

PRIDE, PREJUDICE, PROTEST AND PROGRESS

BY ALIM SEYTOFF

Against great odds, Uyghur activists in exile are learning to make their concerns better known in the international community.

The Uyghur people are among dozens of non-Han peoples living within the current borders of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Uyghurs regard the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR)—known to them as East Turkistan—as their ancestral homeland, as do Uyghurs who for generations have lived in neighboring Central Asian states.

But East Turkistan's 10 million or so Uyghurs are slowly losing their sense of belonging, and our culture and history are being systematically marginalized. Once the owners of a vibrant and diverse culture astride the Silk Road, the Uyghur people, our traditions and heritage are now treated as secondary and incidental to the history and culture of Mainland China.

The dignity of the Uyghur people is greatly reduced under China's current system of regional autonomy. An official Chinese Web site describes the Uyghur people thus: "Uyghurs love dancing, singing and playing their own unique musical instruments. They are hospitable people. Visitors will be invited to taste sweet grapes, melons and plums, drink tea, and join the lively dancing."¹

Yet the Chinese authorities regularly respond to accusations that Uyghur, Tibetan or Mongolian culture is being undermined by claiming that in fact those cultures are being protected and "developed" under China's care. What country, nation or people would willingly entrust their identity to the Chinese authorities? China's own cultural heritage has disappeared or is being destroyed before our very eyes—the *hutongs* of Beijing, the Three Gorges, imprisoned and exiled writers and artists, human lives valued by the market price of a person's internal organs—so why would anyone entrust their culture to such "care" as that?

This desecration of our identity—portraying us as innocent and fun-loving—is almost certainly intended to deliberately belittle us, to make us not only harmless but also actually welcoming to strangers, even Chinese strangers. In East Turkistan it is next to impossible to protest against these official portrayals of us and our culture, never mind attempt to correct them. Indeed, it is impossible to assert any kind of identity that is first

and foremost Uyghur or anything else that implicitly or explicitly rejects being some kind of "pseudo-Chinese."

But the belittling of our culture and identity under Chinese rule is nothing compared to the systematic violations of the Uyghur people's civil and political rights—violations that for decades now have been a way of life for the Uyghur people.

Uyghurs in East Turkistan who have protested either individually or collectively against violations of their civil and political rights have suffered the same brutal responses as other "minorities" in the PRC. Prisons, labor camps and even graveyards in East Turkistan are bursting with Uyghurs who were perceived—correctly or otherwise—to have voiced nationalistic expressions; our religion, a moderate and permissive form of Islam, is seen by the Chinese state if not as a vehicle for Uyghur nationalism, then as a call to violent *jihād*; it is illegal for children to enter a mosque or receive religious instruction in the privacy of their own home; any expression of Uyghur nationalism is regarded as a potential spark for a "color revolution" of the kind recently seen in Central Asia; and even our language is being banned from schools and universities in favor of the "more advanced" Mandarin Chinese.

All of this will be familiar to Tibetans and their supporters throughout the world, as will the fact that even the Chinese government concedes that, according to most major indicators, including longevity, education and income, Uyghurs are falling behind the growing numbers of Chinese settlers in East Turkistan. Similarly, Uyghurs are the focus of China's strict family planning program in East Turkistan, supposedly as a measure for poverty alleviation, while Chinese settlers are often lured to the region with lucrative enticements and bonuses from the state that are never offered to Uyghurs.

Added to all of this is the Chinese government's unstated policy in the wake of September 11 to label Uyghur political opposition as "terrorist." One immediate effect of this is that Uyghurs are—almost without exception—the only people in the PRC to be executed for non-violent political crimes. Another is that Uyghurs have no safe harbor for thousands and thousands of miles if they choose to attempt to flee East Turkistan. Uyghurs have been sent back into Chinese detention from almost every single country neighboring East Turkistan, usually because these countries fear the consequences of rejecting China's demands for extradition. These demands for repatria-

tion contravene international human rights and customary law, as of course do the consequent instances of torture, imprisonment and even execution of those people sent back.

So what are the Uyghur people doing for themselves? What are we doing to advance our aspirations to use peaceful, democratic means to determine our own political future in East Turkistan? Obviously, bearing in mind the features of China's administration of East Turkistan described above, little can be done by Uyghurs who are actually in East Turkistan. But the Uyghur people in exile are starting to organize themselves in ways that the Tibetan movement pioneered more than 20 years ago; and in Ms. Rebiya Kadeer, a former prisoner of conscience, we have a much needed and revered representative for our cause. Her recent nomination for the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize was just the latest example of the Uyghur people's cause becoming more and more internationalized, and with that broader recognition of our plight we are starting to see some progress and the first green shoots of hope.

Several years ago, the Uyghur American Association (UAA) was established in Washington, D.C. to act as a social organizing group for the large exiled Uyghur community in the United States, as well as a rallying point to draw the community together; the UAA then established the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) in 2004 to monitor and publish reports on the Uyghurs' human rights situation in East Turkistan. More recently, Rebiya Kadeer has established her own foundation, which will focus on continuing some of the work for improving the human rights of Uyghur women and children that she started before her imprisonment in East Turkistan.

Along with the World Uyghur Congress based in Munich, the Uyghur diaspora is starting to effectively communicate with the U.S. and European governments, ensuring, for example, that the names of Uyghur prisoners of conscience are on lists taken into human rights dialogues with Chinese interlocutors. There have been several hearings and other events in the U.S. Congress where Rebiya Kadeer has spoken eloquently and persuasively of the need for broader international recognition and support for the Uyghur people. Meanwhile, UHRP is gradually building a reputation as a reliable and accurate source of news and analysis on the Uyghur issue for the international press corps as well as for governments and academics.

Progress is slow, but it is taking place: it is measured in successes such as educating journalists not to describe Uyghurs as "Chinese Muslims," and in successfully lobbying for more than 6,000 Uyghurs stranded in Rawalpindi, Pakistan to be granted Saudi visas—against China's wishes—so they can exercise their right to freedom of religious belief and go on pilgrimage to Mecca.

Needless to say, Beijing is less than happy that the Uyghur people are starting to develop an important voice among the groups of people justifiably demanding recourse from the Chinese authorities. But rather than try to engage in the debate on the rights and aspirations of the Uyghur people, the Chinese authorities have instead resorted to name-calling and bullying. In August 2005 and on at least one other occasion since, Rebiya Kadeer was publicly accused of being a "terrorist" by



Rebiya Kadeer. Photo: HRIC

the most senior Chinese politician in East Turkistan—typically, no evidence was offered to support the claim.

Far more sinister, however, is the treatment of Ms. Kadeer's children in East Turkistan. As of this writing, two of her sons are awaiting sentence after being tried in late October on trumped-up charges of tax evasion, while a third son is almost certain to be charged with "attempting to split the state." At the moment it seems highly unlikely that any of Ms. Kadeer's three sons will avoid prison. Concerns are also being raised for the welfare of Ms. Kadeer's daughter, who remains under a strict and extremely intrusive form of house arrest.

Rebiya Kadeer—along with the vast majority of independent observers—is convinced that the Chinese government's treatment of her children is an act of revenge against Ms. Kadeer herself for publicly describing the plight of the Uyghur people.

What can we do in the face of tactics such as these? Again, the Tibetan people have set a worthy example with their insistence on abiding by the peaceful means advocated by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The vast majority of the Uyghur people have themselves been the victims of violence and abuse for long enough to know that violence solves nothing. But sadly, a small handful of isolated violent acts in the past is still used by the Chinese government to defame the Uyghurs' dreams of freedom.

The Uyghur people realize that using peaceful, democratic means to determine our own political future is a long and arduous journey. But there is no more noble struggle for the Uyghur people to be engaged in, and there is nowhere we would rather be.

NOTES

1. See: "China's Ethnic Minorities," <http://www.index-china.com/minority/minority-english.htm>.