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Despite rapid economic growth, national and religious tensions are rising in Xinjiang in north-western China. The CWI's standpoint on this important issue has been called into question by some individuals within the Chinese left – this article explains our position.

The Turkic-speaking Uighur Muslims, the largest ethnic group in Xinjiang, are today less reconciled to rule by Beijing than at any time since the foundation of the Chinese state in 1949. This is the result of official racism, discrimination, and political and religious repression. The 8 million Uighurs, 2 million Kazakhs and a further 2 million smaller Muslim minorities, suffer higher unemployment, worse poverty rates and lower life expectancies than their Han Chinese counterparts. This is despite years of rapid economic growth, although the proceeds of this growth are extremely unequally divided across China as a whole, with a big layer also among the Han majority almost completely cut off from the so-called economic 'miracle'.

The process of capitalist counterrevolution and destruction of the Maoist social safety-net has enormously reinforced segregation between Han, Uighurs and other ethnic groups in Xinjiang. Uighurs have on average about ten years less life expectancy than Han Chinese, a gap that has widened as healthcare and education have been priced out of the reach of the rural population. While Uighurs and other non-Han peoples account for 60 percent of Xinjiang's total population, in the countryside they make up three-quarters. In 2004, per capita net income in Xinjiang was 7,600 yuan, but only 2,269 yuan in the countryside. [People's Daily, 22 February 2005].

As one Western report noted, "Over the past twenty years, with the end of the policy of the 'iron rice bowl' (tiefanwan) and the arrival of greater numbers of well-qualified Uighurs and, in particular, Han in the job market, the integration

of some elite Uighurs has become more problematical. Thus, many young Uighurs of working-class or middle-class origins reproach the Chinese regime for not providing them with job opportunities commensurate with their training and, instead, for favouring the appointment of Han to management posts." (The Uighurs in Xinjiang – The Malaise Grows, Rémi Castets, China Perspectives No 49, 2003).

Neo-liberalism and repression

Harsher economic conditions under the whip of the 'market' have resulted in a layer of Uighur youth turning to crime and drug addiction, and still others towards political Islam – turning to the past in search of solutions. This background also explains the failure of the Chinese regime to develop a stronger pro-China elite among the Muslim population of Xinjiang. Such an elite does exist but it is not extensive. Less than 38 percent of the membership of the Xinjiang Communist Party were drawn from the minorities in 1997, and these are "often held down in posts with little power or posts where they can be easily controlled," according to the above mentioned report. At no time since 1949 has the key position of CCP Secretary in Xinjiang been held by a non-Han appointee.

One of the clearest manifestations of Han Chinese domination is the paramilitary state farming organisation, XPCC (Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps), which controls nearly a third of Xinjiang's farmland and produces a quarter of its industrial output. Of the XPCC's 2.4 million members, 90 percent are Han, and it is hardly surprising therefore that many Uighurs see it as a "colonising" force.

Today's mix of neo-liberal economic policies and increased state repression is potentially explosive. According to Amnesty International:

"There are increasing reports of Han Chinese

property developers forcing Uighurs from their land. Tens of thousands of Uighur books have been banned and burned and Uighur has been banned as a teaching language for most subjects in Xinjiang University.” [Amnesty International Report, 7 July 2004].

Spokesmen for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) console themselves that open displays of pro-independence sentiment are not as evident today as a decade ago. This is due to a combination of several factors: 1) increased repression especially after the 9/11 terror attacks and the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001; 2) the economic boom that has benefited a minority of mainly urbanised Uighurs; 3) massive disillusionment over the results of capitalist ‘independence’ across the border in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. Beneath this surface ‘calm’, however, Xinjiang remains a time bomb.

“Develop the West”

Xinjiang is three times the size of France, accounting for one-sixth of the territory of China today. It contains a quarter of China’s oil and gas reserves and over a third of its coal. Its geopolitical importance to the Chinese regime has increased immeasurably with China’s emergence as a global power. For Beijing, Xinjiang is the ‘gateway’ to the oil and mineral reserves of Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states. A frenetic and largely Chinese-financed pipeline construction boom is underway across Central Asia, accompanied by a new diplomatic and military ‘Great Game’ pitting China, Russia, the US, and other regional powers against each other in a struggle primarily for energy resources but also for political leverage. Completed in December 2005, the Chinese-built cross-border pipeline from Kazakhstan’s Turgai basin accounts for 15 percent of China’s total crude oil imports. [Xinhua, 25 May 2006].

Fearing that its grip on Xinjiang and other western provinces was slipping, the Beijing government launched the Western Development Program in the year 2000, involving huge infrastructure projects and efforts to entice foreign investment to these provinces, where non-Han ethnic and linguistic groups still outnumber Han Chinese. Xinjiang’s energy-rich Tarim Basin, described by Chinese government spokesmen as “another Saudi Arabia”, is being opened to for-

eign oil companies for exploration. Based on a surge of central government investment, Xinjiang’s per capita GDP has been lifted from near the bottom to twelfth out of 31 administrative divisions (provinces and municipalities) in China. But again, this development has bypassed the majority of ordinary Uighurs. Despite its oil and gas wealth, the Tarim Basin, home to three quarters of Xinjiang’s Uighur population, has one of the lowest per capita GDP ratios in the province.

The 1949 revolution and the minorities

The national question within the current Chinese state is extraordinarily complex and potentially explosive – the legacy of national oppression under the feudal-imperial state of the Manchus and then Chiang Kai-shek’s bourgeois nationalist dictatorship (1927-49).

The Chinese Revolution of 1949 offered an unprecedented opportunity, a starting point, to resolve these national conflicts. By abolishing capitalism and landlordism and undertaking industrialisation on the basis of state ownership and planning, the revolution brought enormous social gains in the field of education, healthcare, industrial infrastructure and conditions for the broad masses in society. But the revolution was not a classical proletarian revolution based on the working class of the cities.

Unlike Lenin and Trotsky in the Russian Revolution of 1917, Mao Zedong and the CCP leadership based themselves on the rural masses. The main instrument of change, rather than a democratic workers’ party based on mass trade unions and factory committees, was the army under a ready-made bureaucratic command structure. Because of the intrinsically national basis and outlook of the revolution (Lenin explained that the peasantry, “is the least international of all classes”), and due to its Stalinist leadership, modeled on the bureaucratic one-party dictatorship of Stalin in the USSR, the new state not only failed to resolve national antagonisms in China but in many cases further inflamed them.

Rather than the conscious working class internationalism that animated Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks, the worldview of Mao’s regime could best be described as radical Han nationalism, combining opposition to foreign imperialism with

an intolerant and chauvinist attitude towards the national minorities of the former Chinese empire. Xinjiang, like Tibet, was regarded as so much strategic real estate, to be incorporated into the new state at all costs – by force if necessary.

The nominal ‘regional autonomy’ which Xinjiang enjoys on paper (the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region was set up in 1955), in no way satisfies the thirst of the Uighurs and other groups for genuine control over their own lives. In practice, this has meant a succession of erratic policy swings – relaxing and then increasing religious and political repression – as local leaders interpret the latest political pronouncements from Beijing and modify them to suit their own interests.

It is true that during the Mao era efforts were made to assist the integration and development of China’s minorities. Article 77 of the Constitution of the PRC guarantees “the protection of national customs and special cultural features as well as linguistic freedom”. In the 1950s there was a huge expansion of the press and education in minority languages. But this took place under the strict censorship and limits imposed by the centre. In the consciousness of China’s national minorities, or at least a large section of the most oppressed, the repressive nature of military-bureaucratic rule by the CCP tended to cloud out its role in abolishing landlordism and capitalism and instituting far-reaching social reforms.

Mao’s agrarian revolution – the shattering of feudalism, nationalisation of the land and its distribution to the poor peasants – was hugely progressive not just from the standpoint of China, but the Asian continent as a whole. But there was nevertheless a bureaucratic downside due to the ham-fisted ‘one-model-fits-all’ manner in which these policies were carried out. This was shown most clearly in regard to national minorities like the Uighurs. The traditional pastoral farming which had applied in much of Xinjiang for centuries did not fit the central government emphasis on settled agriculture. Coupled to the overly optimistic timetable for agriculture under the first Five Year Plan, this led to a massive migration of Han Chinese farmers to Xinjiang, encroaching on land traditionally used by Uighur herdsmen.

U-turns in policy

During the Great Leap Forward in 1958, Mao pushed for immediate and full collectivisation of agriculture, at a time when the still low level of industry meant this was doomed in advance to fail. The complete ‘communisation’ of rural life – with farming communities working, eating and living together – also led to increased national tensions in Xinjiang, as communal dining halls served a standardised Chinese diet including pork dishes, which Muslims refused to eat. A decade later, during the Cultural Revolution, not only religion, but the wearing of traditional national costumes and even minority languages and scripts were branded as “feudal” and “backward” – minority newspapers and radio stations were shut down.

The hooligan attacks on religion during the Cultural Revolution had absolutely nothing to do with Marxism or socialism. Engels lambasted the anarchists in London in the 1870s when they declared “war on religion”. He described this as a piece of stupidity, and predicted the result would be the opposite to that intended – that by offending the religious sensitivities of Christian workers, their faith would be reinforced. For genuine Marxists, the unity of the working class in real struggle – including workers with religious beliefs – is paramount. Religious ideas will lose their grip over the masses only when the material conditions of poverty, hunger and oppression have been eliminated. On the way toward this goal, tact and sensitivity is needed from a revolutionary leadership – not the sledgehammer approach of the Maoist Red Guards.

The sharpening tensions between the ruling Stalinist bureaucracies of China and the Soviet Union, which culminated in the withdrawal of all Soviet military and technical advisors from China in 1962, and an accompanying exodus of 100,000 Kazakhs and other Muslims from China to the USSR, gave rise to a particularly fierce struggle between these two ostensibly ‘socialist’ regimes for influence in Xinjiang and Central Asia. Moscow began to finance underground pro-independence organisations inside Xinjiang and anti-China radio broadcasts in Uighur and other regional languages. This had nothing to do with genuine support for the national rights of the Uighur masses, but represented a cynical power struggle between two rival bureaucratic elites,

each seeking to discredit the other and extract political capital. In the case of the Russian Stalinists, paying lip service to the cause of Uighur independence was also a way to ward off growing disenchantment among the 40 million or so Muslims inside the USSR.

In the 1980s, under Deng Xiaoping, representatives of the central government 'apologised' for the mistakes of the Cultural Revolution and encouraged a religious and cultural thaw. Many new mosques were built and Koran schools opened, many privately. The reason for this was the shift towards pro-capitalist policies at a national level, and the corresponding need to build new points of popular support for the Dengist wing of the bureaucracy against the Maoist old guard.

According to A. Altuni, "In order to gain support for economic reforms, the Chinese government decided to promote the establishment of religious centres and mosques so that the Uighurs, instead of being politically active, were 'busy' with religious activities." [The Uighurs – Cultural Policy in The Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (East Turkestan), not dated].

The pattern of continuous u-turns in Chinese policy towards Xinjiang stretches to the present day – each turn producing greater insecurity and distrust. Beijing's short-sightedness is shown by Deng's enthusiastic backing for US imperialism's covert war against the USSR in Afghanistan, which helped create the viciously anti-communist and reactionary Islamic jihadist groups, such as Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda. The Chinese government sent hundreds of PLA advisors to train the jihadists, which included Uighurs from Xinjiang, at camps in Pakistan and, in the late 1980s, also inside Xinjiang itself. According to Muhammad Najibullah, the former Afghan president who was tortured, castrated and executed by the Taliban in 1996, the Chinese regime "played one of the most important roles in the war." [John Cooley, *Unholy Wars*, Pluto Press, 2002].

The 'blowback' from Deng's policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which border on Xinjiang, led China in 1996 to unleash a new reign of terror, the 'Strike Hard' campaign against 'splittism'. According to Amnesty International, the rate of executions in Xinjiang during the late 1990s soared to ten times the average for China as a

whole.

The last decade has seen a wave of Chinese traders and workers – numbering hundreds of thousands – migrating to Central Asia and Russia, where they have become a convenient target for racist attacks by bourgeois politicians, including close advisors to Russia's president Putin. The fate of these Chinese migrants is interwoven with Beijing's policy towards the Uighurs, raising the danger of anti-Chinese pogroms across the border in 'payment' for future atrocities by the Chinese state in Xinjiang.

11 September and right-wing political Islam

The Bush Administration's global 'war on terror' and the 2001 Afghan war marked a new turning point in Xinjiang's internal politics. This shift in the international situation was seized upon by the Chinese regime to step up its control over Xinjiang's mosques and religious establishments, and to brand all demands for greater national freedom as 'terrorism'. Whereas prior to these events, Beijing had chosen to play down the threat of the armed jihadist groups, in the aftermath of 9/11 the role of even long dormant (if not extinct) groups began to feature heavily in official propaganda.

This followed several years of increasingly violent conflict in Xinjiang in the late 1990s. Around 200 Uighurs were executed after a peaceful demonstration turned violent in the city of Ghulja (Yining in Chinese) in February 1997. Following this, the central government's 'Strike Hard' campaign largely succeeded in smashing those sections of the nationalist movement that had adopted the mistaken methods of individual terrorism – assassinations of Han officials or prominent pro-regime Uighurs. The worst of these attacks were the Ürümqi bus bombings in February 1997, killing nine people and injuring 74. But Beijing's military victory came at a political cost – in further alienating large sections particularly of the Uighur youth.

Marxists have always been implacable opponents of the methods of individual terror, which as far as the liberation of oppressed peoples are concerned, represent a blind alley. Never in history have such methods succeeded in overthrowing an oppressive regime. Instead, by pro-

viding a pretext for even more brutal repression and because they exacerbate ethnic and religious divisions within the working class, terrorist methods can seriously undermine the possibilities for developing a mass struggle against totalitarianism and capitalism.

But while the spokesmen of the CCP in Xinjiang have triumphantly pronounced that “compared to the early and mid-1990s, the threat of separatism has diminished”, the continuation of repression and ethnic-religious discrimination can again in the future push a layer of the younger generation towards terroristic methods in the mistaken belief these are the only way to fight back.

In January 2007, Chinese soldiers raided a training camp run by the East Turkestan Islamic Movement – Party of Allah (ETIM) in the Pamir plateau of Western Xinjiang near the Afghan border, killing 18 alleged terrorists. The facts about this military operation remain unclear. Support for ETIM, which is also listed as a ‘terrorist organisation’ by the Bush Administration, is undoubtedly exaggerated by the Chinese regime to justify its repression in Xinjiang. ETIM has links to the ‘jihadists’ in Afghanistan and Central Asia, including al Qaeda, but most Uighurs belong to the Sufi tradition of Islam – regarded as heretics by the ultra-reactionary Wahhabi sect to which al Qaeda owes ideological allegiance.

Accounts from inside Xinjiang indicate the influence of right-wing political Islam, including groups such as ETIM, is not significant at this stage. For the majority of Uighurs, theirs is still primarily a national and pan-Turkic struggle, rather than a pan-Islamic one. It is revealing that Islamism groups like ETIM do not try to recruit the Chinese-speaking Hui Muslims, who are a significant minority in Xinjiang numbering almost 1 million.

For urbanised Uighurs especially, including the working class, the idea of a theocratic regime holds no attraction, however much they dislike Chinese rule. But this is no guarantee that the influence of political Islam cannot grow in future as a backlash against Beijing’s policies and widening inequality. Accompanying this is also a real danger that Islamism currents – under the influence of groups operating in the wider region – will evolve in an extreme religious chauvinist

and racist direction, further complicating the task of building united working class resistance to the right-wing anti-poor policies of the Chinese regime.

Central Asia – failed capitalist states

Xinjiang experienced a surge of pro-independence sentiment following the break-up of the Soviet Union and the creation of independent republics in Central Asia, most of them with strong cultural, religious and linguistic connections to the Uighurs. This aroused the hope among many Uighurs that with support for their cause coming from the new states, a ‘domino effect’ would break China’s grip over Xinjiang. These hopes were quickly dashed. The ‘independent’ republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have for the most part in practice remained tribute states of capitalist Russia, trying to counterbalance this dependence by striking deals with the US and an increasingly assertive China.

Inevitably, on the basis of capitalism and imperialism, these republics have become synonymous with autocracy, corruption, repression and grinding poverty, making the region as a whole one of the most unstable in the world – hardly a model for an independent Uighur or East Turkestan state. Even the Economist magazine, that mouthpiece of neo-liberalism, was forced to concede that, “In economic terms, the collapse of the Soviet Union was a disaster for the region.” [Economist Survey of Central Asia, 24 July 2003].

In the sphere of foreign policy, Central Asia’s pro-bourgeois regimes have bent over backwards to accommodate China, a process culminating in the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2000. This ‘security alliance’ to combat ‘separatism and terrorism’ in the region, was the final blow to any lingering illusions in pan-Turkic ‘solidarity’ against the oppression of the Uighur people on the part of Central Asia’s ruling elites. By the late 1990s, tens of thousands of Uighur exiles in these states faced a nightmare existence – under the constant threat of deportation back to China. Many who suffered this fate have been executed or incarcerated. This is one of the main reasons why around a thousand Uighur exiles fled to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan – which for many was

the only remaining sanctuary.

Marxism and the National Question

The CWI supports the right of self-determination for the Uighurs and other national minorities in China, up to and including the right of separation. We stand for a democratic socialist China, with an appeal to the national minorities to remain within a unitary socialist state, but with real autonomy, rather than the fake autonomy that applies today. This would be the most advantageous basis to defeat capitalism and build a truly socialist society. But this can only be achieved on a voluntary basis, without coercion. The stand of Mao and the Chinese Stalinists was wholly at odds with the tradition of genuine Marxism. During the struggle against Chiang Kai-shek in the 1930s and 40s, especially when Mao's forces were facing a struggle for survival, they gave assurances to respect the right of self-determination for Uighurs and other minority nationalities. But these assurances were cynically reneged upon once the CCP's position had become unassailable.

Contrast this to the position of Lenin and Trotsky during the founding years of the Soviet Union. In their earlier debates, Rosa Luxemburg – a great Marxist who nevertheless made serious mistakes in relation to the national question – argued that Lenin's policy would lead to national fragmentation and divisions within the working class. Lenin explained that, on the contrary, with the element of compulsion removed, the majority of the national minorities within the old Russian empire would opt to stay within the framework of a voluntary union of socialist republics. However, as the case of Finland shows, where the clearly expressed wish of the masses was for secession, Lenin and the Bolshevik government supported this, granting the Finns independence in December 1917. For Lenin, Trotsky, and genuine Marxism, the decisive criterion is how best to strengthen and preserve the fighting unity of the working class, something that takes precedence over national boundaries.

In today's world, under the blows of neo-liberalism and intensified imperialist domination, the national question almost everywhere is even more complex than during Lenin and Trotsky's time. Xinjiang is no exception. If we assume a majority of Uighurs want an independent state, it

is far from certain a majority in the eastern and northern parts of Xinjiang – where there is a Han Chinese majority – would go along with this. Here is the potential for serious inter-ethnic conflicts that can be exploited by national capitalist elites for their own ends.

The Uighurs today account for less than half Xinjiang's population (45 percent) and the influx of Han Chinese, which has increased on the basis of the recent oil and gas boom, means the Han now account for at least 41 percent of the population, and are a clear majority in major cities like Ürümqi. Uighurs are still a majority in the poorer regions of western and southern Xinjiang including the prefectures of Kashgar, Khotan, and Aksu. While there is a clear Muslim majority in the province as a whole, at around 60 percent, this includes Kazakhs (7 percent of the total population), Hue (5 percent) and smaller minority groups such as Kyrgyz, Tatars, Uzbeks, and Tajiks. The relationship of these groups to each other is sometimes quite complicated, as for example, between Turkic-speaking Muslim groups and the Chinese-speaking Hue.

Within the Han Chinese community too there are myriad social and cultural divisions, between the minority who have lived in Xinjiang for generations and the majority of post-1949 arrivals, including the most recent waves of migrant workers, many of whom do not want to settle permanently. While supporting the right of nations to self-determination, socialists do not stand for replacing the discrimination of the Uighurs with discrimination against the Han Chinese. The experience of the Serbian minority in Kosovo (formally a 'province' of Serbia, but now a de facto independent statelet under imperialist UN 'protection') who now find themselves in the position of an oppressed national group, underlines how long-standing national conflicts cannot be solved within a capitalist framework, but will inevitably flare up again and again. It is the duty of socialists to struggle against national divisions within the working class and strive for unity in order to overthrow capitalism and authoritarianism.

Lenin summed up this approach, referring to the relations between Ukrainian and Russian socialists:

"If a Ukrainian Marxist allows himself to be swayed by his quite legitimate and natural ha-

tred of the Great-Russian oppressors to such a degree that he transfers even a particle of this hatred, even if it be only estrangement, to the proletarian culture and proletarian cause of the Great-Russian workers, then such a Marxist will get bogged down in bourgeois nationalism. Similarly, the Great-Russian Marxist will be bogged down, not only in bourgeois, but also in Black-Hundred nationalism, if he loses sight, even for a moment, of the demand for complete equality for the Ukrainians, or of their right to form an independent state. (V. I. Lenin, *Critical Remarks on the National Question*, 1913)

[<http://Marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1913/crnq/3.htm>]

For a Socialist Xinjiang and a Socialist China

At this stage, it is not certain that a majority of Uighurs want outright independence. Despite the extremely lop-sided effects of today's economic growth, it is clear that Xinjiang benefits from economic integration with the rest of China, and there is an understandable fear even among Uighurs that an independent state of East Turkestan could suffer lost jobs and investments. However, if the majority opted for independence, socialists would support this, but with the slogan of an "independent democratic socialist East Turkestan", explaining that the grip of the Beijing regime (and the capitalist elites in Central Asia who also oppose independence), can only be broken by a successful socialist revolution on an all-China and all-Asia basis.

Only by linking their struggle, in other words, with a mass revolutionary movement of the working class in China and internationally, with the aim of ending capitalism and despotism, can the national oppression of the Uighur people be overcome. On the basis of a democratic workers' and poor peasants' government, the people of Xinjiang would be free to decide what their relationship should be with the Chinese state, whether independence (with democratic guarantees including the right to autonomy or separation for the Han majority regions), or for genuine autonomy within a unified state. This would include the

possibility of a wider socialist federation – on a democratic and voluntary basis – of China, Central Asia and Russia, opening boundless possibilities for the development of the massive economic potential of Eurasia.

On the basis of capitalism and imperialism, the national conflict in Xinjiang and the wider region is insoluble. This is why Marxists refuse to give any support to the existing nationalist parties and groupings – secular or religious – none of which put forward an alternative to capitalism and therefore, regardless of their stated aims, stand not for the abolition of oppression and poverty, but only for changing the national-state forms of this oppression. But we are completely opposed to the suppression of nationalist or religious organisations by the Chinese state and support their right to operate legally, just as we call for full democratic rights: freedom of political activity, freedom of worship, right of assembly, a free press etc. We defend the national and cultural rights of Uighurs and other minorities, including the right to use their own language in dealing with the state, equal status for minority languages in the school system and an end to all forms of discrimination in respect of jobs, housing and public services.

The working class in Xinjiang, and elsewhere, must organise independently of all capitalist political formations. To liberate itself it must forge links with the workers of other nations and other provinces of China. The Han Chinese working class must also embrace the struggle against national and religious oppression in Xinjiang as its own struggle. Xinjiang has become a training ground for the latest techniques in state repression and 'anti-terrorism' that will be used against all those who stand up to the dictatorial CCP regime: striking workers, anti-pollution activists, pro-democracy activists and socialists. Only by building a united working class movement, within which members of the oppressed national minorities will play a crucial role, can capitalism, authoritarianism and national oppression be consigned to the history books.