ethnic unity

In many ways, the increasing ethnicization of Uyghur grievances is not surprising. A small number of the state policies that anger Uyghurs, such as the ban on religious education before the age of eighteen and strict regulation of speech, technically apply across ethnic boundaries, though they are enforced more vigorously for Uyghurs. However, most of the controversial state policies are, in fact, ethnically defined. Police confiscated the passports of Uyghurs (and not Han) in 2007, and continue to require enormous cash deposits from Uyghurs who want to travel abroad. New educational policies have been announced, and partially implemented, that will force Uyghur children to receive all of their elementary schooling, including subjects like math and science, in the Chinese language, while Han children in Xinjiang have no requirement to learn any minority languages. Although state policies toward Islamic practices among the Hui have loosened up dramatically in recent years, Uyghur Islamic

practices are increasingly circumscribed. In the last ten years, for example, the major shrines of Orda Padishahim (near Yengisar), Khūjā Padishahim (near Yengisar), and Ūjmā (near Khotān) have been closed to worshippers. The hajj has become much more difficult for Uyghurs, while the number of Hui hajjis has skyrocketed. Meanwhile, the two major policies that benefit minorities alone – exceptions to the one-child policy and lower university admission standards for students who did not attend Chinese-language schools – stoke Han resentment. Further complicating ethnic policy is the fact that the powers that design these policies are disproportionately Han, as Uyghurs, who are underrepresented in the ranks of officialdom anyway, tend to occupy lower posts.

Yet somehow, in spite of all the entanglement between ethnic and policy grievances, acts of resistance over the last two decades have been remarkably focused on the government, rather than ethnically specific targets. The initially peaceful anti-government protests that took place in Baren (1990) and Ili (1997) both escalated into clashes with security forces, but no reports of anti-Han actions have emerged. Politically motivated bombings, shootings, and knife attacks over the last two decades have tended to be directed against police stations, party officials (very often Uyghur), and infrastructure. Relatively rare attacks on civilians, such as the Urumqi bus bombings of 1997, have claimed Han and Uyghur victims, at least according to official accounts. The overall pattern of resistance suggests that, until now, mobilized Uyghurs have viewed the government as the primary source of their frustrations.

Thus, the brutal July attacks on Han civilians represent a new form of Uyghur resistance. The causes for this shift are unclear. It is hard to imagine that violence on such a scale can be explained simply as a response to the Shaoguan incident, in which Han factory workers beat to death two Uyghur coworkers near Guangzhou. This is even more doubtful considering that the Urumqi uprising started as a peaceful protest against the government's handling of the Shaoguan incident.



An Uyghur woman reads a poster showing the faces of wanted and captured "criminals," Yarkand
Whatever the reasons for the shift, the ramifications are troubling. Since the uprisings, both Han and Uyghur residents of Urumqi have been carrying out informal boycotts along ethnic lines, showing that some members of both groups continue to act on ethnic animosity in the wake of the violence. However, for each of the two groups, increased ethnicization has different implications. Uyghurs in Urumqi, who were less predisposed to lump the Han and the government into a single enemy, and more skilled at navigating the intersections of Han and Uyghur society, are now more alienated than ever. Urumqi has for decades, if not centuries, been a place where Uyghurs came to

participate in a Han-dominated world, an endeavor which always involved some measure of compromise and even assimilation. Yet there are thousands of Uyghurs who are increasingly recognizing that no matter how well they speak Chinese or how well they toe the party line, they will always be Uyghur. Now more than ever, Urumqi Uyghurs are sensing that they are, by virtue of their ethnicity, suspected as enemies within.

Perhaps more significantly for the future of Xinjiang, the ethnicization of Uyghur discontent has widened the scope of conflict by drawing in the Han population at large. The Han demonstrations that took place in September in Urumqi are the work of a newly disgruntled segment of Xinjiang's population, which had until now remained relatively silent. The state now finds itself confronting two conflicting pressures from its citizens, with Uyghurs demanding greater freedoms, and Han citizens insisting that the violence was a result of government laxity toward the Uyghurs.

The mobilization of both Han and Uyghur ethnic anger also threatens to spread beyond the capital, for if the focus of the trouble was Urumqi, inhabitants throughout Xinjiang have felt the effects. On July 30th, wanted posters appeared in towns throughout the province, promising to bring the "fearsomeness of the dictatorship's power" to bear on anyone involved in the Urumqi uprising. Roadblocks, random searches, and identification checks are now commonplace. For over one month after the uprisings (and likely still today), parades of army trucks full of armed Han soldiers circled the streets of even small towns like Qaghilik (Ch. Yecheng) and Shule (Uyghur: Qāshqār Yengishähär). For the Han they mean security, and for the Uyghurs they represent tightening government controls, but they also advertise to both Han and Uyghurs a continuing state of conflict, which is assumed to involve members of both ethnicities throughout the province.

Worst of all, the ethnicization has made the very policies that could have prevented such violence that much harder for the government to enact. Over the last ten years there have been no signs that either Beijing or the Xinjiang government were considering positive moves like the enforcement of anti-discrimination laws or the elimination of those cultural, speech, and travel restrictions aimed only at Uyghurs. Now such policies seem even more unlikely, as crowds of Han demonstrators demand that their government take a tougher stance against the Uyghurs.

The controversy over the Uyghurs' place in China remains much more than an ethnic conflict. To write it off as simple us-versus-them hatred, a phenomenon viewed in the West as irrational and barbaric, would obscure many legitimate grievances. Unfortunately, though, the ethnic vector of discontent is now an increasingly important feature of Xinjiang's political landscape.

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On Thursday, October 8, Rian Thum and Mark Elliott will each be giving a talk on Xinjiang as part of Harvard University's "New England China Seminars" at the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies. For more information on the event, [click here](#).

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