

Religion with “Chinese Characteristics”: Persecution and Control in Xi Jinping’s China

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I am very honored to be here today and I wish to express my profound appreciation to Representative Chris Smith and Senator Marco Rubio for inviting me to testify.

Uyghurs perceive their belief in Islam not only as a personal expression of faith, but also as a statement of their cultural distinctiveness. For many Uyghurs, the incursion of the state into this private aspect of their lives and the role it plays in establishing a broader identity is viewed as part of an assimilative process.

In East Turkestan, the twofold implementation of strict national and regional regulations concerning religious belief and practice mean the Uyghur people are subjected to the harshest conditions governing religious life in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). This occurs even though China’s domestic laws, such as the Constitution and the Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law, guarantee religious freedom.

Rather than simply forbid religious practice, Chinese authorities have implemented regulations that progressively narrow the definition of lawful activity. As a result, many Uyghurs often discover traditional religious customs are increasingly not permitted. However, Chinese officials justify many of the restrictions through claims that outlawed practices have been imported from overseas and that it faces an organized threat to public security in the form of the “three evil forces” of terrorism, separatism and religious extremism.

China’s highly politicized criminal-legal system, as well as the state apparatus governing and monitoring religion, have ensured the government is the ultimate arbiter in the interpretation of religious affairs. In effect, the bodies established by the Chinese state to oversee administration in China do little to protect religious believers, but assist the government’s repression of religious freedom by helping to formulate and promote restrictive regulations.

Religious leaders, such as imams, are required to attend political education classes to ensure compliance with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regulations and policies; only state-approved versions of the Koran and sermons are permitted, with all unapproved religious texts treated as “illegal” publications liable to confiscation and criminal charges against whoever was found in possession of them; any outward expression of faith in government workplaces, hospitals and some private businesses, such as men wearing beards or women wearing headscarves, is forbidden; no state employees and no one under the age of 18 can enter a mosque, a measure not

in force in the rest of China; organized private religious education is proscribed and facilitators of private classes in Islam are frequently charged with conducting “illegal” religious activities; and students, teachers and government workers are prohibited from fasting during Ramadan. In addition, Uyghurs are not permitted to undertake Hajj, unless it is with an expensive official tour, in which state officials carefully vet applicants.¹

Uyghurs found to have contravened religious regulations are punished severely. In a disturbing number of cases, Uyghurs have been given long prison sentences for “illegal” religious activities for actions considered normal by international human rights standards.² An area of considerable concern is the open discrimination against Uyghurs, especially women, who choose to lead religious lives publicly.³

In the 2015, restrictions placed on Uyghurs’ ability to observe the Ramadan fast were widely reported. As detailed by the overseas media, government work units outright denied Uyghurs the right to follow their religious customs. For example, middle schools in Bortala, Tarbaghatay and Tumshuq informed their employees and students that they were not permitted to fast.⁴ In Jing County, restaurant owners were mandated by the local Food and Drug Administration to remain open during fasting hours.⁵ Reports also surfaced on social media that Uyghurs were being compelled to eat watermelon in public to demonstrate non-observance of the fast. Although these reports remain unconfirmed, they are consistent with numerous accounts I have heard from Uyghurs, particularly students, who are required to drink water at school in front of their teachers to “prove” they are following school and local government regulations.

Ramadan in 2015 was particularly tense. In an article dated June 24, 2015, Radio Free Asia described how government workers were being put on alert prior to the holy month. The report was an alarming indication of the suspicion with which the state views Uyghurs who continue with their religious practices. Furthermore, according to Radio Free Asia, one county issued “guidelines calling for the intrusive searches of convenience stores, repair shops, and mosques.”⁶ These restrictions create an atmosphere of distrust; however, 2015 witnessed provocations against the Islamic faith previously not seen. Reports that a beer drinking contest had been organized in Niya, a predominately Uyghur settlement, on the eve of Ramadan was a humiliation of the Islamic faith.⁷

Religious repression of Uyghurs has been long documented by the State Department, the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, the United States Commission on International

¹ See: <http://docs.uyghuramerican.org/Sacred-Right-Defiled-Chinas-Iron-Fisted-Repression-of-Uyghur-Religious-Freedom.pdf>

² <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/hunger-04252014152239.html>

³ <http://www.cecc.gov/pages/virtualAcad/index.phpd?showsingle=125102>

⁴ See: <http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/02/asia/china-xinjiang-ramadan/> and <http://www.ibtimes.com/ramadan-2015-fasting-banned-china-muslim-government-employees-students-teachers-1975294>

⁵ See: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/06/china-bans-ramadan-fasting-muslim-region-150618070016245.html>

⁶ See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/ramadan-06242015084626.html>

⁷ See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/22/us-ramadan-china-idUSKBN0P20L620150622>

Religious Freedom and several human rights organizations. In 2014 USCIRF called for China to remain a Country of Particular Concern on the US State Department's blacklist of religious freedom violators. USCIRF vice chair, Katrina Lantos Swett told reporters: "Any independent religious expression is targeted in China...unless practitioners of whatever faith basically submit to government-controlled religious organizations and religious worship, they are at risk of becoming a target."⁸

A report published by Human Rights Watch in 2005 described the close relationship between the Uyghur identity and Islam. The authors of the report accurately state: "Islam is perceived as feeding Uighur ethnic identity, and so the subordination of Islam to the state is used as a means to ensure the subordination of Uighurs as well."⁹ A report issued by the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) in 2013 found a sharp deterioration in Uyghur religious rights in the period following 2005.¹⁰

Since the publication of UHRP's report in April 2013, the evidence of China's denial of the Uyghurs' right to freedom of religion has not abated. The increased repression of religious practices and belief underway corresponds with Chinese president, Xi Jinping's determination to implement a "major strategic shift" in East Turkestan that prioritizes security policies in the region.¹¹ State rhetoric regarding the tightening of security is often accompanied by crackdowns on the "three evil forces of separatism, extremism and terrorism," which frequently target peaceful religious expression.¹² A trip to East Turkestan by Xi Jinping concluded on April 30, 2014 reinforced the call for enhanced security measures. Xi visited People's Liberation Army soldiers and the People's Armed Police in Kashgar, a Uyghur majority city that he claimed was the frontline of counterterrorism.¹³

Radio Free Asia reported a series of cases involving limits placed on Uyghur religious expression across East Turkestan in 2013 and 2014, including: Balaqsu, near Kashgar in May 2013; Beshtugmen and Igerchi, near Aksu City in May 2013; Uchturpan, in Aksu Prefecture in August 2013; Shihezi in November 2013; Turpan in April 2014; and in April 2014, the fourth extension to an original 12-year jail term handed down to Uyghur religious leader, Abdukiram Abduveli. In an extraordinary move, the harshness of the religious policies prompted a Uyghur delegate to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference to speak out during a March 2014 session.¹⁴

⁸ See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/religious-04302014155256.html>

⁹ See: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2005/china0405/china0405.pdf>

¹⁰ See: <http://docs.uyghuramerican.org/Sacred-Right-Defiled-Chinas-Iron-Fisted-Repression-of-Uyghur-Religious-Freedom.pdf>

¹¹ <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/836495.shtml#.U2KfFa1dWi4>

¹² http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-03/06/content_14766900.htm

¹³ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/29/us-china-xinjiang-idUSBREA3S03D20140429>

¹⁴ See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/registration-05022013112851.html>; <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/hijab-05312013175617.html>; <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/uchturpan-08052013173737.html>; <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/imam-04232014162941.html>;

A further sign that regulations governing religion hardened since Xi's announcement is an April 14, 2014 notice issued by the Chinese Communist Party committee of Qartal Bazaar in Aksu City regarding the holding of an "unlawful" funeral ceremony for Nurdin Turdi, a loyal party official distinguished by the state. The notice, widely circulated on social media, states that as Nurdin Turdi's funeral was held at a mosque and not at his home, his family was in contravention of regulations on funerals for individuals holding Turdi's status. As a consequence of the infraction, the funeral fees normally paid by the state to such individuals were rescinded and six months of benefits to the family withheld. Customarily, the state used to permit Islamic burials for any Uyghur who wished to have one.¹⁵

Prior to Ramadan in 2015, reports surfaced of the harsh sentencing of a Uyghur from Kashgar to six years in jail because he had grown a beard in accordance with his religious beliefs. The man's wife was handed a two year sentence for "veiling herself."¹⁶ The ban on Islamic veiling in Urumchi in 2015 was described by scholars James Leibold and Timothy Grose as a sign of "a deepening rift of mistrust between the Uighur and the Han-dominated Communist Party."¹⁷

Universal religious freedom is protected under Article 18 of the normative human rights standards outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Other international instruments whose standards China is obliged to meet also ensure the right of religious freedom, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. China's domestic laws, such as the Constitution and the Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law, have strong provisions on freedom of religious belief. Despite this international and domestic legal framework, restrictions on religious freedom are deemed "lawful" by Chinese authorities through the strict implementation of regulations that contradict China's own laws and international obligations.

<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/hunger-04252014152239.html> and
<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/delegate-03192014174510.html>

¹⁵ http://docs.uyghuramerican.org/5-8-14_Briefing-Religious_Restrictions.pdf

¹⁶ <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/3/30/activists-call-chinas-jailing-of-muslim-over-beard-absurd.html>

¹⁷ <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/news/articles/2015/opinion/why-china-is-banning-islamic-veils>