Xinjiang unrest reveals fragility of Chinese state

John Chan
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The protests by Xinjiang's Uighur workers and students on July 5 and the brutal military response of the Chinese government, reveal that, as celebrations for the 60th anniversary of the 1949 revolution approach, the very foundations of a unified China of 1.3 billion people, 56 ethnic nationalities and numerous languages, are being called into question.

The promises of the Chinese revolution—of building a land of socialism and equality based on the common ownership of the means of production, thus unifying workers and peasant masses of all ethnic backgrounds—have long vanished.

The military-police and communal violence that claimed hundreds of lives in Urumqi last week have highlighted the glaring divisions between classes, ethnicities and geo-political regions throughout China, caused by the unequal distribution of social wealth. At the same time, the deployment of heavily-armed troops to Urumqi and other Xinjiang cities once again demonstrates how capitalist exploitation is being imposed.

Not a single world leader has openly denounced the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership's military crackdown in Xinjiang, except for Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan, who declared it was a "near-genocide" of the Turkic-speaking Uighurs—in order to appeal to domestic pan-Turkic nationalism.

Indeed, the governments of world imperialism know only too well that violent social and ethnic conflict is inevitable in a state where workers receive average wages of only 20 US cents per hour, while, at the same time, the country is home to the world's second largest group of billionaires (101 in 2008) after the US.

Dru Gladney, a US expert on China's ethnic issues, warned in the *Wall Street Journal* on July 12: "A China weakened by internal strife, inflation, uneven economic growth or the struggle for political succession could become further divided along cultural and linguistic lines. China's threats will most likely come from civil unrest, and perhaps internal ethnic unrest from within the so-called Han majority. We should recall that it was a southerner [Sun Yat-sen], born and educated abroad, who led the revolution that ended China's last dynasty. When that empire fell, competing warlords—often supported by foreign powers—fought for turf."

The source of these conflicts was the inability of the Chinese bourgeoisie, headed by Sun, to create a unified national state because of its ties to the landlords and imperialist powers and its fear of any mobilisation of the oppressed masses. That task was left to the young Chinese working class, inspired by the 1917 Russian Revolution. However, the strangling of the 1927 Chinese revolution due to the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy's opportunist policy of forcing the CCP to subordinate itself to the bourgeois Kuomintang (KMT), left China dismembered for another 20 years, with the KMT regime barely able to control remote regions like Xinjiang.

Today's political crisis in Xinjiang is the outcome of the historical evolution of the Chinese state that was established in 1949. The revolution carried out by the Maoists was not socialist or communist. By 1949, the CCP had long severed ties with the urban working class in favour of the peasantry. The unification of China under Mao, under the exceptionally favourable conditions created by the Cold War and the collapse of all the old colonial empires, was part of the Stalinist "two-stage" theory: that the Communist Party must first accomplish bourgeois national-democratic tasks before embarking on the struggle for socialism. In the urban centres of China, the working class was ruthlessly suppressed by Mao's peasant army.

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Xinjiang, which was ruled by Uighur nationalists and Chinese warlords in the 1930s and 40s—often as vassals of Stalin—was incorporated into Mao's regime through force and political manoeuvres, not through the democratic and conscious involvement of the oppressed masses. Beijing's heavy-handed ethnic policy of imposing religious restrictions and its indifference to local customs was rooted in Mao's consolidation of a national state and national industry against not only the Western powers but also Stalin's regime in the USSR. Landlocked Xinjiang became the "backyard" of China—a site for nuclear tests and nuclear weapons facilities.

Mao's turn to US imperialism in 1971, marked by the visit of US president Nixon, and the policies that followed, have unleashed powerful forces that now threaten to once again break up China. In the 1980s, China's support for US operations inside Soviet-occupied Afghanistan, especially the Mujahedin guerrillas, created a basis for Islamism in Xinjiang itself.

In the 1990s, the collapse of the USSR and the separation of the Soviet Central Asian republics opened up the opportunity for US imperialism to penetrate the region, including Xinjiang. Seeking to counter this pressure, Beijing decided to massively increase Han migration into Xinjiang in order to consolidate its control.

This was followed by the opening up of entire regions of China to the penetration of foreign capital, resulting in the deepening of social and national tensions. Since the initiation of the "Go west" program by Beijing in 2000 to exploit the region's vast mineral resources, Urumqi has experienced the arrival of shopping centres, business towers, department stores and foreign banks. With 30 billion tonnes of oil, Xinjiang holds one third of China's oil reserves, 40 percent of its coal and is a major base for industrial crops like cotton. Moreover, Xinjiang is now the new frontier for Chinese capital to scour Central Asia for oil and gas—in a semi-alliance with Russia.

While a section of the Uighur elite connected to the CCP has become part of China's new wealthy elite, the majority of the Uighur masses have fallen behind, because of language discrimination in employment, lower levels of education and, above all, because they are part of China's vast working poor. According to some estimates, Xinjiang is now among the most economically unequal provinces in China—even though it has the highest per capita income in the country, apart from the most developed southeast provinces.

A section of the Uighur elite that wants a greater share of the profits from the opening up of Xinjiang is seeking to establish independent relations with the major Western powers. This tendency is headed by the exiled Uighur leader Rebiya Kadeer, who was one of the richest women in China and vice chairwomen of both the Xinjiang Federation of Industry and Commerce and Xinjiang Association of Women Entrepreneurs and a delegate to the Chinese Peoples Political Consultative Conference (a platform for multi-millionaires to advise the CCP). While manipulating the grievances of the Uighur masses, this layer of the bourgeoisie shares Beijing's class hostility toward ordinary working people.

The mirror opposite of separatism has been the rise of Han chauvinism in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989, when the Stalinist regime brutally crushed working class resistance to its pro-capitalist policy. As its traditional base of support among the peasantry faded, the CCP consciously promoted Chinese nationalism in order to create a constituency among the middle-classes—a process that can only exacerbate the fracturing of national unity.

While the CCP regime is now holding the country together through military-police repression, it cannot arrest the powerful centrifugal social, ethnic and geographic tendencies. Unless and until the Chinese working class intervenes with a revolutionary internationalist and socialist program to unify the working people of all ethnic backgrounds against all forms of nationalism and chauvinism, the inevitable outcome will be escalating communal violence, with the ever-deepening danger of civil war.

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