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China's Gulag for Muslims

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One of the darkest episodes of the 20th century was the gulag — the Soviet system of forced labor camps where dissidents were imprisoned in terrible conditions, often to perish. The camps were established by Lenin, expanded by Stalin and finally exposed to the world by the great Russian author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, with his 1973 masterpiece, “The Gulag Archipelago.”

“Thin strands of human lives stretch from island to island of Archipelago,” he wrote, and “it is enough if you don’t freeze in the cold, and if thirst and hunger don’t claw at your insides.”

Today, Russia’s gulags are long gone, as is the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that operated them. But now another dictatorship, ruled by another Communist Party, is operating a new chain of prisons that evoke memory of the gulags — more modern, more high-tech, but no less enslaving.

These are China’s “re-education camps,” established in the far-western Xinjiang region, where up to a million Chinese are reportedly imprisoned in order to be indoctrinated. People are forced to listen to ideological lectures, sing hymns praising the Chinese Communist Party and write “self-criticism” essays. Survivors also tell about military-style discipline, sleep deprivation, solitary confinement, beatings and torture.

The target of this mass persecution is China’s Muslim minorities — especially the Uighurs, a Turkic-speaking people based in Xinjiang. They follow a mainstream, moderate interpretation of Sunni Islam. But that is enough of a “mental illness” for Chinese Communists, whose ideology considers all religions, including Christianity, to be backward superstitions that must be diluted and nationalized. That is why they go as far as forbidding people from having beards or fasting during Ramadan, and forcing them to consume pork and alcohol, both of which are forbidden in Islam.

Chinese authorities say they are alarmed about extremists among the Uighurs — and, in fact, a handful of terrorists have carried out attacks against government targets over the years. But those extremists arose partly in response to a decades-old policy of subjugation, along with ethnic colonialization, that Beijing has pursued against the Uighurs. That history suggests that Beijing’s current “counterterrorism” campaign will be only counterproductive — deepening a vicious cycle that authoritarian minds are often unable to understand, let alone break.

And here is the strangest aspect of this story: China’s “re-education” policy is a major attack on Muslim people and their faith, Islam, yet the Muslim world has remained largely silent. While the policy has been condemned by human rights groups and the liberal news media in the West, along with Uighur organizations themselves, only a few Muslim leaders, like the Malaysian

politician Anwar Ibrahim and Pakistan's minister of religion, Noorul Haq Qadri, have raised some public concerns. Not until last month did the Organization of Islamic Cooperation finally express concern about "the disturbing reports on the treatment of Muslims" by China.

That is all very meek given how grim the situation is — and how it compares to what we would have seen if the same persecution had been carried out by some other country, such as, say, Israel.

Why is that? Why are Muslim leaders, especially those who love to be the champions of oppressed Muslims, so lenient toward China?

There are three answers. One is that coziness with China, the world's second-largest economic power, pays. China is the top trading partner of 20 of the 57 member states of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, a huge path of commercial and transportation infrastructure intended to pass through much of the Middle East, holds a lucrative promise for many Muslim nations.

Moreover, China does not shy away from offering its economic assistance as hush money. In July 2018, *The Global Times*, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, ran an interesting editorial suggesting that China's government would help Turkey secure its "economic stability" — but only if Turkish officials stopped making "irresponsible remarks on the ethnic policy in Xinjiang," which means stop criticizing China's human rights violations. (At about the same time, Germany's chancellor, Angela Merkel, was also promising to help the Turkish economy, but only if Turkey corrected its own human rights violations. In other words, Turkey was being pulled in opposite directions, and, sadly, the dark side has proved stronger so far.)

A second reason for Muslim silence is that the Chinese government crackdown on Uighurs is based on a premise that law and order can be restored by eradicating enemies of the government and traitors within a society. This is authoritarian language that most Muslim leaders understand well. It is their own language.

The third reason is that most Muslims who are likely to feel solidarity with their oppressed coreligionists think of the oppressors as "the West," defined as the capitalist, hedonist, Zionist civilization led by the Great Satan. These Muslims, particularly the Islamists, believe that all of their coreligionists should unite with other anti-Western forces — a stance that evokes Samuel Huntington's prediction of a "Confucian-Islamic" alliance against the West in his 1993 article in "Foreign Affairs" titled "The Clash of Civilizations?"

For Muslim autocrats and Islamists, a Confucian-Islamic alliance may still be alluring. China can look like a great model, in which the economy grows without Western nuisances like human rights, free speech or limited government. For Muslim societies, however, the Uighur crisis must be a wake-up call. It shows what can happen to Muslims when authoritarian governments embrace Islamophobia as state policy.

Islamophobia exists in the liberal democracies of the West, too — but there it can be criticized by the news media, checked by the courts and constrained by liberal institutions and traditions. Muslims can still practice their religion freely, and can even become lawmakers by being elected to bodies like the United States Congress.

For Muslim societies, in other words, a choice between freedom and dictatorship should not be too difficult. In freedom, you can live as a Muslim in safety and dignity. Under dictatorship, as China shows us, you can end up in a re-education camp.

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