

# CHINA

Officially, China proclaims itself a unified country with a multiple ethnic make-up, and all ethnic groups are considered equal by law. Besides the Han Chinese majority, the government recognizes 55 ethnic minority peoples within its borders. According to China's sixth national census of 2010, the population of ethnic minorities is 113,792,211 persons, or 8.49 % of the country's total population.

The national "Ethnic Minority Identification Project", undertaken from 1953 to 1979, settled on official recognition for 55 ethnic minority groups. However, there are still "unrecognized ethnic groups" in China numbering a total of 734,438 persons (2000 census figure). Most of them live in China's south-west regions of Guizhou, Sichuan, Yunnan and Tibet. The officially recognized ethnic minority groups have rights protected by the Constitution. This includes establishing ethnic autonomous regions, setting up their own local administrative governance and the right to practice their own language and culture. "Ethnic autonomous regions" constitute around 60% of China's land area.

The Chinese government does not recognize the term "indigenous peoples", and representatives of China's ethnic minorities have not readily identified themselves as indigenous peoples, and have rarely participated in international meetings related to indigenous peoples' issues. It has therefore not been clearly established which of China's ethnic minority groups are to be considered indigenous peoples. The Chinese government voted in favor of the UNDRIP but, prior to the adoption of the UNDRIP, had already officially stated that there were no indigenous peoples in China, which means that, in their eyes, the UNDRIP does not apply to China.

## **Increasing social unrest and protests**

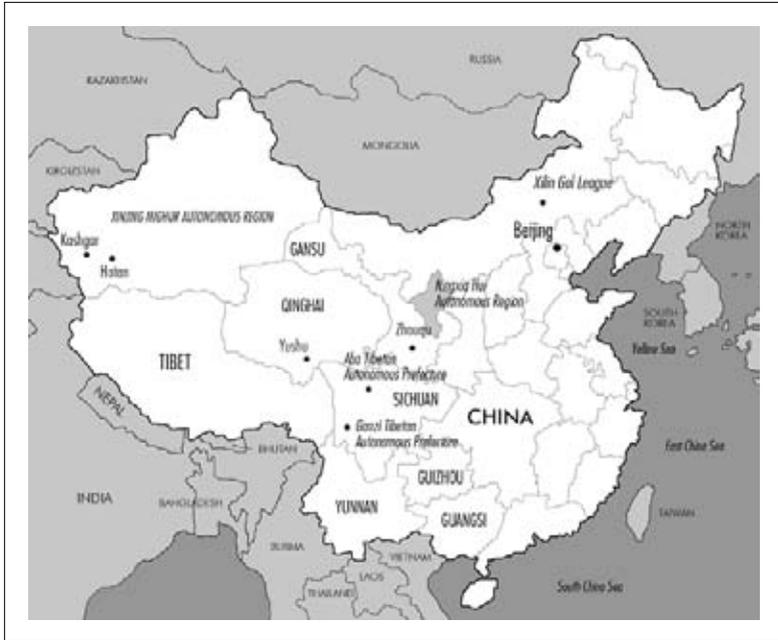
**T**hroughout 2011, China was rocked by a series of mass protests and major social upheavals in urban centers, small towns, as well as in the rural hinterlands. From an overall perspective, many of the underlying reasons had to do with socio-economic inequalities - the fast growing gap between the rich and the poor, and the unfair distribution of resources.

The transformation of modern China into a thriving economy has also brought about a fundamental change from the past Chinese Communist Party's proletariat, socialist ideology to a wealth-worshipping capitalist system. There is pervasive discontent over the worsening levels of corruption on the part of government officials, the defrauding and theft of private land and properties by local administrators, exploitation by big business and the deterioration in the natural environment. It is against this backdrop that a number of troubling developments of violent communal disturbances and large-scale riots have taken place in the ethnic minority regions of China, and these parallel the rising grievances against the ruling PRC regime in society in general.

Examining the past year's events, the two main conflictive issues in the ethnic minority regions were land and religion. Much of the social unrest and violent protest by ethnic minorities was in response to land-grabbing, shady deals related to land development projects, forced relocation due to infrastructure projects (such as the hydroelectric dams and the resulting pollution of water sources in the Yunnan-Guizhou upland areas) and environmental contamination and pollution (such as the illegal dumping of industrial waste containing toxic chromium in Luliang County, Qujing City in Yunnan Province).

## **Violent mass protests in Inner Mongolia**

The violent mass protests in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region<sup>1</sup> in May 2011 received significant international media attention, even though state censors tried to block any information about the biggest unrest by ethnic Mongolians against Han Chinese government rule in over 30 years. The incidents started in the Abag Banner, Xilin Gol League area of Inner Mongolia,<sup>2</sup> where two Mongolian herders were killed in separate incidents. Both cases involved the development of



a local coal mine, which led to agitation by the area's pastoral community in protest at the extensive pollution of the pastureland and water bodies by mining operations.

The protests have become symbolic of the Mongolians' dissatisfaction with a national development policy that is increasingly marginalising them. In recent decades, the Chinese government has prohibited ethnic Mongolians from practicing their traditional way of pastoralist nomadic herding, citing the need to prevent destruction of the pastureland. However, after this prohibition came into effect, the Chinese government went ahead and allowed companies to exploit the region's coal and mineral resources. The prospecting activities, mining operations and running of coal transport trucks have extensively damaged the pastures and the area's environment. Local Mongolian communities were extremely angry and eventually started protesting.

For the Mongolian people, the Han Chinese are intruders on their traditional territory. The Han Chinese incursion began in the middle of the 19th century. To this day, the Mongolians call on the spirit of *Gada Mairan*, a celebrated hero who

led an armed uprising in the 1930s against the exploitation and political oppression of the Han Chinese settlers and the corrupt government.

During the 1960s, Chinese state propaganda promoted Gada Mairen's story to show that the Communist Party stood by the Mongolian people, and that the traditional pastoralist culture could thrive under the benevolent rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). But times have changed, and the Mongolians are now fighting corrupt officials once more, this time those of the CCP which, decades earlier, had trumpeted its co-operation and binding friendship with ethnic minority peoples.

As the CCP's state ideology turns to embrace capitalism, and profit-making has become the driving force, the Chinese government is gradually losing the trust of the ethnic minority peoples. Rapidly growing social inequalities and discontent among ethnic minorities are bound to result in more violent unrest, and are threatening China's national unity.

## **Denial of freedom of religion**

Officially, the Communist Party follows an "atheist" doctrine, and regards religion as superstition – "the opiate of the masses". The Chinese government severely restricts practices of religious worship. However, this anti-religious doctrine runs counter to the ways of many ethnic minority peoples. For the Tibetans, whose culture is deeply rooted in Tibetan Buddhism, and the Uighurs and Hui Muslims who follow Islam, religion is an integral part of their daily lives and cannot be separated from their culture. Any attempt to restrict their religious practices or to force them to abandon their beliefs will result in conflict and ethnic strife.

In 2011, there were several high-profile cases of violence and protest actions due to religious issues in ethnic minority regions. Many disturbing reports filtered through to the outside world, including self-immolation by Tibetan monks, leading to police arrests and the torture of Tibetans, bomb-blast deaths in Uighur Xinjiang Autonomous Region<sup>3</sup> (in Kashgar and Hotan), and the communal violence in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region (bordering Inner Mongolia).

By the end of 2011, a total of 11 young Tibetan monks had burned themselves to death in Sichuan Province's Aba and Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures. News of these self-immolations has led to several such acts of extreme defiance in other Tibetan monasteries. The direct cause of this was state interference and

the forced ideological conversion on the part of the Chinese government. Tibetan monks have been forced to undergo a “re-education program”. Conducted by the state government’s religious affairs department, this “re-education program” is aimed at repudiating the Dalai Lama and indoctrinating the Tibetan monks into Communist Party ideology. If there is any resistance to the program, the monasteries are put under strict confinement, with water and electricity cut off. Consequently, many young monks choose death by self-immolation to protest at the Chinese government’s persecution and to uphold the Tibetan people’s right to religious freedom.

In the traditional Uighur Muslim homeland region of Xinjiang in the western hinterland of China, a number of bomb blasts and violent clashes with police have taken place this past year. State media pointed the finger at the work of Uighur independence movement activists with links to foreign-based organizations. In the aftermath, many hundreds of ethnic Uighur religious teachers and mosque officials have been made to attend re-education classes to “straighten-out their thoughts”. Anyone refusing to undergo these classes has their “Certificate of Religious Work” revoked. More serious cases of defiance can lead to arrest on the charge of “inciting illegal religious activities”. This kind of intimidation by the authorities to force the Uighur Muslims to abandon their religious belief only results in more discontent and social disturbance.

In December, the demolition of a mosque by the local government in Taoshan village, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, led to another serious conflict. The mosque was built and financed by the local Hui Muslim villagers themselves, most of whom are impoverished farmers. The destruction of the mosque led to a major clash between the protesting Hui Muslim villagers and the police force, resulting in several deaths and serious injuries. Around 80 people were arrested.

According to government officials, the building of the mosque was not authorized, and was therefore illegal, and it could also become the focal point of community people gathering to express their dissent. Faced with such discrimination, these Hui Muslims chose to defy and fight the authorities, in order to defend the freedom to practice their own religion.

## **Revealing announcements by the State Ethnic Affairs Commission**

Reviewing the major year-end news announcements from the State Ethnic Affairs Commission can be quite enlightening as they reveal the rationale underlying the

government's ethnic minority policy. The first news release announced an overall population growth rate among ethnic minorities of 6.92 % over the past decade. The second major news announcement was the declaration that Yunnan Province was to be developed into a major bridge-link in order to open up access to and co-operation with the neighboring Southeast Asian countries. The third important announcement concerned the pastoral livelihood of ethnic minority peoples. It was a directive to local governments to promote the "healthy development of the pasturelands", with good planning of construction projects, maintaining the proper ecological balance and providing economic means of support for the ethnic minority herders and their livestock. Thus, the announcement continued, social stability and unity could be achieved among the ethnic groups, along with improved economic development of the livestock-dependent traditional herding-lifestyle areas, mainly in the north, west and some south-west regions of China.

The rest of the news and policy announcements from the State Ethnic Affairs Commission consisted mainly of positive pronouncements regarding the success of government programs in the ethnic minority regions. It is particularly interesting to note what is not said in these year-end pronouncements: there was no mention of any of the many violent conflicts and mass protests that had occurred throughout the ethnic minority regions.

Much of the propaganda and publicity campaigns of the Chinese government still focus on economic development to improve the lives of the poor segments of ethnic groups. This kind of positive media reporting, good news about national unity and ethnic harmony, is in sharp contrast to what is happening on the ground: the violent disturbances and social unrest which are the focus of increasing international attention and concern. ○

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## Notes

- 1 It is also called "Southern Mongolia" by the region's activist organizations and exile groups.
- 2 "Banners" are age-old traditional Mongolian political-administrative divisions based on family-clan alliances and their territorial holdings. Several Banner districts make up a "League". A Banner is roughly equivalent to a County in other provinces of China. Inner Mongolia currently has seven Leagues, 49 Banners and three "Autonomous Banners". In addition, Inner Mongolia has twelve major cities with large areas, which also have their own Banners, as city sub-districts, under their administration.
- 3 Xinjiang is also called "East Turkestan" by the region's activist organizations and exile groups.

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