

Death will not silence the protests

Written by Taipei Times

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If China hopes to quell unrest in Xinjiang by kidnapping, jailing or even executing scores of Uighurs, the results will fall short. Decades of oppression — economic, cultural, religious and linguistic — have at times welled into protests or riots in China's biggest territory, as seen again this summer. Clamping down further on the region, history tells us, is more likely to fuel unrest than squash it.

Yet this is Beijing's strategy. China seems determined to rule by fear in Xinjiang. Indeed, at this point it seems unlikely that China would be able to win over hearts and minds there even if it tried.

China's latest warning to anyone chafing at its grip was a court ruling upholding nine death sentences handed down to alleged participants in this summer's violence in Urumqi. That was followed by news that Chinese authorities in Xinjiang had launched another "Strike Hard" campaign to clamp down on the region between now and the end of the year.

The nine condemned to death are not likely to win reprieve from the Supreme People's Court, which must review the sentences. Nor does it seem likely that China's pursuit of "instigators" will end here. A press release from the Uyghur American Association said the condemned men were among 12 sentenced to death (11 Uighurs and one Han, of whom three reportedly declined to appeal), along with another nine who received varying sentences. All of their trials lasted less than a day and were nontransparent, the association said.

That should come as no surprise in China, where there is bountiful evidence of trial verdicts being determined in advance, and where sensitive trials are closed to independent observers. The veracity of the charges brought against these men will likely never be known — a sickening prospect given that 12 of them will lose their lives.

This is a microcosm of a larger affliction plaguing China, a country where countless tragedies go uninvestigated every year and the courts, prisons and laogai are a tool of the Chinese Communist Party, not justice.

The most famous example is the Tiananmen Square Massacre, a subject off limits in China even to this day, while the number of people still imprisoned over the incident remains unknown. A more recent example was the devastating Sichuan earthquake that killed tens of thousands of people. The "probes" into the "tofu dreg" schools that collapsed in the quake were, like most attempts at justice in China, a travesty.

Less publicized examples also abound, such as Xinjiang's Gulja Massacre, many details of which remain unclear. Beijing might have learned a lesson from its 1997 crackdown on an aggrieved populace — people so distraught they were willing to risk arrest to take to the streets demanding religious and cultural freedoms. Yet China's actions today recall the terror described by residents of Gulja after the incident. In a report last month, Human Rights Watch documented the stories of dozens of Uighurs taken away by authorities after the Urumqi riots and whose whereabouts are unknown. These disappearances were probably the "tip of the

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iceberg," it said.

As long as China seeks to instill fear in Uighurs rather than address their grievances, the tension in Xinjiang will intensify. Uighurs live in terror of being singled out by police, while Han in the region increasingly live in fear of the Uighurs.

China's handling of the situation is untenable. Rather than taking steps to resolve it, however, it is sending men to the gallows without fair trial and holding scores without due process. Further conflict seems unavoidable because China can only load its guns and aim.

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