Between religious terrorism and anti-religious repression: China's ethnic and counter-terrorist policies in Uighur Xinjiang

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INTRODUCTION

The first flag of the Chinese republic enshrined the fraternity between the so-called *five races under one union*: red for Han, yellow for Manchus, blue for Mongols, black for Tibetans and white for Hui (Muslims, at the time). This supposed harmony was, and still is, either a bluff or a wish, but certainly not a reality. In this line, this paper will study a portion of this ethnic structure of modern China, the case of the Uighurs, a Muslim minority, mainly located in the westmost Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. This territory, even if barely populated, amounts for a great deal of Chinese soil. Beyond its critical geopolitics concerning the New Silk Route and key materials, Xinjiang is home for one of the conflicts that many say are critical for the People's Republic of China: a combined case of ethnic nationalism and separatism, terrorism, religious extremism, and state repression and counterterrorism.

In concrete terms, the paper will analyse the drivers of the Chinese authorities to conduct counterterrorist policies. In order to understand if they proceed from a context of ethnic conflict or they respond to religious radicalization in a context of an atheist state in the form of anti-religious repression.

Thus, the research question is the following:

> *Is counterterrorism in Xinjiang the logical dynamic of religious repression in an atheist state, or a pragmatic magnification of terror to serve its ethnic policies?*

To answer it, the paper will outline the religion-state relations in the country and in Xinjiang, to then analyse the violence of Uighur groups, the framing of it by Chinese authorities and their security response.

Religion under Chinese socialism

Atheism/secularism with Chinese characteristics

Communism as the hegemonic ideology in China entails a secular if not atheist conception of the world as envisaged by Marx, Lenin and Mao. Prior to revolution, religion is seen as a tool of the dominant class. Nevertheless, religious creeds under the socialist period are understood in a similar manner as in the liberal Western conception of modernization: religion as all-encompassing is incompatible with modernization (Hann & Pelkmans, 2009). Also, scientific and secular ways of life are key for progress, so there is no room for traditional, pastoral or superstitious thought.

Influenced by the Soviet experiences, the People's Republic of China constitutionally protects freedom of belief and religious practice, despite differentiating between institutionalised religious groups, somewhat tolerable, and feudal superstitions, inappropriate as driving backwards (*ibid*., 2009). However, throughout the revolutionary period, some religious buildings were transformed into profane functioning spaces. Besides, religious social life, even if quite respected, should not play a massively public role, plus, civil servants, party members and authorities should promote scientific atheism (*ibid*., 2009).

From a legal point of view, the long-term policy is based on a 1982 post-Mao document of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): religion is a historical product, used by the oppressor as an "opiate to control the masses" (Lavička, 2021, 62). However, eradication by coercion is fruitless and harmful, so the long process ought to be through material wealth, education and culture while protecting freedom of belief. This was the new way of Deng Xiaoping, "patiently waiting for scientific education, not political coercion, to spread atheism" (Madsen, 2010, 59), this would create secular and socialist citizens, regarded as necessary to preserve the social harmony and economic modernity of the nation.

However, this socialist modernization thesis may not be so accurate, because first, religions are growing, and second, the religious matter is intrinsically public, and it cannot be easily privatised. This is what has in a way happened in Xinjiang. Thus, the state may have had to deviate from the long-term formula to manually push for secularisation.

China vis à vis Islam in Xinjiang

While not being very keen on religion, the government's efforts to accommodate it into the patriotic camp, have created for instance Buddhist or Catholic Chinese Associations. But a fundamental problem lies ahead: many of these religions pledge allegiance to non-state and usually foreign authorities, e.g., Catholics to the Holy See, Tibetan Buddhists to the Dalai Lama or Uighur Muslims to a separate Turkic nation (Lap-Yan Kung, 2006). And this is a challenge to Chinese sovereignty, so patriotism as a civil religion is promoted.

In Xinjiang, during the Cultural Revolution there was both toleration and campaigning against Islam in a pragmatic and flexible way. Then, from the 1980s on, economic growth allowed reconstruction of worship places, public call for prayer was permitted and there was flexibility in a framing of Islam as an ethnic minority tradition (Hann & Pelkmans, 2009). Recently, similarly to Kemalist Turkey, imams and religious academics are being appointed and salaried or trained by the state, and since the 1990s the Religious Affairs Bureau has increased "mechanisms to confine religion to the private sphere" (*ibid*., 2009, 1536). For example, in the 2008 Ramadan, in an attempt to combat radicalism and separatism, Uighur men were forced "to shave their beards, restricted access to mosques, and discouraged ritual fasting" (Madsen, 2010, 70). All these fit into what Madsen (2010) calls the "neoimperial sacral hegemony", where the government is the only master in a world where globalized Islam can threaten it.

Furthermore, to cope with this foreign influx, there has been a dynamic of folklorization of religious acts to avoid its salience, emphasising the ancient and Turkic ethnic roots of festivities instead of the religious ones for tourists and inhabitants (Hann & Pelkmans, 2009), this is, inculturation of religion.

Ethnic & religious violence

Uighur violence & terrorism

Islam is a core distinctive factor of the Uighur people, however, this Turkic ethnicity practiced many branches and denominations of Islam and varied locally, so in this case religion was not a unifying factor. At least not until the penetration of globalization that the contact with worldwide Islamic movements allowed a slight unification process (Madsen, 2010). Sunni Islam impregnates most aspects of the life of the majority of Uighurs, in spite of a competition among Sufi and non-Sufi practices, territorial loyalties, linguistic differences, enmities with and

among elites, and local and regional politics. Plus, as a frontier territory, bordering countries and regions enormously influence Xinjiang (Lap-Yan Kung, 2006).

Added to this complexity, massive waves of Han Chinese have migrated from the East during the 20th century (Hann & Pelkmans, 2009, 1520), who, although most being mere workers, generally benefited from ethnic dominance, leading to more economic development than Uighurs, many of whom would agree with Dibayesh Anand in labelling it as "internal colonization" (cited in Smith Finley, 2019b, 22). With a global population of roughly 22 million, Uighurs account for less than half of it, followed by the Han people, who massively locate in big cities. To try to avoid tension for all these grievances, some benefits for the ethnic minority were imposed, as permission for more children per couple in rural areas, fewer taxes, better education, more access to public office and increased cultural and linguistic toleration (Gladney, 1995 in Lap-Yan Kung, 2006). Efforts as these, instead of minimizing differentiation or religious sentiment, as planned in the ideological guidelines exposed previously (see *Atheism/secularism with Chinese characteristics*), allowed reinforced Islamic sentiment and an opportunity for the resurgence of Uighur regionalism and, eventually, either religious extremism or separatism, even if national identity and religious identity were in a growing symbiosis (Lap-Yan Kung, 2006).

Then, the increasing concern of Chinese authorities became a reality, some elements of the Uighur people initiated a political movement for self-determination. Others initiated violent acts, either loosely institutionalised or well organised. In terms of violence, a turning point was the 2009 Ürümqi protests turned into riots. Before this date and the disproportionate state response, most violence perpetrated by Uighur groups were directed against state officials or government collaborators in the region, but afterwards, violence developed into a more inter-ethnic dimension, in which Uighur extremists attacked Han civilians (Smith Finley, 2019a). With precedents of low-level violent acts, hatred between Xinjiang communities, mistrust and self-segregation, more organized terrorist actions were carried out either by groups of individuals or structured armed wings. An example would take place in 2014, when a Han community was struck by a knife attack or in 2015 with a colliery attack with dozens of dead and injured Han workers (*ibid.*, 2019a). In this sense, we can say that the conflict evolved from a political into a more ethnized one.

Nonetheless, most analysts agree that Uighur terrorism holds no complex network, neither domestic nor transnational, even if members of groups such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement or the Turkestan Islamic Party (recognized as terrorists by the UN and the US

besides China), have had links to the international jihad in Afghan camps, or have fought in Syria along Islamist militias (*ibid.*, 2019a). These ties with foreign elements and the magnification of Uighur violence that certainly intensified during the 2012-15 wave of terrorism in Xinjiang, has led to a circular dynamic of harsher state religious policies and repression, with a posterior Islamist revival, more repression, then leading to resistance and so on.

Chinese state framing

From the territorial point of view, bearing in mind the Beijing notion of democratic centralism, the People's Republic of China is defined, unlike the USSR, as a nation-state. Despite this, it recognizes ethnic minorities and autonomy, nonetheless, there is no right of secession of regions. Plus, most of the officials (just as the population) have been ethnically Han, both in Inner China (the East) and the historical frontier regions, including Xinjiang, whose "First Secretary of the Communist Party in the region has always been a Han Chinese, not a Uighur Muslim" (Hann & Pelkmans, 2009, 1520). Nonetheless, government-led efforts have been pursued as persuading minorities like Uighur Muslims to feel as an integral part of the historical Chinese nation, having been cooperating for centuries with the Han population (Lap-Yan Kung, 2006). Whereas already before the Revolution there was and still is a widely shared superior sentiment of the Han over minorities (Hann & Pelkmans, 2009). This has contributed to limiting the presence of Uighur language or banning headscarves in schools and violating sacred (*halal*) spaces by Chinese security officers (Smith Finley, 2019a), with all the religious impact it entails for believers.

In these ethnic and religious contexts, incumbent president Xi Jinping has carried out a strong securitization of the Xinjiang conflict to fight against the "three evil forces" (Lavička, 2021, 62): terrorism, separatism and religious extremism, through a commitment of the party-sate to oversee Uighur ethnic elements to preserve the unity of the country (Klimeš, 2018). Moreover, for Chinese authorities it is clear that Uighur separatism has a "marked religious dimension" (Lap-Yan Kung, 2006, 386).

So, within this framework of the central state, regional authorities have constructed an all-encompassing system to maintain control of the security situation in front of the violence and terrorism noted above. For instance, a set of information is supposed to help officials rank the citizens' *trustworthiness*: items as Uighur ethnicity, military age, unemployed, level of religious knowledge or practice, children home-schooling, and/or links to foreign countries (Smith

Finley, 2019b). These elements may derive from the ethnic dynamics of historical confrontation, or they can be a disproportionate response to radicalization and violent acts. In either case, many Uighur/Muslim practices or identity elements are regarded as unpatriotic, potentially extremist and capable of boosting suspicious foreign interference, e.g., Saudi Wahhabism, Arab Salafism, and others that are not proper of local traditions. In this line, globalization of religion might have provoked a worry for Chinese authorities of disturbing low-level controlled Islam in Xinjiang.

To cope with this, the Chinese government has also set up a system of "re-education centres" or internment camps to promote patriotism (Smith Finley, 2019b). A patriotism which is understood as incompatible with (extreme) Islam, i. e. an exclusive loyalty conception of civil and traditional religions. Thus, these camps have become a sort of tool for coercive secularisation. These camps have become extremely controversial in and outside China, with reports of "a million or more Uighurs (…) being held in what resembles *massive internment camp that is shrouded in secrecy*" (UN Human Rights Panel cited in Reuters: Wen, Martina & Blanchard, 2018), with cases of torture and brutality besides the privation of freedom for those accused of extremism, separatism or terrorism (Smith Finley, 2019b).

Counterterrorism & repression

This camp system built up by the Chinese authorities should be placed within the counterterrorism context, even if we may classify it as disproportionate or repressive. We can study the Beijing framing of the conflict and its retaliatory action from a constructivist point of view, always bearing in mind the actual violence and terrorism perpetrated by Uighur and Islamist elements.

First, mainly before 9/11, security policies in Xinjiang were aimed against what were called counterrevolutionary acts, but afterwards, they started to be called terrorist acts (Rodríguez-Merino, 2019), probably to obtain international legitimacy in the context of the Global War on Terror since 2001 (like many other governments, indifferent of the nature of their domestic conflicts). And also, in a sense, with the objective of allowing an endless counterterrorist state of emergency in the region. According to the Chinese state, the motivation of violence is "largely the result of a dissident separatist and religious-extremist agency linked to foreign political actors" (*ibid*., 2019, 39), thus, these are the elements to be aimed to. So here we can see the interchangeable character of the concepts of separatism, religious extremism and

terrorism (Lap-Yan Kung, 2006), so the security forces had to direct their efforts towards not only the violent aspect (terrorism), but on the political (separatism) and religious (extremism).

To begin with, the level of terrorism in Xinjiang was magnified just after 9/11, when no such act had happened in China, when 3000 Uighurs were detained as separatists, and treated as potential terrorists (Smith Finley, 2019a), in a preventive way. These a priori purely security activities were broadened in a dynamic of fostering de-radicalization (in a religious lens) and patriotism (in an ethnic-political lens). Nonetheless, efforts to "purify" Islamic practice, effacing foreign practices, returning to local traditional and peaceful Islam, if not secularism, were seen by many Muslims as a humiliation. This political and religious process was carried out in the territory and also in the "political re-education centres" (*ibid*., 2019a, 82), which served as a preventive and extra-judicial incarceration. Finally, ethnic profiling of potential criminals served as a base for an increasing securitization of the conflict. Hence, we can see that the strictly counterterrorist activities (restricted to policing), later met with ethnically, religiously and politically-based profiling (monitoring activities of individuals), as well as direct preventive internment, as they were socially constructed as a threat to the national unity of China.

What is more, there was a booster for this counterterrorism that was transforming into more repression: the 2009 riots in the regional capital, Ürümqi. First peaceful protests that degenerated into violent riots, led the Chinese state to declare these acts as attacking the "core national security interests". This left free way for political reforms: unrestricting the use of force by security officers without central approval, enhanced surveillance based on the said profiling and an intrusive policing (Smith Finley, 2019a). Therefore, since the beginning of the last decade, Xinjiang has been home for a technologically advanced multi-tiered security state. This can make us wonder about whether the Chinese elite aims at stopping the violence and conflict (mostly erroneously) or at fanning the flames of the Uighur conflict to maybe fulfil the interests of the security and surveillance industry or increasing the power of internal security officials and politicians.

What is clear is that this level of securitization increases the insecurity and tension among Uighurs and, consequently, among their fellow Han citizens in Xinjiang. Social engineering directed at changing values and loyalty systems of Uighur communities is basically counterproductive and it does not promote ethnic unity, social stability or permanent order, through eradicating cultural and religious "subversive" practices (Klimeš, 2018). In this context of historical ethnic grievances, a state hostile to religion, and an oversized counterterrorist

repression, many Uighurs feel abandoned. Many of whom engage in political Uighur separatist movements, either peaceful or violent, or radicalize with local jihadist groups. Furthermore, some authors like Smith Finely (2019b) find China's counterterrorism in Xinjiang as highly compatible with the category of *state terror*, going further on than repression.

CONCLUSION

Consequently, the ultimate question is whether the Chinese state is a victim or a perpetrator: is it suffering from international terrorism and responding in a defensive manner or, guided by state atheism, is it repressing a religion and a people? We could say that both and none. On the perpetrator line, we could argue that the socialist modernization notion is not correct, at least regarding the understanding of a supposedly automatic and natural decline of religion in case of material well-being. Hence, a religious state policy of repression of Islam is necessary to push for secularisation. In this sense, it is clear that in China, religion (Islam) and patriotism are constructed as extremely incompatible, and more so with globalization, a dynamic capable of radicalizing religion with foreign elements, threatening the sovereignty of the nation.

On the victim line however, China has obviously suffered terrorism and ethnic violence by Uighur groups, but they were more local than transnational in nature. Its authorities have magnified violent acts framing all of them as religiously extremist, separatist and terrorist, normally responding in a disproportionate manner both in religious and ethnic terms. Nevertheless, repression is more focused on countering religious extremism, in the context of fight against global jihadism, but in a preventive way (see "re-education centres" for forced secularisation).

Going beyond ethnic or religious drivers that play a relevant role, we can wonder about the interests behind securitization in a counterproductive repression. Are there political and economic interests in the corporate industry and state security sectors in the surveillance and security technology in Xinjiang? Because if these policies are directed towards combating either ethnic separatism or religious extremism, they are not helping, but rather enhancing the grievances among Uighur people. Even though, if some elites benefit from maintaining the tension and violence in Xinjiang, the social, cultural and ethnic context and the secular character of China have a high impact on these policies of counterterrorism and repression.

Context is crucial, in the case of this conflict, there is a historical trend, beyond contingent interests of some sectors, that is based on focusing the development of the East (Inner China), and in a way forgetting the Western territories known as frontier regions, such as Xinjiang, Tibet or Mongolia. For instance, another potential threat for Chinese integrity with a strong religious component is the movement led by Dalai Lama, leader of both Tibetan Buddhism and its nationalist movement. In line with this, this paper has exposed the strong antagonism envisaged quite consistently throughout the People's Republic existence: patriotic versus non-patriotic or foreign. On the patriotic camp we find elements such as the revolution and the party, atheism or secularism linked to modernisation, and if not, traditional and controlled folk religions are also regarded as acceptable, like the Uighur low-level Islam can be seen as a *Chinese* Islam. On the non-patriotic camp, we can find counter-revolution, religious extreme obedience, feudal superstitions, links to global religious networks as foreign Islamist or Jihadist movements, and Uighur separatism, all of which are framed as allegiance to God or non-Chinese movements, shrinking the loyalty to the state.

With all this in mind, we shall answer the research question (*Is counterterrorism in Xinjiang the logical dynamic of religious repression in an atheist state or a pragmatic magnification of terror to serve its ethnic policies?*). To begin with, in general terms there is little consistency or continuation in the set of policies concerning religion and its repression, it has varied a great amount in a very pragmatic way throughout decades. But concerning ethnic policies, firstly, there has been a seductive accommodation intent to encompass Uighurs into the Chinese nation. And then, authorities have tried with harsher measures and force, despite the backlash in form of political and violent acts. Therefore, we could argue that there has been more of a pragmatic magnification of terror to serve the state's ethnic policies, as we have seen in the use of the Global War on Terror, the ethnic profiling in securitization and the differential benefits for Han Chinese in Xinjiang.

Nonetheless, religion plays a key role in the conflict, but more as a pretext and justification of foreign interference and radicalization, rather than actual threat to secularism or state atheism. Either way, these counterterrorist and repressive policies are not quite working, they alienate Uighurs from the state, and they cause insecurity for Han Chinese in the region too. Hence, this makes us question the drivers of the Chinese authorities, because either they are failing to secure the region with disproportioned measures, or securitization and surveillance themselves are the aim of political or industrial interests, but this would be a more profound line of investigation requiring further research on the conflict here studied.

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