

Dodging her enemies, speaking out against China

By Neda Monshat



Rebiya Kadeer animatedly discusses the plight of the Uighur peoples in China

Labelled a terrorist, a separatist, and an extremist by her own government, exiled Uighur leader Rebiya Kadeer received a warm welcome from a packed house at a recent Castan Centre event in Melbourne. Speaking on the struggle of the Uighur people in China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, Ms Kadeer gave her lecture amidst strong calls from Chinese government representatives in Australia to ban a documentary on her life which screened at the 2009 Melbourne International Film Festival (MIFF). *The 10 Conditions of Love* is a film about Ms Kadeer's relationship with her exiled husband, also an activist for Uighur rights, and the impact of her political struggle on her family – specifically, three of her eleven children who have received jail sentences in China. The Cultural Attaché at the Chinese Consulate in Melbourne made a direct call to MIFF director, Richard Moore, demanding that the film be withdrawn and further rebuked him for allowing Ms Kadeer to appear at the festival. When Mr Moore refused to withdraw the film from MIFF, a host of internet users in China hacked into the festival's website causing massive disruptions to online ticket sales and the website's general utility.

Unfortunately, China's intense reaction to her dissent is familiar territory for Ms Kadeer. Having served a five year prison term for sending newspaper clippings to her husband overseas, Ms Kadeer has lived in exile in the United States since her release from jail in 2005. This year, the Chinese government has accused her of bringing about the July ethnic clashes that occurred in Xinjiang's capital Urumqi which led to almost 200 dead and over 1,700 injured. However, as a Nobel Peace Prize nominee and leader of the World Uighur Congress, Ms Kadeer stressed that hers was a peaceful, non-separatist movement seeking realisation of the rights of Chinese Uighurs which the Chinese government themselves had promised.

Since 1949 Xinjiang has been one of five autonomous regions in China, meaning that it has the right to self determination and self-government under Chinese law. Uighurs have the right, in theory to live freely, in touch with their cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity. However, in her address, Ms Kadeer described the Chinese government repression of Uighurs since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, labelling it 'cultural genocide'. She

spoke of the Chinese government using the September 11 attacks as a ruse to label the mostly Sunni Muslim Uighurs as terrorists, providing a pretext for intense and systematic discrimination against them.

However, according to Ms Kadeer, such discrimination has been going on for much longer than just the last 8 years. She told of witnessing the 1997 'Gulja Massacre' in which hundreds, possibly thousands of Uighurs peacefully protesting the growing repression of Uighur culture were killed in Xinjiang. Ms Kadeer lamented the massacre as 'nothing short of another Tiananmen Square'. Ms Kadeer also told of the 2001 forced transfers of young Uighur people to Chinese schools for cultural indoctrination and the 2003 'Bi-lingual Language Policy' introduced by the Chinese authorities. This was really an invasive imposition of the Chinese language, she said, in an attempt to destroy the Uighur language. The policy led to the dismissal of various Uighur teachers and professors unable to teach in Chinese, who now work as unskilled labourers due to dramatically reduced job opportunities for Uighur people. Ms Kadeer also talked of the 2006 policy forcing rural Uighur women to work in sweatshops against their will. In addition, many Uighur farmers have had their land repossessed by the 'Xinjiang Construction Company' and subsequently been forced to work as cheap labour in Chinese speaking eastern China. Ms Kadeer pointed this out as another attempt by the Chinese government to dilute Uighur culture and language.

Regrettably, the list of offences goes on: the Chinese government has labelled the Uighur 'barbaric peoples', and have charged approximately 15,000 Uighur peoples with terrorism and separatism related offences. At the end of her lecture, Ms Kadeer returned to the Chinese accusations that she was the instigator of the July violence in Xinjiang. She claimed that the Chinese authorities randomly opened fire on Uighur people after nightfall, and then "disappeared" hundreds of protesters in the weeks following. Continuing her ceaseless commitment to the peaceful struggle for her peoples, it seems that Ms Kadeer's most immediate goal now is exposing the truth behind the 2009 protests - protests in which almost 200 Uighur people died holding up Chinese flags, asking for their rights as Chinese citizens.