



## Spare a thought for China's Muslim Uyghurs

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The days in which many Westerners celebrated what many thought was mainland China's inevitable march towards freedom as a consequence of its limited opening to global trade are now well and truly over. The present battle over Hong Kong, one of the world's most economically-free regions, is plainly a proxy for a wider fight about China's future—a future in which Beijing has made clear does not include much room for political freedom and rule of law.

Then there is the regime's ongoing suppression of religious freedom throughout China. Churches are burnt, pastors and priests who don't toe the line are harassed and imprisoned, and anyone who think that there are some things about which Caesar has nothing to say about quickly learns that their career prospects are limited. But perhaps the most shocking sign of Beijing's steady march even further down its already well-worn authoritarian path is the regime's treatment of its Muslim Uyghur citizens.

The Uyghurs was an ethnically Turkish group who number just over 11 million people. They live mostly in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in North-West China. The vast majority of Uyghurs are Muslims, more specifically Sunni Muslims.

For a long time, a separatist Uyghur movement has been seeking independence for Xinjiang province. Beijing has made it very clear that China will never countenance this. And one way in which the regime is trying to suppress this movement is by directly attacking expressions of Muslim faith among the Uyghur, presumably on the basis that Islam forms a major component of Uyghur culture and identity. People such as the Cato Institute's Mustafa Akyol have been sounding the alarm about this for some time and haven't hesitated to compare what it is going on to Stalin's Gulags.

It has been estimated that over one million Muslim Uyghurs—almost 10 percent of the Uyghur population in China—are imprisoned in what amount to concentration camps. Among other things, they are subject on a daily basis to relentless “reeducation.” Recently linked Chinese government documents have revealed that the objective of the exercise is to destroy the detainees' sense of cultural distinctiveness. That means seeking to systematically eradicate their connection to the Islamic religious beliefs, practices, and culture that have been part of everyday Uyghur life since the sixteenth century.

That such things happen in the twenty-first century is mind-boggling—until you realize that simply assuming that humanity is inexorably marching towards a freer world is an illusion. There's no reason to assume that free societies are inevitable. The Chinese government will go a long way, and do many things considered unthinkable by civilized people of all faiths and none,

to maintain an iron grip on society. China's treatment of its Muslim Uyghurs are just one of the most shocking signs of how far it is prepared to go.