

## **So call Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in East Turkistan: Rights in Theory and Practice**

The ancestral homeland of the Uyghurs, East Turkistan, was designated by the Chinese government as the “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region” on October 1, 1955. Today marks the 70th years of this so-called autonomous status. The Chinese government is holding major celebrations to mark the occasion.

However, it's important to emphasize the following point:

The so-called “Uyghur Autonomous Region,” declared on October 1, 1955, was never established as an institution based on the free will of the Uyghurs and other ethnic groups in the East Turkistan. It is solely a governance system forcibly imposed by the Central Government of the People’s Republic of China.

In 1949, East Turkistan was occupied by the Communist Chinese army, and following the occupation, armed and ideological resistance continued in the region. During this period, the Chinese government declared the “autonomy” status in order to suppress Uyghur independence demands and to establish its own control.

The proposal by then-Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai on the “Establishment of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region” was approved by the Standing Committee of the China National People’s Congress on September 13, 1955. The area, previously administered as “Xinjiang Province,” was declared the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region on October 1, 1955. However, no concrete or clear legal framework was provided to support the autonomy at the time of its declaration.

Twenty-nine years later, on May 31, 1984, the National People’s Congress passed the Law on Regional National Autonomy. This law, consisting of 67 articles, theoretically recognized political, economic, cultural, and religious rights in autonomous regions, granted them established legislative, administrative, and local resource management powers under the law.

Within the framework of this law, five separate institutions were established in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region:

1. Communist Party of China Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Party Committee
2. Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region People’s Government
3. Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region People’s Congress (regional legislature)
4. Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Political Consultative Conference
5. Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (Bingtuan)

Although these institutions appear equal in written law, in practice, the highest decision-making authority is the China Communist Party Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Party Committee. In other words, while there are five institutions on paper, the actual decision-making power rests entirely with the Party.

Thus, under the 67-article autonomy law adopted in May 1984, political, economic, cultural, and religious rights were theoretically recognized, but in practice, they have not been implemented. Even where implemented, only a very limited portion has been realized. The

Chinese government has consistently showcased the law for its own purposes, rather than ensuring genuine autonomy.

Today, I would like to draw particular attention to Prof. Ilham Tohti. The demands put forward by Ilham Tohti, winner of the Sakharov Prize, do not constitute “separatism” as claimed by China. Ilham Tohti merely advocated for the implementation of provisions already present in China’s constitution and the autonomy law. However, for these demands, the Chinese state accused him of “separatism” and sentenced him to life imprisonment.

## **Theoretical Rights vs. Practical Violations**

### **1. Political Rights**

Theoretical:

- The autonomous region has its own regional People’s Congress and People’s Government.
- Executive positions, particularly the governor and key posts, should be held by local ethnic groups (Uyghurs).
- The regional legislature can make local regulations, subject to Beijing’s approval.
- Every ethnic group has the right to participate in state affairs and local democratic elections.

Practical:

- All political authority is concentrated in the hands of the CPC Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Party Secretary. ( Chinese)
- The governor and other administrative organs have no real decision-making power; local mechanisms operate only within the framework of the Party Secretary.
- Officials who are not Party members, especially Uyghurs and Kazakhs, cannot exercise decision-making or implement policies.
- Over 90% of Party officials are Chinese, and Uyghurs and Kazakhs are minimally represented; no actions can be taken without the Party Secretary’s approval.

### **2. Economic and Social Rights**

Theoretical:

- The region can formulate its own economic development plans and utilize its underground and surface resources.
- Resource revenues should primarily be used for the welfare of the local population.

Practical:

- The Chinese government favors Chinese nationals economically.
- Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other ethnic groups face serious discrimination despite legally recognized autonomous rights.
- Discrimination is persistent in workplaces; especially since 2008, young Uyghur have been relocated to other Chinese regions as cheap labor.

- Forced labor continues: 25% of global cotton production, over 40% of raw materials for solar panels, and significant portions of products such as ketchup and tomatoes rely on Uyghur forced labor.
- These practices violate Articles 23 and 10 of the Law on Regional National Autonomy.

### 3. Cultural and Educational Rights

#### Theoretical:

- Local languages (Uyghur language ) should be used in official institutions and education.
- There is the right to mother-tongue education; textbooks should be prepared in local languages.
- Cultural heritage and ethnic traditions should be preserved.

#### Practical:

- Under the “bilingual” education program, Uyghur-language education has been completely eliminated.
- This violates Article 37 of the Autonomy Law and reflects the government’s aim to Sinicize Uyghur national education.
- Since 2004, education has been conducted primarily in Chinese.
- After the September 5, 2009 events, hundreds of Uyghur-language websites were shut down, and their administrators arrested.
- Uyghur language activists such as Abdulla Ayup were threatened and imprisoned for opening a Uyghur language nursery in 2013.

### 4. Religious Rights

#### Theoretical:

- All peoples have the right to freely practice their religion.
- Places of worship should be protected, religious leaders trained, and religious institutions operated.

#### Practical:

- Religious freedoms are severely restricted.
- Between 2017–2020, approximately 8,000 mosques were demolished and 8000 mosques partly destroyed.
- Islamic names of mosques are banned.
- Hijabs, beards, and other religious symbols are prohibited.
- Fasting, prayer, religious marriage, and funeral rites are banned.
- These practices violate Article 11 of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Law.
- Reports by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) document these violations in detail.

## 5. Rights over Underground and Surface Resources

### Theoretical:

- The region can manage its own resources, and most revenues should be allocated for local development.

### Practical:

- East Turkistan's oil, gold, uranium, gas, and other resources are controlled by the central government.
- Uyghur and Kazakh communities derive virtually no benefit from these resources.
- This violates Article 62 of the Law on Regional National Autonomy.

## Conclusion

On paper, the 1984 Law on Regional National Autonomy provides the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region population with broad political representation, cultural freedoms, religious rights, and access to economic resources. However, in practice, all of these rights remain largely theoretical, suppressed by the central government's control and the dominance of the Communist Party.

The so-called "autonomy" granted by the Chinese government under the name of the "Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region" is nothing more than a political mask. In reality, it serves to erase Uyghur identity, forcibly assimilate the Uyghur people, and permanently annex East Turkistan as Chinese territory.

History shows us clearly: whether under the Manchu Empire, the Nationalist regime, or the Chinese Communist Party, none of the promises made to the people of East Turkistan were ever honored. Every Chinese regime has sought to dismantle the region's political and cultural autonomy.

After the founding of the East Turkistan Republic in 1944, the Communist occupation of 1949, and the hollow declaration of "autonomy" in 1955, Uyghurs have been subjected to systematic oppression, their identity eroded, and their freedoms crushed under the weight of state control.

Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2014, these policies have escalated into a full-scale campaign of genocide. United Nations assessments, independent investigations, the Uyghur Tribunal's rulings, international reports, and the recognition of Uyghur genocide and crimes against humanity by 11 parliaments—including the European Parliament—document the shocking reality: mass arbitrary detentions, forced labor, coercive birth control, and the deliberate destruction of Uyghur culture and heritage.

In the face of this ongoing atrocity, it has become undeniable that there is no lasting path for the Uyghurs to safeguard their identity, language, culture, and very existence other than through independence. The international community must no longer remain silent. It must recognize these crimes for what they are, uphold international law, and respect the Uyghur people's right to self-determination. Support for this fundamental right is not a matter of choice—it is a moral and political obligation.