

China's crackdown on Uighurs requires EU response

Written by Josep-Maria Terricabras on 20 October 2014 in Opinion
Opinion

China is tightening its grip on ethnic minorities and violence is escalating in the fight for autonomy, says Josep-Maria Terricabras.



Located in east Turkmenistan, the Xinjiang Uighur autonomous region of China has a population of 8.68 million. Uighurs take up one sixth of China's territory. Most people in the region are Muslim, and appear to associate more with their neighbours in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan than with the Han majority to the east.

Of course, this is a problem. Uighurs are unable to settle under the communist regime. The leadership of the party, known as the 'caring father', requires uniformity for all. Uighurs, along with other smaller Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, have fought against China's authoritarian government for years. This is in response to what their leaders depict as religious restrictions and widespread discrimination.

Ethnic rioting and clashes in Xinjiang reached a peak in 2009, resulting in roughly 200 deaths and triggering a crackdown by local authorities. More protests took place last year and also turned violent. They are thought to have claimed more than 100 lives. Meanwhile, Chinese authorities have accused

the Uighurs of carrying out terrorist attacks. This has led to even wider surveillance and restrictions in the province of Xinjiang. Tensions in the area are now higher than ever.

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In southern Xinjiang's Aksu prefecture, where most residents are Uighur, Chinese authorities are offering up monetary rewards to persuade residents to inform on each other. On 16 April, the region's official website published a list of at least 36 types of useful information, and offered rewards ranging from €6-€6,000. Authorities appear to have offered rewards for informing on activities such as prayer in public places, disputes between members of ethnic minorities and Han Chinese, people dressed in an unusual manner or with long beards and foreigners.

Xinjiang authorities recently announced that so far eight people have been executed over charges relating to separatist violence. This includes an attack last year in which a car ploughed through tourists near Beijing's Tiananmen square and burst into flames. Twelve more individuals were sentenced to death last week.

This is only the latest in a series of incidents. Chinese authorities have made a point of showcasing their firm grip on the province and eliminating any dissent that could give rise to demands for further autonomy. The government seems to have taken an even more heavy handed approach. Authorities have encouraged Han migration to the region and placed restrictions on Islamic religious practices. They have set up a police state and educational policies aimed at making Mandarin the only language used in the province. During a highly publicised tour of the region, president Xi Jinping highlighted the message of integration and stability, urging Uighur students to devote themselves to Mandarin and praising truncheon bearing troops.

The European Union cannot stand idly by, ignoring its own core values of democracy, respect of religious freedom and the freedom of expression. Of course, trade is important and trade relations with China should be reinforced as much as necessary to ensure healthy European economies. But we must not forget the trust that people have bestowed upon us. We must not forget their hopes. The EU must remain a key actor on the global stage and a vocal representative of the respect of the fundamental human rights that we all share.

About the author

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[Justice and Rights](#) [2]

Categories

[International Relations](#) [3]

[Public order, justice and rights](#) [4]



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