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Assimilation Uber Alles. The PRC Law on Promotion of Ethnic Unity and Progress

On March 12, the People's Republic of China (PRC) legislature adopted the Law on Promoting Ethnic Unity and Progress (民族团结进步促进法). The adoption of the law took place during the annual Lianghui, or (两会), meaning the "two sessions," or the annual plenary meetings of China's top legislative and political advisory bodies. These are the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.[1]

The law is an all-encompassing statute that now officially codifies how Beijing is authorised to impose state control over the PRC's 56 officially recognised ethnic groups and nationalities. If there is an overall theme or intention behind the act, it is to force - via state-mandated conformity – these nationalities to assimilate and subjugate the traditions and practices of their daily lives to a more comprehensive set of policies that serve the nation's interests over their own.

As one of the essays written not long after the passage of act describes, "the law enshrines a decades-long shift towards aggressive assimilationist policies. Structurally, it reflects a deepening merger of Party ideology and state law that is becoming increasingly prevalent under Xi Jinping."

As with numerous changes under the current Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary, Xi Jinping, this is not a development that has suddenly sprung about overnight. It is the end point of process that began over 12 years ago during the CCP's Central Ethnic Work Conference.

As an analysis of this event then highlighted, the situation internal to the PRC at this point was one in which the growth of "mass incidents" across the nation that had nationalist or ethnic conflicts as their initial cause was becoming a more pronounced concern. At this

time, Xi was already concerned with the potential for the country to implode along ethnic lines.

The General Secretary described the situation as on which the CCP should formulate a solution that would permit the citizenry and the Party that controls it to "resolutely walk the correct road of China's unique solution to the ethnic question."[2]

To many of us, it sounded like the old ways of the PRC's iron hand coming back again.

In 2010, the Financial Times correspondent Richard Mc Gregor, who had finished his stint as the paper's correspondent in Beijing, published his famous assessment of the PRC's political order, "The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers."

Three years later, in an act that McGregor's writings almost set the scenario for, a far more hardline and return-to-the-previous-era Xi Jinping takes power.

The Country That Runs on Soviet Hardware

As McGregor described the overall system that rules the PRC, it is a set of institutions that run primarily "on Soviet hardware." Even though the USSR as a nation ceased to exist more than three decades ago, the model for the top-down and a centralized control dictatorship that was taught to Beijing by their then-Russian role-models is the mechanism that is still alive and well today.

The basic attributes of that system begin with, first and above all others, that CCP operates behind closed doors and in the process maintains an absolute grip on power.

Secondly, and in line with the old Soviet model, the Party is the pre-eminent and dominant force. The CCP systematically controls all the key pillars of society—including the government, courts, media, and military. In the process the lines between state institutions and party apparatus become unclear. Where the authority of one ends and the other begins is a blur more often than it is clearly discernible.

It also the CCP that is set up to deal with corruption and discipline. High officials accused of corruption or other irregularities are turned over to the all-powerful Party Central Commission for Discipline Inspection rather than a state federal law enforcement organ.

Trials are private internal tribunals rather than public, independent legal processes. Those convicted (and they almost always are) lose their Party membership as one of the primary punishments.

This process has seen a marked uptick as stamping out corruption has become a never-ending campaign with Xi. This is due to – his supporters say – corruption being a problem that has only increased over the years. I

n Louisa Lim's 2014 book "The People's Republic of Amnesia," she looks back on the events of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. She interviewed several of those who were involved in the event on one level or another who describe just how severe these corrupt practices had already become 12 years ago.

One of those was Wu'er Kaixi, a student protest leader who has lived in exile in the Republic of China on Taiwan and the US since being forced to flee in 1989. His observations for the book capture the overall scale of the dilemmas that confronted the PRC leadership 12 years ago.

His interpretation: The political causes that the students wrote about in their hunger-strike declaration—"widespread illegal business dealings by corrupt officials; the dominance of abusive power, the corruption of bureaucrats; the fleeing of a large number of good people to other countries; and the deterioration of law and order"— remain not merely unresolved but worse than in 1989."

"The corruption cases that make the headlines today feature billions of dollars rather than millions," he continued. "A campaign against rumor-mongering has placed new controls on speech and online expression, punishable by prison. Meanwhile, citizens are being arrested for simply trying to protect the rights afforded to them by law."[3]

This was the situation only about 18 months after Xi succeeded Hu Jintao as the CCP General Secretary. Hu, who took over as the Party's head at the beginning of the new millennium will also go down in history is one of the PRC's weakest rulers. Xi's paranoia at

time was what could happen to the PRC was due to what at the time appeared to be the state slipping into a less authoritarian model of governance.

No Kinder, Gentler PRC On My Watch

These were developments for XI that were all too similar to that of Mikhail Gorbachev's final years as the ruler of the Soviet Union. It was also not lost on Xi that the major difference between the PRC today and Gorbachev's USSR was that the Soviet leader never let his security apparatus loose on the population. Russians felt they could let their country collapse because they were no longer afraid of the state.

His conclusion: Hu's relaxation of the ideological discipline in the PRC has to be reversed and the army of police state repressive apparatus needs to be used to the maximum extent possible - in the manner that General Secretary Xi has ended up doing since taking power. Gorbachev was also not in the process of scaring his elites by conducting a semi-ruthless purge such as that which has been on-going in the PRC now for more than a decade.

When he becomes the General Secretary Xi begins a set of actions designed to completely reverse that trend that was developing under Hu. His message was that "there will be no kinder, gentler PRC on my watch." In matter of fact, as he saw it, the course of the nation had to become one that was in no way a more humanitarian and less totalitarian state.

The dangers, as Xi saw it then and sees it now, was if the PRC became less tightly controlled rather than more, this would threaten the very foundation of the country. It is his overriding fear – one might say obsessive paranoia – that the world's most populous communist state could suffer the same fate as the former Soviet Union.

This impacts directly on Xi's favourite theme: He frequently warns that the Soviet Union collapsed because its ideals and convictions wavered, and because "nobody was man enough" to stand up and fight for the party.

(This explanation, however, say many of the Russian European-minded politicians who look at the PRC today, is not an accurate one. The rule of the Soviet Communist Party

(CPSU), they say, was no subject of adulation, was heavily criticised by those like the future President of Russia, Boris Yeltsin, and was hated by many. There are even those who describe the final days of the CPSU as an entity that was finally put out of its misery.)

Xi refuses to see the CPSU for what it was and states the Soviet system collapsed due to a loss of ideological faith and purity. Xi then argues that the CCP must learn from its Soviet predecessor. The Soviet leadership, as he sees it, lost its ideological compass, and permitted "historical nihilism" and a wavering of ideological adherence to communist beliefs that let the system rot from within.

Xi also places a particular emphasis on how the Soviet military's withdrawal from political education was a fatal blow that happened in parallel alongside the CPSU's loosening grip on society. Discarding the ideological control of the armed forces, in his opinion, sealed its fate of the USSR.

This goes a long way to explain why Xi has been so relentless in purges of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) leadership. Even some of the most senior and respected members of the Central Military Commission like the famous General Zhang Youxia, have not been spared.[4]

How To Avoid the Soviet Collapse

Looking at the matter in this context it appears that the law is not just – as it has been characterised – "the culmination of a policy trajectory that has been building for over a decade." It is also a defensive mechanism that involves deleting those practices within the PRC system that were adopted from the USSR but today are not adequate to the task of maintaining the total dictatorship that Xi is building.

Under Xi, Beijing is moving away from the post-1949 legal framework of nominal ethnic autonomy, which was imported from the Soviet Union. Even though ethnic affairs were always administered under tight CCP control they were never on the level of the General Secretary's ambitions now: subsuming all facets of an individual's family and cultural history to be subservient to a common national identity.

This aggressive assimilationist approach is likely to eventually make the expression of ethnic differences so undesirable as to be subject to repression by state authorities. It is more likely than not that certain levels of loyalty to one's ethnic grouping could even be regarded as subversive and punishable by law.

Provincial and municipal authorities in the PRC have enacted a wave of local "ethnic unity and progress" regulations in recent years, focused on specific areas that have been seen as trouble spots - like Xinjiang Province or Inner Mongolia. It is entirely possible that these manner of controls over the populations could be see an expansion of their target set and be enforced in still more ethnic enclaves – if not nationwide.

The new national Ethnic Unity and Progress legislation also creates the administrative authority for doing so as it elevates this approach to the level of a national statute governing all the PRC.

This "assimilationist uber alles" initiative also stands the risk of worsening ethnic tensions in the PRC instead of suppressing them. Efforts to stamp out cultural identity in Inner Mongolia in 2020, which included ratcheting up Han Chinese-centric instruction in elementary schools, precipitated widespread citizen protests and boycotts.

This was followed by a purge of the ethnic Mongolian Party and government officials who were now castigated as insufficiently committed to Beijing's new Party line. The new law does almost nothing to safeguard against a similar type of backlash.

There is, for example, no language as there was in the previous 1984 Ethinc Autonomy Law that specifically required education to be conducted in minority languages. That 1984 law also warned against imposition of Han dominance or "chauvinism" becoming official state policy.

Those 1984 changes were made with the intent to dial back and/or eradicate the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. But much of what has done since Xi taking over has been to re-introduce and revive the ideological aspects of that era.

This may end up being a very dangerous as well as a self-defeating policy if rigidly enforced. Xi believes by inculcating a new national common identity in the PRC that this is another preventive measure that would proactively inoculate the country against

fracturing or for the society to develop separate and conflicting sets of interests and agendas.

His followers say Xi's programme of forcing these new ethnic policies down the population's throat are supposed to make the nation more unified and stronger. They may very well have the opposite effect.

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