China at the Tipping Point?
Andrew J. Nathan ▪ Zhenhua Su et al. ▪ Cheng Li ▪ Tiancheng Wang
Xi Chen ▪ Carl Minzner ▪ Louisa Greve ▪ Xiao Qiang & Perry Link

Egypt: Why Liberalism Still Matters
Michele Dunne & Tarek Radwan

Tocqueville and the Struggle Against Corruption
Alina Mungiu-Pippidi

Charles Fairbanks & Alexi Gugushvili on Georgia
Gustavo Flores-Macías on Mexico
Jørgen Møller & Svend-Erik Skaaning on Sequencing
R.J. May on Papua New Guinea
Benjamin Reilly on Southeast Asia

Debating the Arab Transformation
Hillel Fradkin ▪ Olivier Roy
On balance, tensions and troubles in peripheral areas of the People’s Republic of China (PRC)—especially the “autonomous regions” of Tibet and Xinjiang—strengthen rather than weaken the country’s authoritarian regime. They buttress the Communist party-state’s legitimating ideology and its bureaucratic systems of repression.

All-out crackdowns on dissent and religious freedom in Tibet and Xinjiang used to be cyclical affairs. Now the weight of the regime’s heavy hand is felt more or less continuously. Since 9/11, the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has made its fight against the “three evil forces of separatism, terrorism, and religious extremism” a constant, unlike the episodic “Strike Hard” antiterrorism campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s. Tighter controls and more arbitrary arrests in Tibet and Xinjiang—especially since the 2008 disturbances in the former and the 2009 unrest in the latter—have thrown a blanket of repression over both regions as well as ethnic autonomous counties and townships in neighboring provinces. Life today in these areas includes wartime-style checkpoints, midnight sweeps of whole neighborhoods following any sort of public incident, and a sharp increase in forced disappearances of young Uyghur men. New tactics in response to the wave of self-immolations since 2009 of young Tibetans include collective punishment of their families and villages via the withholding of state benefits and the cancellation of public-works projects.

At the same time, coercive assimilation to Han Chinese culture has accelerated. Teaching in the Tibetan and Uyghur languages has been phased out over the past decade and a half in the schools, reaching elementary schools and now kindergartens. Children attending the five-days-per-
week “boarding” day-care establishments may never fully master their parents’ native languages. Not only are rebellious monasteries surrounded by armed security forces; even personal religious observances have been banned in the most severe totalitarian fashion. In Xinjiang, for instance, parents are forbidden to teach their religious beliefs to their children, and no one under eighteen may enter a mosque. Sixteen Uyghur boys who were arrested in April 2010 for studying the Koran on their own after school are now serving sentences of eight to fourteen years in jail. Students, government employees, and nearly all others who are neither farmers nor itinerant peddlers are now prohibited from fasting during Ramadan. Workplaces and schools must appoint “Ramadan Stability Teams,” and often provide daytime meals during Ramadan, with the understanding that anyone who refuses to eat will face punishment. Police also patrol the streets in the predawn hours; if lights show at apartment windows, officers demand entry to ascertain whether the family is eating a meal to prepare for the day’s fast. If so, some or all family members will find themselves fined, demoted, or fired.

Islands of Misery

The regime’s stated policy response to ethnic grievances is to promote economic development. This has brought the peripheral regions economic opportunities—for people with connections. It has also encouraged Han migration to these regions while fueling massive corruption and creating environmental problems that threaten the lives and livelihoods of many. In a cruel twist, some policies purportedly designed to protect the environment from overgrazing have in fact created islands of misery in Tibet and Inner Mongolia by forcing families of herdspeople to give up their animals and submit to being “villagized” into grim concrete housing blocks where only meager government handouts keep starvation from the door.

Programs to provide jobs to unemployed youth carry the effect, intended or not, of bringing large groups of young people to live in factory dorms thousands of miles from home. And while the same is true for millions of rural young Chinese who have left home to work in the export-production factories over the past two decades, the recruitment policy in Xinjiang has produced high anxiety among these teenagers’ parents: Unlike in any other part of China, local officials are required to fill government-mandated quotas, using deception, pressure, and threats. Is it any wonder that Uyghurs would like to know why government policy is geared toward resettling young Uyghurs far from home in Han Chinese cities? In a similar vein, policies designed to provide greater educational opportunities for Tibetan and Uyghur youth steer young people away from their families and cultures—large numbers of the best and the brightest are now in programs where they spend their formative years at
boarding schools in big eastern cities, a policy that puts tremendous pressure on intergenerational community ties.

Perhaps surprisingly to central-government policy makers—who may sincerely believe that such policies, if they succeed in bringing material improvement, will also lessen ethnic grievances—all these policies not only have fostered mounting discontent, but have undermined the regime’s long-term goal of promoting stability by making social and cultural identity less tied to ethnicity. The March 2008 protests in the Tibet Autonomous Region and neighboring Tibetan areas are a case in point. News that police had detained a dozen monks for staging a peaceful, silent protest march in Lhasa spread within 48 hours to more than sixty other towns across the Tibetan plateau, in areas that are among the poorest, most remote, and least “wired” parts of the PRC. In parts of five provinces and autonomous regions, thousands of young people—some astonishingly brandishing the banned “snow lion” flag of Tibet—came out to register their discontent despite the certainty of violent police repression. In the event, this was but a foreshadowing of the post-2009 wave of young people who have sacrificed their lives by self-immolation for the sake of their ethnonational identity.

Could such episodes move China toward a “tipping point” that undoes the CCP regime? Might we see a replay of what happened two decades ago in the dying Soviet Union as central control unravels, weakened in part by the de facto secession of “captive nations”? In a word, this is unlikely. The share of China’s population that is involved is too small—there are only about 6 million Tibetans, 9 million Uyghurs, and relative handfuls of other ethnic minorities in the PRC, a country of 1.3 billion people, more than 90 percent of whom are Han Chinese.

Moreover, the economic immiseration of the non-Han ethnic groups finds no general parallel in the populace at large. Residents of the PRC’s Han Chinese heartland may be angry over inequality, gross corruption, and rampant injustice (all of which threaten the CCP’s legitimacy), but there is a powerful constituency that derives significant economic benefits from the current system. Moreover, some defecting members of the Soviet nomenklatura were also attracted by the prospect of building their own crony-capitalist state. China’s apparatchiks have already been enjoying life in just such a state for the past twenty or thirty years, and have no need to undo the current order in order to construct a cronyist realm.

In other words, there are few if any significant interest groups that would be tempted to take problems on the periphery as a signal to turn against the CCP regime. In fact, interest groups that would be harmed by a breakup, but thrive on the threat of breakup, are only growing stronger. To that sobering observation, others may be added. One is that the CCP regime’s determination to maintain its grip on the periphery bodes ill for hopes that gradual promotion of the rule of law might show China a peaceful way out of its current quandaries. Another is that the “periph-
eral” experience depressingly demonstrates how readily and persistently the regime will fall back on the manipulation of Chinese-nationalist sentiment as a means of bolstering its doubtful legitimacy.

The Hollowness of “Autonomy”

The peripheral regions include not only Tibet, Xinjiang (literally “New Frontier,” so coined by the Qing dynasty; Uyghur activists prefer “East Turkestan”), and Inner Mongolia, but hundreds of counties, prefectures, and townships in Sichuan, Qinghai, Yunnan, and other areas. By law they are “autonomous” and as such supposedly enjoy self-rule as well as a host of safeguards for their local languages, religions, ethnic traditions, and cultural expression. In reality, of course, the entire constitutional-legal edifice of “autonomy” is a giant fiction that Mao Zedong borrowed more or less whole from Joseph Stalin’s trick of hiding the reality of centralized Soviet domination behind a paper façade of documents granting minorities self-government and an array of rights.

Mao made a number of fine-sounding promises as he pursued his project of extending complete Communist Party control over the whole territory of the former Qing Empire (1644–1912), but having served their purpose, those promises have not been kept. In the PRC, therefore, minorities have rights by law and all Chinese citizens have rights under the constitution, but the CCP and its security organs trample all such guarantees and other nominally democratic features of the system as often and as wantonly as they feel the need to.

China’s doughty weiquan (rights-defense) lawyers, whose drive to use the existing legal system to enforce the rule of law has been blunted even in the big eastern cities, admit to complete helplessness when it comes to pursuing legal cases under what amounts to martial law on the periphery. When asked about his experience in trying to help a Han Chinese Christian arrested in the far west, one attorney privately declared, “Oh, there’s really no law in Xinjiang.”

It is becoming ever less likely that the rule of law, riding on a wave of desire for economic modernization, will re-emerge in the medium term as a common goal among powerful forces in the Chinese state and economy, or as a serious objective of would-be top-down Party reformers. Chinese who contemplate the experience of the periphery will only see confirmation, if more evidence is needed, of how far-fetched such hopes really are. There, the party-state has shown how willing it is to eviscerate anything resembling law-based rule when respect for law threatens its overriding concern with staying in power.

The buildup of an aggressive security state in the peripheral regions also holds grave implications for democratic prospects in China as a whole. First, the “stability-maintenance” agencies have seen their budgets—and the opportunities for graft available to their functionar-
ies—grow astronomically. A not insignificant portion of this growth is a response to ethnic unrest. The security agencies’ greater weight and independence (to the point where they now form a lobby of sorts that influences central policy) suggest a regime that will dig in and fight rather than embrace reformist accommodation in the face of discontent. Ethnic unrest, in other words, is feeding yet another antireform constituency.

Second, the reintroduction in Tibet and Xinjiang of totalitarian-style controls on ordinary personal freedoms (not targeted solely at people who specifically challenge abuses of power or speak out on political matters) is an ominous sign for all of China. Heartland Chinese overwhelmingly accept the state propaganda system’s invocation of the “separatist” threat as justification for harsh policies toward the minorities. This attitude receives reinforcement from deep-seated racist attitudes that not only go unchallenged by civil society or state civic-education programs, but are embedded in the assumptions and rhetoric of the state’s coercive assimilationist approach to dealing with Tibetans and Uyghurs. But the “national minorities” are not the only PRC citizens threatened by the heavy-handed state-security tactics now making a comeback on the ethnic periphery. To mention one dramatic example highlighted by China analyst Ethan Gutmann: Highly unethical practices occasioned by the shortage of transplantable organs—including what appears to be organ-harvesting from the bodies of live prisoners—are now a nationwide scourge (and, some say, a shoe waiting to drop in the Bo Xilai scandal). These practices were first tested on condemned prisoners in Xinjiang.

The CCP has learned from its study of the Soviet Union’s demise not to underestimate the dangers of partial political reform. Because national minorities played such a conspicuous role in the USSR’s unraveling, Chinese leaders feel especially anxious not to let restive minorities “get out of hand.” This imperative fits in neatly with the Party’s claim to have restored China to greatness after its “century of humiliation” between the First Opium War of 1839–42 and the Communists’ victory over the Nationalists in 1949—a period, so the narrative goes, when China was invaded, divided, and dominated by foreigners. Tibet may be a high, forbidding plateau inhabited by only a few million residents, but it retains symbolic significance as a once-sovereign realm that is also the last territory to have put up armed resistance against forced incorporation into the PRC. The CCP regime has now declared it to be a “core interest” on the same level as Beijing’s claims to sovereignty over Taiwan. While dissatisfaction with environmental disasters, widespread corruption, and abuse of power may be exposing the CCP to skeptical scrutiny, so far the appeal to Chinese nationalism has held fast. The vast bulk of Han Chinese seem to cheer their government’s strong stance in defense of “territorial integrity” in disputes over various islands and in its Taiwan policy. They also embrace the internal, ethnic dimension of today’s state-sponsored nationalism: Beijing’s resolution in combating the “hostile forces” that are supposedly
working to split Tibet and Xinjiang from the motherland. Moreover, Han Chinese almost universally seem to feel that their government is bringing civilization and development to what they see as backward minorities.

Overall, the response of the Chinese state—and of Chinese society at large—to the problems of the periphery is piling more tension and misery upon the populations there, but it is not undermining state power. If anything, the party-state seems to draw strength from peripheral troubles, and indeed these troubles continually undermine prospects for better governance under any future rulers, including those installed by the 2012 Eighteenth Party Congress.

So far, this brief essay has been a tale of woe. Is all the news bad? Will troubles on the ethnic and geographical periphery do nothing but undermine democracy’s already tenuous prospects in China? Perhaps there is a glimmer of hope. Slowly but perceptibly, awareness of the rot at the PRC’s edges seems to be growing. A small but rising number of Han intellectuals are showing a genuine interest in ethnic minorities’ views, undaunted either by these views’ lack of popularity or by the government’s clear willingness to use ominous guilt-by-association tactics against anyone who even hints at sympathy for ethnic grievances.

Worthy of mention are several intellectual initiatives. One is Charter 08’s inclusion of language about finding federalist solutions to China’s problems. Another is the work of novelist and commentator Wang Lixiong, well known for championing the rights of Tibetans, and whose book My West China, Your East Turkestan is one of very few devoted to exploring the Uyghurs’ perspective. The efforts of the now-shuttered Open Constitution Initiative (OCI) to analyze the reasons for Tibetans’ sense of grievance and to propose policy alternatives was groundbreaking. Its May 2009 white paper challenged the official narrative on the causes of the unrest, and recommended that Chinese authorities do more to respect and protect the Tibetans’ interests and rights, including their right to religious freedom. While the OCI fell short of demonstrating a full understanding of Tibetans’ aspirations for democratic rights and cultural survival, it was nothing less than courageous in its attempt to undertake and disseminate independent research and analysis on an issue that is truly neuralgic for the Chinese state.

Finally, popular writers such as Yu Jie are breaking new ground by stating that Tibetans and Uyghurs deserve a say in their lives and the policies that affect them. Yet even Yu forthrightly admits that that he does not expect most Chinese to shed their deeply ingrained sense of racial and civilizational superiority. To his appeal is added that of 2010 Nobel Peace Laureate Liu Xiaobo, who over the two decades before his imprisonment in 2009 wrote more than twenty essays touching on ethnic questions and problems. Yu and Liu may still be voices crying out in the wilderness, but it is encouraging that at least some Han Chinese are pointing out that the ethnic-nationality story has two sides, and that what the ethnic peoples have to say in their own cause deserves to be heard.