

China Overview

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Environment

China is a vast country and the home of one of the world's most ancient civilizations. The world's most populous (almost 1.3 billion people in the 2000 Census) and fourth largest country, it encompasses a huge variety of climates and landscapes, as its borders extend all the way through Central, South and South-East Asia, from the shores of the Pacific Ocean to the tropical jungles of Southeast Asia and the highest mountains of the globe with the Himalayas. It contains mostly plateaus and mountains in the east. The north near Mongolia and the north-west contain extensive grasslands and desert areas (Gobi Desert), while the south is dominated by hills and low mountain ranges and the west has among its features the Himalayas mountain range.

Much of its population is concentrated in the east, along the shores of the Yellow and East China Sea and the alluvial plains of the main rivers emptying into the Pacific, such as the Yangtze and the Huang He.

Because of its antiquity, vast size and geographic features, there is also a huge variety of climates and vegetation, and a corresponding diversity of human cultures and societies throughout China's long history.

Peoples

Main languages: Mandarin Chinese (*putonghua*), Yue (Cantonese), Wu (Shanghaiese), Minbei (Fuzhou), Minnan (Hokkien-Taiwanese), Qiang, Gan, Hakka, Uyghur, Tibetan, etc.

Main religions: Buddhism, Roman Catholicism, Islam, Lamaism (Tibetan Buddhism), Protestantism, Shamanism, Animism, Taoism, Dongba,

Minority groups include Zhuang 16.2 million (1.3%), Manchu 10.7 million (0.86%), Hui 9.8 million (0.79%), Miao 8.9 million (0.72%), Uyghur 8.4 million (0.68%), Yi (Lolo) 7.7 million (0.62%), Tujia 8 million (0.65%), Mongol 5.8 million (0.47%), Tibetan 5.4 million (0.44%), etc. (Source: National Population Survey of China, 2000)

The definition of ethnic minorities/nationalities in the People's Republic of China has been conceived by

the state and does not truly reflect the self-identification of such ethnic minorities or the reality of ethnic diversity within China's boundaries. *Mínzú* (the Chinese term that signifies non-Han 'undistinguished ethnic groups', numbering more than 730,000 people) have not been recognized among or classified within the state's official 56 ethnic minorities (these comprise the majority Han grouping and 55 minority nationalities).

The *Minzú* also do not include ethnicities that have been classified by the state authorities as belonging to existing minorities and hence denied their legal rights to public participation. For example, the Mosuo are officially classified as Naxi, and the Chuanqing are classified as Han Chinese, but they reject these classifications as they view themselves as separate ethnic minorities. The Gaoshan, categorized as a single nationality by the government of the People's Republic of China, are generally considered to include 12 distinct indigenous peoples living mainly in Taiwan. There are also a number of unrecognized ethnic minorities known as 'undistinguished nationalities' in official parlance, including small numbers of Sherpas, Mang and Khmu. While it is difficult to count precisely the number of minorities in the country given the fluidity of the concept, China probably has well over 100 distinct ethnic groups. The largest non-Han minorities are the Uyghurs, Mongols and Tibetans, and the territories inhabited by these three minorities occupy a huge proportion of China's land mass along its western and northern borders, territories which in recent times have become increasingly strategically important in terms of resources and location.

Some groups are still actively fighting for recognition as minorities. In the 1964 Census, there were 183 nationalities registered, of which the government recognized only 54. However, census numbers are somewhat suspect due to the re-registration of significant numbers of Han people (a majority of 91.6% in total, according to the 2000 National Population Survey of China) as members of minority nationalities in order to gain personal benefits, such as exemption from the family planning policy of 'one family one child' or the right to cremate their dead. Interestingly, the minority population is growing at a much faster rate than the Han population due to the strict implementation of this policy. Compared with the 1990 and 2000 population census figures, the population of the Han increased by 116.92 million persons, or 11.22 per cent; while the population of national minorities increased by 15.23 million persons, or 16.70 per cent.

Whether one focuses on language, religion or culture, China offers an overwhelming kaleidoscope. Most of the country's largest minorities are in fact included in the Han Chinese grouping. Their language is not Mandarin but one of many Chinese 'dialects' that are considered to be distinct languages by many linguists; for example, Yue speak Cantonese, Wu speak Shanghaiese, Minbei speak Fuzhou, Minnan speak Hokkien-Taiwanese and so on.

The recognized ethnic minorities have considerable autonomy with regard to their way of life and this has resulted in complicated forms of autonomy for six provinces (among them Inner Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang), but also in the creation of autonomous cities, prefectures and municipalities where minority nationalities are territorially concentrated. In practice, the system remains subject to the political control of the Communist Party.

China's western regions are the most ethnically diverse, with 80 per cent of the country's minorities living in the area. However the *Mínzú* are mainly distributed in the border areas of the north-east, north, north-west and south-west of China. Many of these regions have significant natural resources, including oil, gas, minerals and precious metals, and new regional development strategies are being specifically targeted there. Nevertheless, without accompanying decentralization of political power, this strategy risks further exacerbating the already simmering ethno-regional tensions, as development rights for these groups are totally controlled by the central government.

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History

China contains one of the world's oldest civilizations, with the earliest evidence of modern human presence in Guangxi dated to approximately 67,000 years ago.

While there were a number of Han cultures prior to it, the first reliable historical Chinese dynasty is that of the Shang (or Yin) from the eighteenth to the twelfth century bc, which settled the north-eastern region along the banks of the Yellow River valley. What is now known as China would gradually, from these modest origins, expand to form one of the world's greatest empires, as conquest, colonization and absorption would bring into its control huge tracts of territory and large numbers of peoples of different ethnicities. The Shang dynasty was to be replaced between the twelfth and fifth century bc by the Zhou, expanding the borders of what was to become China north of the Yangtze River. The authority of Zhou rulers eventually weakened, leading to a period of warfare between states that only occasionally or nominally recognized the sovereignty of the Zhou during what is known as the spring and autumn period.

It was after the Zhou dynasty that China began to take form as a unified state under the Qin Dynasty in 221 bc. More importantly, it was also during this period that the Chinese language was standardized and was to become one of the defining characteristics of Chinese culture. This was further strengthened during that Han Dynasty which ruled China between 206 bc and 220 ad. From this period onward the close identification between Han culture and China became firmly established, though at the same time China's territory was vastly expanded, reaching Korea, Vietnam, Mongolia and Central Asia during this period. It was also during this expansion that many of today's minority populations were incorporated into China.

After a period of disunity, China was reunited under the short-lived Sui Dynasty from ad 580. Chinese art, culture, economy and technology continued to expand during the succeeding Tang and Song dynasties. In 1271, the Mongols under Kublai Khan established the Yuan Dynasty, followed in 1368 by the Ming Dynasty until 1644. It was replaced in the seventeenth century by the Qing, who remained in power until the 1912 revolution. This was China's last dynasty and involved not the majority Han Chinese, but the Manchus, a nomadic people based in what is now north-eastern China.

The creation of the Republic of China on 1 January 1912 was followed by a period of instability and fragmentation. China had already started to lose its grip on some of its territories during the Qing Dynasty, losing Taiwan to Japan as a result of the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-5, as well as recognizing the independence of Korea.

The Kuomintang's Sun Yat-sen became the provisional president of the new republic, but he was forced to step aside by Yuan Shikai, a former Qing general who took the presidency, dying shortly afterwards. The political fragmentation that followed also saw assertions of independence in some territories - including Tibet and Xinjiang - where Qing authority was weak or tenuous. Warlords in other parts of the country exercised real control rather than the still existing national government of the republic. The Kuomintang, under Chiang Kai-shek, was able to reunify the country in the 1920s, but China was to lose further territory after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and its establishment of the puppet state of Manchuko. The Chinese Civil War also began during this period, when the faction of the Kuomintang led by Chiang Kai-shek purged the Communists in 1927 from an alliance then in place between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party of China. This was interrupted by the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-45 (and the Second World War). After the war, the Chinese Civil War between the

Kuomintang and the Communists resumed, ending in 1950 with the Communists controlling mainland China under the People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949. The central Kuomintang government of the Republic of China under Chiang Kai-shek retreated to Taiwan and several outlying islands.

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Governance

Since its inception the People's Republic of China has remained a centralized state with ultimate and paramount power firmly with the Communist Party of China (CPC). Most top positions in the government and military are held by Communist Party members and the 24-member political bureau (Politburo) or the supreme political body. Overall, the country's human rights record is poor. While China has a well-developed legal system, poor training, increased corruption and overarching control of political authorities severely hamper the independence of the judiciary, despite significant attempts at legal reforms in recent years. Serious human rights abuses are persistent, especially involving those whose activities are perceived as threats to the authority of the government - including some of the larger minorities such as Mongols, Tibetans and Uyghurs.

According to basic minority policies, China practises a system whereby national minorities exercise regional autonomy and, in theory, the constitutional and legal position of minorities is far from negative: Article 114 of the Constitution, for example, stipulates that the chairman of an autonomous region, or the prefect of an autonomous prefecture or head of an autonomous county, must be a member of the minority 'exercising regional autonomy in the area concerned'. The government has also set up five autonomous regions (Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Tibet and Xinjiang), as well as smaller autonomous districts, generally in areas where the non-Han population predominates. In reality however, the real power and decision-making authority rests with the regional branches of the Communist Party - usually dominated by Han Chinese - and national unity considerations always take precedence over regional autonomy.

The CPC's minority policies have vacillated since the inception of the People's Republic of China. In the more idealistic and egalitarian phase (1949 to the late 1950s) soon after the establishment of the republic, the policies towards minorities could be described as both tolerant and supportive, with nationalities being recognized in the country's Interim Constitution (the 1949 Common Programme), and some recognition also for the use of their languages, though without any specifics. From the late 1950s to 1960s, nationalities were perceived by Chinese authorities as potential obstacles to the Revolution, and as holding on to 'backward' practices and attitudes. At this time the revolutionary authorities developed a more obvious identification with the Chinese Han majority. For example, the notion of the 'need' for a 'common language', literally *putonghua*, a standardized form of Mandarin Chinese emerged at this time. During the Cultural Revolution, minorities and their leadership were often the target of some of the worst excesses, and minority languages were practically banned during this period.

The excesses of the Cultural Revolution gave way to greater tolerance and accommodation of China's minorities from about the mid-1980s to 1995 during a period of relative liberalization. Though negative attitudes towards minorities still exist, the Communist Party's approach is very different from the atrocities of the previous period. In theory, minorities gained substantial rights under 1984 legislation, such as the Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law (REAL, revised in 2001), which increased autonomy in education and culture and other activities which, *ipso facto*, meant some degree of control for minorities over autonomous administrative authorities and the language used by officials.

More recently, since about the mid-1990s, the Chinese authorities have entered into a more repressive

and less tolerant phase, especially with regard to the country's largest minority groups such as the Mongols, the Tibetans and the Uyghurs. This can be partially explained as a backlash on the part of the Beijing authorities against the perceived 'excesses' of previous policies, which are now seen as encouraging 'splittism' and as constituting failures in light of incidents involving minority opposition in Tibet and Xinjiang, but may also be linked to an increasing prominence and assertion of Han nationalism within the state structures and hierarchy of China.

For minorities, the current period is one of increasing limitations in the areas of official use of minority languages - and consequent loss of employment and educational opportunities for the largest minority groups. While legislation and rhetoric still acknowledge the rights of minorities in a way that shows there is at least officially an acceptance of such concepts, in practice there is increasing monolingualism and promotion of Mandarin to the exclusion of other languages, and increasing Han domination in the areas of politics, education and employment.

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Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

The international community has expressed great concerns over the continued violations of Tibetans' and Uyghurs' religious rights and Mongols' cultural rights; in dialogue with the Chinese government, human rights groups have also criticized China's human rights practices and raised issues of minority protection. Yet, despite the heightened international scrutiny of the country in the lead-up to the 2008 Olympics, the state marked the one-year countdown to the Games without having fulfilled the promise to conform to its human rights obligations.

In 2007 the government remained very sensitive about ethnic unrest in strategic border areas and kept a tight rein on its national minorities. Freedom of religious expression and association remained highly circumscribed, with the enforcement of new rules for Tibetan Buddhists, surveillance and execution of Uyghurs, and persecution of Christians. Minority-Han tensions exploded into uprisings, followed by swift government reprisals, as in the case of Hui Muslims. The political slogan that advocates building a 'harmonious society' served as a reason to crack down on ethnic 'separatism' in order to safeguard social stability, to remove the causes of social tensions in order to ensure national security, and to set up an emergency mechanism to monitor relations among groups to deal with ethnic strife in developing minority areas.

The State Ethnic Affairs Commission (SEAC) has announced the Country Ethnic Minorities Affairs 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-10), aimed at strengthening the protection of the cultural identity of disadvantaged ethnic minorities and bringing about positive change by investing in infrastructure development and improvement of living standards in Daur, Ewenki and Orogon minority provinces. The plan is a positive step forward, but minorities such as Mongol pastoralists and farmers, harbour a deep mistrust of what they see as Han designs for oppression and discrimination, and remain suspicious that, under the plan, the central government would foster sanctioned or spontaneous 'ethnic swamping' to facilitate the entry of dominant Han Chinese into minority areas, thereby reducing the minorities' proportion of the population.

Despite some progress, poverty alleviation in ethnic minority and border areas remains an arduous task, with growing tensions caused by inequitable benefit distribution, and inherent contradictions between environmental protection and change associated with the process of development. China's environmental challenges are daunting and, in spite of the official commitment (the ambitious National Climate Change Programme 2007), state efforts have been slow to support sustainable ecological construction and

environmental protection in disempowered ethnic autonomous areas.

Ethnic Development Plans (EDPs) have been adopted in Guangxi and Sichuan, but some developmental initiatives led to a host of adverse consequences in the dry northern areas and on grasslands and forest reserves, with minorities losing the right to use their own land and traditional resources. The impact of climate change and environmental degradation on subsistence-based communities threatened the lives of minority communities in Yunnan during 2007, which brought one of the deadliest rainy seasons in years; and in north-western Gansu Tibetan herders were forcibly relocated by the authorities citing climate change as the reason. The vicious cycle of climate change and pastoral poverty affected the fragile ecosystem and livelihoods of 33 minority groups on the pastoral Qinghai Plateau in the north-west. This combination of high exposure to natural disasters and decline of pastoral productivity, in turn, inhibits the capacity of both minorities and the government to prevent risk.

The 'great leap forward to modernization' is steadily eroding the environments, cultures and social values of China's ethnic minorities, depriving them of their traditional means of subsistence. The country faces enormous challenges (water scarcity, severe soil erosion, high rates of desertification, massive floods, and excessive levels of water and air pollution), which impose enormous burdens on China's people and jeopardize long-term progress.

Another worrying trend in China is the growing identification of the country with an increasingly blatant Han Chinese form of nationalism, as the country appears to move away from the traditional doctrines of communism. Officially, and in conformity with what could be described as Marxist doctrine, the CPC still opposes forced assimilation and allows autonomy to the minority nationalities, so that they can retain their own characteristics. It was under this policy that the government set up numerous autonomous areas throughout China, many of which are identified with specific nationalities, as did the former Soviet Union in the past.

Since 2001, the practice and reality are increasingly not so benevolent for most minorities, especially those in Inner Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang. An enormous amount of money has been invested in two new major rail-lines - one to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, which is now completed, and the other to the Uyghur city of Kashgar, which is being finished - and billions more dollars are being invested to build highways, some with the financial backing of international agencies such as the World Bank. Ostensibly aimed at assisting the economic development of these regions and improving their transportation infrastructure, these projects are connected to government policies that are clearly discriminatory and favour almost exclusively Han Chinese individuals.

The World Bank and much of the international community have remained largely silent and even complicit in what is in effect a surreptitious ethnic 'transmigration programme': recruitment for the thousands upon thousands of road- and rail-building jobs mainly targets Han Chinese in other parts of the country, and some estimate that, for Tibet alone, the new rail-line will open the door to some 900,000 Han Chinese annually to move into the ancient 'Land of the Snow', attracted by various employment opportunities and even financial incentives from the Chinese central authorities.

Government policies for minorities are very positive on paper; the problem is the implementation of such policies at a grassroots level, with widespread corruption often hampering efforts. This results in the Han Chinese being overwhelmingly favoured and supported, and leads to the Mongols, Uyghurs, Tibetans and other minorities such as the indigenous Deang and Dai being swamped and rendered increasingly powerless in the face of the mammoth influx and settlement of Han Chinese.

Employment practices by public authorities seem to be increasingly discriminatory. This is partly fuelled by the growing numbers of Han Chinese settling in the more remote provinces and often results in the

effective exclusion of minorities from various jobs because of language requirements. Though officially supportive of minority languages, reports continue to indicate that, even where minorities represent a very high percentage or a majority in a region, civil service offices refuse or are unwilling to use local languages in their activities (Article 121 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China states that: 'In performing their functions, the organs of self-government of the national autonomous areas employ the spoken and written language or languages in common use in the locality'). Recruitment of civil servants is often based on fluency in Chinese, with no consideration of knowledge of local languages; minorities are clearly and unreasonably disadvantaged by this Chinese-language bias and are passed over for employment opportunities in favour of ethnic Han.

The discriminatory position of the Chinese language, as the almost exclusive language of employment opportunities for government and government-supported initiatives in regions where there are substantial minorities, has augmented the complete dominance of Han Chinese in almost all areas of political and economic significance. Minorities generally have access to school instruction in their own language, but there may be few job opportunities unless their language is used as a language of work. This is particularly true in those regions, such as Inner Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang, where there are very large and territorially concentrated populations.

Chinese authorities tend to emphasize that ethnic minorities enjoy equality through the system for regional ethnic autonomy, that they have the right to receive instruction in their own language, and that this is in fact more respectful of the identity of minorities than what is in place in many Western states. This autonomy is in most cases more illusory than real, however, with key positions of power usually kept in the hands of Han Communist Party cadres and Han Chinese generally being employed in most senior positions. For example, appointments made to the Chinese Communist Party's committee in September 2006, which in effect runs Tibet's capital, included a smaller proportion of Tibetans than at any time in the last 40 years.

In 2005 the government published a White Paper on 'Regional Autonomy for Ethnic Minorities in China', which emphasized that China's policy of Regional National Autonomy is 'critical to enhancing the relationship of equality, unity, mutual assistance among different ethnic groups, to uphold national unification, and to accelerate the development of places where regional autonomy is practiced and promoting their progress'.

While this White Paper and other developments show that authorities are discussing the situation of minorities, international organizations have continued to be critical of the realities of respect for minority rights in China. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education concluded in 2003 that there was discrimination in the implementation of the country's minority education policy, and especially in relation to the imposition of the Chinese language, which tended to lead to the elimination of minority linguistic identity.

Relatively recent regulations hailed as emphasizing the equality of minorities are in fact double-edged. Regulations in Tibet permitting the use of either Tibetan or Chinese in the region will increasingly lead to the marginalization of the Tibetan language because of the increased influx of Han Chinese, the *de facto* bias against and discriminatory disadvantaging of the Tibetan-speaking population, and because the regulations do not actually require that officials use Tibetan.

The overall evolution in the treatment of religious minorities also gives mixed messages. Officially, there is no restriction on the religious beliefs of individuals in private. Authorities however continue to crack down, often brutally, on unsanctioned religious activities, especially those of groups that are deemed to be a threat to the authority of the Communist Party or are linked with 'separatist' or 'terrorist' threats. There are also new regulations in force since 1 March 2005 which will increase the state's

control of all religious activities, as well as banning those of unrecognized religious groups. The US State Department reports that the 'freedom to participate in officially sanctioned religious activity increased in many areas of the country, but crackdowns against unregistered groups, including underground Protestant and Catholic groups, Muslim Uyghurs, and Tibetan Buddhists continued and worsened in some locations'.

There does not seem to have been any let up in the targeting and harsh treatment of practitioners of the Falun Gong spiritual movement. The same criminal laws that had been used to incarcerate members and to suppress the activities of the Falun Gong were being used against newer religious minorities, especially evangelical Protestant groups that refuse to register officially.

The situation has worsened for Muslim Uyghurs. Chinese authorities have cracked down heavily and unrelentingly on some Islamic religious practices, and even on the use of the Uyghur language, whether or not these are connected to the banned East Turkistan Islamic Movement (banned despite not advocating violence). This includes a prohibition against minors receiving instruction on the Qu'ran at home and the prohibition of private madrasas and mosques. Many Uyghurs continued to receive long prison terms and to be executed for separatist or terrorist activities.

Even cultural or religious popular events may fall foul of the 'War on Terrorism' in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The Party Secretary issued instructions to all local authorities from 2002 to crack down on 'separatist techniques', one of which was 'using popular cultural activities to make the masses receptive to reactionary propaganda encouraging opposition', permitting the intimidation, arrest and detention of Uyghur cultural and human rights activists.

According to the population census in 2000, the illiteracy of ethnic minorities is 14.63 per cent, 60 per cent higher than the national average. As such, a central government 2006 decision to allocate a special fund of 10 million yuan (US \$1.28 million) each year to foster the education level of minorities and improve school conditions for primary and middle school students in minority areas is to be applauded. A *China View* (Xinhua news agency) article in November 2006 reports that about 6 million children are attending more than 10,000 bilingual schools in China, using both Mandarin and ethnic languages, and more than 3,000 textbooks are compiled in 29 languages annually.

Throughout 2006, the Chinese state continued investing to improve TV programming in minorities' languages. Currently, in the autonomous areas of ethnic minorities, 105 out of 441 radio programmes are in ethnic minority languages. In addition, of 489 TV programmes, 100 are in ethnic minority languages. Moreover, the TV stations managed at prefecture or county level in ethnic areas also use more than 10 ethnic minority languages or dialects, including but not limited to Dai, Kazakh, Kirghiz, Korean, Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur and Zhuang.

The huge boom in economic and industrial development in itself threatens the cultures and languages of minorities. China's famed Western Development Strategy exemplifies this trend, its main aim being to extract oil and gas from resource-rich rural areas for use in urban, coastal centres. Indirectly, however, Chinese Communist Party leaders hope that the resulting influx of Han Chinese settlers and state capital into the western regions will lead to assimilation in areas currently dominated by the presence of minorities. Ultimately, it appears to be an internal colonization project. On a more positive note, the Chinese government partnered with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2006 to attempt to lift ethnic minority groups out of poverty through developing cultural based industries and tourism.

In May 2008, a massive earthquake hit China's Sichuan Province, killing tens of thousands of people. The small Qiang minority, numbering around 300,000 lived concentrated at the epicentre of the quake.

The group was devastated through death and displacement, as well as loss of cultural heritage. The Chinese government's response to the crisis was commended by domestic and international human rights organizations, and the government announced a specific programme to evaluate damage to, and assist in the reconstruction of Qiang homes and cultural heritage sites.

In July 2008, ten days ahead of the start of the Olympic Games in Beijing, Amnesty International released a report criticizing the government for worsened human rights abuses in the run-up to China's turn on the international stage in the government's attempt to squelch dissent through enhanced use of arrest, house arrest, censorship and torture. There were indications that minority groups were among its main targets. According to Amnesty International reports, Chinese authorities made increased use of punitive forms of administrative detention against human rights defenders, religious practitioners, ethnic minorities, lawyers and journalists including 'Re-education through Labour' camps, where detention may last up to four years without trial. A month earlier, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada released a report detailing the increasing persecution of Christians ahead of the Olympic Games. The Falun Dafa Information Centre claimed that with the Olympics approaching, the government had arrested thousands of Falun Gong adherents and sent them to labour camps, perhaps for years. In Xinjiang province in the month before the opening ceremonies, police killed five Uyghurs and arrested nine others in what they said was an anti-terrorist raid to prevent 'holy war' against Han people. Earlier in the year, police announced they had broken up a Uyghur plot to disrupt the Olympics. Mongolian rights activists also claimed that in the weeks before the Olympics, the government was quietly cracking down on the minority Mongol population of Inner Mongolia, including through arrest and increased surveillance of dissidents, as well as restrictions on travel by Mongols to Beijing.

Despite the call of the UN Committee Against Torture (CAT) in November 2008 to 'immediately abolish all forms of administrative detention', torture and other ill-treatment by authorities continued in prisons, police stations, 'Re-education through Labour' camps, and other unofficial detention facilities. According to Amnesty International the groups particularly at risk of torture and ill-treatment include ethnic and religious minorities, in particular Tibetans, Uighurs, and Falun Gong practitioners, Christians, Muslims and others practising their religion in officially unsanctioned ways. The authorities detained, harassed, and ill-treated members of unsanctioned Christian house-churches, and confiscated or destroyed their church property.

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Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and surrounding Tibetan inhabited areas

2008 saw a series of demonstrations and riots in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and surrounding Tibetan areas. Demonstrations began on 10 March 2009, the 49th anniversary of the failed uprising against Chinese rule in 1959. The protests began when 300 monks demanded the release of other fellow monks detained since the previous Autumn. Political demands surfaced soon after the initial few days of peaceful demonstrations and the protest turned violent. Rioting, burning, looting and killing began on March 14 in Lhasa. According to media reports rioters targeted police cars and other official vehicles and shops and cars owned by Han Chinese and by members of the Muslim Hui minority living in Lhasa. Xinhua, China's official news agency reported that, 'in the violence that erupted in Lhasa, capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region, on 14 March, rioters injured 623 people including 241 police and armed police and killed 18 others. They also set fires at more than 300 locations, mostly private houses, stores and schools, smashed vehicles and damaged public facilities.' In a news conference held two days after the violent clashes in Dharamsala, India, the Dalai Lama called for an international probe of China's treatment of Tibet, which he said is causing 'cultural genocide' of his people. The US news channel CNN reported that a spokesman of the Tibetan-government-in-exile confirmed at least 80 deaths in the unrest. Exact figures were difficult to determine also in relation to the aftermath of the riots. Amnesty

International reported that ‘while Chinese authorities announced that over 1,000 individuals detained in the protests had been released, overseas Tibetan organizations estimated that at least several hundred remained in detention at year’s end.’ There were reports of torture and other ill-treatment in detention, in some cases resulting in death. Major monasteries were reported to remain under virtual lock-down. The ‘Patriotic Education’ campaign was reintroduced, which requires Tibetans to participate in collective criticism sessions of the Dalai Lama and to sign written denunciations against him. The campaign also requires Tibetan members of the CPP to remove their children from Tibet exile community schools, where they obtain religious education.

Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR)

Amnesty International reported on tight control over religious practice and intensified persecution, torture and ill-treatment by authorities against the Uyghur Muslim population in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) throughout 2008. In July 2009 violent riots broke out between Uyghurs and Han Chinese that resulted in at least 197 deaths and hundreds injured and many buildings and cars destroyed in Urumqi, the capital of XUAR (according to Chinese official sources). The violence was part of ongoing ethnic tensions between the Han and the Uyghurs and according to MRG has its 'origins in a lack of any meaningful political participation for Uyghurs in the region, restrictions on their religious and cultural practices and loss of their land'. MRG says the Chinese authorities all too often equate the frustration of ethnic minorities, and Uyghur activism in particular, with social unrest to be repressed, leaving the underlying factors driving ethnic disgruntlement unaddressed. This is confirmed by Amnesty International which claims that Chinese authorities ‘used a series of violent incidents, allegedly linked to terrorists, to launch a sweeping crackdown’. According to Chinese official media, almost 1,300 people were arrested during 2008 on terrorism, religious extremism or other state security charges, and 1,154 were formally charged and faced trials or administrative punishments'. With the exception of one Tibetan case, the XUAR remains the only region in China where individuals are executed for political crimes. Following the Urumqi riots, Navi Pillay, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said demonstrators had the right to protest peacefully and that those arrested should be treated in line with international law and a full and transparent investigation should be conducted into the causes of the deadly rioting to prevent a vicious cycle of unrest and retribution.

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