



*The Current Column*  
of 20 July 2009

**Ethnic unrest in Xinjiang –  
Quo Vadis?**

By Julia Bader and Dr. Doris Fischer,  
German Development Institute /  
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik



## Ethnic unrest in Xinjiang – Quo Vadis?

Bonn, 20 July 2009. Following the violent unrests in Tibet last year, earlier this month the most violent ethnic motivated upheaval in decades occurred in the Autonomous Region of Xinjiang in western China. The unexpected level of aggression demonstrated during this recent turmoil caused the death of nearly 200 people and left more than 1600 people injured. The incident demonstrates the limitations of the concept of social harmony that the Chinese government has employed in recent years in order to glaze the social conflicts resulting from rapid. Arguably, the harmonious society envisaged and idealised by the Chinese government has never really materialised in the Autonomous Regions of Tibet and Xinjiang.

The roots of the latest unrest go far back into history, as Xinjiang for the longest time has been a multi-ethnic region, influenced and ruled by changing forces before it became part of the People's Republic of China. Consequently, a major objective of the Chinese government has been to stabilise the region and – especially in the course of the overall reform process – to stimulate economic development. However, from the perspective of the local "national minorities" which do not only comprise Uighur people but a number of other ethnic groups, the minorities never prospered from the success of China's rapid economic development in a way the Han Chinese population did.

The Chinese government has tried to counter this perception by means of its minority related policies. Indeed, during the 1990s, the government – among other initiatives – extended the freedom of religion and eased access of the minority people to education and especially to universities. The "go west" policies of the second half of the 1990s were intended to enhance the development of China's western areas and to reduce the development gap between the coastal regions and the rest of the country. Compared to other provinces and regions Xinjiang performed better economically and benefited from all kinds of direct and indirect subsidies.

Nevertheless, minority policies in Xinjiang and Tibet failed in one crucial aspect: Since the early 1990s, as a result of laxer birth controls for minority people, the share of minorities in overall population grew in all autonomous regions or districts of China except for Tibet and Xinjiang (and Liaoning) where the minorities declined. At the same time the population of Xinjiang grew from about 15 million people to more than 20 million. In the urban agglomerations such as Urumqi the national minorities that used to dominate the local population literally became minorities.

Against this background of huge growth in population, a shift in the relative weight of the minority population as well as a political system which grants rights but does not allow for substantial participation or autonomy, any minor incident could have sparked an outbreak of the simmering conflict. In this case, the trigger of the unrest has most likely been the economic downturn resulting from the global financial crisis. This is indicated by the fact that the Urumqi



unrests followed a conflict among workers of different ethnic groups in a factory located in southern China. Also, Han-Chinese have repeatedly voiced their anger against unfair privileges Uighur people presumably enjoy due to their minority status. Such arguments arise in times of crisis when growth is limited and distribution conflicts prevail.

Due to the specific mixture of historic and short-term factors that have provoked the recent unrest, quick solutions to solve the conflicts clearly are not at hand. For sure, the Chinese government will not endanger national integrity, thereby creating precedence for other provinces or minorities striving for independence. Similarly, the fact that many Han-Chinese families have already lived in Xinjiang for generations limits the options for a far-reaching ethnic-based autonomy. Any sustainable political solution for Xinjiang would have to respect the needs of Uighurs as well as those of the other minorities and the Han Chinese. To ease the conflict and to establish a literally harmonious society, more social justice and cultural integration among the ethnic groups involved would be needed. This will hardly be achieved by the increased military forces that currently appease the situation in Urumqi. Future integration policies will have to be more inclusive and participatory, integrating the indigenous population more actively in public and governmental institutions. In the long run, political stability for Xinjiang can only be envisaged in the context of a changed national political environment based on institutions that guaranty far reaching transparency, extended political rights as well as fair mechanisms of distribution and reconciliation of social interests.



By Julia Bader and Dr. Doris Fischer,  
German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE).