**Uighurs and the wall of silence**

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National integration is essential for not only nation-building but also for national security. Sociology contends that there are many different paradigms towards this end. The differentials model represents one such example and prescribes the eradication of ethnic minorities as a means of national integration. The idea being eliminating separatist elements while curbing dissent in order to make society as homogenous as possible. In real terms, this translates into chaos by cultural and identity genocide. This can be seen in the ongoing and prolonged Israeli atrocities against the Palestinians as well as China’s treatment of its Uighur Muslim minority population.

“There was and is and always will be trouble in Xinjiang,” writes British journalist and author Tim Marshall in his book: ‘Prisoners Of Geography’. The autonomous Xinjiang region remains one of China’s most mineral-rich provinces. The site of an underground nuclear site, the area borders eight countries and is home to around 12 million Uighurs. This minority group, which also includes Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and ethnic Turks, have twice declared the independent state of East Turkistan in 1930 and 1940, respectively. Xinjiang represents a major trade route and China cannot afford any unrest there. Not least because it lies at the heart of Beijing’s ambitious BRI (Belt, Road Initiative) project; connecting East Asia to Europe.

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There have long been reports, dating back to 2018, of Uighurs being rounded up and put in detention camps. China insists these are ‘vocational educational and training centres’ and are aimed at uplifting people out of poverty. Yet Xinjiang has seen a clampdown on mosques and even Muslim names are banned. Social media, for its part, is full of first-hand accounts by former inmates that speak of indoctrination and torture. There are testimonies of women detainees being gang-raped, enduring forced sterilisation and forced abortions. Some 2 million Muslims are reportedly incarcerated in 1,400 camps. This is genocide.

Yet we must also ask how all this came to pass. To answer this, we need to go back to the 2009 Ürümqi riots, when clashes erupted between the majority Han Chinese and the Uighurs. Then, in 2014, suspected Uighur militants went on stabbing spree at Kunming train station, killing 31. All of which prompted China to clamp down on dissent while pouring a lot of money into the region. This coincided with an orchestrated media campaign against the Uighurs and moves to relocate the Han ethnic majority to Xinjiang. Beijing paints the Uighurs as terrorists and extremists while invoking the war on terror narrative to justify the treatment of this minority group.

On the world stage, we have the US, which keeps bringing the Uighur issue to attention of the UN. This is, of course, the very same US which held the UN hostage over the recent Israel-Palestine violence. Pakistan, on the contrary, spotlighted the plight of the Palestinians at the world body while maintaining silence on the Uighur Muslim genocide. Thus, we may conclude that some Muslims are more equal than others, to borrow and play around with George Orwell’s famous ‘Animal Farm’ quote. It all boils down to foreign policy.

The world has borne witness to Israeli atrocities and voiced its concern. Yet the world has been largely silent when it comes to the suffering of the Uighurs. What little has come to light has been mainly due to western media coverage. Even here, there is no altruism to be found. Rather, the West is riled by China’s economic progress and is committed to smearing the country’s public image at every turn. This is often preferable than going down the UN route given that Beijing enjoys veto power at the Security Council. As for Pakistan, it can ill afford to upset the CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) applecart. Thus, we have no option but to trust Prime Minister Imran Khan — who has termed the Uighur issue as too sensitive to be discussed publicly — that he is, as pledged, bringing it up behind closed doors. And in the meanwhile, we, the citizenry, can and must raise our voices for all the oppressed. Whether the Hazara, the Shia, the Uighur or the Palestinians. Because, simply put, all Muslims are equal in and outside of the nation state construct.