

China's Concentration Camps For Uyghurs: In China's Own Words

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IN the past few years, there are increasingly disturbing reports about China's internment camps for Uyghurs in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region of China. There have been many credible academic studies as well as journalistic reports documenting the systemic incarceration of an entire nationality/ethnicity, in the name of a "war on terror." China, and Chinese media, have claimed that these reports are distortions by the "western media" and "western nations" interested in discrediting China.

Information on the issue tends to be from ideologically polarised sources. So, like so many issues in today's world, there is a tendency to take positions based on ideological camps rather than facts. Every report in the BBC, New York Times or Washington Post can be dismissed as "fake news" and "Western propaganda", while likewise any report from Xinhua or Global Times can be called "Chinese propaganda".

How should we, on the communist, Marxist Leninist Left in India and the world, view the matter? Marxists have to look at any matter from the perspective of facts and the highest principles of the rights of people and of oppressed communities. No one should choose to believe or disbelieve facts, or support or oppose oppression, based on "camps" in the global world order. There is no doubt that the US and its allies have vested interests in isolating China; and also in spreading a variety of racially motivated Sinophobic material, which has many takers in India. But that cannot mean that those who are firmly opposed to any such US/NATO agenda, make no independent assessment/criticism of China's policies and its treatment of dissenters, minorities and oppressed nationalities. In fact, it is important that if rightwing discourse is attacking China, a consistent Left must assess and critique China's policies from a firmly Marxist vantage point. Even at the height of the Cold War, the CPIML made its own independent assessments and critiques of the Soviet Union from a Marxist perspective, rather than taking stances based on Cold War camps. The CPIML also opposed the Tiananmen Square massacre. We pointed out that facts simply did not support the claim that the protesting students were all part of a rightwing pro-capitalist plot, and that regardless, nothing could justify the massacre of protesting students. In August 2009, Liberation carried a piece by Arindam Sen titled 'Mao Zedong Thought and Ethnic Clashes in Xinjiang', outlining the Chinese State's divergence from Mao's "emphasis on opposing Han chauvinism" in dealing with contradictions with minority nationalities.

On the current situation of the Uyghurs in China, Liberation attempts to separate the wheat from the chaff, by closely and critically reading China's own official public White Paper on their Uyghur policy; and their official responses to leaked documents and other reports in various news outlets. We scrutinise these official positions and responses of the Chinese state and ruling regime, to see if they match up to the principles of upholding the rights of people and oppressed communities that we on the Left demand from any regime. So, does China's policy towards the Uyghur people stand up to such scrutiny?

China's 2019 White Paper On Uyghurs

After a period of denying all reports of the existence of internment camps for Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region, China changed course, and decided not only to admit the existence of the camps but to justify and even boast of these camps as a successful model of fighting "terrorism." In March 2019, The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China published a white paper titled "The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang". This position paper can be accessed on the official website of the Chinese Government.

This paper begins with a long discourse on "terrorism", and stating that since the 1990s, and especially in the wake of the September 9/11 terror attack in the US, separatist forces aiming to establish Xinjiang as "East Turkestan" separate from China, have been indulging in terrorist activities there. The paper cites several of these instances.

Marxist Leninist principles demand that we try to identify and address the material and political basis for militancy, rather than blaming it on "outside" forces or on "religious extremists." For instance, we remind our fellow Indians that the Indian State cannot be allowed to get away with the claim that militancy in the Kashmir Valley is a product purely of Pakistani interference or "Islamic extremism". There are genuine political grievances that the Kashmiri people have: and militancy is primarily a product of the refusal of the Indian State to admit or address those grievances. For militancy in Kashmir, Manipur, or Nagaland, there are historical and political grievances at root, compounded by Indian State's brutal and repressive policy of treating entire communities in these regions as potentially "terrorist". The Chinese Government's paper on Uyghurs does exactly the same as what the Indian State does: blame militancy on "outside interference" and "religious extremists". Our August 2009 piece analysed the issued underlying Uyghur resentment and alienation. Why does the Chinese state not reflect on their own failings in addressing the root political issues, and failure to win the confidence and support of the people in the Xinjiang province?

It is also interesting that while the Chinese State blames all criticism of its Uyghur policy on "Western capitalist propaganda", its own policy document echoes the US, NATO "War on Terror" propaganda and policy (a fountainhead of Islamophobic state sponsored violence), complete with the invocation of 9/11 as a watershed moment.

Policing A Community In The Name of "Preventing" Crime

Across the world, from Black communities in the US to India's policy in Kashmir, Manipur, Nagaland, and Bastar, repressive states have labelled entire communities as prone to "crime" or "terror", to justify intrusive surveillance and state terror against people of those communities, based on their identity not on crimes committed by them. "Salwa Judum" in Bastar is one instance, where the Indian State justified acting to displace and imprison entire adivasi villages, in the name of "preventing Maoist terror".

The White Paper makes it clear that the Chinese State does much the same: treating the entire Uyghur population as prone to religious extremism and terrorism, and justifying mass incarceration of Uyghurs in "reeducation camps" in the name of "preventing" terrorism.

A UAPA On Steroids

So what is the legal basis for the Chinese State to send vast numbers of Uyghur people to such camps? What is the legal basis for judging that an Uyghur individual is in need of "reeducation"? The Counterterrorism Law of the People's Republic of China attempts to cover its own back by stating that no one should be targeted on the basis of any specific religion or ethnic identity. But this is how

the Government White Paper describes the scope of the law under which persons can be sent by “people’s courts” to the “deradicalisation” centres: “In the course of counterterrorism and de-radicalization, the local government forbids any organization or individual from using religion to split the country, spread religious extremism, incite ethnic hatred, undermine ethnic unity, disturb social order, harm citizens’ physical or mental health, hinder the implementation of the country’s administrative, judicial, educational and cultural systems, or harm national security, national interests, public interests and civil rights and interests. It prevents ill-intentioned people from using religion or religious activities to create disorder or commit crimes.”

Nearly every word in this paragraph is vague and open to arbitrary and subjective interpretation by the State. For instance, there is no clarity on how the law distinguishes spreading religious faith from “spreading religious extremism.” If a religious preacher advocates abstaining from alcohol, for example, is he spreading faith or extremism? If an Uyghur person speaks about Han Chinese majoritarian domination, or imposition of the Mandarin language, is he or she guilty of “undermining ethnic unity” or “disturbing the social order”? If an Uyghur person wears a beard, or observe a fast during Ramzan, are they hindering “implementation of the country’s cultural systems”? How does the State distinguish “ill-intentioned people” from “well-intentioned” ones?

All in all, the Counterterrorism Law of the People’s Republic of China is like India’s draconian UAPA (or its predecessors POTA and TADA) on steroids: a handy tool which empowers the State to surveil and criminalise the most innocent and ordinary of actions, especially if the said actions are committed by a religious minority or ideological dissenter.

Imposition of Mandarin Chinese Language

As Indians, we are acutely aware of the sensitivities and sensibilities of various nationalities and ethnicities regarding language. We are also aware of how India’s fascists seek to impose homogeneity in the name of “Hindi” linguistic and “Hindu” religious supremacy. India has witnessed and continues to witness mass protests — in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Assam, Karnataka, for example — against the imposition of Hindi.

Likewise, for the Uyghurs and other minority ethnicities in the Xinjiang region, language is a key, precious and sensitive part of their identity. Imposition of Mandarin Chinese (the language of the Han Chinese that constitute the majority in China) is resented, and seen, understandably as an attempt to erase Uyghur culture and identity.

The White Paper repeatedly states that the Xinjiang people’s weak command over the Mandarin Chinese language makes them less capable of telling right from wrong, illegal from legal. The vocabulary of the White Paper implies that the Uyghur people are uncivilised and childlike: and need to be civilised by being taught Mandarin Chinese and the rule of law.

The White Paper is peppered by a disturbing number of references to how “rural residents in Xinjiang” have a tendency to become criminals because they “are weak in the use of standard spoken and written Chinese language, slow in acquiring modern knowledge, and have poor communication skills”, and thus “such people are more inclined to be incited or coerced into criminality by terrorist and extremist forces.” Perhaps what is most disturbing about reading this White Paper is that it is a document China has made available in the public domain. The Chinese State feels no qualms or hesitation about declaring such racist stereotypes as its official policy! This policy terming the speakers of ethnic minorities’ own languages as “slow”, non “modern”, and “poor in communication skills”, and therefore prone to crime, is reminiscent of the Criminal Tribes Act in colonial India. Reading these passages, there is no doubt that the Chinese State’s official policy seeks to humiliate and criminalise the language, culture, and entire communities of Uyghur people.

Note: Chinese State policy openly sees knowledge of Mandarin Chinese as a test of patriotism. To put this in perspective: If the Modi regime were, in an official policy document, to declare knowledge of Hindi to be a test of patriotism, (and conversely, a lack of knowledge of Hindi as a proof of lack of intelligence and criminal/terrorist potential) it would easily be recognised and resisted as a fascist policy of enforced homogenisation.

Mass Displacement/Forced Labour?

The White Paper refers repeatedly to “transfer employment” as a job policy for the Xinjiang region: it speaks of “implementing the plan of transfer employment for 100,000 laborers in southern Xinjiang in three years (2018-2020)”; “having realized the transfer employment of 75,000 people”; and “transferring 8.305 million surplus rural labourers for employment in Xinjiang from 2016 to 2018.” What exactly does “transfer employment” mean? Do the labourers have any choice in the matter of where they choose to work, and whether or not they would like to “transfer”? There have been reports of China relocating thousands of Uyghurs from Xinjiang in western China to factories across the country where they work “under conditions that strongly suggest forced labour,” producing for a variety of global brands including Apple, Nike, Amazon, Samsung, Zara, H&M, Microsoft, Mercedes-Benz, and Uniqlo.

Is this policy of “transfer employment” forced labour? This question can only be decided by the Uighur workers themselves, if they could answer in an environment free of fear of loss of liberty. All we can say, based on the official documents and statements of the Chinese State, is that such an environment certainly does not exist.

Does China Deny The Authenticity of Leaked Documents?

Now, we come to the documents leaked, reportedly by someone from within the Chinese regime, to the New York Times newspaper in November 2019.

The first thing we at Liberation did was to check whether China questioned the authenticity of the documents. The answer is: No.

A report titled “Western media report on Xinjiang lacks morality”, the Global Times (the international version of the Chinese Communist Party’s People’s Daily newspaper) dated 17 November 2019, wrote that “The New York Times disclosed more than 400 pages of “leaked files” from Northwest China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and maliciously attacked China’s governance in Xinjiang.” The use of the word “disclosed” suggests that the Chinese State and CPC are not denying the authenticity of the documents.

The same report merely blames the critical analysis of the said documents by the NYT, on “Western public opinion used their value system to criticize the vocational education and training centers in Xinjiang.”

This very notion of a “Western value system” which is distinct from an Eastern one is a racist and colonial trope, embraced and regurgitated by rightwing ideologues in both the supposed “East” and “West”. The Indian far right, for instance, denounces Marxism and communism itself as a “Western value system”.

The report, after claiming that Xinjiang cities are now free of terror and crime, asks a question: “How many people in the world will oppose such changes in their own cities and prefer to live in a so-called democratic and free society where extremism prevails and terrorism is rampant?” Repressive regimes across the world (including that of India in Kashmir) justify restrictions on liberties and democracy as a necessary sacrifice in exchange for “safety”, “welfare” and

“development”. We may recall the Right to Privacy verdict in India which rightly observed that “The refrain that the poor need no civil and political rights and are concerned only with economic well-being has been utilised through history to wreak the most egregious violations of human rights. Above all, it must be realised that it is the right to question, the right to scrutinize and the right to dissent which enables an informed citizenry to scrutinize the actions of government.”

In the voice of the Global Times, the Chinese State effectively admits that Xinjiang under their rule is neither democratic nor free. But if you hold democracy and freedom to be vital components of any substantive safety, welfare, and development, the Chinese State dismisses you as being an advocate of a “Western value system”!

Note that the Chinese State does not claim to be upholding a socialist value system as opposed to a capitalist or imperialist one. That is a relief, since any socialist value system should by definition have higher standards of democracy, human rights, freedom, and civil liberties than the ones held by bourgeois capitalist democracies.

The Thought Police

The leaked documents read as though they are pages from a dystopian novel like Orwell’s 1984.

Students returning to Xinjiang from campuses in other parts of China for summer holidays are dismayed to find their parents, grandparents, or other relatives missing. The documents lay down instructions and a detailed Question and Answer script for local government officials, explaining the protocol for responding to the students’ anguished questions.

The first thing that strikes one, is that the documents repeatedly refer to the camps as “concentrated education and training school students”. Naturally, this is a translation from Chinese into English: but China has not claimed there is anything wrong with the translation. So, it seems clear that China in its internal documents effectively admits to holding Uyghur people in “concentration camps”.

The Q&A script makes it very clear that the persons are being detained in camps without having committed any crime at all. For instance, in reply to the question “Did they commit a crime? Will they be convicted?”, the scripted reply is: “They haven’t committed a crime and won’t be convicted.”

But the script repeatedly uses the dehumanising language of lack of “health”, “infection”, “virus”, “disease” and “malignant tumour” to describe the condition of the incarcerated Uyghur persons: “It is just that their thinking has been infected by unhealthy thoughts, and if they don’t quickly receive education and correction, they’ll become a major active threat to society and to your family. It’s very hard to totally eradicate viruses in thinking in just a short time. It needs to be dealt with like detox for drug addicts.”

The script warns the students that their own conduct can affect the amount of time for which their relatives are detained: “family members, including you, must abide by the state’s laws and rules, and not believe or spread rumors, and take an active part in collective life. Only then can you add points for your family member, and after a period of assessment they can leave the school if they meet course completion standards.”

The script also indicates that the camps are no less than prisons. In reply to the question “Can my family members ask for leave to visit me?”, the script offers the reply: “This is strict, regulated and concentrated training behind closed doors....In general, leave won’t be granted while they’re in training and study. If you want to see your family member, we can arrange for you to see them through video.”

The documents also prescribe strict surveillance and censorship of the students and their social media posts, and “direct thought guidance” to indoctrinate these students, warning that “Returning students from other parts of China have widespread social ties across the entire country. The moment they issue incorrect opinions on WeChat, Weibo and other social media platforms, the impact is widespread and difficult to eradicate.” It is clear from this that the Chinese State is the Thought Police which decides which opinions are “incorrect”, and which openly and unashamedly claims the authority to tell students what to think.

The documents’ claims that they are providing “jobs” and “vocational training” to improve the lives of the incarcerated persons is undermined by the fact that many detainees had careers as scholars, civil servants and entertainers, and are being detained as punishment for their “incorrect thoughts”.

“He refused to round up everyone who should be rounded up”

The documents leaked to NYT revealed that in August 2016, a hard-liner named Chen was transferred from Tibet to govern Xinjiang. Chen issued an order to “Round up everyone who should be rounded up.” This vague order made it clear that the criteria for being “rounded up” were entirely arbitrary. One official Wang, who ordered the release of more than 7,000 camp inmates, was punished by being “detained, stripped of power and prosecuted.” His confession, in which he wrote (presumably under duress) that “Without approval and on my own initiative, I broke the rules,” was publicly read out to officials in Xinjiang. But the real reason for his punishment was hidden in a secret internal report which was among the leaked documents. The report said that “He refused to round up everyone who should be rounded up”: a phrase that could have come straight from the pen of Orwell. (The New York Times article on the leaked documents can be read on Indian Express)

Islamophobia and Double Standards

Remember when Trump instituted the “Muslim Ban”, banning immigrants or refugees from certain Muslim majority countries, associating those countries with terrorism? That policy was rightly protested for its Islamophobia and racism. The Chinese State’s documents display a similar Islamophobia. The Q&A script cites a question frequently asked by students about their incarcerated relatives: why were Xinjiang residents being detained in camps for travelling to two dozen Muslim majority countries (including Turkey and Saudi Arabia) using passports issued by the Chinese State? The reply: “Because they have visited countries where religious extremism is very serious and they may have come under its influence, the dangers are immense as soon as the buds of religious extremism appear. That’s why it’s really necessary to put them through legal-system education and patriotic education after they return.” The Global Times report cited above states that some areas in southern Xinjiang are sensitive to chaos and terror because they “are bordered by Pakistan and Afghanistan.”

The double standards and hypocrisy of the US when it comes to attacking China on the question of Islamophobia, civil rights, racism, and detention/internment camps are obvious. But the hypocrisy and double standards of countries like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey in supporting China’s Uyghur policy are also glaringly obvious.

Among the more than 50 countries that have signed onto a letter endorsing Chinese “governance” in Xinjiang, are the same Pakistan and Saudi Arabia that Chinese State documents associate with terror and religious extremism. So, Uyghur persons are persecuted for visiting Pakistan and Saudi Arabia: yet Pakistan and Saudi Arabia support this persecution. Turkey under Erdogan is busy repatriating Uyghur refugees to China to face certain imprisonment and possible death, using the underhand means of first allowing them to be extradited to a third country. Pakistan and Turkey are very loud on the violation of human rights of the people of Kashmir by the Indian State. Why are they

silent and complicit in the violation of human rights of the Uyghur people by the Chinese State?

We do not have to look further than China's own documents and its own propaganda organs to recognise that the Chinese State is holding vast numbers of Uyghurs in concentration camps, subjecting the entire Uyghur community both inside and outside the camps to forced indoctrination, surveillance and censorship, and attempting to erase the identity and culture of the Uyghur people. China has been touting its Xinjiang model as a successful model of "counterterrorism" which the world should adopt. Certainly, Narendra Modi and his fascist regime in India, would be happy to adopt China's Xinjiang model for Kashmir, and for minorities and dissenters in the whole of India, lock, stock, and barrel.

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