Assignment-2 Submission

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China's use of technology for Uyghur surveillance

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1   Introduction

XUAR, the largest region of China, is home to nearly 25M people. Historically, the region has been dominated by the Uighur community (more than 75% population), a predominantly Sunni Muslim community.[7] Recently, there have been numerous reports on 'ethnic cleaning' carried out by the Chinese government in the region against Uyghurs[3]. In this document, we will focus on the surveillance and use (misuse) of technology by the government and evaluate the policies based on various ethical theories.

Figure 1: Uyghurs in the concentration centres in Xinjiang

The Chinese government calls this act of mass surveillance targeted this specific community as a move against terrorism and separatism. There has been continuous surveillance of the people in the name of terrorism.[3] This is because the Chinese law is 'absurd' when it comes to identifying terrorists. For

example, having a big beard, suddenly quitting smoking and drinking, and not listening to television or radio comes under acts of suspicion. Now, a lot of it is due to the fact that the Uyghur community is not culturally open to a lot of entertainment. Another reason of it is the lack of development in the region. All this gives them the excuse to put many Uyghurs(for cultural reasons, this community commonly does not do these things) under surveillance.

Recent UN reports have revealed ethical misuse of information by the Government in China[7]. From personal to biometric data, from eating habits to places of visit, everything is put under monitoring by the Chinese. So much so that even big companies(such as Apple [2]), well-known for their commitment to user privacy in the west, have to provide personal information to the Chinese Government. From an information collection point of view, this is another reason why not using a mobile phone is seen as an act of suspect. [4] Installing CCTV cameras in residential areas, markets, and even places of worship raised serious privacy issues where every individual is racked 24x7 and has no authority or say in the use of that data. [6]

While these measures seem qualitatively wrong, it's important to analyze them based on a commonly accepted set of ethical theories. Henceforth, we do this evaluation using three different theories, each covering a different aspect.

Figure 2: CCTV Surveillance around mosques in Xinjiang, China

2 Evaluation of the policy

2.1 Kantian Evaluation

The Kantian theory states that we should respect the rationality of others. People should not be used as a means to an end. If we go by the 1st formulation, the government would not like that the entirety of China, including the government activities, to be put under surveillance. Thus, the proposal's moral rule is self-defeating. If we use the 2nd formulation, China is violating the rationality of its people. It is using its people as a means to an end. Here, the end goal

is the creation of a uni-cultural society, and the means is the altering of their lifestyle and amalgamating "pure Chinese" culture into them.[8]

Figure 3: A guard stands in a watchtower of Kashgar prison in Kashgar, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China, May 3, 2021

2.2 Utilitarian Evaluation

Utilitarian theory is based on the consequences of the action to decide whether it is right or wrong. As discussed in the class, the policies meant for a large-scale public, especially those made by the government, often uses utilitarian evaluation because it gives a picture of a net balanced outcome.

The act-utilitarian idea would **argue for the surveillance policy**. Surveillance of a minority to secure the majority would lead to a net benefit. The safety "concerns" of the Chinese government majorly come from the fact that Uyghurs muslims have a different ethnicity and because of religious beliefs. Applying the principle of utility to individual actions would safeguard the rights of the majority population by violating the rights of the minority.

The rule-utilitarian idea would, however, the communist regime of china would want every citizen to be under full surveillance. We have seen recent cases of urban Chinese cities having surveillance tools installed at various places. This theory would still argue for the surveillance policy as it could lead to lesser criminal activities, faster investigation, and so on.

But utilitarian evaluation by design also emphasizes on **majority benefit and not the last mile benefit** (benefit to the most backward). So, if a decision involves a minority population as a beneficiary, then utilitarian evaluation might not be the best method to evaluate as it would assign greater weight to the majority.

Figure 4: Schoolchildren walk beneath surveillance cameras in Xinjiang in western China.

2.3 Social Contract Theory

According to Thomas Hobbes, we implicitly accept a social contract. In this example, it is the social contract between the people of china to provide security to its state against possible threats of terrorism. These rules are not moral and are **purely authoritarian**. In terms of the democracy ladder created by Arnstein based on degrees of citizen participation, this policy would be 1 or 2 i.e., manipulation and therapy.

John Rawl's *veil of ignorance* nicely brings out the problems with the surveillance policy. Rational principles of justice include claiming adequate rights. In this case, it is exactly the opposite, where the data is unwillingly taken and monitored. Xinjiang is one of the poorest regions of China. The second justice talks about equal social and economic opportunities and the greatest benefit to the least-advantageous members of society. In this case, the least-advantageous members are exploited based on their ethnicity, religious beliefs, and economic condition.

Social contact theory talks about how civil disobedience can be the morally right decision in many cases. The injustice against Uyghurs checks all the boxes for a rational civil disobedience movement to raise the voices against the authoritative government in China. Thus, social contract theory is strongly against the surveillance policy, majorly due to the fact that the minorities have no control and rational justice is not served to them.

Figure 5: Hightech chinese surveillance against uyghurs

2.4 Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics has the basis of the character of "good" people in the society. The habits are inhabited by learning and self-practice. Based on this, we can argue that any stable society that supports collective living would not support such targeted surveillance and treatment. Since it is mainly meant for individuals and not government policies, it can be used best when the public in china has some power to initiate the changes in any government policy.

3 Conclusion using mixing theories

For every policy or change, there is an innate intuitive sense of right or wrong in all of us. The Chinese surveillance of Uyghurs clearly gives a sense of wrongness. Based on the above evaluations, we can say the following

1. Kantian evaluation argues against the policy due to the usage of people as a means to an end, that too without a concession. The government would not like it if the same is imposed on it. Thus, the rationality of the Uyghurs is clearly exploited, and that is precisely the argument of Kantian evaluation.

2. Utilitarian evaluation justifies the act given some threats from the Uyghur minority. But it is one of the major limitations of the utilitarian theory that it cannot be used to evaluate policy meant for the minority.

3. Social contract theory has a clear and strong criticism of the policy. Since it focuses a lot on promoting collective rights to life, liberty, and property, the policy becomes completely opposite, where the freedom is limited, and you are directed to follow a particular protocol for the lifestyle.

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