

The Tibetan and Uighur struggles for justice

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Contents

- [Uighur struggle](#)
- [National movements](#)
- [Western support?](#)

Chinese authorities had detained more than 1000 Tibetans by April 3 in the wake of protests and riots calling for self-determination that started on March 10, the BBC reported on April 4.

According to Tibetan sources, 140 protesters have been shot by police and troops. The Chinese government has only acknowledged 18 deaths: those that occurred on March 14 when crowds rioted in Lhasa. Most of these victims were Hui and Han Chinese, killed by rioters who were burning and looting non-Tibetan businesses.

The protests began on March 10 with commemorations by Buddhist monks and nuns in Lhasa of the anniversary of the unsuccessful 1959 uprising against Chinese rule. Perhaps seeking to avoid a public relations problem in the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics, the response of the Chinese authorities was initially relatively restrained.

However, this restraint disappeared after March 14, when the clergy's protests triggered spontaneous outpourings of anger by ordinary Tibetans that spread throughout the Tibet Autonomous Region and the Tibetan-majority areas of the neighbouring Gansu, Qinghai and Sichuan provinces.

Uighur struggle

Meanwhile, on March 23 and 24 more 1000 people from the Uighur nationality demonstrated in the city of Khotan in the south of the Autonomous Region of Xinjiang. The protests were sparked by the killing in police custody of Uighur businessperson Mutallip Hajim and restrictions on women wearing Islamic headscarves.

The Uighurs, along with most of the non-Han nationalities in Xinjiang, are Muslim. More than 500 Uighurs have been detained by Chinese authorities who blamed the Khotan protests on the "three evil forces" of separatism, terrorism and religious extremism.

The grievances fuelling both Tibetan and Uighur opposition to Chinese rule are broadly similar. In both cases, while incorporation into the People's Republic of China in the decade following the 1949 revolution brought economic development and the elimination of oppressive pre-capitalist class relations, this was offset by cultural and religious persecution and discrimination vis-a-vis Han Chinese, reflected in significantly lower indicators in education, health and employment.

In both Tibet and Xinjiang, the market-driven economic reforms of the 1980s and '90s that lead to the integration of China into the global capitalist economy increased national tensions. The boom in

Chinese manufacturing has been largely concentrated in the coastal provinces of the east, with Xinjiang and Tibet confined to being sources of raw materials.

Furthermore, the sparsely populated autonomous regions have become destinations for Han Chinese transmigration. The discrimination and educational disadvantage faced by the local population has meant that, in both Xinjiang and Tibet, the rapidly growing modern sector of the economy and the work force is dominated by transmigrants.

National movements

The Chinese government portrays the separatist movements as backward-looking. However, it is the exclusion of the local populations from the benefits of development, not development itself, that is fuelling anti-Chinese sentiment in Tibet and Xinjiang.

In both Tibet and Xinjiang, the national movements have a religious aspect: Buddhist in the case of the former, Muslim in that of the latter. That the Tibetan protests have become a major issue in the Western media while those of the Uighurs have been largely ignored can be partly explained by the Islamophobia that has become a central feature of imperialist propaganda since the “war on terror”, which has replaced the anti-Communist Cold War as the main justification for Western aggression against the Third World.

The main pro-independence organisation in Xinjiang, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, is classified as a terrorist group in the US as well as in China. During the Cold War, the CIA supported armed nationalist groups in both Tibet and Xinjiang until the rapprochement between China and the West in 1972.

However, the prominent coverage of Tibet also reflects a popular Western myth that portrays the isolated, Himalayan country as having been a spiritually-inclined utopia.

In reality it was a society comprised mainly of impoverished, overworked and illiterate serfs whose subservience to the theocratic nobility was enforced with institutionalised torture. During the Cold War the myth of a utopia was promoted and it was successfully exploited by the leader of the theocratic elite, the Dalai Lama, after he fled to India following the crushing of the 1959 uprising.

Notwithstanding that he started his political career as theocratic despot, and took 60 tonnes of treasure with him into exile, the Dalai Lama’s saintly image has seen him win the Nobel Peace Prize. Not surprisingly, Western politicians are as keen as rock gods and movie stars to be seen meeting him.

Western support?

However, while verbal support for Tibet is sometimes used by the Western politicians to strengthen their position with respect to China, it would be a mistake to assume that, as was the case during the Cold War, Western imperialist powers are seeking Tibetan independence.

Not only is China embracing capitalism, it has become essential to the globalised economy. The booming manufacturing industry of eastern China is either directly or indirectly controlled by Western capital.

While many leftists and anti-imperialists see self-determination for Tibet as a tool to open up Tibet to

the imperialist global market, this is ignoring the fact that the imperialist global market is reaching Tibet through the Beijing-Lhasa railway.

The West's desire not to see China dismembered is reflected by the Dalai Lama, who supports autonomy, as opposed to independence, as makes moral strictures against rioting. This is creating a divergence between his government-in-exile and Tibetans inside the country.

For its part, the Chinese government is using the similarity between the self-determination struggles in Tibet and Xinjiang to tar the Tibetans with the terrorism brush. On April 1, public security ministry spokesperson Wu Heping accused the Dalai Lama of preparing squads of suicide bombers to attack the Olympics.

P.S.

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