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"I Believe Violence is A Dead-End-Street": Dolkun Isa

Dolkun Isa is described as 'one of the eleven most dangerous terrorists' by the Ministry of Counter-Terrorism and Public Security of People's Republic of China. He has been accused of organising terrorist activities on behalf of Eastern Turkistan Liberation Organisation inside Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region. In a face-to-face, a gentle, focused and diplomatic Dolkun Isa appeared completely different from what was portrayed of him by the Chinese government agencies. Originally published in the April 2011 edition of **Pachakuthira Magazine**, this piece is based on a conversation between Design & People Co-founder Sethu Das and **Dolkun Isa**.



UNLIKE Tibet, very little is known about the freedom struggle taking place inside East Turkistan, also known as Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region of north-west China. The country now remains under the military rule of the Chinese communist government.

The people of East Turkistan are not Chinese but Turks originating from Central Asia who speak the Turkic language. Home to about 20 million Turkic-speaking Uyghur Muslim people, this little kingdom has now become a battleground for the ethnic Uyghurs and the immigrant Han Chinese community which is slowly making the ethnic population a marginalised one. As with independent Tibet in 1949, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China marched to East Turkistan to end the independence of the East Turkistan Republic — opening a dark chapter in their history.

Despite six decades of brutal repression, and cultural genocide, the spirit of the Uyghur people refuses to die away. They continue their fight against one of the most brutal military regimes in the world.

Dolkun Isa is the Secretary General of World Uyghur Congress (WUC), formed under the leadership of a charismatic woman — Rebiya Kadeer, a philanthropist who spent nearly five years of solitary confinement within the Chinese jails. Since the WUC was formed in Munich in 2004, it has worked towards freedom and democracy in East Turkistan and in exile. A student-leader of the pro-democracy demonstrations at Xinjiang University in the 80s, Dolkun was dismissed from University; he then pursued his Master's Degree in Politics and Sociology from the Gazi University of Turkey. Though his movements are monitored and work restricted by the Chinese authorities, he continues his political activities for the rights of the Uyghur people. I met with Dolkun Isa, a man who has been described as "one of the most dangerous terrorists who promotes violent activities launched by Eastern Turkistan Liberation Organisation inside Xinjiang," according to a list published by the Ministry of Counter-Terrorism and Public Security of China in 2003, at the World Uyghur Congress Headquarters, a gentle, focused and diplomatic Dolkun Isa appeared completely different to what was portrayed of him by the Chinese government agencies.



Dolkun Isa (Right), Secretary General of World Uyghur Congress (WUC) with Sethu Das, Co-founder of Design & People at the WUC Headquarters. The National Emblem and the outlawed National Flag of East Turkistan are seen on the wall.

Excerpts from an interview:

Sethu Das: Ever since the 2009 uprising in Urumchi, the capital of East Turkistan, the Chinese authorities intensified their war against the Uyghur people and converted the region into one of the most militarised zones with the deployment of 130,000 troops. What is the current situation of the people living under the cultural and religious repression of People's Republic of China?

Dolkun Isa: For many years, the Chinese government has waged an intense and often brutal campaign to repress all forms of Uyghur dissent, including cracking down on Uyghurs' peaceful religious activities and independent expressions of ethnicity, diluting the Uyghurs' culture and identity as a distinct people, and threatening the survival of the Uyghur language. However, since the events in July 2009, the human rights situation of the Uyghurs has worsened considerably. International human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have documented the situation in detail. Today Uyghurs in East Turkistan are living under heavy surveillance in all areas of their lives. They have literally no possibility of breathing freely.

Sethu Das: One of the main objectives of World Uyghur Congress is to work towards a peaceful settlement of the question of East Turkistan through dialogue and negotiation. How optimistic are you about a 'dialogue' with one of the most dreaded military regimes in the world?

Dolkun Isa: The World Uyghur Congress (WUC) and its leaders have publicly called upon the Chinese authorities to start a dialogue with the Uyghurs for a solution to the conflict of East Turkistan in April 2010 in Brussels and Belgium and during an international conference at the European Parliament. However, the Chinese authorities have not responded to this offer. And I don't think they will do so in the near future. Therefore, our vision of an official dialogue is rather pessimistic; however, we continue to insist on our proposal and continue our struggle through nonviolent and democratic means.

Sethu Das: In spite of all the peace efforts from the Uyghur people under the leadership of Rebiya Kadeer, somehow the struggle inside East Turkistan remains a violent one. Do you think there is a contradiction between the path the leadership has chosen for the people and those inside East Turkistan?

Dolkun Isa: The struggle inside East Turkestan is not a violent one. Yes, there have been some violent acts in the past, but these were made on an individual level and do not receive the support of the Uyghur population as a whole. The Chinese authorities have routinely equated Uyghurs' peaceful political, religious, and cultural activities with the "three evils" – terrorism, separatism and religious extremism – and have couched their persecution of the Uyghurs as efforts to quash these 'three evils'. Therefore a wrong perception of the Uyghurs and their struggle are being developed among outsiders. If you really want to understand what is going on today in East Turkestan, you have to go to the root causes. A case in example, root causes of the terrible events in July 2009 lie in the longstanding discriminatory policies of the Chinese government towards the Uyghurs and the egregious repression of Uyghurs' religious, political, educational, linguistic, and economic rights. This means, today Uyghurs are living in an open-air prison which lead to an increase in social tensions and which may lead to violence. When saying this, I am not excusing or favouring violence, but instead am trying to explain the reasons behind it. I strongly believe that violence is a dead-end-street and I personally, and the WUC, therefore condemn any acts of violence.

Sethu Das: China has accused extremists groups in the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region of being inspired and trained by Al-Qaida, Islamic groups in the former Soviet Union, Chechnya and the Taliban. They have also stated that the Uyghurs enjoy the sympathy and support of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Taiwanese and Turkish intelligence agencies. Any comments.

Dolkun Isa: When referring to extremist groups in East Turkistan, China is referring to organisations like the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). However, many experts and academics have serious doubts about the existence of such groups and they rather think that they are made up by Chinese authorities to have another reason to persecute the Uyghur people. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is of course sympathetic to the Uyghur struggle. Tibetans and Uyghurs share a very similar history of occupation and oppression from Chinese authorities. As you know, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetans are supporting a peaceful and nonviolent struggle just as we, the Uyghurs do. Taiwanese and Turkish intellectuals and human rights activists have also supported us in the past.

Sethu Das: In the wake of the recent uprisings against dictatorships across the Arab nations, the Chinese Communist Party is once again tightening its control on Xinjiang fearing a similar uprising. Do you think revolutions are in the making in many parts of China?

Dolkun Isa: I don't think that time has come for similar revolutions in China. I think it will take some more time until the Chinese citizens are ready for such events. At the moment, the Party's control over the country is very strong and they are regularly cracking down strongly on dissents. However, dissident voices in China are getting louder and louder, and I am hopeful that sooner or later China will experience strong social and political changes.

Sethu Das: The United States continues to support the political activities of the Uyghur people outside Xinjiang, while making China a strategic partner in its 'War Against Terrorism' and establishing an FBI Legal Attaché in Beijing with US-China counterterrorism working groups. Don't you think the stand taken by the States on East Turkistan, Tibet, Taiwan etc contradicts with its foreign policies? Don't you think the real motive is only to break the Chinese leadership, not the freedom of the oppressed people?

Dolkun Isa: I think the behaviour of the United States regarding China is not a surprise. Like any other country interested in having a positive relationship with China, the US is also trying to consolidate its relations with the Chinese authorities on several levels. This of course is a clear contradiction between the human rights demands and foreign policy of many governments around the world. Many western countries are condemning China's human rights violations on its own people, including the Uyghurs. But at the same time the very same nations are pushing forward for better economic relations with China. Is this a contradiction? Of course it is. But it is also unfortunately the way politics works. Despite this fact, there are many people in politics today who strongly support our cause. This support is essential for us and we are very thankful for it.



Fire Power vs. People Power: Chinese Riot Police deals with ethnic Uyghur people during the mass uprisings in Urumqi, capital of East Turkistan on July 7, 2009. Hundreds of Uyghurs and Han Chinese were killed and many disappeared in serious violent riots. Nine 'rioters' have already been executed by China while hundreds of people face criminal charges and death sentences.

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