

Why Xi Jinping's Xinjiang policy is a major change in China's ethnic politics

Beijing's "Sinicization" campaign extends well beyond Xinjiang.

By **David R. Stroup**

November 19, 2019 at 6:00 a.m. EST

"Absolutely no mercy" was Chinese President Xi Jinping's 2014 directive in Xinjiang, according to a recent New York Times article based on over 400 pages of leaked Chinese Communist Party (CCP) documents. These documents offer new clues on the extent and official rationale for the CCP's mass detention of 1 million or more Uighurs, Kazakhs and other Muslims in internment camps.

Other signs of CCP efforts to "Sinicize" religion are evident throughout China. In July, Reuters reported that local authorities in Beijing ordered 11 halal restaurants to remove Arabic language and Islamic imagery from their signage. These and other examples suggest that authoritarian consolidation under Xi's leadership has led to a sea change in China's policy toward its ethnic minorities. Here's what you need to know.

The CCP once promoted multiethnic pluralism

Since the 1950s, the CCP's long-standing policy was to recognize and promote official registration of citizens as ethnic minorities via census and preferential policy measures. This system enabled China's leadership to maintain the image of China as a multiethnic society that embraces cultural pluralism, by allowing minorities to display state-approved expressions of difference. The CCP portrayed ethnic minorities as belonging to the larger "family" of Chinese nationalities under Beijing's leadership.

After the outbreak of violence between the majority Han Chinese and ethnic minorities in Tibet in 2008 and Xinjiang in 2009, some of China's top policymakers began to argue that the system of ethnic differentiation had done little to promote national unity.

Under Xi, assimilation became paramount

Influential scholars and officials claimed that official recognition of ethnic differences was the source of ethnic problems, rather than the solution. Xi's statements over the past five years, and the ensuing changes in enforcement of ethnic policy throughout China, suggest that advocates for the linguistic and cultural assimilation of minorities are rising in profile within the CCP.

Influential members of this group want to revise the system of ethnic differentiation, and push for a "second generation" of ethnic policies — which would end census tracking of ethnic identity and policy privileges for minorities.

In an [April 2016 National Religious Work Conference](#) speech, Xi declared that religious communities must “promote Chinese culture, strive to integrate religious belief with Chinese culture,” and align with the values of the state. In his [2017 address](#) to the CCP Party Conference, Xi promised that the party would strive to ensure that “religions in China must be Chinese in orientation.”

“Sinicization” is spreading well beyond Xinjiang

Global news reports have documented the impact of these policy shifts — in particular, the mass [surveillance](#) and [detention](#) of ethnic Uighurs in the [Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region](#). These detentions, along with the banning of many [ethnic](#) and [religious](#) practices, and the demolition of [mosques](#) and [graveyards](#) in Xinjiang, represent the most extreme and widely reported facet of Beijing’s assimilation campaign.

But the CCP’s crackdown on ethnic and religious expression extends well beyond Xinjiang. Local authorities have begun to restrict ethnic expression and the practice of faith among ethnic Hui communities (what foreign media sometimes refer to as “Chinese Muslims”) throughout China. In late 2017, the CCP began to remove Arabic signage from public spaces. Officials also demolished or altered the appearance of [mosques](#) in multiple [locations](#) in [Ningxia](#), as well as in the provinces of [Gansu](#), [Yunnan](#), [Shaanxi](#) and [Henan](#).

The wider adoption of assimilation tactics first used in Xinjiang suggests that the CCP views Xinjiang as a replicable model for management of ethnic relations. [The Global Times](#), a state-run newspaper, explained last year that Ningxia officials would travel to Xinjiang to “learn from Xinjiang” as part of a “cooperation agreement against terrorism.”

A report on concerns about “[pan-halalism](#)” and efforts to replace food labeling in Arabic, for instance, suggests that the CCP views its efforts in Xinjiang as part of a larger push to prevent the spread of ideologies the party believes are shaped by religious extremism and [foreign influence](#). Another [Global Times](#) article claims “training centers” have reduced the violence in Xinjiang, signaling the success of Beijing’s efforts to turn those it sees as potential extremists into “normal people.”

This is a fundamental shift in China’s governance strategy

The CCP’s emphasis on using “Chinese-ness” as a measure of cultural normality, and the moves to promote cultural Sinicization, represent a profound shift in the CCP’s management of ethnic politics. The new prominence of the [United Front Work Department](#), an expansive unit tasked with [a broad mandate](#) to promote China’s interests at home and [overseas](#), seems to herald wider CCP support for this “second generation” approach to ethnic policy in China.

Under the leadership of [Hu Lianhe](#) — an advocate for assimilationist policies, and an academic with strong views on terrorism and the importance of protecting stability as a means of legitimating party rule — this department has added new bureaus dedicated to Xinjiang. The department has played a central role in the development of new policy measures concerning ethnic and religious affairs.

By enacting policies that require assimilation and deliberately end special status and policy benefits for ethnic and religious minority groups. Xi’s administration signals that the CCP is no longer focused on

showcasing internal ethnic and religious diversity through programs of differentiation.

The sharp assimilationist turn in ethnic politics since 2014 signifies the CCP's fundamental concern for its own ruling legitimacy: The CCP provides the societal stability necessary for China's continued prosperity. As some analysts explain, the CCP remains greatly concerned about the threat of ethnic unrest. Writings from Xi's early career that urgently connect management of ethnic policy to China's survival suggest that Xi, himself, shares these concerns.

Xi's message of Sinicization as central to the success of CCP governance, a theme these newly leaked CCP internal documents seem to support, suggests that the assimilation campaign is likely to continue, in Xinjiang and elsewhere.

David R. Stroup (@davidstroup) is a lecturer of Chinese politics at the University of Manchester. His research focuses on everyday ethnic politics in China's Hui Muslim minority communities.