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Hui Muslims and the “Xinjiang Model”
of State Suppression of Religion



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HUI MUSLIMS AND THE “XINJIANG MODEL” OF STATE SUPPRESSION OF RELIGION

ABSTRACT

Despite the relative freedom from Chinese government restrictions Hui Muslims experienced in recent history, official Chinese government rhetoric and policy has become less tolerant toward practice and expression of Islamic identity among Hui Muslim individuals and communities. The restrictions on Islam among Hui Muslim individuals and communities are increasingly similar to restrictions experienced by Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). In addition to being detained along with Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and others in the XUAR’s mass internment camps, Hui Muslims are subject to what some have called the “Xinjiang Model” of intrusive and repressive religious policies. This policy shift is due in part to Chinese officials’ conflation of Islamic identity and extremism and the Chinese government’s campaign to “sinicize” Islam.

I. BACKGROUND

a. Repression of Islam in the XUAR

In the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), the Chinese Communist Party has implemented a campaign of repression and control that, according to scholars and rights groups,¹ constitutes crimes against humanity.² Experts have documented a large network of mass internment camps in the XUAR in which authorities are said to have arbitrarily detained up to 1.8 million individuals from predominantly Muslim ethnic minority groups including Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Hui.³ Individuals have been detained in mass internment camps and held in formal detention for actions related to Islam that are protected under international law.⁴ Reasons for detention included the following:

- being a “Muslim who had a beard”;⁵
- saying “God is great” at a funeral;⁶
- being able to read the Quran;⁷
- performing religious activities without a permit;⁸
- working as Muslim clergy;⁹
- having Islamic digital content on one’s phone or computer;¹⁰
- performing a religious wedding ceremony;¹¹
- praying;¹²

- performing traditional funeral rites;¹³
- giving a sermon;¹⁴
- allowing employees to listen to sermons;¹⁵
- having previously participated in the Hajj;¹⁶
- enrolling one's child in religious classes;¹⁷
- studying Islam at an Egyptian university;¹⁸
- traveling to or living in predominantly Muslim countries;¹⁹
- having a deceased family member who was a Uyghur religious scholar;²⁰
- having a family member who performed religious activities;²¹ and
- posting about Islam on the messaging service WeChat.²²

Authorities have also detained individuals for interacting with persons listed on a government “blacklist”;²³ having relatives who study abroad;²⁴ attempting to emigrate or speaking about emigrating from China;²⁵ and having a journalist family member who reported on the XUAR.²⁶

Outside the camps, members of predominantly Muslim ethnic minority groups in the XUAR face extreme levels of surveillance; restrictions on freedom of movement, expression, and religion; forced political indoctrination; forced labor; widespread, systematic forced sterilizations and birth control; and forced placement of children in state-run orphanages and boarding schools.²⁷ Recent reporting has revealed the large scale of the mass internment camp system and the continued detention of Muslims despite official assertions to the contrary.²⁸ Reporting from 2020 found that the Chinese government had destroyed hundreds of mosques and sacred sites in the XUAR since 2017.²⁹

b. Unique Status of Hui Muslims in China

According to the 2010 census, more than 10.5 million Hui reside throughout China³⁰ and constitute significant portions of the population in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Gansu and Qinghai provinces, and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).³¹ Hui individuals speak a variety of local dialects,³² and in contrast to Turkic groups in China, the Hui are often described as Mandarin speakers.³³ Anthropologist Dru Gladney compares the identity of the Hui to other minorities in Chinese society this way: “The Hui are unique among the 55 identified nationalities in China in that they are the only one for

whom religion (Islam) is the only unifying category of identity, even though many members of the Hui nationality may not practise Islam.”³⁴

International media reports have highlighted the disparity in official policies toward, and treatment of, Hui Muslims and Uyghur Muslims. Reports stressed the government’s comparative tolerance of Hui Muslim religious practices and government programs incentivizing Hui-owned business ventures,³⁵ and the promotion of Hui communities in China as a “cultural bridge” between foreign Muslim communities and China.³⁶ One 2017 Freedom House report stated that

Routine elements of Muslim practice that are common around the world are quite visible among Hui, but severely restricted and even criminalized for Uighurs. These include mosques using loudspeakers to summon Muslims to Friday prayers, believers fasting during Ramadan, adolescents studying at madrassas, children accompanying parents to prayers, individuals watching educational videos on Islamic teachings, or men growing beards and women wearing headscarves.³⁷

II. OFFICIAL REPRESSION OF ISLAM AND HUI MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

a. Detention of Hui Individuals in the XUAR

Like Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim minorities, authorities held Hui individuals in formal detention and mass internment camps in the XUAR for actions related to Islam that are protected under international law.³⁸ Reasons for detention included the following:

- advocating for religious freedom for Muslims;³⁹
- reading the Quran in a mosque;⁴⁰
- teaching the Quran via WeChat;⁴¹
- conducting an Islamic funeral;⁴²
- viewing online religious media content;⁴³
- funding mosque construction;⁴⁴
- “privately preaching the Quran;”⁴⁵ and
- living and studying in Pakistan.⁴⁶

Hui individuals have also been detained in mass internment camps for contacting a landlord abroad via WhatsApp,⁴⁷ and using a virtual private network.⁴⁸

b. Repression of Hui Individuals and Communities Outside of the XUAR

In addition, officials throughout China have targeted Hui Muslims and Hui Muslim communities with restrictions and repression similar to that experienced by Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in the XUAR.⁴⁹ International observers and Hui community members have stated that the repression of Islam in the XUAR (often called the “Xinjiang Model”) appears to have spread beyond the XUAR to Hui communities living in other locations.⁵⁰ Authorities outside of the XUAR have formally imprisoned Hui religious figures⁵¹ and detained Hui individuals for sharing materials related to the Quran online,⁵² criticizing restrictions on Islamic religious practices,⁵³ buying Islamic books,⁵⁴ performing the Hajj pilgrimage,⁵⁵ traveling abroad,⁵⁶ and resisting the destruction of a mosque.⁵⁷ Hui Muslims outside of the XUAR whose identity documents were registered in the XUAR have also been sent to prison or reeducation camps in the XUAR.⁵⁸

Similar to the restriction and suppression of expressions of Islamic faith in the XUAR,⁵⁹ officials in areas with large Hui populations have implemented policies and restrictions limiting Hui Muslims’ ability to practice their religion and culture.⁶⁰ In locations throughout China, (including Beijing municipality, Gansu, Henan, Jilin, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Yunnan, and Zhejiang provinces, as well as the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region) officials have closed mosques, demolished or removed minarets, domes, and other Islamic features from mosques and placed surveillance cameras inside them, closed Islamic schools, and restricted Islamic preaching, clothing, Arabic script, halal food, and use of the Islamic financial system.⁶¹

III. CHANGE IN OFFICIAL POLICIES TOWARD HUI MUSLIMS

Chinese authorities previously allowed Hui Muslim communities and individuals limited freedom to practice their religious beliefs; however, authorities have recently implemented policies increasingly similar to those restricting Islam in the XUAR.⁶² This increased

similarity is likely due in part to Chinese officials' conflation of Islamic identity and extremism as well as the Chinese government campaign to "sinicize" Islam.

a. Officials Often Conflate Islam and Extremism

After the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York City and the subsequent international response to global terrorism, the PRC increasingly used what was described by the human rights organization Amnesty International in 2004 as the pretext of anti-terrorism to justify its restrictions on basic expressions of religious and ethnic identity by Uyghurs in the XUAR.⁶³ A number of violent attacks have occurred in China,⁶⁴ but reports indicate that authorities often conflate such terrorism with the peaceful expression of religious and cultural identity.⁶⁵ In September 2018, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination was "alarmed" by "numerous reports of the detention of large numbers of ethnic Uighurs and other Muslim minorities" ... "under the pretext of countering religious extremism" for "even non-threatening expressions of Muslim ethno-religious culture, such as a daily greeting."⁶⁶ Human rights organizations have noted that while restrictions on religious freedom are common in China, those placed on Uyghur Muslims are more severe compared to other religious groups.⁶⁷

In recent years officials and others have made calls to counter an alleged increase in Muslim extremist influence among Hui Muslims.⁶⁸ State Administration for Religious Affairs Director Wang Zuo'an stated in November 2016 that "Islamic extremism" was spreading to China's "inland provincial areas" where many Hui live.⁶⁹ Domestic online commentators have also warned about Islam's corrupting influence in society and criticized China's restrictions on Hui Muslim believers as being too lax relative to restrictions on Uyghur Muslims in the XUAR.⁷⁰ One scholar on Islam in China noted that in China, "[i]nterest groups have actively promoted Islamophobia in interior regions in order to create a nationwide environment that justifies Xinjiang's anti-terrorism campaign."⁷¹ Reports have also indicated the rise of Salafism, an ultra-conservative Sunni sect, in both the Hui and Uyghur Muslim communities, and described government actions to limit the growth of Salafism in China due to concerns over its alleged ties to extremism.⁷²

In one example indicating the potential expansion of counterterrorism policies from Uyghur communities to Hui Muslim communities, a top Party leader from the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, home to over 2 million Hui,⁷³ visited the XUAR in late 2018.⁷⁴ The Party leader praised the region’s counterterrorism and “stability maintenance” measures and signed an agreement to cooperate on counterterrorism and stability maintenance.⁷⁵ One of the leaders the delegation visited was then Deputy Secretary of the XUAR Zhu Hailun, who was sanctioned by the U.S. Department of the Treasury in July 2020 for his “connection with serious human rights abuses against ethnic minorities in [the XUAR].”⁷⁶

b. The “Sinicization” of Islam

In 2015, Party General Secretary Xi Jinping announced “the need to uphold the sinicization of religion in order to actively guide religions to adapt to socialist society.”⁷⁷ The resulting “sinicization” campaign aims to bring religion in China under closer Party control and in line with officially sanctioned interpretations of Chinese culture.⁷⁸ Christians and Muslims in China have been particular targets of the sinicization campaign due to government fears of foreign influence and extremism.⁷⁹ In various platforms, the Chinese government has called on Muslims throughout China to promote “sinicization” and resist the “Arabization,” “Saudization,” and the “generalization of halal” in their communities.⁸⁰ International reporting has linked government statements on “sinicization” of Islam to the crackdown on Islamic practices and the destruction, closure, and alteration of buildings.⁸¹

This “sinicization” campaign has extended to Hui communities in the Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture in Gansu province.⁸² Linxia is often described as China’s “Little Mecca,”⁸³ and has a thriving Hui Muslim community with a majority Muslim population, a significant number of mosques, and visible displays of Muslim dress.⁸⁴ However, as part of the “sinicization” campaign, authorities in Linxia and the surrounding villages have:

- demolished mosques;⁸⁵
- replaced Arabic-style minarets with Chinese-style ones;⁸⁶
- stopped restaurants from using the word “halal” in Arabic to reduce Arab influence;⁸⁷

- prohibited the Muslim call to prayer;⁸⁸ and
- prevented children from attending Arabic or religious schooling.⁸⁹

ENDNOTES

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