CHINA’S DARK SECRET

The Uighurs’ call for self-rule has been met with brutality ever since China forcefully annexed East Turkestan in 1949, says Alim Seytoff

I was born in the summer of 1969 at the height of China’s notorious Great Cultural Revolution during which all Uighur families, including mine, lived under the ‘Red Terror’. Six months before my birth, my father was charged by the Chinese communists as a ‘counter-revolutionary’ and sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment for refusing to accept China’s brutal rule in East Turkestan, the historical homeland of the Uighur people.

After the imprisonment of my father, my family became an official target of government denunciation and persecution. As a result, many people hated us because we were seen as the enemy of communist China. Our friends, neighbours and acquaintances shunned us and even made fun of us. My mother, who was left with four little children and no means of income, had to work at a construction site to take care of us. Chinese Red Guards frequently harassed my family.

I am the youngest of four children. I have two older brothers and one sister. My eldest brother was severely beaten many times by Red Guards for being the son of a counter-revolutionary. Every time he was beaten, people laughed at him, made fun of him and encouraged others to beat him. No one
was there to protect him. He was only six or seven years old, and as a result of such abuse, he suffered physically and mentally and was not able to grow up as a normal child.

When I was growing up, I didn’t know anything about politics or the terrible political situation we were in. One thing I did know was that everybody else had a father, but I didn’t. I didn’t understand why my playmates’ parents hated my absent father and never talked to my mother. As a child, I played with both Uighur and Chinese children. We played hide-and-seek in the snow, climbed trees, and sometimes got into trouble. Boys will be boys no matter whether you are Uighur or Chinese.

In 1976, two important things happened: the dreadful Cultural Revolution ended, and Mao Zedong died. At the school I attended, a funeral ceremony was held in commemoration of Chairman Mao’s death. We were required to bow down in silence for three minutes. As children, we didn’t know who died and why we were bowing down. We just made ugly faces to other classmates and pulled the hair of the girls in front of us whenever our teachers weren’t looking.

After Mao’s death, his appointee Hua Guofeng briefly ruled the country in turmoil and relaxed previous heavy-handed rules in China. ‘The Gang of Four’, which was supposedly responsible for all the atrocities of the Chinese Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution, was denounced all over China. Hua Guofeng announced the beginning of a new era that would allow people to have some breathing space. But Hua’s lenient rule was cut short by a political coup in Beijing led by a short and shrewd Chinese politician: Deng Xiaoping. Uighurs had no idea how the coup had taken place, but they knew that Chinese policies toward East Turkestan would not change, regardless of who became China’s new ruler.

China took over East Turkestan by military force in October 1949. In 1955, it was renamed ‘Xinjiang’, which means ‘new territory’, and designated as the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR). At that time, the Chinese government promised Uighurs self-rule and assured that Uighur culture, language, religion and traditions would be respected. However, this has never been the case, even from the beginning.

East Turkestan possesses huge reserves of natural resources, including petroleum, gas, uranium, gold and other important minerals. As a neighbour of eight countries, it is strategically important as China’s gateway to Eurasia and an economic engine in its rise as a global power. Without East Turkestan, China would lose its direct access to Eurasia and all the natural resources that has powered its breathtaking development over the past two
decades. Because of this, Chinese rule in East Turkestan has been brutal from day one. The government is constantly ready to crush any kind of Uighur resistance to its rule.

Uighurs like my father, who opposed China’s rule in East Turkestan, were ruthlessly eliminated under all kinds of convenient political charges in different political campaigns. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Uighurs have been arrested, tortured and executed by China since 1949. The exact number is China’s darkest secret. Many estimate the actual number to be more than one million. In almost every Uighur family, someone has been detained, arrested, imprisoned or executed by China. So every Uighur family has a sad story to tell the world.

I saw my father for the first time at the age of 11 in the summer of 1980. He was finally released after serving a ten-year prison term in addition to a two-year detention. I will never forget that day. That afternoon, I was playing
in the mud with kids in my neighbourhood. An acquaintance of my mother passed by and told me that my father had been released and was at home. I was so excited that I ran into our home, a two-bedroom apartment on the fifth floor. I was still short of breath when my sister opened the door. I saw a skinny old man with grey hair and a beard sitting on the couch. He was a total stranger to me. I was shocked and shy. But my mother encouraged me to give him a hug. So I did. It was the first time he saw me, his youngest son. He was delighted; he touched my face and rubbed my hair. He gave me a camel-hair sweater that he had made in prison as a gift. I don’t know how he made it or where he got the camel hair, but the sweater fit me like a glove. He even wrote a Uighur-Chinese military dictionary while in prison.

For the first time in my life, I became proud of him because now I had a father just like all of the neighbourhood kids, who would protect me when I got into trouble. He was not imprisoned for common crimes, but for the love of his country and for fighting against a brutal regime. To me, it was not shameful for him to have been in prison, as the Chinese government had portrayed it – it was an honourable thing. He became my role model. I tried to do everything to please him and to be like him – a fighter for freedom.

In almost every Uighur family, someone has been detained, arrested or executed

I graduated from Xinjiang University in 1991 and was assigned to work at the XUAR Overseas Chinese Affairs Office. I thought I could help my people by working at this important office but I soon realised that it was impossible for a Uighur. The only way for Uighurs to survive at government offices is to become a ‘yes man’ to the Chinese officials. I saw that all the power, privilege and positions were reserved for the Chinese, while Uighurs in the so-called ‘autonomous region’ served as their loyal underdogs. They had, and still have, no decision-making power. They must always follow decisions made by their Chinese superiors who know little or nothing about the life of Uighurs. The Uighur officials at the
XUAR government are decorations, a presentation for the outside world. Senior Uighur officials, such as the chairman of the XUAR, are only puppets handpicked by Beijing to serve China’s national interests, not the Uighur people.

Out of great disappointment, I quit my job in early 1995. I worked for a foreign company for a year and then went to study journalism in the United States in 1996. I never thought I would stay in the US and never return to my homeland. But an unfortunate turn of events made it a reality. In February 1997, six months after I arrived in the US, the Chinese government massacred hundreds of Uighurs and arrested thousands in Ghulja City after Uighur youths peacefully protested against their rule. I was born in Ghulja City and I was so angry at the massacre that I decided to do something about it. I began to write and expose China’s gross, systematic and egregious human rights violations against the Uighur people.

But things got even worse for the Uighurs, especially after the tragic events of 9/11. Since Uighurs are Muslims, China saw 9/11 as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to further justify its repression by artificially linking them with international terrorism. China, a country that has terrorised the Uighurs and Tibetans since 1949, all of a sudden claimed itself a victim of Uighur ‘terrorism’. Since 9/11, China has been able to aggressively implement a number of coercive policies that could not otherwise be justified prior to 9/11, such as the abolition of the use of the Uighur language in all schools, mass forcible transfer of young unmarried Uighur women, the confiscation of all Uighurs’ passports, and frequent execution of Uighurs charged with terrorism.

Although China has not been able to successfully demonise Tibetans as terrorists or claim that they have links with international terrorism, Chinese rule in Tibet is not any different than in East Turkestan. Therefore, both Uighurs and Tibetans share the same suffering under this rule, and aspire to the same freedom. Both the Dalai Lama and Rebiya Kadeer, the exiled Uighur leader, want to peacefully resolve the Tibetan and East Turkestan issues by negotiating with China. However, Chinese leaders are so far deaf to the voices of peace. They do not recognise moral authority – only power backed by guns and bombs. Their solution to problems in both Tibet and East Turkestan is repression.

Repression is not a solution to long-standing political issues. The recent events in Tibet have proven that decades-long repression can send even peaceful Tibetan monks and nuns to a point of no return.
This shows that Chinese policies of repression in both Tibet and East Turkestan have failed miserably. They have failed to create the political stability the government desires. Both the Dalai Lama and Rebiya Kadeer wish to negotiate with China, but the real question is whether leaders in Beijing have the political will.

The world is watching China even more closely as the 2008 Beijing Olympics are fast approaching. It is curious to see how Chinese leaders will eventually resolve the issues in Tibet and East Turkestan. The time has come for China to do the right thing. It must, with the Dalai Lama and Rebiya Kadeer, find a genuine and peaceful solution to the problems in the historic homelands of Tibetans and Uighurs, instead of demonising both as violent ‘separatists’ and ‘terrorists’. The Beijing Olympics will soon end, but the problems in Tibet and East Turkestan will continue if the Chinese leaders do not have the political will necessary to resolve them, as they should have done long ago.

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Alim Seytoff is general secretary of the Uyghur American Association