

China: Assimilating or radicalising Uighurs?

The Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR), a restive province in China's western periphery, is populated in almost equal proportions by Turkic-speaking Uighurs and Mandarin-speaking Han Chinese. The Uighurs, who are predominantly Muslim, call the region East Turkestan. Since October 2013, when China witnessed its first [terrorist suicide car attack](#) on Beijing's Tiananmen Square, for which the [East Turkestan Islamic Movement](#) claimed responsibility, the province has been haunted by a series of deadly assaults. Beijing has responded with its version of the 'war on terror' and the reinforcement of a range of policies aimed at 'better assimilating Uighurs into the mainstream Chinese society'.

Battling the 'three evil forces': religious extremism, separatism and terrorism

Faced with a rising number of terrorist attacks associated with Uighur separatism and religious extremism in Xinjiang, in May 2014, the Chinese leadership revisited its [2010 strategy](#) for Xinjiang at the Second Xinjiang Work Forum. It undertook a major strategy shift, moving from considering '[leapfrog development](#)' as a panacea for the region's ethnic conflicts, towards a focus on security and stability, and a new policy of '[ethnic mingling](#)'. A year-long '[people's war against terrorism](#)' was [launched](#), which requires '[ultra-tough measures and unconventional means](#)', and *inter alia* involves strengthening the police and military presence in the region, including with the deployment of surveillance [drones](#).

The crackdown on terrorism also comprises the strict and rapid enforcement of Chinese criminal law. In May 2014, a [public mass sentencing](#) of 55 terrorist suspects in a Xinjiang sports stadium attended by thousands of citizens showcased Beijing's resolve to combat terrorism with a firm hand. This event and other measures have given rise to [concerns](#) about the denial of due process. In [June](#) and [August 2014](#) several persons sentenced to death for charges of terrorism were executed. But, Beijing's battle against 'the three evil forces' is not limited to violent acts but also targets dissent and advocacy for Uighur rights and freedoms.

In July 2014, [Ilham Tohti](#), a Uighur economics professor, was [indicted](#) for separatism by a court in Xinjiang. Six months after he was detained in Beijing, he was accused of using his website to incite violence, separatism and hatred between Han and Uighur people. His [lawyers](#) have raised concerns about the authorities' secrecy in handling the matter and the denial of access to the lawyer hired by his family. [Supporters](#), who assert that he has not advocated Xinjiang's independence, claim that he was indicted in retaliation for his outspokenness about inappropriate government policies. On 23 September 2014, he was [sentenced](#) to life in prison for separatism.

The case has sparked criticism from the international community, notably from [Amnesty International](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#). On 4 August 2014, the Council of the EU issued a [statement](#) calling on China to release Ilham Tohti without delay and ensure full respect for his rights and freedoms.

Amid the on-going extensive security crackdown on Xinjiang's Muslim population, long-standing [restrictions](#) on the practice of religion by civil servants, teachers and students have been enforced more strictly in various places in 2014 than in previous years. In line with the [Chinese Communist Party's](#) official atheist stance, the prohibiting on fasting in Ramadan is allegedly designed to prevent the use of schools and government offices for promoting religion, and has usually been presented as a [health issue](#). In practice, authorities are said to be visiting Uighur families, offering them food and drink and then staying to watch them eat. In case of refusal they are accused of '[illegal fasting](#)'.

Beards and veils are perceived more and more as a sign of religious extremism and defiance of Chinese rule. Turpan prefecture is even considering a [law](#) to impose fines for wearing veils and cloaks. In Shayar county, [tip-offs](#) to the authorities on local residents exhibiting one of [53 proscribed behaviours](#), attract financial

rewards. The [Uighur-American Association](#) considers that such policies violate the preferential treatment Beijing has granted its ethnic and religious minorities, *inter alia* in [Article 4](#) of the 1982 Constitution. Some [commentators](#) warn of the growing difficulties with the situation in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, even suggesting it could become China's Chechnya.

Ethnic and linguistic assimilation policies underlying Uighur grievances

For decades, [massive in-migration](#) of Han Chinese to Xinjiang has been [incentivised](#) by Beijing, to pacify local unrest and to develop the economically backward region, which is richly endowed with minerals and oil. Since [2006](#), poor Uighur peasants have been encouraged to move to China's south, to earn their living as [migrant workers](#) in labour-intensive factories. In 1949, Uighurs made up the majority of the Xinjiang population, while Han Chinese accounted for only [6%](#). A [2010 census](#) shows that Han Chinese (41%) now almost equal Uighurs in number (43%). This demographic change has exacerbated ethnic tensions. Uighurs feel that they have increasingly been marginalised in XUAR, with competition with Han Chinese for jobs being marked by widespread [discriminatory](#) recruitment and employment practices. These have been mitigated in the public sector through affirmative action policies, in the form of [quotas](#) for Uighurs.

A 2012 [study](#) shows that in non-state sectors, Uighur workers earn 52% less than Han workers. The paper concludes that large disparities in income and in terms of job opportunities, in both private and public sectors, are a major source of ethnic resentment. These findings have been corroborated by recent [academic research](#) which reveals that the huge [income disparities](#) between Uighurs and Hans persist, regardless of education and work experience. This suggests that the existing discrimination can to a great extent be attributed to ethnicity. Although the region's economy has grown at double-digit pace, ethnic inequalities have constantly deepened, as economic [benefits](#) have mainly profited urban Han Chinese located in northern Xinjiang and mainly engaged in industry and services, rather than rural Uighurs in the south, among whom – contrary to the general trend – the [proportion of farmers](#) grew between 2000 and 2010.

In an effort to defuse ethnic tensions with material incentives, a new trial programme promoting [inter-ethnic marriages](#) was launched in Qiemo county in August 2014. It offers annual cash payments of RMB 10 000 (about €1 250) for five years to newly married couples of different ethnicities, as well as housing, healthcare and education subsidies. At the same time, the [new family planning policy](#) for southern Xinjiang aims to curb Uighur family size by enforcing the one-child policy, ending the rule that urban Uighurs are [allowed](#) to have two children and rural Uighurs three. [Urbanisation](#) is seen as another way of stamping out religious extremism. Several cities will be rebuilt from scratch and transformed into 'major poles of growth'.

An increasingly monolingual, Mandarin-dominated education system

As a consequence of the intensive Han influx and the growing significance of Mandarin within and outside the province, in comparison to the Uighur language, Xinjiang's education system has profoundly changed. Despite considerable [achievements](#) in universal education and [affirmative action](#) for Uighur students, the Munich-based [World Uighur Congress](#) argues that the evolution from a multilingual towards an increasingly monolingual education system is gradually eroding Uighur linguistic distinctiveness.

In 2002, the largest university in Xinjiang ceased to teach courses in Uighur and a bilingual education policy introduced Mandarin as the main language of instruction in primary, middle and high schools. The Uighur language was declared '[out of step with the 21st century](#)'. Currently, there are [three types](#) of schools where Mandarin is predominant: Han schools, minority schools and '[joint minority Han schools](#)'. Many Uighur teachers have [lost](#) their jobs to Han teachers, since they failed the Mandarin proficiency tests. Three [intellectuals](#), who in 2012 established a Uighur language nursery school in Xinjiang, were arrested in August 2013 for [illegally accepting donations](#). Recently, one of them, Abduweli Ayup, was [sentenced](#) to 18 months imprisonment.

In its [resolution](#) of 14 March 2013 on EU-China relations, the European Parliament 'took note of the significant efforts made by the Chinese Government to develop (...) Xinjiang economically, and the impact of those efforts on nomad communities and traditional livelihoods'. However, it urged the Chinese Government to involve Uighurs 'in governance issues, including resource management and economic development priorities', and to respect rather than dilute 'cultural elements such as language and religion'. It asserted that 'the Chinese Government will not achieve lasting stability in (...) Xinjiang (...) through forcible assimilation, cultural destruction or repressive police and security methods, but only by seriously addressing all indigenous complaints in order to create genuinely shared responsibility for the well-being of [the] "autonomous" [province]'.