



Commission Analysis

Draft Ethnic Unity Law Intensifies Language and Cultural Repression of Uyghurs and other Ethnic Groups



SUMMARY: Recent developments suggest that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is escalating a systematic campaign to assimilate ethnic minorities—signaled most visibly by Xi Jinping’s highly symbolic September visit to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) and reinforced through tightened laws and policies in the Tibet Autonomous Region and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. Unveiled alongside Xi’s trip, the new draft *PRC Law on Promoting Ethnic Unity and Progress* (Draft Law) frames its agenda as “ethnic unity” even as authorities continue mass detentions and coercive family planning measures targeting Turkic Muslims in the XUAR. The Draft Law would institutionalize assimilation by pushing Mandarin-language instruction for ethnic minority children beginning in preschool and embedding ideological education that prescribes a single, “correct” understanding of history, ethnicity, culture, and religion as defined by the Chinese Communist Party. In practice, these measures hollow out protections for minority language and religious freedom recognized in both domestic commitments and international norms—accelerating the erosion of minority cultures, identities, and community life under the banner of unity.

Recent developments indicate that officials in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) plan to heighten the assimilation of Uyghurs and other ethnic minority groups, further narrowing the space for distinct ethnic identities. In mid-September, the Central Committee Political Bureau (Politburo) reviewed the

draft of the new **PRC Law on Promoting Ethnic Unity and Progress**. The review of the law took place around the time of Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping's September **visit** to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), during which he marked a celebration of the Party's control over the region on the 70th anniversary of its establishment as an autonomous region. While in the XUAR, Xi **emphasized** the importance of "ethnic unity" and called for the continued "sinicization of religion." Xi's visit, and the review of the Draft Law, occurred as officials continued to detain hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims, including those detained for their religious beliefs, and continued to carry out forced sterilization and other types of coercive family planning measures among ethnic minority groups in the XUAR.

In 2021, officials passed regulations in the **XUAR** and the **Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region** promoting "ethnic unity," a year after authorities passed similar regulations in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), in what observers **criticized** as moves aimed at eradicating ethnic minority cultures. In the XUAR, officials have used rhetoric related to "ethnic unity" to carry out repressive policies that likely constitute mass atrocity crimes, such as the **"becoming family" program**, in which ethnic minority families in the XUAR were forced to host civil servants and Party cadres in their homes, sometimes even sharing the same bed. Women in these families have been subjected to **rape and sexual abuse** as a result of such programs. Authorities have also used programs promoting "ethnic unity" to enforce **religious repression** in Muslim ethnic minority communities throughout the PRC. **Articles 12, 40, and 44** of the Draft Law contain language that would restrict the freedom of religion.

The new Draft Law mandates the promotion of Mandarin Chinese as the national language and emphasizes the necessity of "forging the common consciousness of the Chinese nation" (牢中华民族共同体意识), a concept underscored by Xi during his recent visit to the XUAR. The Draft Law raises questions about the PRC's commitment to its **Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law** (REAL), which contains protections for the languages, religious beliefs, and customs of ethnic minority "nationalities" in addition to a system of regional autonomy in designated areas. The new Draft Law, in addition, may violate Article 5 of the PRC's ratified commitment to the **International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination** (ICERD), which guarantees the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Official proposals to increase the use of Mandarin Chinese in the PRC's border areas **increase concern** that the wider use of Mandarin will further marginalize ethnic minority groups. In both the **XUAR** and the **TAR**, authorities have implemented a policy of "bilingual education," which largely replaces instruction in ethnic minority languages with instruction in Mandarin.

The concept of ethnic unity, enshrined in the Draft Law, is consistent with **“second generation”** ethnic policy reforms, long advocated by leading officials and scholars, which prioritize identification with the country over identification with one’s ethnic group. These reforms would also dismantle the system of regional ethnic autonomy created by the **“first generation”** of ethnic policies and replace them with policies aimed at eroding minorities’ language and identity. The first generation system allows, on paper, **a system** wherein ethnic minorities living in dense communities possess the right of regional autonomy. **The PRC Constitution** and REAL guarantee “the freedom [for ethnic minority groups] to use and develop their own spoken and written languages.” Article 12 of the new Draft Law, however, contains language providing for education to “guide people of all ethnic groups to firmly establish a correct view of the country, history, ethnicities, culture, and religion.” Article 15 of the Draft Law, meanwhile, provides for the promotion of Mandarin Chinese at the preschool level, bringing to mind a **plan** published by the Ministry of Education in 2021 that established mandatory Mandarin Chinese-based instruction in preschools throughout China. The new Draft Law further entrenches officials’ forced assimilation of ethnic minorities and leaves promises of autonomy unrealized.