



The sentencing on July 23 of Uyghur journalist Gheyret Niyaz to 15 years in prison for endangering state security came as a shock to people around the world. Mr. Niyaz's "crime" was to speak to foreign journalists. His unusually long sentence, along with other harsh sentences for three Uyghur webmasters on July 23 or 24, highlights an unwritten Chinese government guiding principle that pays lip service to ethnic harmony while at the very same time implementing policies that undermine it.

Attacks on Uyghur writers, journalists and webmasters are nothing new. Far too many are languishing in jails for revealing the darker side of the Communist Party administration in East Turkestan, also known as Xinjiang. They include Mehbube Ablesh, a journalist who uncovered the inequities of "bilingual" education; Abdulghani Memetemin, a journalist who exposed human-rights abuses against Uyghurs; Nurmemet Yasin, a writer who penned an allegorical story articulating the Uyghur yearning for freedom; Gulmire Imin, a website administrator who helped run a online forum for Uyghurs; and many more.

The four journalists sentenced last month—Mr. Niyaz, Nureli, Dilshat Perhat and Nijat Azat—were imprisoned simply for exercising freedom of speech. The Chinese government hides behind charges of "endangering state security," "splittism" or "terrorism" when punishing Uyghur voices, but the simple truth is that whenever Uyghurs contradict the official narrative stating the benevolence of the Chinese Communist Party, they are severely punished.

A Muslim Uyghur woman begs as armed Chinese paramilitary policemen march past on a street in Urumqi on July 5, 2010.

In Mr. Niyaz's case, even expressing views consistent with those of the Chinese government was not enough to keep him out of jail. In an interview with a local Chinese publication on Aug. 2, 2009, less than a month after the outbreak of unrest in Urumqi, Mr. Niyaz not only openly sided with much of the Chinese government version of the unrest, but also dismissed my contribution to the Uyghur people. I welcome Mr. Niyaz's considered critique and resolutely defend his right to speak openly and freely. Without the expression of dissimilar voices there is

little validity to any political process.

Most of what the Chinese government actually does in East Turkestan is not discussed in public. The unrest in Urumqi in July 2009 should have been a wake-up call for the Chinese Communist Party to reform misguided policies and change six decades of repressive policies. Instead, the government has used the unrest as an opportunity to intensify its forced assimilation of the Uyghur people.

The most recent assault on civil liberties came when authorities recently installed 40,000 cameras in Urumqi to surveil the local population. In February, the draconian “Law on Education for Ethnic Unity in Xinjiang,” took effect, which criminalizes speech harmful to a vague definition of “ethnic unity.” The government also announced this year the demolition of Uyghur neighborhoods in cities across East Turkestan, including Kashgar, Urumqi, Karamay and Ghulja.

On top of all of this, Beijing is encouraging large numbers of Han Chinese to migrate to East Turkestan—a policy that aims to make the unique Uyghur identity a thing of the past and adds to local tensions as citizens compete for economic and social resources. The government is not forthcoming about the extent of this migration, nor does it disclose civil-service hiring policies that actively discriminate against Uyghurs and women. With Han Chinese favored in the competitive job market, mass migration into the region only fuels resentment. The result of this aggressive assimilation has been exacerbated tensions between Han Chinese and Uyghurs.

China’s policies toward its ethnic minorities are clearly failing to resolve local tensions. In East Turkestan, the Chinese government has not only ignored the voices of the Uyghur people crying out for change, it has also actively moved to silence them. Unless international pressure is brought to bear, the Uyghur people will quietly slip into the history books.

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