



UIGHURS IN XINJIANG: ECONOMIC DISCRIMINATION AND POLITICAL REPRESSION

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the political economy of systematic discrimination of Uighurs in Xinjiang, the Turkish minority in the province by the Chinese Communist Party. The various economic projects like the Western Development Program (WDP) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) further exacerbated the alienation of the ethnic minority. Through such programs, the Chinese government encouraged the Han population to Migrate into Xinjiang, and 'hanification' of the province culminated in widening the inequality and relative deprivation of the Uighurs. The tensions after the new development projects increased the secessionist and national tendencies among them. During the covid-19 outbreak, the government intensified the repressive measures, and the question of Uighurs in economic terms remains unresolved.

KEYWORDS : Uighurs, Xinjiang, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Western Development Program (WDP), Covid-19.

INTRODUCTION

Uighurs in China has been the central point of minority discourse in the world. The western block alleges the Chinese government committing an unprecedented human rights violation against the ethnic minority and persecutes them in detention centres. Discriminations against Uighurs after the coronavirus outbreak has outraged the public anger against the Chinese government and many human rights organisation has publicly expressed their concerns regarding the protection of fundamental human rights of Uighurs.

DISCRIMINATION OF UIGHURS.

The phrase 'tyranny of the majority' coined by J S Mill is well understood that minorities in a political community may be discriminated in various grounds. Such discrimination could be manifested, particularly in terms of goods and services, in order to obstruct their mobilisation, and the government will impose assimilation projects justified and implemented on the pretext of security rhetoric.¹ Moreover, alienation of the minorities from the labour market will negatively impact their welfare wherein the majority population tend to get employments very quickly, and their counterparts from the minority communities experience high unemployment and systematic discrimination in availing other welfare programs from the government. Identity-based strategies in the job market further widen the communication gap and peaceful co-existence between the majority and minority groups hence sustain communal tensions.

The Uighurs in China, who are highly concentrated in Xinjiang province, face such discrimination from the government of China. Development projects implemented in the region further worsened the situations as it created pessimism following the subsequent in-migration of the Han population to the western province. Apart from the fear of the demographic change in the wake of mass influx, the job market's unfairness, particularly in the state sector, fuelled the secessionist aspirations among the Uighurs.²

I discuss the economic discrimination of Uighurs with reference to the major Western Development Program and the reforms in the state sector. I argue that new projects under the government barely helped the Uighurs avail themselves decent jobs and enhance economic prosperity but led them to more insecurity after the Hans population flowed into Xinjiang. As Xinjiang is geopolitically crucial for RBI and WDP programs, the rhetoric of economic prosperity and the integration of Uighurs reverberate the systemic efforts of the government to change the demography of the region with more Hans migration and suppress the separatism in the pretext of the potential influence of the terrorist organisation in Central Asia and the Middle East.

HANIFICATION IN XINJIANG

Xinjiang province is divided into two parts, south and north. Uighurs are concentrated heavily in the southern part, whereas the north is inhabited by different populations, including Russians, Hans, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, Mongolians, etc. At the earliest stage of the Peoples Republic, Hans settled in an immense amount in the northern portion, which subsequently became a Han dominated area. Urumqi, the province's capital city, became almost a city of Hans thanks to the internal migration. Similarly, the cities in the southern part, for instance, Khotan and Kashgar, witnessed the Han population's influx while the tensions among Uighurs soared. Nationalists among the community called it demographic genocide and ethnic swamping.³

Uighur population in Xinjiang was 80 per cent in 1949. However, in 2000 their number shrunk to 50 per cent mainly because of the migration. Currently, the exact population of Uighurs is twenty million, and Hans is equal in number. The turnaround in the population after a long period of dominance by Uighurs concerned the community and badly damaged the autonomous region. The fear of being out-populated, intertwined with the anger at the communist regime after a systematic deprivation from the economic opportunities, culminated in the separatist agitation. As a response to the agitation, the Chinese government launched a crackdown in the name of 'Strike Hard Severe Repression', which followed by a campaign to build a wall against the separatist. The repressive policy was added to the WDP program, and religious activities connected to the separatism though the separatist movement was not religious in character. Today, the Chinese authority does not tolerate any separate activity and tends to suppress dissent with an iron fist.⁴

Xinjiang is not the first region in China wherein the Han migration was promoted by the government. The regime also targets Tibet due to the uprisings against the government. Tibet also witnessed the large influx of the Han population, and the ethnic minorities in Tibet were marginalised by the former. In contrast with Uighurs, Tibetans are poorer and undereducated with inadequate job opportunities in the job market. The railway construction in Tibet connecting the region with Beijing sparked the fear among the people that new connectivity will help the Han population increase their migration and dilute the population.

The demographic swamping by hands less likely to weaken the Uighurs separatism but will keep their discontent unabated. The tension is confined to the demographic discourse and rooted in economic dimensions, especially in the formal sector, where the discrimination in the ground of identity is normalised and perpetuated by the state machinery.

However, the separatist movement may lose momentum after the influx of the Han population. As Uighurs are outnumbered by the people coming from outside, the population's mobilisation will not be very easy, and not surprisingly, they are pushed out of economic opportunities. The ethnic population is scattered in Xinjiang and not concentrated in one locality. Furthermore, the government has shown no sign of mercy in dealing with and suppressing the Uighur, splitism, by imposing the death penalty and other repressive actions. The economic impoverishment and hopelessness caused many anti-social activities among Uighurs, like addiction to the drug that is oversupplied in the border of Afghanistan.

Western Development Program

The communist party in china presented the program in the western part of the country to create more jobs and alleviate the region's economic disparities. The program resulted in exacerbating the economic tension among Uighur as it benefitted exclusively for Han, and the former's discontent was increased.⁵ As part of the project, the communist regime encouraged people to migrate to the province and have decent jobs, where the Uighurs became underrepresented in the job market. The larger chunk of the community was underqualified and inadequately educated to grab a good waged job. The government exploited such rhetoric of backwardness and the absence of a skilled workforce as a tool to overcome the sponsored flow of migration.

In terms of investment, the government paid money mainly for the big urban projects, which culminated in the concentration investment favouring the Han dominated cities and alienation of Uighurs who used to live in small localities. New economic developments led them to a vicious circle where poverty and other derivations increased; instead, the fear of demography by Han migration worsened the situation. It led to relative deprivation and obstructed their capacity to engage actively in new economic opportunities and benefit out of them. Chinese bureaucracy discriminated against Uighurs and other minorities in giving permits which are required to start a business and avail bank loan, which in contrast, Hans received without any delay.

After the tremendous western Development Drive, GDP in Xinjiang substantially increased, which has crossed more than 836 billion RMB. The development program was mainly focused on oil and cotton industries known as 'One Black One White'. Other provinces in china depended extensively on exports while the economy of the province relied on natural resources. Half of the fiscal revenues come from oil and gas exploitation, but four-fifth of the jobs in construction and other industries like transport, science and technology, communication is dominantly grabbed by the Han population.

The apprehension about the demographic change orchestrated by the Chinese government has tremendously increased among Uighurs. By the constant migrating of Han from eastern parts of the country, ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, particularly Uighurs, fear that they will be outnumbered by the former. However, the Chinese government claims that the new development program will help eliminate the nationalist objectives of the minority, and they will be assimilated into the Chinese culture. Rather, such expectations are likely less to happen because the region's current developments do not favour the government. Uighurs believe that the new project is implemented to alienate and discriminate them further and exclusively designed to promote Han migration to the region.

There is no clear evidence that Uighurs will become more loyal to the government by achieving economic prosperity because their nationalist aspirations are not merely based on economic terms but other factors, including socio-cultural difference and demand for historical injustice. The nationalist sentiment among Uighurs is intense, and the government has

to build trust among the community and find more robust ways of making them participate openly in the domestic economy and shun the communal tension.

Economic Discrimination

The government in China has advocated its commitment to protect the minority and preserve their culture and heritage. Motivated by the socialist ideology and equality, the government has tirelessly put many efforts into territorial integration and harmony within ethnic groups. It is notable that when Urumchi was industrialised, the government allocated ethnic quotas in a large number of factories. Also, the universities reserved seats for minorities, and the representation of Uyghurs in the state sector was between 10 to 20 per cent, which was quite impressive. The Peoples Republic of China has taken many initiatives to mitigate the economic disparities among minorities. In 1978, the Chinese Communist Party initiated market reforms to promote the market economy and excessively downsized the state sector's labour force⁶.

However, after 1978 the ethnic disparity in the state sector with reference to the discrimination in schooling began to emerge. The education gap between Han and other minorities, mainly Uyghurs, significantly widened thanks to the market reformation. The reformation demanded efficiency and performance with high skilled labours, and it favoured Han at the expense of minorities, particularly Uyghurs. Moreover, when it comes to the workforce's downsizing and layoff, managers targeted minority labours. The minority students who graduated from universities remained jobless. In contrast, Han students from local colleges could get the job quickly. the government support intensified the systemic discrimination of Uighurs because Xinjiang is the most state-centred state due to the geopolitical importance and economic resources⁷.

Lack of efficiency is a pretext to discriminate against Uighurs as there is a prejudiced identification that the minority community is less productive vis a vis Han. The Chinese government identifies Han as the model of civilisation, where the minorities like Uighurs presented with the rhetoric of backwardness. Such fake and baseless pre-assumptions deepened in the labour market; even the minorities, to some extent, internalised the inferiority. Interestingly, membership in CCP can increase one's chance to be employed in the state sector. An Uyghur without membership in CCP is 292 per cent more likely to work than a non-CCP counterpart and 574 per cent more expected to do a job in government agencies⁸. Also, a graduated from the Uighur community in formal schooling is more favourable as compared to Han to get a job in the public sector. The myth of the average productivity of a Uighur as compared to Han favours the latter in the state sector. As the market transforms as more competitive, the need for efficient workers rise. Such prevalent belief perpetuates the secessionist tendencies among Uyghurs and widens the discrimination in the job market.

Belt and Road Initiative and Covid - 19

Xinjiang is geopolitically a crucial region as four Belt and Road initiative routes are going through it. Moreover, it is the only province in China that connects Beijing with the countries in Central Asia and the middle east. China Pakistan economic corridor is a significant route in BRI which is going through Kashgar city. The city is a religiously significant place for Uighurs and known as the spiritual heart of the community. Chinas ambitious BRI thus collide with the religious sentiments of the Uighurs, and the government made Kashgar a special economic zone.

The city's investment projects increase the alienation of the Uyghurs; rather, the ethnic minority became more vulnerable when the government intensified the crackdown. CCP alleges that the new project may lead Uyghurs to get exposed to the

terrorist organisations in Central Asia. When China launched BRI in Xinjiang, East Turkistan Islamic Party threatened the government to conquer the region and later, by claiming that Xinjiang is an integral part of the Islamic central Asia, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria also intimidated Beijing. After receiving threats from the external terrorist organisations, the government launched reeducating the Muslim minorities to enhance national aspirations and eliminate the influence of the external terrorist organisations.

The BRI will create a favourable condition and immense support for the Chinese government from the different countries in world politics, with no exception of Muslim countries. After the pandemic, the BRI project countries have failed to pay back the funds to China, where the latter also was unable to give the fund for the investment project to the participatory countries in due time. Such a financial crisis also implied diluting the criticisms from the respective political leaders. As these countries benefit from China's investments, they are not willing to criticise china openly against discriminating against Uighurs. The political leaders from the Muslim countries who are vocal against the regimes that unfairly treats Muslims in different parts of the world are selectively silent on the Chinese repression of Uighurs.

The crisis after the Covid-19 pandemic has exploited by the government as a shield to suppress the Uyghurs internally. The Chinese government used the Uyghur labour force to make up for the loss caused by the outbreak. The workers from the ethnic group were forced to work in the factories after regular workers' evacuation.⁹ In many parts of the province, Uighurs were forced to resume their work even at the peak of the outbreak. Moreover, religious persecution and human rights violation continued with more intensity. The mosques were shut down forcibly, and despite everything was brought under control, the restrictions imposed during the pandemic not lifted accordingly. BRI has helped china to maximise the oppression during the lockdown and make silent the voices.

CONCLUSION

The major challenge for the Chinese government is to address the terrorist attacks in Xinjiang. Promoting a well shared economic prosperity is the first remedial step to alleviate the grievances of Uighur. However, the unsustainable natural resource is the backbone of the economy of the province. A more inclusive economic policy may not help in reducing the separatist activities because the demographic tension is also paramount for Uighurs. For the Chinese government, it is crucial to integrate the region into Chinese nationalism and assimilate the Uighur minorities into the mainstream culture. For Uighurs, such assimilation is conflated as the identity crisis and suppressing their cultural and linguistic heritage. China has to take sufficient remedial policies to eliminate the growing tension among Uighurs and act accordingly to integrate them into the mainstream economy at the earliest. As natural resources are not sustainable, the Chinese province may witness uncertainties in the future. An alternative economic policy with an inclusive implementation might bring peace to the region. Otherwise, the Uighurs' apprehension will rise, and the relative deprivation may result in a more chaotic atmosphere where the ethnic community could be exploited by other international actors making the problem more complicated.

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