

# How censorship can affect the peaceful solution to the crisis in Xinjiang

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## **REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS**

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Apart from North Korea, do you know any other place in the world where Internet and international phone calls have been blocked for almost a year? A place where from all a sudden hundreds of web sites, blogs and Internet forums have been shut down. Its Xinjiang. The July riots have dramatically increase the level of censorship, control, repression and propaganda. Such violations of free speech are not new in Xinjiang or Oriental Turkestan, but since one year it took a new dimension.

Of course, last May, the Xinjiang Autonomous Region was reconnected to the Internet, which has allowed a relative reopening to the outside world. It took ten months for the Beijing authorities to take this decision that deprived millions of Uyghurs and Han to get access to the outside world.

Recently, a BBC survey showed that 70 % of the people consider that access to Internet is a fundamental right. So it shows that in this case, the Chinese government went very far from the basic international standards in terms of free flow of information.

The way the Chinese government handled the media during the last year in Xinjiang is a paradox. Foreign journalists had access to the field even it was difficult to talk freely to Uyghurs, especially the families of the detained people. Han demonstrations against Uyghurs were broadcasted live and the Chinese officials were very proud to publicize the presence of dozens of journalists.

At the same time, the crackdown on Internet for the normal people was huge and very radical and a hardline propaganda campaign started that reduced to nothing the chances to get a dialogue and reconciliation. For 10 months, Xinjiang was therefore the victim of a discriminatory measure as regards Internet access. It was the longest-ever case of government censorship of this kind.

In October 2009, Reporters Without Borders investigated access to websites dedicated to the Uyghur community, including sites in the Uyghur language, in Mandarin and, in a few cases, in English. Of the 81 sites investigated, more than 85 per cent were blocked, censored or otherwise unreachable. They included very popular sites such as Diyarim ([www.diyarim.com](http://www.diyarim.com)), Xabnam ([www.xabnam.com](http://www.xabnam.com)) and Ulinux ([www.ulinux.com](http://www.ulinux.com)), a site registered in the name of the University of Xinjiang that served as a portal. Some of them are back online, but it's a minority.

Above all, several journalists, netizens and website editors are still in jail. They include Dilshat Parhat (the co-founder of the Uyghur website Diyarim), Nureli (the creator of the Uyghur website Selkin), Muhemmet (the head of another Uyghur website), Obulkasim (a contributor to Diyarim) and the journalist Gheyret Niyaz.

Websites and blogs about the Uyghur issue continue to be a favourite target for the censors. Many of them – including the sites of the Uyghur American Association (UAA) and Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) – are still blocked because they do not toe the official line promoted by the central government. The list of forbidden keywords includes “Rebiya Kadeer” (the Uyghur human rights

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activist), “World Uyghur Congress,” “Uyghur Human Rights Project” and “East Turkestan Independence.”

This anti free speech attitude has been the basement of all sort of rumours, misunderstandings, hatred speeches. Something similar to what happened in Tibet in March 2008. In both cases, nothing encouraging for a negotiated solution that we all support.

Since last year event till now, the free speech issue is at the heart of the crisis. People went to the streets because they had no others ways to protest. The official media will never publish the grievances of the people. Despite the incident was mentioned and debated on the Internet, it was mainly in Uyghur web sites and forums. Still now, Uyghurs might feel impossible to express their concern for the future and its very difficult to get a clear picture of the human rights violations.

So now, what's next? The fact that local authorities said that they will “maintain stability at all costs” and will crack down on “separatist elements” is not a good news because we all know what such words mean in China.

And we heard that in the recent days, orders were given to prevent Uyghurs to give interviews to foreign media. And the international reporters who went there did not found the so called “normalisation” of Urumqi.

We strongly believe that the respect for freedom of expression, to which its inhabitants have a right, and a reduction or elimination of censorship about the Uyghur culture and population, which cannot be branded as just terrorism, are key points for a democratic development of the area.

Such discrimination against Uyghurs and other local ethnic minorities will not in any way help to restore stability in China. It is archaic, it is a step backwards. China needs to demonstrate its commitment to the modern era by allowing all of its citizens to have unrestricted access to the Internet.”

## **Reporters Without Borders**

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