



The Recent Violence in Xinjiang and China's Ethnic Policy

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It is evident from the series of violent incidents in Lukqun, Hotan and Aksu in June 2013, that inter-ethnic tensions have been very high across the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) because of increased security measures undertaken, prior to the fourth anniversary of the 7/5 incident in 2009, in the XUAR's capital, Urumqi. Within a fortnight of the April 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, this year's first ethnic clash in Xinjiang broke out at Salibuya (Siriqbuya) in Bachu (Maralbexi) on the outskirts of Kashgar. Fifteen policemen and community workers belonging to different ethnic groups and six suspected terrorists were reportedly killed in the clash referred to as the 'Bachu incident'. Interestingly, the violence was reported to have originated in the residence of a suspect and the weapons used by them were knives. Many people in China expressed doubts about the official account of the incident, in which a father, his two sons and some friends were accused of being involved in terrorist acts. Hu Ping raised several points to show the inconsistency in the official reports on the "terrorist incident" in Bachu (Hu 2013). In fact, the clash in Bachu and the manner in which it was handled, provides insights into China's fight against home-grown terrorism in Xinjiang and its ethnic policy.

Incidentally, the US Ambassador Gary Locke was on an official visit to the XUAR with a trade delegation, when the clashes took place. The contention between China and the US on the issue of terrorism in Xinjiang once again became prominent, when the US State Department spokesman Patrick Ventrell, refused to accept the Chinese government's assertion that the Bachu incident was a terrorist act. Following the death of 35 people in a riot in the early morning of 26 June 2013, at Lukqun (Likeqin) township in Shanshan (Piqan) county of Turpan prefecture situated in the east of the region, Patrick Ventrell urged Chinese authorities to conduct a transparent investigation into the incident and to provide due legal protection to those detained after the riots. He also expressed US concerns regarding the reports of discrimination and restrictions against Uyghurs and other Muslim communities in China (Michael Lipin 2013). On 27 June 2013, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying, rejected the US government's criticism of China's existing ethnic and religious policies in her comments on the incident (*Huanqiu shibao*, 28 June 2013). Li Wei, the director of the Anti-terrorism Centre of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) commented, that the US concerns were baseless and devoid of logic. Li

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Wei further noted that the Boston explosion last April was the result of the exploitation of Chechnyan refugees in America and discrimination against Muslims in the UK and declared that the Western countries should not adopt double standards as to how China was dealing with violent terrorism (*Huanqiu shibao*, 28 June 2013).

There is however a need to look beyond the Sino-American charges and counter-charges. Many Chinese scholars, social scientists, ethnologists and intellectuals are also increasingly concerned about the growing ethno-national tensions in the XUAR, Tibet, the Tibetan-populated areas in Qinghai and Sichuan and other minority areas since the riots in Lhasa and Urumqi in 2008 and 2009 respectively. They are openly discussing the necessity of reviewing the existing minority policy (Qiu 2010). On the basis of some recent developments, this analysis throws light on whether there is any change in Chinese ethnic policy.

Bachu, Lukqun and other Incidents

According to the official media reports on the Bachu incident, three community workers entered a private property in Salibuya and discovered some suspicious individuals with knives, on 23 April. The community workers reportedly alerted others, but were killed before help could arrive. It appears that a bigger clash was triggered off subsequently. The XUAR government spokesperson was quick to describe the incident as an act of terrorism and the police later identified a new terrorist group headed by a person named Qasim Muhammad. Further, the Xinjiang police released information about how the terrorist organization had come into existence in September 2102 and how the members of the group had been regularly assembling and meeting since December 2012, in the house of one Muhanmetemin Barat, to train themselves with the help of video clips (Raman 2013). The police as well as the community social-workers who died in the clash, were later posthumously honoured as 'regional anti-terrorist heroes' (Tursun 2013). Moreover, it is clear from the posthumous honoring, that the actual role of these social workers is to monitor household affairs of individuals and dig out traces of terrorism and inform the police. Some scholars point out that this kind of 'community service' is part of 'social management works' in the minority areas.

Within two months, another round of violent incidents took place, in June 2013. From the intensity of violence, we can see that the Lukqun conflict is certainly the deadliest one since the Urumqi riots in 2009 when about 200 people were killed. The Chinese official media described the Lukqun incident as a 'violent terrorist attack' on the police station, the special petrol squadron, the township administrative office, public construction sites and migrant workers' dormitories in the early hours of the day. From time to time, they also released the number of casualties in the incident at Lukqun. It was also reported that the attackers burnt a police station and set fire to a police vehicle (*Xinjiang Daily*, 28 June 2013; Makinen 2013). Another report on 29 June in *Xinjiang Daily* described the incident as an 'organized and premeditated violent terrorist attack' and mentioned that 16 out of 24 casualties belonged to the Uyghur community and that there were also some women among the dead. The report described the incident in somewhat hyperbolic terms (*Xinjiang Daily*, 29 June 2013), but was conspicuously silent on the causes leading to the riot, in a peaceful township in Turpan prefecture, which has hitherto not been associated with violent insurgency in the XUAR. The opacity surrounding the incident thus raises doubts about the nature of reporting in the Chinese media and provides ample scope for speculations.

It is possible, as Pan Zhiping of the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences suggests, that the terrorists in the XUAR have changed their tactics and began carrying out sudden attacks in places where security arrangements are weak. Furthermore, the terrorist elements decided to strike in the early hours of the day (06:00 am, Beijing time), when, in addition to the surprise element, it would be quite dark in the XUAR (*Huanqiu shibao* 27 June 2013). According to the official news, a mob of about 100 Uyghurs attacked the police with knives and as a result, a total of 27 Uyghurs died, together with 11 assailants. It was also reported that the main targets were the Uyghur police personnel and Han migrant workers (Makinen 2013). The entire episode has very little resemblance to regular terrorist attacks in other countries. The perpetrators of the violence in Lukqun confronted the heavily armed police with knives, and their targets were specifically symbols of state power. It suggests that they possibly had deep resentment and anger against local authorities and the Uyghur police officials, who were apparently on duty to handle the situation.

News released by the Uyghur American Association (UAA) on 26 June however indicates that in recent months, the small township Lukqun was frequently on the watchful scanner of Radio Free Asia (RFA). RFA came out with a story on 10 April 2013, which described killing of a seven-year old Uyghur boy by a Han, who suspected the victim and two other boys of stealing from his brick kiln in a village near Lukqun. The incident led to tensions between the Uyghurs and the Hans. About 150 Uyghurs in revenge, tried to attack the Han Chinese homes around the brick kiln (Radio Free Asia, 09 April 2013). The follow-up news on 22 April revealed that the suspected killer was arrested, but authorities in Shanshan county treated him as a person with mental illness and claimed that the murder was not related to the ethnic issue, which led to much unhappiness among the local Uyghurs. The report further stated that Abdulla Nuraji, the deputy chief of the state authorized Islamic Association of Shanshan county, was unwilling to accept that ethnic hatred was not involved in the murder. He tried to pacify angry local residents, but he personally believed that the official explanation about the motive of the murder was neither adequate nor logical. Nuraji also urged the government to resolve land disputes that are the main source of tensions between the Han migrants and the Uyghur farmers in the area (Radio Free Asia, 22 April 2013). It is difficult to refute the RFA reports in this case. The issue of land disputes also cannot be rejected, because such disputes are a common cause of conflicts across China. According to an official report on 3 April, some land-related disputes in a few villages of Shanshan county, were settled in favour of three Han migrants, through people's mediation (Ding 2013). This particular case possibly does not have any relation with the Lukqun riots, but land-related disputes are certainly a major cause of the escalation in inter-ethnic tensions in the county, particularly since the last few years when the leadership renewed the development agenda in the XUAR.

Restrictions on religious customs and practices could well be yet another aspect of the unrest in Lukqun. For last few years Tuyuz Mazar, a famous religious site in the county, situated about 10 kms from Lukqun, has become a source of dispute between local Muslims and the authorities, who have allowed tourist companies to transform a living shrine into a tourist hot spot. Ordinary Muslims cannot enter the Mazar because of the high entrance fee. For several

years the crackdown on religious activities before and during the holy month of Ramadan, has become an annual practice, which severely affects the rhythms of Uyghur socio-economic and cultural life (Fay 2013).

Lukqun was not the only place to experience violent outbursts of ethnic tensions in the month of June. The day the Lukqun incident occurred, a local police official in Ghorachol town in Awat county in Aksu prefecture, released news about the killing of 12 Uyghurs due to the explosion of the devices they were carrying, while being pursued by police during a house-to-house search. No police personnel were killed during the operation. According to the report, this happened in the beginning of June, but there was no explanation available as to the late release of the news (Radio Free Asia, 26 June 2013).

While the local government was still busy with the Lukqun incident, Khotan, one of the most restive places in the XUAR, once more appeared in the news on 28 June 2013. According to a state media report, a violent attack broke out on a pedestrian street in the township of Hanrike in Hotan county. No details about the casualties were given in the official reports. It appears from other sources that some young men rioted and lit fires on Unity Street of the township at around 3.00 pm and the area was guarded by the armed police and riot police (Associate Press, 29 June). It was later revealed in the *Global Times*, that more than a hundred people, riding motorbikes and wielding knives attacked a police station in Moyu country in Khotan prefecture (Reuters, 29 June 2013). The central leadership ordered tighter security and initiated large-scale troop deployment in the region - from 29 June, dozens of armored vehicles and military trucks started patrolling in Urumqi.

Politics of Terrorism

Even as the XUAR witnesses recurrent bouts of violent incidents, the regional leadership periodically issues statements lauding improved inter-ethnic relations. The somewhat complacent comments of Xinjiang's deputy-governor, Shi Dagang, in Beijing on 28 May 2013, which proved to be completely unfounded after the outbreak of riots in Lukqun, is indicative of this confusion. During his visit to Beijing, he dismissed the notion that Xinjiang was a hotbed of ethnic unrest and told reporters that ethnic minorities of Xinjiang are 'simple-hearted and honest, very kind and unaffected'. They are interested more in dancing, singing, and hosting

rather than making trouble. He also clearly stated that the violent terrorists, ethnic splittists and extremists who want to cause trouble are all outside the country (Reuters, 28 May 2013). It is obvious that this projection of a normal and peaceful socio-political environment in the province is contradictory and self-deceiving. Moreover, this kind of message from local leaders can create some confusion among policy makers in Beijing.

Furthermore, whenever violent incidents break out, the local authorities are quick to label it as a terrorist act and impose greater restrictions on the minorities. There have been some efforts at disassociating terrorism from ethnicity and religion since Zhang Chunxian took charge as regional party secretary in XUAR in 2010. It was also clear from the official response after the Bachu incident, that the Chinese authorities were reluctant to link local violence with international terrorism. The violence in June and subsequent developments however, helped the authorities legitimize a more radical and repressive anti-terror policy in XUAR. ‘People’s war’, the anti-terror slogan of Jiang Zemin era is back again and further criminalization and marginalization of the Uyghurs appears to be underway. Official Chinese pronouncements have prominently referred to transnational terror groups and their involvement with the Eastern Turkestan separatists. This time state media pointed fingers at Syrian opposition forces (Reuters, 1 July 2013). Rohan Gunarana, a professor at the Nanyang Technology University in Singapore has questioned a *Global Times* report regarding the number of Uyghurs involved with Syrian rebel group cited in. In his estimation about a dozen had tried to enter Syria, but he was unsure how many of them had actually succeeded (Jacobs and Buckley 2013).

The recent angry exchanges between the US and China have their roots in the different perceptions regarding the problem of terrorism in the XUAR and the former’s skepticism regarding the regional leadership’s version of the riots. Ambassador Locke’s visit to the XUAR was the first by a senior US official to the region in more than 20 years, with the objective of exploring the investment prospects in the region. Given Beijing’s intention to attract foreign investment, the violence would have been a great embarrassment. Ambassador Locke did not make any comment on the Bachu incident, but the US State Department spokesman Patrick Ventrell, expressed his disagreement with the XUAR

government spokesperson about the clash (Pantucci 2013). After the Lukqun incident, Ventrell made even sharper comments about Chinese ethnic policy towards Xinjiang.

It is however interesting to note that Locke, in a speech at Xinjiang University, affirmed the American intention to engage in economic activities in the region in order to fully realize its great potential, not just in terms of its mineral resources, but also of its human resources (Locke 2013). Locke also made an official visit to Tibet on 28 June (Radio Free Asia, 28 June 2013). While he did go along with Beijing’s efforts at showcasing peaceful ethnic regions, he did not refrain from airing his views on the plight of the Tibetans and preservation of diversity in Xinjiang. These are indicative of attempts by both sides to explore possibilities of some meeting ground on the issue of Tibet and Xinjiang.

Any Change in Ethnic Policy?

Discussions on a possible amendments to, or shift from the existing ethnic policy, appeared once again in the public domain, after the publication of comments on China’s Tibet policy by Professor Jin Wei of the Central Party School in *Yazhou Zhoukan (Asia Weekly)* on 9 June 2013. Prof. Jin’s proposals include allowing of public display of the Dalai Lama’s portrait, end to the open denunciations of the Tibetan leader and reduction of police presence in monasteries (Interview with Prof. Jin Wei, 2013). According to a RFA report, Chinese authorities in the Tibetan populated areas of Qinghai and Sichuan provinces have already started to implement these proposals on an experimental basis (Radio Free Asia, June 26 2013). It will certainly take a long time to effectively implement this new policy in the entire Tibetan areas. But the basic arguments made by Prof. Jin, that there is no need to politicize religion and that it is a mistake to treat nationalities and religious issues as political issues, are relevant in the on-going debate on the existing ethnic policy in China.

A debate on the theoretical issues related to the depoliticization of China’s current nationalities’ policies and need for second-generation ethnic policies has been underway in China, since the publication of an article¹ by Professor Ma Rong

¹ ‘Lijie minzu guanxi de xin silu – shaoshuminzu wenti de “qu zhengzhihua”’ (理解民族关系的新思路 - 少数民族问题的“去政治化”) [Depoliticization of ethnic minority problem – a new approach to understand ethnic relations].

in 2004. Prof. Ma's argument is that China's ethnic minorities are basically similar to various ethnic groups of America like Afro-Americans, peoples of Asian origins and the Indians. In his opinion, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was the first to politicize ethnic problem through a series of policies like federalism, demographic immobilization along the border, territorialization of ethnic autonomy, and institutionalization of preferential policies. Besides adopting a federal structure, China just blindly followed the Soviet ethnic policies (Ma 2013). Ma Rong's concept of depoliticization of ethnic policies comprised the following four aspects: a shift from politicization to culturalization; from tribal state to civil state; preferential policy for ethnic groups as a whole and focusing on cultural relations and blending rather than on ethnic relations (Ma 2007). This has however has been severely criticized by scholars. Ma's thesis first came to public notice after the publication of an article by Hu Angang and Hu Lianhe in 2011, discussing the need for a second generation ethnic policy.

There are many similarities between Jin Wei's arguments and Ma Rong's concepts, but the former appears to be discussing issues of effective governance more. She has also criticized 'stability maintenance' in the minority areas through *de facto* martial law and it seems that there are many people in the new establishment in Beijing who share her views. One blog author avers that the recent violence in Xinjiang has provided Xi Jinping and his colleagues with opportunity to strengthen their stand that many of the old ways of governance in minority areas are not working any more. He also points out that there has been some change of behaviour within the central leadership and change in the articulation in some official newspapers after the June riots in Xinjiang, but it is certainly not easy to inspire the local cadres to stay calm and cast-off past practices (Moses 2013). Responding to the riots in a speech on 30 June 2013, Xi Jinping emphasized building a team of high quality cadres. This definitely suggests that the CPC central leadership is keen to improve quality of governance, but changes in ethnic policy per se, is still not the priority (*Jiefangjun bao* 2013).

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