

China cracks down on aggrieved party cadres in Xinjiang and Tibet

Critics say hardline stance against 'separatism and religious extremism' has provoked significant disquiet

Simon Denyer for the Washington Post

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China has mounted an extraordinary set of attacks against Communist party members in the troubled western regions of Xinjiang and Tibet, with accusations of disloyalty, secret participation in religious activity, sympathy with the Dalai Lama and even support for terrorism.

The accusations reflect a hardening of the party's stance in Buddhist Tibet and Muslim-majority Xinjiang, experts said, as well as President Xi Jinping's determination to push for ideological purity within the party nationwide, quashing debate and dissent. But critics say they also reflect the fact that the party's hardline approach towards crushing "the three evils of separatism, terrorism and religious extremism" in both regions has not only alienated many ordinary ethnic Tibetan and Uighur people but has also provoked significant disquiet in its own ranks.

Some party officials openly criticise policies handed down from above, complained Xu Hairong, secretary of Xinjiang's Commission for Discipline Inspection, making the unusual admission in a commentary published last month.

"Some waver on clear-cut issues of opposing ethnic division and safeguarding ethnic and national unity, and even support participating in violent terrorist attacks," Xu wrote in his agency's official newspaper.

"This does not mean the cadres participated in attacks," said Nicholas Bequelin, East Asia director for Amnesty International, "but rather is the equivalent of local officials saying: 'The central authorities are sending leaders who are so ham-fisted they have driven people to the edge and understandably they have started blowing up things.'"

With Xi taking the lead in formulating policy toward Xinjiang, "everybody has to march to the same drumbeat", Bequelin said.

An article published last Friday on China Tibet Online, a party website, said that 355 party members had been punished in Xinjiang last year for violating "political discipline".

The article said that one had joined a social media chat group titled "Uighur Muslim" that was meant to undermine ethnic unity, while another had reposted an interview given by the prominent Uighur intellectual Ilham Tohti, who was sentenced last year to life in prison on charges of advocating separatism.

Written by Zhao Zhao, the article said that some officials blame social problems on ethnic discrimination, thereby inciting ethnic hatred. "There is also a lack of faith in Marxism. Some grassroots party members even participate in religious activities," he wrote, adding that this would never be allowed.

Critics say there is widespread economic, cultural and religious discrimination against Uighurs and Tibetans.

After 2009 riots in Xinjiang's capital, Urumqi, left at least 192 people dead, the party acknowledged that it needed to address Uighur grievances, Bequelin said.

But later, with an increase in violent attacks by Uighurs, the party changed course, asserting at a major meeting on the region in 2014 that the priorities were stability and unity rather than economic development and combating discrimination.

The imprisonment of Tohti, a moderate economist whose work had detailed the problems Uighurs face, sent a strong signal to academics and party officials alike that the debate about discrimination had been closed, Bequelin said. The party now vehemently asserts that Uighur terrorism is directed by Islamist militants based abroad and is increasingly rooted in extremist ideas picked up on the internet.

At the same time, the Communist party has been recruiting, and the number of members in Xinjiang is reported to have risen by 21,000 to 1.45 million in 2014. And that has brought other problems.

"The Chinese Communist party believes that it is witnessing a 'crisis of faith' in Xinjiang and Tibet in particular," said Julia Famularo, an international securities studies fellow at Yale University.

"It has actively endeavoured to draw ever greater numbers of ethnic minorities into the party, but it now fears that these new recruits possess only superficial loyalty to the party-state," Famularo wrote in an email. "Beijing laments that these minority party members still make clandestine visits to mosques and monasteries, and that they still have stronger ties to their own people than to the party or to China."

In Tibet, 15 party members were investigated last year and 20 this year for violating political discipline, China Tibet Online reported, saying that some had participated in organisations supporting “Tibetan independence”.

Last month, Tibet party boss Chen Quango said the party would go after officials who held “incorrect views” on minority issues or who “profess no religious belief but secretly believe,” including those who follow the Dalai Lama or listen to religious sermons.

China accuses the Dalai Lama, the exiled spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists, of trying to divide the country and pry Tibet away from China. The Dalai Lama insists he only wants meaningful autonomy for the region.

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