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Causes and Ramifications of the Xinjiang July 2009 Disturbances

Colin Mackerras^a

Abstract

In July 2009, serious ethnic disturbances took place in Ürümqi, the capital of Xinjiang, in China's north-west. Although open to diverse interpretations, they embodied serious conflicts between the Uighurs—the most populous ethnic group of Xinjiang—and China's dominant Han nationality. This article seeks to identify the causes of the disturbances, including both those internal to China and those external to it, both short-term and long-term. The issue is important, because Chinese official sources largely blamed outside terrorist and extremist forces, especially those associated with the main Uighur diaspora organizations, while the Uighur diaspora itself, largely supported by Western journalists and scholars, put the responsibility on the Chinese state, charging it with injustices against the Uighurs. This article contributes to the literature by finding both internal and external contributing factors. It also looks at the ramifications of the disturbances, including both the aftermath of the incidents and prospects for the future, and adopts a fairly pessimistic stance concerning short-term ethnic relations. The methodology is textual analysis and personal experience.

Keywords

Xinjiang (China), Uighurs, Ürümqi, 2009 riots (causes), Uighur-Han conflict

Xinjiang is a multiethnic province-level region in North-western China. The most populous ethnic group is the Uighurs¹, who are Turkic and Muslim, but there has been significant immigration from China's dominant group—the Han. Ethnic relations are tense and there have been occasional separatist movements and disturbances among the Uighurs since 1990. However, the Chinese state is dedicated to national unity, which means strong opposition to any hint of separatism.

In July 2009, serious ethnic rioting erupted in the Xinjiang's capital Ürümqi. The main incident was Uighur against Han ethnic rioting on July 5, 2009 but two days later, Han counterattacked against Uighurs. This article's principal aim is to analyze the causes of these riots, as well as some of the effects and other ramifications.

As a beginning, it is necessary to summarize briefly what precisely happened. The initial part of the July 5 Incident was a peaceful demonstration, but it turned violent and led to the worst ethnic rioting in China for many decades, and possibly in the whole history of the People's Republic of China since 1949. According to official Chinese figures, the final death toll was 197, with over 1,600 injured. Among the dead, 156 were termed "civilians," and among these 134 were Han, 11 Hui (Sinic Muslims), 10 Uighurs and one Manchu (Xinhua 2009). Uighur diaspora sources

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put the death toll far higher; for instance, the World Uyghur Congress estimated that the Chinese paramilitary police killed about 800 young Uyghurs (World Uyghur Congress 2009; Human Rights Watch 2009: 13; Uyghur Human Rights Project 2010: 26-32).

As can be seen from the accounts of casualties, the disturbances were extremely controversial. Spokespeople for the Chinese government and Uyghur diaspora gave very different accounts, each side blaming the other for what had happened. This paper argues that causes both internal and external to China and Xinjiang are at play, and that it is misleading to emphasize one at the expense of the other.

The main internal causes were: (1) a tragic incident in Shaoguan, Guangdong Province, involving tense Han-Uyghur relations; (2) long-term Sinicization of cities in Xinjiang and Han immigration there; (3) serious Han-Uyghur social and economic inequalities favouring the dominant Han people; and (4) political suspicion toward Uyghur culture, notably by the Xinjiang leader Wang Lequan, driven by a realistic but exaggerated and obsessive fear of separatism. Anti-Chinese terrorism, largely stirred up from outside China and aimed at separating Xinjiang from China, was also an important cause.

As for sources, these include the works of major scholars in the area, newspaper reports, official documents from the point of view of the Chinese state, the Uyghur diaspora, and personal experience in Xinjiang, especially in 2007 and 2010. The methodology is textual analysis and experiences gained personally in the region. Full objectivity is not possible, especially in circumstances where people hold very deep-seated feelings, but the author aims to be balanced and fair.

BACKGROUND

Information about the context of the riots is necessary as the background. In area Xinjiang is the largest province-level unit in China. At about three times the

size of France, it takes up about one-sixth the total area of China. The topography is largely desert and mountains, the great Taklamakan Desert being among the largest in the world. There are many oases, and especially in the north, some pastoral land. The economy is based on oil, cotton, agriculture, and nomadic pastures. It has grown very rapidly in recent years and the GDP per capita in the first half of 2012 was about US\$3,750.²

Another matter relating to context is population. Since 1949, when the People's Republic of China was established, the demographics of Xinjiang have changed significantly. According to the 1953 census, the Han were only seven percent of all Xinjiang's people. However, in 1954, the government established the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps from almost entirely Han demobilized troops, with the aims to develop the economy and to promote internal security. From the late 1950s, an increasing number of Han youth were sent to Xinjiang. The 1964 census showed the Han proportion in Xinjiang rising to just under 32 percent and that of 1982 to 40.41 percent. (Mackerras 1994: 125, 253). Since that time, the Han proportion has stabilized. The 2010 census had the total population of Xinjiang at 21,813,334, of whom 10.09 million or 46.24 percent were Uyghurs, 8.75 million or 40.1 percent were Han, 1.53 million or 7.02 percent Kazaks, and 990,300 or 4.54 percent Hui (World Bank Loan 2011).

It is also useful as the background to summarize some recent history. In terms of ethnic disturbances, there has been a series in Xinjiang over the past decades. A particularly serious outburst came in April 1990 in Baren Township in the southwest of Xinjiang, when an uprising based on the Islamist theory of the holy war took place. Following this incident the 1990s turned out to be the most volatile decade in the recent history of Xinjiang by far.³ The many reasons for this worsening of the situation included the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, which altered the strategic architecture of the region significantly. In the

first decade of the twenty-first century, the situation appeared to stabilize substantially and the Chinese were able to take advantage of some American and United Nations support for cracking down on Islamist-based violence due to the war on terrorism, which began late in 2001. In 2002 both the US and the UN accepted China's claim that a body called the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) should be classified as terrorist. Later the US State Department offered some financial support to Uighur diaspora resistance to China through its National Endowment for Democracy. For Chinese authorities, this support was treacherous and hypocritical, but the sums of money involved have not been enormous up to now.

The 1990 Baren Township uprising mentioned in the preceding paragraph both reflected poor ethnic relations in Xinjiang, and exacerbated them. The introduction of reform policies all over China introduced at the end of the 1970s was resulting in enhanced competition. Although this brought about spectacular economic growth and improved standards of living in China, it also increased disparities and social tensions, which in Xinjiang included an important ethnic dimension. The disturbances of the 1990s reflected a declining relationship between the Uighurs and the Han that went together with the tensions brought about by the reform policies. There is already a significant literature on ethnic relations in Xinjiang during this period (Smith 2002). One of the world's leading specialists on Xinjiang has written about the topic in the twenty-first century (Millward 2007: 348): "If the sporadic violent episodes of the 1990s seemed to have tapered off by the 2000s, personal relations between ethnic groups, particularly between Uyghur and Han, were if anything more tense than at the start of the decade."

As the final background issue bearing on the causes of the disturbances, the extent to which they were organized might be mentioned. One school of thought contended that they were largely spontaneous⁴ and a reaction against Chinese repression and

callousness. However, the Chinese government insisted all along that the riots were very well-organized, especially by separatists and other people who wished to disturb the situation in China, and could not have happened without planning (Bovingdon 2010: 170-171). Although this matter is hardly susceptible to proof, some of the causes discussed below are consistent with a degree of spontaneity, while others suggest detailed planning.

THE INTERNAL CAUSES

With this background in mind, the study can move to analyse the causes of the 2009 riots. They can be divided into internal and external factors and also into short-term and long-term.

Short-Term Internal Factors

Among the short-term factors internal to China and Xinjiang, three stand out.

The first was the major disturbances that occurred all over the Tibetan areas of China in March and April 2008, only the year before. These aroused controversies that have resonances with the July 2009 Ürümqi riots. In particular, many people in the West blamed Chinese repression for the Tibetan disturbances, while the Chinese authorities were insistent that the "Dalai clique" was to blame. Here is not the place to contribute to this debate, but the precedent of the disturbances on the eve of the Beijing Olympics may have been one factor emboldening the Uighurs toward similar action (Barnett 2009: 6-23).

Another factor was incidents associated with the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, which some groups both inside China and outside wanted to embarrass China on human rights grounds. There were three serious incidents in Xinjiang in August 2008, one of them just before the Games began and two actually during them. Of these the middle one was in Kucha, central Xinjiang, taking place on August 10, 2008; it was very unusual in involving a 15-year-old Uighur

female bomber and two suicide bombers (Hooker 2008). Although the Chinese did not hide these incidents, they remained out of the Western news enough to avoid embarrassment for authorities in the management of the Games.

The initial spark that set the fire of the July 5 riot alight, and the most important short-term internal cause was an incident on June 26, 2009 in a toy factory in Shaoguan, Guangdong Province, right at the other end of China from Xinjiang. Han had murdered two Uighurs rumoured to have raped Chinese women. The government was dilatory in taking action to deal with the matter, leading many Uighurs to feel that authorities did not care about them. The peaceful demonstration that started the riot of July 5 was a protest “against a lack of government action” in regard to this incident (Uyghur Human Rights Project 2010: 3). Heyrat Niyaz, a Uighur journalist, blogger and AIDS activist who held an interview for the Hong Kong weekly *Yazhou Zhoukan (Asia Weekly)* not long after the disturbances, stated that he warned the authorities to take very speedy remedial action or “blood would flow”. He claimed that his recommendations were totally ignored (Niyaz 2009).

Long-Term Internal Factors

The study now turns to the main long-term internal factors behind the disturbances, which are actually more important than the short-term. It began with a factor that lay behind the Shaoguan Incident, namely the sending of Uighurs to work in the eastern provinces. A white paper, the State Council issued in September 2009, mentioned that in 2006 the Xinjiang government had launched a “labour-export” programme with the aim of expanding employment for the people of the region, especially the Uighurs. “Through the program local rural residents could apply for positions at inland companies after signing up and going through training courses that give them the necessary qualifications” (Information Office of the State Council 2009a). However, the program also

aroused great resentment among some Uighurs. In his interview cited earlier, Heyrat Niyaz (2009) summarized his views on this matter as follows:

In the eyes of [Uighur] nationalists you can joke all you like, but don’t joke about our women. Almost all of the workers initially organized to be sent out to work were 17- and 18-year-old girls. At the time, some elders said, “60 percent of these girls will wind up as prostitutes; the other 40 percent will marry Han Chinese”. This led to enormous disgust. In carrying out this policy, the government first failed to carry out proper education work and, second, failed to realize that such a small thing could have such major repercussions.

This cause for the disturbances involves Uighur migration to eastern China, but the movement of Han to Xinjiang is, if anything, a more significant factor behind the kind of intense Uighur discontent that resulted in the July 5, 2009 riot. The migration of Han people to Xinjiang from the 1950s to the 1980s was enough to affect the demographic make-up of the region, giving Uighurs the feeling of dispossession in what they regard as their own territory.⁵ Although the Han proportion has not changed much since the early 1980s, the absolute figures have increased in a context where Han couples are restricted to one child only, while policy toward the Uighurs is far more liberal. This means that while Uighur population increase is natural, that for the Han is largely through immigration.

In the early years of the People’s Republic of China, the government sent Han to Xinjiang for political and economic reasons, such as building the economy and defending the border areas. However, in the reform period since the late 1970s, Han going to Xinjiang are most likely to be motivated by profit. Relations between the Uighurs and the Han newcomers are worse than with those who came before the reform period, because in general the long-standing Han have made more effort to understand Uighur culture than the profit-hungry new settlers. According to one specialist, even at the

beginning Han Chinese had become reluctant to adapt to Uighur culture, and now instead, expected Uighurs to adapt to Han culture. "This has led Uyghurs to complain of Great Han chauvinism and ethnic discrimination" (Smith 2002: 157).

This process of immigration has accompanied and to some extent driven the increasing impact that the Han are exerting on Xinjiang's cities and on Uighur society and culture. Although Uighurs have begun to adapt to the new Han-driven economy, Han tend to gain more than the local Uighurs from the very considerable economic growth and rise in outside investment that has occurred. Even if the proportion of the Han population has not increased, there is a justification in the perception among Uighurs that the Sinicization of the population is increasing.

One result of this process of Sinicization in Xinjiang is that there are considerable and apparently rising disparities in wealth and employment. Actually, government policy requires affirmative action on behalf of Uighurs in state-sponsored employment. However, in spite of this, many Uighurs say that they are disadvantaged in practice. A Uighur friend of the author told that he regarded Uighur unemployment as the single most important cause of the 2009 disturbances. Too many young people, especially men, do not have enough to do. When rumours of anti-Uighur discrimination spread, young men can readily take to the streets and, when the situation is as inflamed as it was on July 5, 2009, peaceful demonstrations can easily turn violent.

One specific and important instance of unemployment is among Uighur teachers, especially among those who do not know much Chinese. It has for a long time been the case that the higher up the educational ladder one progresses, the more likely it is that instruction will be in Chinese. In 2004 the Xinjiang government introduced an education system that required high-school graduates "to master both their mother tongue and the Han Chinese language". In 2008, bilingual training programs for teachers were

carried out (Information Office of the State Council 2009a). The aim is to give Uighurs a better chance of employment by raising their level of Chinese. According to informants in Xinjiang in 2010, the trend in recent years has been toward a greater focus on Chinese, with less on Uighur. The implication has been that teachers, including Uighurs, increasingly need excellent Chinese to do their job effectively. This means that many teachers whose Chinese is below par have been rendered redundant and lost their jobs. This applies especially to older ones, among whom resentment against the new system is particularly fierce (O'Neill 2009).

Disparities and inequalities such as those considered in the preceding paragraphs extend well beyond employment in the teaching profession. Two Western journalists cite Xinjiang official figures as conceding that the income gap between the countryside, where Uighurs dominate, and the cities, where the Han tend strongly to concentrate, has grown wider in recent years. In 1980 urban income was 2.1 times rural, but grew to 3.24 times in 2007 (Hille and McGregor 2009; Human Rights Watch 2009: 10).

Differentials in health indicators are also stark. A scholarly study published just before the 2009 disturbances found that: "In life expectancy, infant mortality, maternal mortality and morbidity Uyghur people are much worse off than Han" (Schuster 2009: 433). One very specific set of figures was that life expectancy at birth for Han people in all of China was 73.34 years, while for Uighurs in Xinjiang it was only 63. The figures may not be exactly comparable, because one applies to all China, the other only to Xinjiang, but do suggest a serious gap.⁶

As for the reasons why the health differentials are so great, the study just cited summarized as follows: "Preliminary investigations suggest that lack of education, low income, cultural attitudes about gender, group-specific psychological stress, and the socio-economic and demographic changes of the past 60 years could be the major factors" (Schuster 2009:

433). Some of these factors can be blamed on the government, such as the demographic changes. Others are due to various factors such as culture and may operate in spite of government policy, rather than because of it. These would include the lack of education in a context where government policy makes education compulsory, and low income in a situation where the government has for a long time been strenuously emphasizing economic improvement for all people. However, government policy does not necessarily save the Han and the state from being the targets of Uighur hatred and resentment in a context where they see the living standards of others rising far faster than their own.

Turning from socio-economic to political long-term internal causes of the July 5, 2009 riots, one that government spokespeople often cite is terrorism, and in particular bodies mentioned earlier such as ETIM. The issue of terrorism has proved to be highly controversial. This is because although Chinese official sources have attached a great importance to it, many Western studies have argued that the Chinese state exaggerates the extent of terrorism for political purposes. One specialist even doubted the functionality of ETIM and similar bodies, arguing that “the entire premise of China’s ‘war on terror’ is problematic because it remains unclear whether a militant Uyghur organization even exists that is capable of carrying out substantial and organized acts of terrorism” (Roberts 2012: 1). He also talked of a “self-fulfilling prophecy” (Roberts 2012: 17), meaning that China’s constant harping on the terrorist threat might drive some Uighurs actually to adopt this course. Roberts is right in the sense that hard evidence for internal terrorism by organized groups is lacking as a cause for the July 2009 riots. However, the distinction between internal and external is never clear for a force that is, after all, international. This study returns to this issue below in the discussion of external causes.

Fear of terrorism by the Chinese state and the Han,

as well as Uighur fear of being branded terrorist does point to an intangible but important long-term internal factor for the July 2009 riots, namely the evident lack of trust between the Uighurs on the one hand and the Han and the Han-dominated Chinese state on the other hand. Because there have been terrorist and separatist incidents, Han people and the government tend to become suspicious of Uighurs and their religion. The vast bulk of Uighurs, almost all of whom regard themselves as Muslims, is no more inclined to terrorism than people belonging to any other ethnic group or religion. But how does the state distinguish between the vast majority and the small minority who may have terrorist sympathies? What authorities tend to do is to err on the side of caution and suspicion. Although Islam is formally free and openly practised in Xinjiang, there have been many documented complaints of discrimination and even persecution against Uighur Muslims.⁷ The result is resentment among Uighurs in general, who feel picked on for their religion and ethnicity.

This discussion leads directly to the question whether Islam is itself one of the causes of the disturbances. Two leading scholars of Xinjiang have argued that “Islam is likely to play an increasing role in the Uyghur nationalist movement in the future” (Fuller and Lipman 2004: 344). Their reason for this view is that Han immigration poses a threat to Uyghur existence that can be to some extent countered by ethnic nationalism and its religious basis, which is Islam. However, there was no convincing evidence that local Islamic clerics or other directly religiously inspired internal forces were behind the riots. Insofar as it was important for the 2009 disturbances, Islam lay indirectly behind other factors. As the two scholars suggested, it was a source of inspiration for Uighur nationalism.

In discussions of Islam in Xinjiang, it is necessary to add that there are many Muslims there who are not Uighurs and in general do not suffer the same suspicions or discrimination as the Uighurs. The

reason is that neither the Han population nor the state regards them as potential separatists, religious extremists, or terrorists. The leaders of what separatist movements have occurred are Uighurs, not members of the other Muslim ethnic groups.

The last important long-term internal cause of the disturbances is another political factor, namely the leadership of Wang Lequan, who had been the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) secretary for Xinjiang since 1994. Sometimes referred to as “the king of Xinjiang”, Wang Lequan was reputed as excessively tough and intolerant in dealing with ethnic problems, in large part because of an inordinate obsession with separatism. Many people placed the blame on him for the disturbances, not only because of his inflexibility, but also because of “his failure to adequately anticipate the occurrence of the violence and take proper precautions against it” (Hou 2009), which he certainly had the power to do. Many people in Xinjiang, even the majority, were glad to see him leave office in April 2010.

THE EXTERNAL CAUSES

Next the study will look at the external causes of the disturbances.

An economic factor was the Global Financial Crisis, which was already affecting China by the time the riots took place. Although China’s economy continued to grow impressively, the employment situation worsened, with some people being thrown out of work. There were undoubtedly effects also in Xinjiang, adding to already existing tensions.

It was noted above that Wang Lequan’s political leadership was an internal factor accounting for the July 2009 riots. Yet Wang himself was not in any way prepared to accept responsibility. Instead, he put the blame on terrorists and separatists bent on independence for Xinjiang, people who wanted to split China. In his view, many of these were internal, but many others, including the main ones, were

outside China.

The official view of the Chinese government, as expressed in the September 2009 white paper on Xinjiang, backed up Wang Lequan’s version of events. It was that the riots were “masterminded by terrorist, separatist and extremist forces both inside and outside China” (Information Office of the State Council 2009b). The person and group that the Chinese government blamed most vehemently were Rebiya Kadeer and the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), of which she was president. Because of the importance of Kadeer and the WUC in the Chinese official imaginary, some comment about them is necessary here.

Rebiya Kadeer was a Uighur businesswoman, who became the richest person in Xinjiang and was for a while touted as a model of how well a Uighur woman could do in the new socialist China. She even became a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, a united front legislature with great prestige though little power. However, she fell foul of the authorities by using her membership of the legislature to make an impassioned speech on the hardships of her people. She was imprisoned a few years later for stealing state secrets, a crime often trumped up against influential political adversaries in China. However, in April 2005 she was released just before one of the visits of U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The Chinese imposed a condition for her release, namely that she promised not to engage in politics. However, after going to the U.S., she immediately went back on this promise, regarding the deal as a Faustian bargain.⁸ In the following year (2006), she became the president of two major diasporic Uighur associations: the Uyghur American Association and the WUC.

This latter body was established in Munich in 2004. It is actually a coalition of various Uyghur diasporic groups with different aims and purposes but united on the basis of opposition to China and its policies in Xinjiang. According to its website, the

WUC “represents the collective interest of the Uyghur people both in East Turkestan and abroad” and its main objective “is to promote the right of the Uyghur people to use peaceful, nonviolent, and democratic means to determine the political future of East Turkestan”. The website is clear on its opposition to the “Chinese occupation of East Turkestan”, the territory the PRC officially designates as Xinjiang (World Uyghur Congress N.d.). What this signifies is that the WUC is strongly opposed to Chinese rule in Xinjiang and promotes either full or nearly complete independence, but only through peaceful means, and its platform is secular.

There is a long history of Uyghur diasporic activity, with the main countries involved being Turkey and Germany and, since the 1990s, the United States. The various groups have found it extremely difficult to cooperate and factionalism has inhibited their effectiveness. Since Islam does not enjoy a good image in the West, it has not been nearly as easy for Uyghur diasporic groups to gain support from Western governments and people as has been the case, for example, with the Tibetans and the Dalai Lama. In this context, the establishment of the WUC in 2004 was a real achievement and has given considerable momentum to the Uyghur diaspora and its cause.

So it may not be surprising that the Chinese and Xinjiang leadership put the largest share of blame for the disturbances on the WUC and its leader. China’s main news agency Xinhua immediately castigated the riots as “a pre-empted, organized violent crime”, claiming that they were “instigated and directed from abroad and carried out by outlaws in the country”. The morning after the disturbances, July 6, 2009, the Uyghur Governor of Xinjiang Nur Bekri went on television to blame Rebiya Kadeer and the WUC: “Rebiya had phone conversations with people in China on July 5 in order to incite... and the Internet was used to orchestrate the incitement”.⁹

Chinese government representatives have repeated these accusations numerous times. Xinhua even

claimed that 12 of her relations still in China, including her son Khahar, her daughter Roxingul, and her younger brother Memet, had addressed a letter to her saying: “Because of you, many innocent people of all ethnic groups lost their lives” in Ürümqi on July 5, “with huge damage to property, shops, and vehicles”. Her response was to reject the letter, claiming it was written under duress (Jackson-Han 2009).

What should one make of the charge that she and the WUC she leads were responsible for the disturbances? Most Western observers have challenged and rejected it. One scholar typically observed that the Chinese government attempted to pin the blame on Rebiya Kadeer “have proved fruitless and, in some cases, counterproductive” (Bovingdon 2010: 171). The Uyghur diaspora also rejected the charge against Rebiya Kadeer. For instance, the Uyghur Human Rights Project (2010: 24) vigorously contested the “Chinese government allegation that the unrest was a premeditated ‘terrorist’ attack organized by the World Uyghur Congress, and that the World Uyghur Congress President, Ms. Rebiya Kadeer, masterminded a coordinated attack” in Ürümqi in July 2009.

On the other hand, there is also independent evidence supporting the Chinese case. Nick Holdstock, a British academic with great experiences in Xinjiang and writing initially in a little-known left-wing journal based in New York, interviewed a Uyghur he called Alim, who claimed close association with people involved in organizing the riots. He told Holdstock that on July 3, 2009, Rebiya “called on Uighurs to protest”, adding that “the message spread via discussion boards and instant messaging programs”. He also said that later “someone sent a picture message which contained exact place and time of demonstration” (Holdstock 2010, 2011: 340).

This does not prove that Rebiya was the main organizer. But, assuming Alim indeed had close contacts with who took part in the organization, as he claimed, Rebiya appeared to have had some

involvement. Moreover, the WUC was very happy at the turn of events because of the discredit it poured on China. Alim told Holdstock that he believed that the riots had been very positive because they had forced the Chinese to fear and respect the Uighurs. "We only need to kill 1,000 Chinese and the others will leave", he said (Holdstock 2010, 2011: 347).

Leaving aside the Uighur diasporic bodies, there are Islamist and Turkic nationalist groups in Central Asia very keen to cause trouble in Xinjiang, with the aim of driving out the Chinese and attaching the area to a pan-Turkic state. Attempts to smuggle arms and ammunition are very difficult, because the Chinese forces are very well-organized, but not impossible (Hastings 2011: 904-908). However, political and ideological influence may be easier to transport than armaments.

The best known of the pan-Turkic groups is Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami or Party for Islamic Freedom. The earlier cited Uighur journalist Heyrat Niyaz (2009) claimed this body to have close to 10,000 followers in Xinjiang.¹⁰ Asked about outside influences on the July riots, he immediately put the blame on the Party for Islamic Freedom (Niyaz 2009):

On July 5, I was on Xinhua South Road watching as rioters smashed and looted. More than 100 people gathered and dispersed in an extremely organized manner, all of them wearing athletic shoes. Based on their accents, most were from the area around Kashgar and Hotan [both areas in southern Xinjiang with significant Islamic and even Islamist influence], but I did not see any of them carrying knives. I suspect they were from the Party of Islamic Freedom because of their slogans. The rioters were shouting "Han get out!" and "Kill the Han!". They also shouted slogans such as "We want to establish an Islamic country and strictly implement Islamic law". One of the main goals of the Party of Islamic Freedom is to restore the combined political and religious authority of the Islamic state and strictly implement Islamic law; it is a fundamentalist branch.

It is difficult to doubt his statement about the shouting of slogans. Whether or not those involved were actually from the Party of Islamic Freedom was

not proven. However, in the light of what we do know about the influence and importance of this Party in the Central Asian region, this account is highly credible. The fact that they were present in significant numbers at this event, and appeared to have come all the way from Southern Xinjiang, where both Hotan and Kashgar were located, suggested that they knew about the disturbances in advance. It is hardly surprising that they did not make their presence felt too strongly before the event. Nor is it strange that neither the Chinese authorities nor Rebiya Kadeer took note of their presence, because that would not suit the political agenda of either of these two sides, and each was more intent on blaming the other than on putting the responsibility to any other group.

Heyrat Niyaz, who was quoted in several places in this article, was arrested and imprisoned in mid-2010. An Ürümqi court sentenced him on July 15, 2010 to 15 years' imprisonment for "endangering state security" (US Department of State 2010: 15). The interview with *Yazhou Zhoukan* was among the contributing factors, the outcome showing the continuing and enormous sensitivity of the disturbances. However, it also strengthens the weight of his evidence on the disturbances, rather than weakening it, because it shows him as a genuinely independent journalist who says what he thinks, knows and has experienced.

THE AFTERMATH AND EFFECTS OF THE DISTURBANCES

From this analysis of causes of the disturbances of July 2009, this study now considers several events and trends that followed, some of them are direct results. This section discusses the most important ones to occur down to April 2012.

The first one is that, reflecting the gravity of the situation, China's top leader, CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao, cut short a visit to Italy he was making to attend a summit of the Group of Eight. He returned

immediately to Beijing where, on July 8, he chaired a meeting of the country's most powerful body, the Standing Committee of the CCP Central Committee's Politburo. The meeting issued a statement full of standard rhetoric calling for stability and ethnic unity. However, the very fact that Hu had returned to Beijing ahead of time and called the meeting at short notice did emphasize that the central government had no intention of giving in to rioters.

The Chinese state was quick and thorough in punishing suspected culprits and taking them to law. Within two weeks of the riots at least 4,000 Uighurs had been arrested. There were many cases of disappearance of suspects and breaches of due legal process, including torture. At least 24 Uighurs and two Han were sentenced to death, though there was no public information or confirmation on precisely how many of these were actually carried out.¹¹

An unfortunate occurrence to follow the July 2009 riots came in the next month: a series of attacks with hypodermic syringes, mostly on Han. Such attacks cause alarm, because they give rise to sensationalist rumours and nobody can tell how much harm they will do on individual people. Syringe attacks are especially harmful in Xinjiang, because HIV/AIDS is quite prevalent there due to intravenous drug use,¹² which means that surprise syringe attacks cause fear of the virus. Local Han blamed the syringe attacks on Uighurs. According to a Hong Kong source, Xinjiang television claimed that by September 2, 2009, hospitals had reported treating in total 476 people, among them 433 Han. However, police denied that anybody had caught any infections, even though the syringes were rumoured to be contaminated (Kwok 2009: 1). The riots and the following syringe attacks led to a tightening of security, one sign of this being that the number of surveillance cameras increased substantially.

To defend its actions in Xinjiang, the government issued a white paper on the region on September 21, 2009. This put forward a strong defence of policies

that the government has pursued since 1949, including its own version of the July 5 riots. The main emphasis in the white paper is the enormous extent of economic and social development that has taken place under the People's Republic of China. The final words predict that: "with the care and support of the Communist Party of China and the central government", the peoples of Xinjiang will ensure a brighter future for the region (Information Office of the State Council 2009a).

The handling of the communications with the outside world is always a crucial aspect of reacting to crises. After the July 2009 riots, the authorities initially allowed outside journalists to visit Ürümqi to cover the situation. This suggested a more confident and open approach than what had happened with the Lhasa disturbances of March 2008, when an initial group of reporters gave such negative accounts that authorities banned further outside journalists from visiting the Tibetan capital for the time being. However, although reporters from outside China could visit Ürümqi, for 10 months' contact with the outside was severely constrained for ordinary residents. A government report said that "Internet connection, international long-distance calls and mobile phone text messages were cut in some areas of Xinjiang" after the July riot (Xinhua 2010). Gradual restoration did not become complete until May 2010 (US Department of State 2010: 32). One informant told the author that he had made a special trip to Gansu Province, the nearest accessible place outside Xinjiang, in order to be able to access his e-mails.

The reactions to the disturbances and their aftermath showed ramifications not only for handling the foreign media, but also in Xinjiang's political leadership. Early in September 2009, just after the syringe attacks discussed above, a major demonstration mainly by Han people took place in Ürümqi demanding the resignation of Xinjiang CCP Secretary Wang Lequan. Such an action was entirely unprecedented and showed extreme dissatisfaction

with this very powerful figure, especially among his own ethnic group, the Han. Probably because of his strong connections with the central leadership in Beijing and because he was a member of the CCP's Politburo, among the most powerful bodies in all China, Wang did not step down at this stage. However, both the Ürümqi Municipal CCP Secretary Li Zhi and the head of Xinjiang's public security Liu Yaohua were dismissed. As two reporters have aptly noted, it was "somewhat unusual for China's leaders to replace a senior local official so quickly after protests" because of their reluctance to bow to public pressure (Bradsher and Yang 2009). What the dismissal within hours of the demonstration against Wang Lequan showed was the sensitivity with which Beijing's top leadership regarded the situation.

Although Wang Lequan was able to use his influence to avoid dismissal, he did in fact step down as Xinjiang CCP secretary in April 2010. To avoid the suggestion that this was a disgrace, Vice President Xi Jinping, a member of China's most powerful body, the Standing Committee of the Politburo, made a special visit to Ürümqi and gave a speech of praise about Wang's saying "he was 'loyal to the party', 'hard-working' and that he had made 'important contributions to Xinjiang's development and stability'" (Wu 2010). The man who replaced him as Xinjiang's CCP secretary was the much more broad-minded and less divisive Zhang Chunxian.

Further central Chinese leadership action followed Wang's replacement by Zhang in Xinjiang. In May 2010, the month after Wang's resignation, the central government held a special three-day top-level working conference about the situation in Xinjiang, claimed as the first of its kind since 1949. CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao announced preferential tax and resource policies that aimed at a "moderately prosperous society in all aspects" in Xinjiang by 2020. Hu's view, as paraphrased by two reporters, was that Xinjiang "should improve people's living standards and build an eco-friendly environment, as well as ensure ethnic

unity, social stability and security" (Cui and Zhu 2010: 1). President Ashar Turson of the Xinjiang University of Finance and Economics commented that the tax policy change would boost Xinjiang's annual fiscal income by eight to 10 billion yuan, a significant increase given that the 2009 figure was 38.8 billion yuan.¹³ Adding that most of the extra income would go to the poor areas, he expressed the opinion that Xinjiang's long-term stability depended on economic development and improvements in living standards, "because people are unlikely to be manipulated by terrorists or separatists when they are happy with their lives".¹⁴

Clearly the authorities hoped that the additional money in Xinjiang would help relieve the discontent that led to the 2009 disturbances. Combined with the change of the top CCP leader in Xinjiang from an obsessive to a milder and more open style, the new policies show the high priority that the Beijing leadership puts on trying to find a solution to the crisis. They were obviously aware that ethnic tensions were already serious before the riots, and that these have exacerbated feelings still further.

Actually, the decision did not stop violent incidents, among which only two are mentioned here. On August 19, 2010, seven people were killed and several others wounded when a vehicle crammed with explosives was driven into a crowd on the outskirts of Aksu, which is in the central west of Xinjiang, fairly close to the border with Kyrgyzstan. In February 2011, two men, Tuerhong Tuerdi and Abudula Tueryacun, both probably Uighurs, were sentenced to death for the involvement in the incident (BBC 2011). The second of the two incidents took place at the end of February 2012 outside Karghilik (Yecheng in Chinese). Rioters armed with knives killed 10 people, police shooting two of the attackers dead. Local authorities blamed terrorists, but did not suggest any immediate cause (J. J. Yang and J. H. Yang 2012).

Apart from the internal ramifications, there were also international repercussions of the riots. Although

these constituted an enormous topic well beyond the scope of this paper,¹⁵ the figure of Rebiya Kadeer loomed so large in Chinese statements about them that the effects on her international reputation were worth mentioning. She was not particularly well-known before the riots, but gained greatly in profile due to the riots. An early major event exemplifying this greater publicity occurred when Rebiya Kadeer visited Australia in August 2009, the very month after the riots had taken place. The television documentary *10 Conditions of Love* about her life and anti-China struggle was screened at the Melbourne Film Festival and she also addressed the Australian National Press Club in Canberra. Because the Chinese consulate in Melbourne unsuccessfully tried to induce the organizers to withdraw the film, Kadeer gained in profile and reputation at the expense of the Chinese and their version of the events the month before. China was furious with the Australian government for granting her a visa to enter the country, the English-language *China Daily* (2009: 8) charging in an editorial that “by providing Kadeer a platform for anti-Chinese separatist activities, Canberra chose to side with a terrorist”.

It appeared that the Chinese consulate learned a lesson from their counterproductive and unsuccessful attempt at intervention in the Festival. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) came under pressure to screen the documentary on ABC Television, and it did so in May 2010. Naturally, the Chinese were unhappy but decided not to create a fuss, as a result of which the screening passed with no fanfare and very little effect on Rebiya’s profile.

While it is true that the disturbances and China’s reaction have had the lasting effect of promoting Kadeer from a little known figure to one with some good international repute, she is still well below the Dalai Lama in profile, attracting by comparison very little media publicity and favorable attention by governments. As far as Xinjiang itself is concerned, she enjoys significant following among ordinary

Uighurs, as evidenced by a once very large and popular but now closed supermarket she formerly ran in the middle of Ürümqi. However, according to several of the author’s Uighur friends in Xinjiang, she is not highly regarded among educated people there. Asked about Rebiya Kadeer’s status among intellectuals, Uighur journalist Heyrat Niyaz (2009) replied simply: “They’re not interested. Rebiya basically has no ideas”.

CONCLUSIONS

The author may conclude with a very brief recapitulation of the main argument of this paper, and some speculation of what the present tensions might imply for the future.

The causes and effects of the July 2009 riots are complex and both internal and external to China. As far as causes are concerned, ignoring or underplaying either the internal or external factors does not assist the debate about this very tragic event. The Chinese authorities have an obvious motive for blaming only outside forces, because it deflects responsibility from their own behaviour and policies. But correspondingly there is too much of a tendency among the Uighur diaspora and much of the Western media to focus exclusively on Chinese repression and bad governance, and to ignore the very real dangers to ethnic relations and the Chinese state that flow from terrorism and separatism.

In an important book on Xinjiang published in 2004, the editor discussed the future, presenting two possible scenarios, one harmonious and showing ethnic trust and cultural survival, the other full of tension and sharpened conflict, with ethnic trust disappearing and the economy in decline. He added that: “One thing can be said with absolute certainty: The choice between these extreme outcomes, or any other conceivable scenarios, will be determined above all by what happens in Beijing” (Starr 2004: 21). This judgment is apt, but it should be added that external

factors are likely to continue playing a role. The Chinese leadership will do what it can to prevent such influences from disrupting stability in Xinjiang and it has plenty of allies in such a quest. But it would not be surprising if Islamist and other elements outside Xinjiang continue to try to create an impact in the region.

Already delicate ethnic relations became even tenser following July 2009. One specialist specifically blamed harsh measures taken by the Chinese state, claiming that they “will most likely only lead to increased ethnic tension, more violence, and increased potential for conflict” in Xinjiang (Roberts 2012: 16). The present author’s view is that the rioting itself is also responsible for the worsening of ethnic relations. Based on what he saw and heard in Xinjiang during a visit there in late September and the first weeks in October 2010, there was probably no improvement in the ethnic situation; and any possible amelioration was no more than marginal.

From the Chinese state’s point of view, full independence for Xinjiang is not a realistic option, because the likely effect would be a nightmare scenario of national splintering. However, negotiations that lead to a greater Uighur participation in state affairs in Xinjiang should be possible. At present, obsessive fear of separatism drives the Chinese state and many local Xinjiang officials toward an intolerance of Uighur culture and Islam, but education campaigns on behalf of mutual understanding would not necessarily compromise the national unity that is so important to the Chinese state. The trend toward economic development in Xinjiang is leading to better living standards.

The situation may look different from a nationalist Uighur point of view. They may share the wish for better living standards, but also put much more weight on the good health of their own culture and religion. Economic growth does not necessarily lead to loyalty to the government and its effects on ethnic relations are uncertain. On his departure from a period of

teaching in Yining in Northern Xinjiang, a Uighur friend said to Holdstock (2011: 327): “If people ask about us when you go home, tell them that we’re not terrorists. We just hate the government. The Chinese are not so bad. But sometimes we forget the difference. That is all”. This suggests that Uighurs may hate the Chinese government more than they do the Han Chinese. There is nothing inevitable about the persistence of bad ethnic relations between Uighurs and Han. But on present indications a radical improvement is likely to require at least a generation.

Notes

1. The usual spelling of this ethnic group within China is Uygurs. The diasporic groups spell the word as Uyghurs. A more neutral spelling is Uighurs, and that is the form followed here. In the case of formal titles or quotations, the original is adopted.
2. According to ChinaTao (2012), Xinjiang’s GDP for the first half of 2012 was US\$41.2 billion, up 10.7 percent year on year over the first half of 2011.
3. In his book, Bovingdon (2010: 174-190) had listed all the “organized protests and violent events in Xinjiang, 1949-2005”. Those of the 1990s cover pages 180-188. See also the graph of numbers of violent incidents from 1990 to 2009 in Hastings (2011: 899), as well as some commentary in pages 900-912.
4. Hastings (2011: 911) claimed that the riots were “not necessarily ‘planned’ at all”.
5. There is a literature on Han immigration and the negative feelings it causes among the Uighurs. For instance, see Toops (2004).
6. See Schuster (2009: 434). The September 2009 white paper has a 2008 figure that the overall life expectancy in Xinjiang was 72 years. See also Information Office of the State Council (2009a).
7. Human Rights in China (2005: 3) claimed that there was the evidence for “a multi-tiered system of surveillance, control, and suppression of religious activity aimed at Xinjiang’s Uighurs”.
8. See a good account down to her moving to the US (Millward 2007: 357-361).
9. Both the Xinhua and Nur Bekri statements are quoted by Jian (2009).
10. A full-length study on the Hizb-ut-Tahrir argued that it “has reportedly extended its influence” into Xinjiang, its website paying increasing attention to the situation in China “only

during the last few years”, meaning since about 2005. See Karagiannis (2010: 71).

11. See the summary in Roberts (2012: 15). Several human rights organizations have researched the human rights abuses involved in the July 2009 disturbances and their aftermath, notably Amnesty International (2010).
12. For a view of the seriousness of HIV/AIDS in Xinjiang see Rudelson and Jankowiak (2004: 318-319).
13. About 8 yuan is equivalent to US\$1.
14. See Cui and Zhu (2010: 2). The journalists are here quoting Ashar Turson’s words directly.
15. For an account of the early international repercussions of the July 2009 disturbances, see Mackerras (2011: 33-40).

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