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# China's far-west strife reveals a country in flux

Mon Jul 13, 2009 12:25am EDT

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By [Chris Buckley](#) - Analysis

URUMQI, China (Reuters) - The potential dark side of China's future was on show last week when crowds of Han Chinese, clutching clubs, axes and mobile phones, sought revenge after a rampage by minority Uighur Muslims.

The ethnic violence in Urumqi, capital of the far-west Xinjiang region, was also a product of the new China, with its increasingly mobile and sometimes assertive population.

Enmity between Uighurs and Han Chinese mixed with high-tech communications and sometimes fumbling state security to stoke the strife in Urumqi, which the government says killed 184 people.

There are many unanswered questions about the tumult that began with a student protest over Uighurs killed at a factory in far southern China. Not least, how many died in the subsequent violence by Uighurs and then rioting by Han Chinese residents.

But the mayhem has also highlighted how China's market economic transformation is changing society in ways the ruling Communist Party and its security forces may struggle to master.

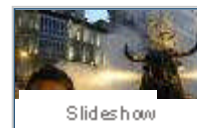
"There are deep faultlines behind the veneer of stability in China," said Nicholas Bequelin, an Asia expert with Human Rights Watch who has long studied Xinjiang.

"The Party is trying to hold things together, but social change has set in motion powerful undercurrents that prove uncontrollable with the old tools."

Uighur discontent over the factory deaths spread on the Internet, and both sides used mobile phones to record images of protest, before authorities severed such communications.

Recent smaller and less deadly outbreaks of protest in China have also reflected the potential for the tensions of a society in flux to sometimes

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overwhelm the Party's traditional controls, with news from local clashes rippling nationwide and globally.

That certainly does not mean more deadly riots will engulf China. The one-party state is still a potent force, as the thousands of troops now guarding Urumqi show. But last week's events highlighted the social strains that may some day seriously challenge the Party's grip on a country home to 1.3 billion people and the world's third biggest economy.

#### FROM THE INTERNET TO THE STREETS

The spiral of protests, riots and violence started around the People's Square in central Urumqi on July 5, when the students gathered to protest the factory killings.

According to many Uighurs, that conflict began with Internet, text messages and street rumors beyond the grasp of Party censors, helping spread claims that dozens, if not hundreds, of Uighurs were slain in the factory in Shaoguan, Guangdong.

All Uighurs interviewed in Urumqi were convinced the official count of two dead in the factory strife was fiction. Few in China trust central state-run media these days, and that applies especially to the discontented Uighurs.

"If you're told something on television, you assume the opposite is true," said Alim, a Uighur official, who added that he believed 50 or more Uighurs were killed at the factory. [Continued...](#)

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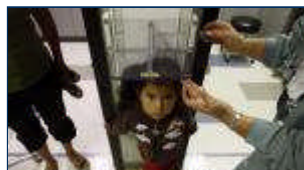
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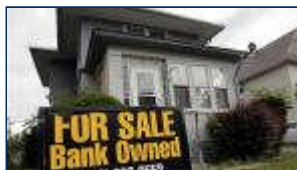
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