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CHINA: Xinjiang - Imams and mosque education under state control

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

The imam of the central mosque in the town of Turpan, north east of China's Xinjiang region, admitted to Forum 18 News Service in early September that the Chinese authorities name all imams to local mosques. Imams also have to attend regular meetings of the national religious committees at their town administration, where they are told what they can do and are ordered to preach peace and condemn terrorism in their sermons. Local adult Muslims, mainly ethnic Uighurs, can learn about their faith only in certain mosques where the imam has gained special approval, while children are banned. "The authorities instruct us to tell parents that their children must complete their education before they can start to attend mosque," the imam reported, though Forum 18 observed some children in Turpan's mosques at Friday prayers.

Although the local Uighur Muslim population is not as devout as in the south-west of China's Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region, Forum 18 News Service found in early September in the town of Turpan in Xinjiang's north-east that local Muslims (most of them Uighurs) are as harshly controlled by the Chinese authorities as in the south-west. The town of 65,000 people is situated in the Turpan Depression. At 150 metres (500 feet) below sea level, the depression is the lowest place in China, though the highest temperatures in the country have been recorded here.

The imam-hatyb of Turpan's central Janubikuk mosque, Sirojdin Abdurakhim, admitted to Forum 18 that all the imams are appointed by the authorities. The imam-hatybs also have to attend regular meetings of the national religious committees (which are responsible for work with religious believers) at the town administration. "At the committee we are told what mistakes are allowable at a mosque," he told Forum 18 in Turpan on 10 September. "We are ordered to preach the concept of peace to believers and to explain to them what harm is done to Muslims by the terrorists who operate in the name of our religion."

Although, unlike in the south-western city of Kashgar, Forum 18 did not find any posters in mosques banning young people under the age of 18 from attending, Abdurakhim admitted to Forum 18 that children are not allowed to attend mosques. "The authorities instruct us to tell parents that their children must complete their education before they can start to attend mosque," he told Forum 18. However, this order is not observed too rigorously and Forum 18 observed several children in Turpan's mosques.

Abdurakhim also admitted that children are not allowed to study Islam. Even adults may only study the faith in mosques where the imam-hatybs have received specific authorisation from the authorities, though Forum 18 did see posters in a number of mosques stating that instruction in Islam was permitted in them.

Separatist tendencies are far less developed among Turpan's Uighurs than among fellow-Uighurs in Kashgar and in other cities of south-western Xinjiang such as Hotan. Speaking to Forum 18, local Uighurs themselves ascribed their relative loyalty to Beijing mainly to the fact that Turpan is much closer to central China than are the cities of south-western Xinjiang and that it therefore fell under Beijing's influence earlier.

Nevertheless, Turpan's Uighurs, like their fellow-Uighurs in the south-west, prefer to pursue a policy of voluntary "apartheid" towards the Chinese. Local Uighur men hardly ever marry Chinese women. They also refuse to eat in Chinese-owned restaurants because the food is not prepared in accordance with Muslim law. At the same time, Uighurs in the Turpan area are far less devout than those in the south-west. Even during Friday prayers Forum 18 counted no more than 50 believers at Turpan's Janubikuk mosque. In south-western Xinjiang, around 30 per cent of married women wear the Islamic veil, but Forum 18 saw no woman with her face covered in Turpan.

It is worth noting that, as local Muslims told Forum 18, between 1983 and 1996 underage children were not prevented from attending mosque or from studying Islam. Forum 18's sources maintained that during this period, Muslims faced almost no restrictions from the authorities. It is possible that Beijing has stepped up its policy against Muslims because the Chinese authorities have concluded that religion is clearly an underlying cause of Uighur separatist sentiment.

For more background information see Forum 18's Xinjiang religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=143

A printer-friendly map of China (including Xinjiang) is available from
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=china>

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