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CHINA: Xinjiang - Strict control of China's Uighur Muslims continues

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In China's north-western Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, control over Islam continues to be much stricter than over other religions, Forum 18 News Service has found. However, the authorities' control over mosques used by Dungans – a Chinese Muslim people - is less strict than over mosques used by Uighurs. Many Uighurs are Muslims, and their religiosity is often closely connected with separatism. Pressure – for example on the texts of Friday sermons, and attempts to force schoolchildren and state employees such as teachers to abjure Islam – is applied more strictly in the north of the region. There is also a ban in Xinjiang on the private Islamic religious education of children. In response, Forum 18 has noted that Uighur parents often take their children to other parts of China, where they can study freely at a medresseh. Islamic movements such as Sufism and Wahhabism are repressed, and the authorities are attempting to assimilate Uighurs through economic inducements. This policy, Forum 18 has found, has made some impact amongst Uighur Muslims.

In China's north-western Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, control over Muslim religious believers is much stricter than over believers of other religions, Forum 18 News Service has found. However, the authorities' control over Dungan mosques is less strict than over mosques used by Uighurs, a Turkic people mainly found in Xinjiang but also in Central Asian states. (The Dungans are a Chinese Muslim people also found in Central Asian states.)

The reason for this is that the Chinese government presumes - with some justification - that Uighur religiosity has a connection with advocacy of a separate Uighur state. The Chinese government's great sensitivity on this topic has been highlighted by the recent detention in Uzbekistan and deportation to China of a Canadian citizen and refugee from China, Huseyincan Celil, who is a Uighur activist and imam. On the surface though, there is within Xinjiang an apparent state tolerance of religious belief alongside tight state controls (see F18News 4 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=537).

Many Uighur's are Muslims, which shows itself in, for example, the widespread refusal by Uighur's to go to a Chinese restaurant because the food is not prepared according to Muslim requirements. Many devoutly Muslim Uighurs told Forum 18 that they do not think that they have the right – in Islam – to accept living under the rule of China, because "the Chinese are heathens." By comparison, in Central Asia when it was part of the Soviet Union, such arguments were not heard amongst devout Muslims, who had no hesitation in going to Russian restaurants.

Every Friday morning Xinjiang's imams are obliged to go to their local state Religious Affairs Bureau, to discuss the text of their Friday sermon with officials, Forum 18 learnt. At these Friday meetings, imams receive only "general instructions and may improvise" in their sermons. During the Islamic fasting month of Ramadan, the authorities force Muslim schoolchildren to have lunch. State employees are under similar pressure. "I am a deeply believing Muslim, but I have to hide this from my colleagues," one local Muslim teacher who preferred not to be named told Forum 18. "As a school teacher I cannot wear a beard and perform the namaz [Muslim prayers] at work. During Ramadan I have to eat with the other teachers in order to hide my faith." The teacher added that praying at home, without revealing this to others, would not cause problems (see F18News 29 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=662).

One medresseh [Islamic religious school] teacher told Forum 18 that the private teaching of religion to children is banned. "Children may receive a religious education only after the age of 15 in the medresseh in every district of Xinjiang or in the Islamic university in Urumqi," the teacher, who asked not to be named, told Forum 18 in Kashgar in late July 2006 (see F18News 15 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=411). "When students are admitted their political views are investigated. During their studies, alongside religious subjects the students also study the policy of the Chinese Communist Party." This ban on the Islamic religious teaching of children is not applied rigorously outside Xinjiang (see F18News 1 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=641). In response, Uighur parents often take their children to other parts of China, where they can study freely at a medresseh.

Similar prohibitions on the religious education of children also apply to the state-controlled Patriotic Catholic Church in Xinjiang (see F18News 28 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=532).

The strictness of the authorities' control over Muslims also depends directly on the level of religiosity of Uighurs in different districts of Xinjiang. For example, in Hotan and Kashgar there is a notice at all mosques to the effect that state employees and children are not allowed to attend the mosque. In the yard of the mosque, detailed instructions are posted about what one is not allowed to do in the mosque (see F18News 28 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=421). And in Hotan, where the population is more religious than in Kashgar, the number of instructions is greater.

However in Urumqi, Ghulja (the capital of the Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture, bordering Kazakhstan) and in Turpan (Eastern Xinjiang), as well as in the Altai, - all regions in the north of Xinjiang - there are no such notices. The reason for this appears to be that the local Uighurs are less religious than those in the south. In Urumqi, Forum 18 observed children present at the mosque. "In principle the ban on children attending the mosque is not applied too strictly and children sometimes attend the mosque with their parents," the imam of the Usman mosque in Kashgar, Emed haji Yusuf, told Forum 18 on 30 July.

By contrast, in Hotan the ban on children attending the mosque is applied very strictly. For example, during the Friday prayers police guard the mosques to ensure that children do not attend.

The Chinese government also wages a strict campaign against Islamic movements such as Sufism and Wahhabism (followers of the form of Islam practised in Saudi Arabia). Sufism is found mostly in southern Xinjiang (in Hotan and Kashgar). The Sufi zikr ceremony (ritual songs and dances) is banned, as are rituals at the graves of devout Muslims (see F18News 26 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=659). Books by Sufi authors are banned and Chinese scholars assert in their research that Sufism is a distortion of Islam. It is possible that the reason for this position is that, in the 19th century, it was members of the Sufi brotherhoods who resisted Chinese forces most fiercely. (There was a similar situation in Central Asia and the Caucasus during the 19th century Russian conquest.) In contrast, in the neighbouring Central Asian states Sufism is often encouraged by the governments, since the Sufi form of Islam which has become intertwined with local traditions is seen an effective alternative to fundamentalists.

Just as in Central Asia, so-called Wahhabis appeared in Xinjiang in the 1990s when local Muslims had the opportunity to go on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca, which is obligatory in Islam for those who are able to perform it. "The Wahhabis were very easy to spot," imam Emed haji Yusuf of Kashgar's Usman mosque told Forum 18. "They performed the namaz a little differently from us. However, about five years ago the authorities banned this movement on the grounds that it was causing division among Muslims. After this the 'Wahhabis' completely ceased their activities."

Some Muslims in southern Xinjiang are sympathetic to Wahhabism, Forum 18 found, but unlike in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan they have been frightened into inactivity by the Chinese government's strict policy. As a result, unlike in Uzbekistan, in Xinjiang there are no recorded cases of criminal prosecutions against Wahhabis.

Three years ago the authorities conducted a major reconstruction of the area around Kashgar's main Id-ha mosque, demolishing many small mud-built restaurants and tea houses where Muslims met to talk after prayers. In their place, modern buildings with a hint of Islamic architectural style were built. Many Uighurs complained to Forum 18 that, since the reconstruction, the famous district around the mosque "has lost its original spirit". Similar reconstructions have affected other towns in Xinjiang, such as Hotan.

In Urumqi, the old mosque was demolished and rebuilt as part of a shopping mall, including a Kentucky Fried Chicken branch and Carrefour supermarket, as Quentin Sommerville of the BBC World Service noted on 29 November 2005. One Uighur told him that "It really isn't appropriate. We come here to worship - but sometimes we can't hear our prayers because of the music and singing from the bazaar."

It is notable that the Chinese government's policy of assimilating the Uighurs has had an impact. The authorities are investing significant sums in the region's economy and encouraging Uighurs to become involved in business ventures, which many perceive there to be no alternative to. The BBC World Service was told by one Uighur that "it's getting more and more difficult for us to earn money now. Uighurs are doing anything they can to make a living - there's no alternative." The change in the economy is noticeable: ten years ago few cars were on the streets, while today they form the main means of transport. This economic revival helps to assimilate the Uighurs, many of whom now want to send their children to Chinese-language schools, something unimaginable ten years ago. Several Muslims who told Forum 18 in recent years that they found it impossible to coexist with ethnic Chinese have since opened their own businesses. Now, they have told Forum 18 that they are prepared to submit to the Chinese government's religious and ethnic policies, to advance their own economic position. (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Xinjiang religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=414; the previous 2003 Xinjiang religious freedom survey is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=143.

For analyses of other aspects of religious freedom in China, see <http://www.forum18.org/Analyses.php?region=3>

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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