



Human Rights in China

Uyghurs of East Turkestan



Uyghur people are indigenous to East Turkestan (Xinjiang).

The Uyghurs are a people of Turkic descent living in East Turkestan (current-day Xinjiang region, China). Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Uyghurs, like all other Chinese citizens, have undergone numerous forms of oppression.



In addition, as a result of Mao Zedong's "cultural revolution" and China's subsequent assimilationist policies, Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities were subject to targeted cultural suppression. Like in neighboring Tibet, where Chinese authorities designate Buddhist clerics, East Turkestan's Imams are chosen by representatives of the Chinese communist party. In spite of laws theoretically granting the eight million Uyghurs a right to have media and higher education in their language, they have become second class citizens and are not allowed to celebrate their traditional holidays (the ceremonies of Newruz – the Uyghur new year – or the age-old Meshrep festivals).

Like in Tibet, the central government has implemented – over the past decades – a policy of ethnic dilution, bringing millions of ethnic Hans to East Turkestan. Although countless reports of the United Nations and human rights NGOs have denounced systematic human rights violations in the region, the situation of Xinjiang's Uyghurs is still often overlooked.

Freedom of Religion

Religion under control. In China, Imams, Lamas and Catholic clerics are 'approved' by Chinese authorities. A majority of Uyghurs are Muslims. Despite the provisions of [article 36](#) of the Chinese constitution granting freedom of religion to all Chinese citizens, religious manifestations are strictly controlled. In his report after a visit to China in 1994, the United Nations Special Rapporteur of Freedom of Religion underlined the fact that the right to manifest one's beliefs was not guaranteed there. Since 1994, despite numerous requests, the new Rapporteur has not been granted a visa to China. University students are openly forbidden to fast during the month of Ramadan or to show any pious behaviour ([Human Rights Watch report on Xinjiang, Oct. 2001](#)). The content of the Friday sermon is kept under strict scrutiny by Chinese authorities who validate all quotes and interpretations of the Quran in advance. The authorities decide upon the legitimacy of religious groups, taking into account various criteria, among which: July 2005, the Xinjiang's Yili Autonomous Prefecture decided to ban the Sala Sufi branch of Islam and detained and fined 179 followers ([Human Rights Watch, China: A Year After New Regulations, Religious Rights Still Restricted, 01 March 2006](#)). Numerous reports also point to mandatory political training to the few Uyghurs Muslims who get 'approved' to put to practice their faith, such as the undertaking of the Hajj pilgrimage.

Hajj ban. Until this summer, Chinese Muslims over 40 were eligible to apply for passports to go on the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the five fundamental duties for all Muslims) but in June 2007, all passports were confiscated and Xinjiang authorities announced that only a small delegation of selected Muslims would be allowed to go to Mecca ([Human Rights Watch, China: A Year After New Regulations, Religious Rights Still Restricted, 01 March 2006](#)). Pursuant to the 2004 [Regulations on Religious Affairs](#), overseas pilgrimages to Mecca require a state authorization (Art. 43) and must be organized by the state-monitored national religious body of Islam (Art. 11).

Cultural Rights

Forbidden traditions. Pursuant to Article 4 of the Chinese Constitution, Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities should theoretically enjoy the right to "use and develop their own spoken and written languages, and to preserve or reform their own ways and customs". This provision is reiterated in the famed – and yet-to-be-applied – 1984 Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law (Art. 10). Yet Uyghurs are not allowed to celebrate their Newruz (Uyghur new year) and traditional Meshreps (cultural festivals) have been outlawed in 1994.

Endangered language. Uyghur language (a Turkic language closely related to Uzbek) is taught as a second language in primary and secondary schools but scarcely used as Uyghurs are forced to use Chinese. According to the Human Rights Council resolution 60/251 from the UN General Assembly of June 2006, 70% of schools in East Turkestan are taught in Chinese. Uyghur was also used as a language of instruction at Xinjiang University until 2002 when the government decided that the majority of courses should be in Chinese. The destruction of thousands of Uyghur books by Chinese authorities is another illustration of an intention to undermine Uyghur culture ([Uyghur Language and Culture under Threat in Xinjiang](#), Michael Dillon, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst, 14 August 2002). Moreover, the aforementioned restrictions upon religious practice also have a direct impact on the transmission of the Uyghur cultural heritage.

Freedom of Expression

State-controlled press. Despite the [Chinese Constitution](#)'s provision that "[c]itizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, of the press" (Art. 35), the press is under total control of the authorities. Like all Chinese citizens, Uyghurs are subject to organized censorship, as illustrated by the warning addressed by Xinjiang Party Committee Secretary Mr. Wang Lequan to journalists: "our media absolutely does not allow any noise that counteracts the party's voice" and underlining that "journalists should remember the principle of news reports serving the party and socialism" ([Human Rights Watch report on Xinjiang](#), Oct. 2001).

Control on communication with the outside world. A BBC crew that entered Yining (Ghulja city) on 9 April 1997 shortly after the Ghulja massacre of February 1997 was detained and held for ten days before being expelled to Pakistan. Officials confiscated all materials including video tapes. Crew members had managed to interview some residents, and there were reports that after the expulsion, police made a "large number" of arrests ("Confiscated Materials of the BBC Crew Could Lead to More Arrests," WUNN News posting, 29 April, 1997).

In 2006, Reuters reported that in 2005 alone, thousands of Uyghurs were arrested. Amongst the arrested are scholars (such as Tohti Tunyaz), writers (such as Nurmammed Yasin) and journalists and editors (such as Abdulgani Memetemin and Koresh Huseyin)

On May 30, 2006, three adult children of Rebiya Kadeer, the famous emblematic figure of the Uyghur community, were arrested in Xinjiang to try to prevent them from meeting with a team carrying out a fact-finding in the region for the United States Congressional Human Rights Caucus. Two of them were severely beaten by police officers and have since been detained incommunicado (Human Rights Without Frontiers, hearing at the European Parliament, July 2006).

In an Aug. 2007 report entitled "You will be harassed and detained", Human Rights Watch explained that besides the fact that "the Chinese government maintains a stranglehold on the activities of domestic journalists", it failed to respect its commitment to enable foreign journalists to work freely and subjects them to "harassment, detention, and intimidation". In their 2007 Annual Report, Reporters Without Borders deplored China's "great wall of sound" designed to jam foreign radio stations.

(Further background material: [US Department of State report on Freedom of Religion in China 2002](#))

Communication submitted by:

UNPO (Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization)

Stichting Oost-Turkistan Nederland