

**CHINA'S ETHNIC POLICIES:
POLITICAL DIMENSION AND CHALLENGES**

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EAI Background Brief No. 441

Date of Publication: 12 March 2009

Executive Summary

1. The pillar of China's ethnic policies is regional autonomy for ethnic minorities (RAEM). The policies leave the decision to implement certain state policies or adopt special local policies to the governments of these areas, so long as it has been approved by the authority higher up.
2. Ethnic minorities also occupy top administrative and legislative posts and many official slots in autonomous areas. They also have higher representation in the national and local legislatures and in key political consultative body than their share in the population.
3. However, there are clear political limits to RAEM. The Chinese Constitution prohibits separation of any territorial units. In most autonomous areas the No. 1 power holder, namely, the Party Secretary, is usually a Han, whereas the administrative chief reserved for ethnic minorities is the No. 2.
4. These ethnic officials are trained to refrain from making ostensible ethnic demands. The higher authority is reluctant to approve the ethnic areas' resort to legal prerogatives. Autonomous areas also continue to suffer from relatively weak fiscal capacity and economy and lower adult literacy.
5. China's ethnic policies have made several achievements. The GDP of ethnic regions has grown more rapidly than the nation's since the mid 1990s. Mandarin becomes the passport to a better economic world for many ethnic minorities who also see the benefits of being a Chinese with China's rising international status. More importantly, there are few or no reports of social protests from most of the 55 ethnic minorities, suggesting that Beijing's ethnic policies are by and large acceptable to them.
6. The main exceptions are Tibet and Xinjiang. Tibetans and Uygurs have their own language and cultural identity and are under strong religious influence.

The two provinces integrated with China only under the Qing and are far from the power base of Beijing.

7. The Dalai Lama asks for a very high degree of autonomy and radical Uygurs even want political independence. Their demands far exceed Beijing's framework of "regional ethnic autonomy".

8. Beijing is likely to uphold the current political framework which has avoided a disintegration in the like of the federal Soviet Union. In his dialogue with envoys of the Dalai Lama in July 2008, Du Qingling, Director of the United Front Work Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) declared that both the CCP's leadership and the institution of RAEM should be "resolutely" maintained in Tibet.

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China's Ethnic Policies Facing Challenges

- 1.1 Riots in Tibet and terror attacks in Xinjiang underscore the challenges faced by China's ethnic policies.¹ The pillar of Beijing's ethnic policies is the regional autonomy for ethnic minorities (RAEM, or *mizu quyu zizhi* 民族区域自治). The RAEM provides limited regional autonomy, fiscal benefits, economic and cultural support from the state, and favourable social and economic treatment of ethnic minorities.
- 1.2 With RAEM, ethnic minorities occupy top administrative and legislative posts and many official slots in the autonomous areas. These areas have the prerogatives of not implementing certain state policies and adopting special local policies.
- 1.3 The state also allows a significant representation of ethnic minorities in the national and local legislatures and a key political consultative body. It also invests considerable resources in training cadre corps of ethnic minorities.
- 1.4 However, there are clear political limits to RAEM. First, the Constitution prohibits separation of any territorial units and prescribes punishment for separatist activities. The Chinese state is thus unitary, unlike the federation of

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¹ For an analysis of the riots in Tibet, refer to Huang Jing, "China's Tibet Problem: Still No Way Out?" *EAI Background Brief No. 383*, Singapore: East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore, 26 May 2008.

the former Soviet Union, where republics were constitutionally entitled to secession.

- 1.5 Second, in most ethnic autonomous areas (EAAs), the No. 1 power holder, namely, the Party Secretary, is usually a Han. The administrative chief (governors, mayors, magistrates, etc.), a position reserved for ethnic minorities, is the No. 2 power holder. Some even view regional autonomy as a facade to disguise the Han's dominance. Third, the administrative chief and cadres of ethnic minorities, who occupy many official posts in ethnic areas, are trained by the CCP to dutifully implement the Party's line and refrain from making ostensible demands for ethnic minorities.
- 1.6 Fourth, from the late 1980s to the mid 1990s autonomous areas received limited fiscal support from the state which had its focus on coastal development and had drastically scaled down its subsidies and financial support for ethnic autonomous regions. This led to growing fiscal deficit and slower growth of these areas. Despite recent improvements, Beijing may need to address the areas' low gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, their serious fiscal deficit, and comparatively lower adult literacy.
- 1.7 On the other hand, Beijing has made several achievements. It has apparently helped ethnic areas grow faster economically than that of the nation as a whole in the past decade. Its provision of medical services in ethnic areas is almost equivalent to that of the nation put together. China's rising international status and rapid commercialisation also encourage ethnic minorities to embrace the mainstream Han culture and language and to identify themselves as Chinese. The West-led anti-terror war has also undermined the moral support for violent political movements in Tibet and Xinjiang. Most of the 55 ethnic minorities seem to have accepted the institution of regional autonomy as reflected in the low incidence of protests and violence since the mid 1980s.
- 1.8 The troubled areas for Beijing are Tibet and Xinjiang. Tibetans and Uyghurs were late in integrating with China during the Qing. They have their own

language and cultural identity, are under strong religious influence, and are far from the power centre of Beijing.

- 1.9 Both the Dalai Lama and his followers want a very high degree of autonomy and radical Uygurs even demand political independence. Beijing cannot accommodate to their demands without abandoning its conventional “limited administrative autonomy” framework for resolving the ethnic issue.
- 1.10 Regional autonomy may well remain a pillar for China’s solution to the ethnic minority issue. With far less autonomy granted to ethnic minorities, China’s constitution and laws enable China to maintain national unity and avoid a disintegration in the like of the federal Soviet Union. This framework is however often subject to criticism. If Beijing upholds co-existence of ethnic groups, the West may criticise it for ignoring ethnic minorities. However, if Beijing accelerates economic integration, Beijing may be blamed for “destroying ethnic cultures”.²

Main Ethnic Policies

- 2.1 China’s ethnic policies are spelled out chiefly in the *Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law*. First promulgated in 1984, it was amended in 2001. It allows the setting up of ethnic autonomous areas (Article 12) of regions (provinces), prefectures and counties if one or more minorities live there in concentrated communities.
- 2.2 By the end of 2000 the PRC had 154 ethnic autonomous localities, including five provincial-level autonomous regions (*zizhiqu*) (Table 1), 30 autonomous prefectures (*zizhizhou*), and 119 autonomous counties or leagues (*zizhixian* or *zizhiqi*). In addition, there were 1256 ethnic townships (*minzu xiang* 民族乡). Forty-four of the 55 ethnic minorities have set up their own autonomous areas.

² For an analysis of Beijing’s Tibet dilemma, refer to Bo Zhiyue and Chen Gang, “Beijing’s Tibet Problem: Policies and Dilemma,” *EAI Background Brief No. 384*, Singapore: East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore, 26 May 2008.

Three quarters of ethnic minorities reside in autonomous areas which accounted for 64% of the national territory.³

2.3 According to Li Weihuan, the architect of RAEM, the core of regional ethnic autonomy is administrative autonomy.⁴ According to the Law, in the ethnic autonomous areas, the administrative chief (including the chairman of an autonomous region, the prefect of an autonomous prefecture or the head of an autonomous county), as well as the chairman or vice chairman of the standing committee of the legislature (coined people's congress) shall be a citizen of the ethnic group exercising regional autonomy (Article 17). As of 1998, the top legislative and administrative leaders of 154 autonomous regions and areas in the reform era were ethnic minorities.⁵

2.4 The state also allows ethnic minorities to have a higher representation in the legislature and at various levels of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference than their shares in population. Compared to the 1954-59 period, an era of moderate ethnic policies, the share of ethnic minorities as national legislators initially increased from a low 9.4% in 1975, to around 14.8% in 1988 and 1993. It was a respectable 13.8% in 2003 and 2008 (Table 2). This is much higher than the 8.4% share of ethnic minorities in the population.

2.5 The Party devotes considerable resources to training and grooming cadres of ethnic minorities. According to official statistics, in 1998, there were 2.7 million cadres of ethnic minorities, accounting for 6.9% of cadres nationwide, 54 times that in the early years of the PRC. The share of ethnic minorities in the cadre corps was 73.9% in Tibet, 47% in Xinjiang, 34% in Guangxi, 23.4% in Inner Mongolia and 17.5% in Ningxia.⁶ In 2002 there were 4.1 million

³ Wang Geliu and Chen Jianyue, *Minzu qiuyu zizhuzhidu de fazhan (Development of the Ethnic Regional Autonomy System)*. Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2001, pp. 4-5.

⁴ Xu Xiaoping and Jin Xin, *Zhongguo minzu wenti baogao (A Report on the Ethnic Issue in China)*. Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2008, pp. 70-1.

⁵ Wang and Chen, *Minzu qiuyu zizhuzhidu de fazhan*, p. 44.

⁶ Wang and Chen, *Minzu qiuyu zizhuzhidu de fazhan*, p. 44.

ethnic CCP members, equivalent to 6.2% of the total 66.4 membership, a noticeable increase from 2.8 million or 5.7% in 1990.⁷

- 2.6 The Law leaves it to the ethnic autonomous regions to decide on whether to implement regulations and policies from higher authorities. The decision, however, is subject to the approval of the higher authorities who are given 60 days to respond (Article 20). However, in practice there are indications that the higher authority sometimes sits on the request without giving a timely reply.
- 2.7 The Law also empowers autonomous areas with the right to enact self-governing regulations and separate regulations tailored to local and ethnic conditions. These regulations, again, need to be submitted to the legislature of the next higher level for approval (Article 19). Autonomous areas can also organise local public security forces for local need and with national approval (Art. 24).

China as a “Unitary Multiethnic State”

- 3.1 There are limits to rights bestowed on China’s ethnic minorities. First, according to the Law, the PRC is a “unitary multiethnic state”, whereby separation of any territorial units from the nation is strictly prohibited, ethnic unity preserved, and separatist activities severely punished.
- 3.2 Second, as the Chinese Communist Party is the ruling party, the Party is the supreme power holder at all levels and in all localities in China. Ethnic autonomous regions are no exception. The post of administrative chief (governors, mayors, magistrates, etc.) of the EAAs that is held by ethnic minorities is the No. 2 office. In most EAAs the Party Secretary, the No. 1 power holder, is usually a Han. This led some to view regional autonomy as a mere political facade to disguise the Han’s dominance.

⁷ See sources of Table 2. Colin Mackerras. “Ethnic Minorities”, in Czeslaw Tubilewicz. ed. *Critical Issues in Contemporary China*. New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 177.

- 3.3 Third, the CCP devotes considerable resources to training cadre corps of ethnic minorities. They are taught to dutifully toe the Party's line and refrain from making ostensible demands for their ethnic groups, especially political ones. Fourth, the actual utilisation of the legal prerogatives of not implementing policies from above in ethnic areas is quite rare.

Achievements of China's Ethnic Policies

- 4.1 In terms of economic development, Beijing has developed ethnic areas at a faster rate than that of the nation in the last 12 years. By doing so, Beijing has narrowed the economic gaps between the ethnic areas and the nation. This does help to take the steam out of ethnic discontent. Ethnic autonomous regions' edge over the nation in growth was 1.5% a year from 1996-2006 and 2.4% a year from 2001-2006 (Table 3).
- 4.2 Moreover, the central and local governments have provided comparable medical services to ethnic areas. From 1995 to 2006 there were 2.3 to 2.4 hospital beds per 1,000 residents in the ethnic regions, almost the same as the range of 2.3-2.5 for the nation (Table 4).
- 4.3 Similar changes have taken place in Southern Xinjiang. In the past rural Uygurs drank untreated water from small ponds right outside their run-down houses. In recent years, many villagers are provided with sanitary water. Villagers there no longer need to worry about disease from unclean water. As a result, some Uygurs even cooperated with the local authority in reporting and arresting violent Uighur extremists in recent years.
- 4.4 Moreover, in the course of China's rapid economic development, many ethnic groups in China want to ride on the nation's rapid economic progress and prosperity. Mastering the Chinese language seems to be the most sensible option. Many ethnic parents want their children to speak Mandarin so as to fare well in the job market. This helps in the economic and cultural integration of China.

- 4.5 Internationally, two factors have aided Beijing. First, the September 11 attacks and the West's anti-terror war have undermined the legitimacy of radical and violent movements for independence in Tibet and Xinjiang around the world. Second, a rising China has given ethnic groups the incentive to identify themselves with the Chinese nation.
- 4.6 Finally, despite the many limitations of regional ethnic autonomy, the institution apparently has been acceptable to most of the 55 ethnic minorities. This is vividly reflected in the fact that only liberal and radical Tibetans and Uygurs demand for autonomy and even independence far beyond what the current RAEM allows for; other ethnic groups have been relatively quiet, despite sporadic unrest in Inner Mongolia in the early reform years.

Internal and External Challenges to China's Ethnic Policies

- 5.1 China's ethnic policies face practical challenges in economic and social terms. Despite rapid growth, the gap in GDP per capita between ethnic regions and the nation as a whole is enlarging, even though the ratio to GDP per capita is declining. The gap in GDP per capita between ethnic regions and the nation steadily increased from 1773 yuan in 1995 to 5488 yuan in 2006 while the ratio of the gap to ethnic GDP per capita had declined, from the peak of 76% in 2000 down to 52% in 2006 (Table 3).
- 5.2 Adult literacy is also comparatively lower in ethnic areas which also register serious fiscal deficit. According to the last major national census in 2000, adult literacy in ethnic areas was 86.9%, 5.8% lower than the national rate of 92.7% (Table 4). The ratio of deficit to local revenue in these areas grew from 1.4:1 in 1995 to 1.47:1 in 2000, and peaking at 1.97:1 in 2005. It decreased slightly to 1.92:1 in 2006. In comparison, the nation's ratio as a whole in these years ranged mostly from 1.21:1 to 1.29:1. It peaked at 1.48:1 in 2000 (Table 4). The weak capacity for local revenue generation has hindered the provision of public services in ethnic areas, as reflected in lower local fiscal expenditure per capita than that of the nation (Table 4).

- 5.3 In Tibet and Xinjiang, where ethnic separatism has been most prominent and in some cases, violent, there seems to be an uneven distribution of economic benefits. The Han and the Hui outperform other ethnicities in the western region where ethnic minorities are concentrated. This is due to their entrepreneurial spirit and hard work, their possession of capital, skills, and social and even political network, and proficiency in Mandarin.
- 5.4 The most serious challenge to China's ethnic policies comes from the Tibetans and Uygurs. In general, language, religion, geopolitics, and the late integration with China all play a part in their political separatist tendency. Most of the 55 ethnic minorities are not proficient in their own ethnic language. Even the most populous ethnic groups, such as the Zhuang, Manchus, the Hui, and Mongolians, speak Mandarin. Most of them have been integrated into China for centuries, and are therefore highly sinicised.
- 5.5 Though more Tibetans and Uygurs can speak Mandarin, they still maintain the use of their own language, ethnic cultural identity as well as strong religious belief. Both provinces were integrated into China at a rather late point in history. They became a standard sub-national unit of China during the Qing Dynasty. Both provinces are also far away from the power centre of Beijing. It takes about five hours of flight from Beijing to reach Lhasa and 4 hours to reach Urumqi.
- 5.6 Finally, both provinces are backed by external forces and influences. The Dalai Lama in exile becomes the spiritual and appealing leader for the Tibetan movement while the Uygurs are inspired by radical Islam, Turkic nationalism, the independence of the former Soviet republics in Central Asia, and the once-successful Uygur attempt at setting up their own republic in the early 20th century.
- 5.7 The crackdown on demonstrators has been heavily criticised by the West. Beijing has much to do to improve its public image. It should be more open and less sensitive on its ethnic issues. Its ban on foreign journalists' coverage

of ethnic violence, imposed again in the wake of the Tibetan riots and Uighur attacks, only deepens Western bias against Beijing.

- 5.8 The West's criticisms of Beijing do not end here. The West tends to dismiss economic-social programmes by an authoritarian state to help out minorities as unresponsive to minorities' needs due to the lack of participation in the formulation. If Beijing upholds co-existence of ethnic groups, the West may criticise it for ignoring the economic hardship of the ethnic minorities and for only helping out the Han. On the other hand, if Beijing accelerates economic integration, it will be accused of "destroying the ethnic culture" and "colonising the periphery inhabited by the ethnic minorities." Furthermore, the West tends to embrace self-rule or self-determination in areas embroiled in ethnic conflict. This inevitably sets itself on the collision course with Beijing. Beijing tolerates no major challenges to its unitary and centralised political control and does not permit competitive regional or national elections.
- 5.9 Riots in Tibet and terror attacks in Xinjiang were apparently aimed at drawing international attention, especially from the West, at a time when China was about to host the Olympic Games.
- 5.10 Disgruntlement and resentment of the more competitive Han and Hui by the unemployed and underperforming Tibetans and Uygurs might have played a role in the recent riots in Tibet and terror attacks in southern Xinjiang. Some of the attacks (such as arson in Tibetan areas and blasts in Kuqa) targeted shops and stores owned by the Han (and in the case of Tibetan riots, also the Hui).
- 5.11 The riots are also apparently targeted at Beijing's ethnic policies. In 1992 the Dalai Lama withdrew his previous demands for autonomy of Tibet (and even a greater Tibet) like that enjoyed by Hong Kong. Instead, he demanded for "meaningful autonomy". Recently, he reaffirmed his position, declared his concern for "religious harmony", "human values" and "the well-being of the

Tibetan people”. He referred to the elections of the Tibetan representatives and wanted the Tibetan issue to be resolved through “international norms”.⁸

- 5.12 Radical Uygurs’ demands usually include independence of Xinjiang. Many Uygurs see Xinjiang as their own land and resent the inflow of ethnicities that do not live there in the past, especially a large number of Han people. All these demands go far beyond Beijing’s principle of limited autonomy, with some falling under Beijing’s category of “splitting up the motherland”, a serious political crime.
- 5.13 In the reform era, top Chinese leaders have attached great significance to regional autonomy for the minorities. In 1987 Deng once remarked that Mao was right in not copying Soviet federalism of allowing secession of provinces, thus maintaining China’s unity. His successor, the then State President Jiang Zemin coined regional ethnic autonomy as one of the three fundamental political institutions of the state.⁹ In 2003, Jiang’s successor, Hu Jintao, proclaimed the “three insists” (三个坚持) — adherence to socialism, the CCP leadership and RAEM. This stance was reaffirmed in 2006 by the Politburo of the CCP.¹⁰
- 5.14 In July and November 2008, in its dialogue with envoys of the Dalai Lama, Beijing reaffirmed the “three insists” principles in its Tibet policy. It rejected Dalai’s demands for a greater Tibet covering vast western areas inhabited by Tibetans and for a high degree of its autonomy. As RAEM will remain a pillar for China’s ethnic policies in the foreseeable future, it is unlikely that Beijing

⁸ Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama (OHDL), “His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibet Issue,” July 17, 2008, OHDL Press Release.

⁹ Wang and Chen, *Minzu qiuyu zizhuzhidu de fazhan*, pp. 36-7.

¹⁰ “Central Government’s Policy toward the Dalai Lama Changes from ‘Two Supports’ to ‘Three Insistences’” (中央政府对十四世达赖政策 从“赞成两条”到“三个坚持”), posted at http://cn.chinagate.com.cn/infocus/2008-05/20/content_15352505.htm on May 20, 2008, accessed July 2, 2008.

will allow Tibet and Xinjiang to have political and administrative autonomy like Hong Kong, even less for independence. These political scenarios simply do not fit into Beijing's *de facto* limited regional ethnic autonomy framework offered to Tibetans and Uygurs as well as 53 other ethnic groups.

APPENDIX

**TABLE 1 CHINA'S FIVE PROVINCIAL-LEVEL
ETHNIC AUTONOMOUS REGIONS**

Name	Set-up Date	Capital	Area (1000 square km)	Population (millions)	Population of Ethnic Minorities (millions)	Percentage of Ethnic Minorities (%)
Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region	May 1, 1947	Hohhot	1,183	23.9	5.2	21.6
Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region	October 1, 1955	Urumqi	1,650	20.1	12.1	60.4
Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region	March 15, 1958	Nanning	236	49.25	19.0	38.54
Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region	October 25, 1958	Yinchuan	66.4	5.96	2.1	35.98
Tibet Autonomous Region	September 1, 1965	Lhasa	1,228	2.76	2.6	93.48

Sources: Wang and Chen, *Minzu qiuyu zizhuzhidu de fazhan*, p. 227; *China Statistical Yearbook 2006*, Beijing: China Statistical Press, 2006, p. 45.

**TABLE 2 NUMBER OF ETHNIC MINORITIES IN THE
NATIONAL PEOPLE'S CONGRESS**

NPC	Year	Total Deputies	Deputies of Ethnic Minorities	Percentage of the Total	Number of Minorities Represented
First	1954	1266	178	14.5	30
Third	1964	3040	372	12.2	53
Fourth	1975	2885	270	9.4	54
Fifth	1978	3497	381	10.9	54
Sixth	1983	2978	405	13.6	55
Eight	1993	2977	493	14.8	55
Tenth	2003	2985	415	13.9	55
Eleventh	2008	2987	411	13.8	55

Sources: Wang, *Xinshiqi minzu zhengce de lilun yu shijian*, p. 68; "Shijie quanguo renda daibiao mingdan gongbu" (The Name List of the Deputies of the Tenth National People's Congress Is Publicized), posted at http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2003-03/02/content_752650.htm; "Shiyijie quanguo renda 2987ming daibiao zige queren quanbu youxiao" (Qualifications of 2987 Deputies of the Eleventh National People's Congress Have All Been Confirmed), posted at <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2008-02-28/214015040922.shtml>, accessed on April 14, 2008.

TABLE 3 ECONOMIC INDICATORS OF ETHNIC AREAS COMPARED TO THOSE OF THE NATION

	Ethnic Minority Autonomous Regions				National			
			1996-2006	2001-06		1979-2006	1996-2006	2001-06
GDP Annual Growth (%)			10.7	12.2		9.7	9.2	9.8
Ethnic Regions' Edge over the Nation in Growth (%)			1.5	2.4				
	1995	2000	2005	2006	1995	2000	2005	2006
GDP Per Capita (Yuan)	3,055	4,451	8,991	10,554	4,828	7,828	14,062	16,042
Gap Between Ethnic Regions and the Nation (Yuan)	-1,773	-3,377	-5,071	-5,488				
Gap/GDP Per Capita of Ethnic Regions	-58%	-76%	-56%	-52%				

Sources: The author's compilation and computation using data from *China Statistical Yearbook 2007*, 26-33; 46-49; 60; *China Statistical Yearbook 2002*, 22-29.

TABLE 4 FISCAL AND SOCIAL INDICATORS OF ETHNIC AREAS COMPARED TO THOSE OF THE NATION

	Ethnic Minority Autonomous Regions				National			
	1995	2000	2005	2006	1995	2000	2005	2006
Hospital Beds Per 1000 Residents	2.4	2.3	2.3	2.4	2.3	2.3	2.4	2.5
Adult Literacy (%)		86.9				92.7		
Local Government Revenue Per Capita (Yuan)	155	283	588	724	246	505	1155	1392
Local Government Expenditure Per Capita (Yuan)	371	697	1746	2112	563	1253	2595	3075
Fiscal Deficits/ Fiscal Revenue (local)	-1.40	-1.47	-1.97	-1.92	-1.29	-1.48	-1.25	-1.21

Sources: The author's compilation and computation using data from *China Statistical Yearbook 2007*, 26-33; 46-49; *China Statistical Yearbook 2002*, 22-29; *Zhongguo Minzu Tongji Nianjian 2007 (China's Ethnic Statistical Yearbook 2007)*, Beijing: Minzu Chubanshe, 2008, 644.