

## **Briefing: Chinese Government Accelerates Assimilative Policies in “Sinicization of Religion” Campaign**

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Earlier this month the Chinese State Council Information Office, a propaganda organ aimed at overseas audiences, released a White Paper entitled “China’s Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief.”<sup>1</sup> This comes as the authorities ramp up an official campaign to “Sinicize” (中国化) religion which is affecting believers nationwide. Religion must, the White Paper states, “explore religious thought which conforms to the reality in China;” the government retains the sole right to determine what that reality is. The Chinese government has long sought to control religion, but as the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) has documented, the Uyghurs have been a particular target of repressive policies which infringe upon their right to freedom of religious belief.<sup>2</sup>

UHRP believes that the Chinese government’s recent passage of numerous items of legislation passed by both the central government and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) government represent part of a new strategy aimed at bringing religion fully under government control and adding a new assimilative element aimed at adding “Chinese” cultural features to religious practice, especially to “foreign” religions such as Islam and Christianity. This will have a particularly negative effect on the Uyghurs because their traditional religious practices do not historically have Chinese influence. This means that Uyghurs’ rights to maintain their ethnic identity are being further infringed. Furthermore, the government’s targeting of the Uyghurs as a particular threat is directly related to their religious identity and is one of the primary motivations behind the establishment of re-education camps currently incarcerating tens of thousands of Uyghurs indefinitely and without charge.

### **Increasing Religious Legislation**

This White Paper comes in the wake of new national level religious regulations which came into force in February, updating the 2004 regulations<sup>3</sup> (unofficial translation available at China Law Translate<sup>4</sup>). The regulations maintain strict control by the government over religious life, and add language referring to the government’s role in “actively guiding” religion to adapt itself to socialist society and put core socialist values into practice (Article 4), despite not allowing party members to be believers. Religious regulations applying specifically to East Turkestan were passed in 2015, demonstrating the government’s particular focus on controlling the religious observance of the Uyghurs.<sup>5</sup>

The 2015 regional religious affairs regulations are not the only evidence of the authorities’ particular concerns about the Uyghurs. The White Paper states that “China takes measures against the propagation and spread of religious extremism, and at the same time, carefully avoids linking violent terrorism and religious extremism with any

particular ethnic group or religion.”<sup>6</sup> However, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Uyghurs are being singled out when East Turkestan is still the only region to have its own implementation guidelines for the national level Counter-terrorism Law.<sup>7</sup> The national level law identifies religion as the ideological basis of terrorism and the regional law further singles out Islam through regulations about “distorting the concept of halal.” The broad and vague guidelines have been put to use in the ongoing harsh repression in the region. East Turkestan was again targeted by the authorities with the “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Regulations on De-extremification,” which set up small groups for eliminating “extremism” in government bureaus at all administrative levels, which appear to be involved in identifying Uyghurs to be sent into the system of reeducation camps.<sup>8</sup> Religious believers are one the five categories of people targeted for imprisonment, along with people who do not use their cell phones, former prisoners, “blacklisted people” and people with relatives abroad.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Sinicization Campaign**

The control of religion by the CCP is nothing new- it has been the status quo since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. However, the so called Sinicization campaign can be seen as part of the pattern of the Xi Jinping administration making efforts to re-extended control by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) into every facet of life. At a conference on religious work in 2016, Xi laid out the official line on what this “active guidance” consists of: to guide religious believers to love the motherland and people, to safeguard the unity of China, to obey and serve the interests of the Chinese nation, to support the leadership of the CCP and the socialist system, and stick to the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics; promote Chinese culture and integrate beliefs with Chinese culture, and contribute to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,<sup>10</sup> goals reiterated in the recent White Paper. This can be seen as the attempt to assimilate diverse religious traditions and transform them into a nationalist project subordinate to the state, with particularly troubling implications for the Uyghurs.

The emphasis on the “Sinicization” of religion is a new element of official control, and is related to the new official emphasis on “excellent Chinese culture,” including classical Chinese traditions, and “cultural self confidence.” At a conference held in Beijing in September of 2017, the leaders of the five officially recognized religions stated that they “truly endorsed that the assimilation into the Chinese cultural community and Chinese ethnic community (中华民族共同体) is the direction of religion’s Sinicization, and that it is the basic requirement of adapting religion to the society of socialism with Chinese characteristics.”<sup>11</sup> This means breaking with the foreign religions’ culture of origin and developing new methods of expounding their principles utilizing Chinese culture, in the words of the president of the Chinese Buddhist Association. It is Taoism and Buddhism that are singled out for praise for their contributions to traditional Chinese culture and promotion of it in the modern day, as in this 2015 interview with Wang Zuonan, head of the State Administration for Religious Affairs.<sup>12</sup>

“Foreign” religions are praised for adopting elements of Chinese culture and classical Chinese thought. The head of the Chinese Islamic Association, Yang Faming, in a speech to the CPPCC in March of this year, laid out the official policy direction of

“Sinicization” as it relates to Islam in China.<sup>13</sup> He praised Chinese Muslims’ adoption of Chinese language, clothing and surnames, as well as Chinese philosophy, stating that in the Qing Dynasty Muslim scholars taught that “the correct Dao entails loyalty to Allah but even deeper loyalty to the monarch (忠于真主, 更忠于君父, 方为正道),” [and] their mastery of Islam and Confucianism reached unprecedented heights”(translation by Max Oidtmann<sup>14</sup>). The overall message is one of nationalistic devotion and subordination to the PRC; Yang Faming’s speech stated that the Chinese Islamic Association advocates the following policies:

- 1) That education about the Socialist Core Values must enter the mosque; 2) That the outstanding traditional culture of China (中华优秀传统文化) enter the mosque; 3) That the “Lessons on Muslim Patriotism” enter the mosque; 4) That religious rituals, culture, and architecture must embody Chinese characteristics, Chinese styles, and Chinese manners; 5) That the Islamic community will make the refutation of and resistance to religious extremism the focus of all scriptural (Koranic) education, purge themselves of heterodoxy while holding fast to orthodoxy, and effect a thorough reform to recover the original.<sup>15</sup>

Noticeably, it is the Hui and their comparative integration with Han society which are praised in this speech. The Uyghurs, with their distinctive language and culture, have not yet been “Sinicized.” The diversity of the practice of Islam within China is seen by the authorities as a problem. As one scholar from Xinjiang Normal University wrote in China Ethnic News, the Islam practiced in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is distinct from that practiced in the interior provinces and is not fully “Sinicized,” with little influence from Confucianism or “advanced socialist culture.”<sup>16</sup> Reflecting the official view, the scholar went on to say that “vigorous leadership is extremely needed to guide Xinjiang Islam’s development in the direction of Sinicization.”<sup>17</sup> Praising historical Hui philosophers’ commentaries on the Confucian classics as an example of Sinicization, he suggests that lack of Chinese language and foreign infiltration attempting to “Arabize” and “Turkify” the region constitute an obstacle to “Sinicization” of “Xinjiang Islam”- not even mentioning the Uyghurs by name.

One increasingly prominent official preoccupation is the supposed “foreign” elements in mosque architecture, which the authorities fear constitutes “Arabization” or “Saudization,” leading to the official China Islamic Association to convene a discussion forum on strengthening ideological guidance and the standardization and management of mosque construction to ensure its “Sinicized” direction.<sup>18</sup> The removal of crosses from churches in Wenzhou and elsewhere beginning in 2014 has been in the news,<sup>19</sup> but much the same thing is now happening to mosques, both Uyghur mosques in East Turkestan and elsewhere. Domes and crescent finials are being removed; furthermore large propaganda posters are being placed both inside and outside of the buildings, replacing Quranic passages. The crescents have even been removed from the historic Id Kah mosque in Kashgar. Small neighborhood mosques<sup>20</sup> and shrines<sup>21</sup> appear closed as well, according to academics who have traveled there recently.



*Above: mosque in Korla as it appeared in 2011,*

*Below: as it appears today, with domes and crescents removed and “Love the Party, Love the Nation” placard replacing Quranic passage “There is no God but God and Muhammed is His Prophet”*



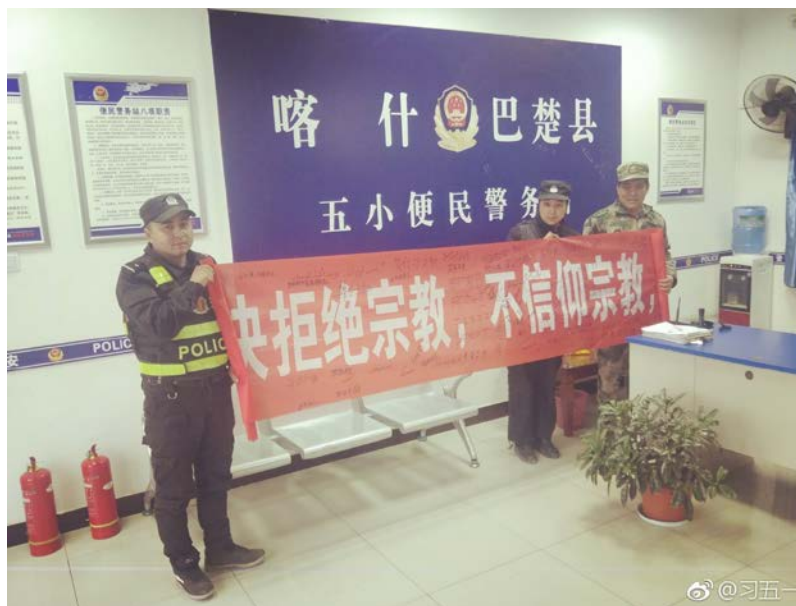
### **An Increased Role for the United Front Work Department**

Control over the mosque by the government has long been the status quo in East Turkestan. Religious leaders must be officially registered and submit to official training. In a pattern that echoes other groups of Uyghurs being sent to inner China for education, the United Front Work Department (UFWD), and other offices are beginning to send Uyghur religious personnel on trips to indoctrinate them with the official view of Chinese history and modern society.<sup>22</sup> The State Administration for Religious Affairs was criticized in 2016 for not exercising enough control over religion,<sup>23</sup> and this year it was absorbed by the United Front Work Department, giving the UFWD direct control over ethnic and religious affairs.<sup>24</sup> This is part of the campaign to consolidate Party control

over government organs, allowing orders from the central leadership to be more directly implemented. Last year the UFWD opened a new bureau for XUAR, to “assist in coordinating and supervising the implementation of the central government’s decisions on the region.”<sup>25</sup>

The Uyghur imams are now being sent to inner China in larger groups for longer sessions to learn that they belong to the “5,000-year-old” culture which emerged from the central plains of China. The training centers emphasize the need to learn Chinese, saying that without studying the language they cannot understand government policy, serve their religious community, adapt with the times, comprehend science and technology and important information, or contribute to Xinjiang’s development, stability and ethnic unity.<sup>26</sup> They leave promising to study Xi Jinping’s important speeches, to help preserve Islam’s direction of Sinicization, and to be politically reliable. This campaign can be seen as an extension and expansion of the government’s efforts to assimilate the Uyghurs that have been ongoing for decades.<sup>27</sup>

This has led to increasing political content in mosques, with weekly flag raising ceremonies and patriotic songs like “No New China Without the Communist Party” replacing the call to prayer.<sup>28</sup> Clergymen convey the instruction given to them in their official patriotism classes to worshippers, encourage the study of Chinese and hang propaganda banners inside and out.<sup>29</sup> This has reportedly led to lower attendance than in the past, even for major holidays.



*Police at a “convenience police station” in Kashgar hold up a sign saying “reject religion, do not believe in religion” originally posted on Xi Wuyi’s Weibo*



## Eliminating Religion from the Public Square and Private Sphere

The government has been increasing its efforts to prevent any study of Islam outside of official channels, destroying any unofficial schools<sup>30</sup> and handing down harsh sentences to individuals caught worshipping outside of designated places.<sup>31</sup> Laws against women, minors, Party members and government officials entering mosques means that a large portion of the population has been cut off from the supposed freedom to worship which the White Paper touts, particularly given the crackdown on religious expression outside of official mosques, including the confiscation of religious books.

This campaign has extended overseas as well; Uyghur students studying abroad beginning early last year were swept up in a campaign to assess their political attitudes, but students at al-Azhar University in Cairo were a particular target. They were held by Egyptian security forces and interrogated by the head of the Chinese Students and Scholars Administration and other Chinese officials about their knowledge of the Quran and religious practices.<sup>32</sup> Those who returned home were taken into police custody and there are reports that several have died in custody under unclear circumstances,<sup>33</sup> while others such as Buzainafu Abudourexiti were given harsh sentences in secret trials.<sup>34</sup>



*Officials from the Xinjiang Bureau of Quality and Technical Supervision inspect illegal religious items at a “De-extremification propaganda education base”<sup>35</sup>*

The government seeks to purge religion from Uyghur life, both in public and from individual households. In late 2017 reports emerged of Uyghurs’ houses being searched for illegal religious items including prayer rugs, decorative items with Quranic inscriptions and any items with the star and crescent symbol, which were turned over to the authorities.<sup>36</sup> Special boxes to deposit the “three illegals and one material” (illegal

religious publications, including books without a publication number, pictures and calendars, handwritten materials, clothing and jewelry, illegal audio and video from the internet, explosives and sharp objects beyond those needed for daily use) have appeared in the region, promising that those who place items in it will not be pursued by the authorities.<sup>37</sup> The White Paper boasts that the Quran has been translated into Uyghur and other Turkic languages, but the reports say that Qurans and other religious texts were among the items confiscated from people's homes.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, Muhammad Salih Hajim, the 82-year-old scholar who translated the Quran into Uyghur under official auspices, was taken into custody in late 2017 along with his family members, where he later died.<sup>39</sup> The authorities have still not announced his death to the public nor revealed the circumstances of it.

New technologies make the government's control over religion easier and more intrusive than ever. The app that all residents are required to download onto their phones and mobile devices, called Jingwang, transmits all data to a central government server, where they are scanned for illegal content.<sup>40</sup> Police stop citizens on the street to ensure it has been downloaded. There are reports that people have already been sent to prison for content on their phones. One Uyghur student who returned home to visit his family while studying in the US reported that he was sent to a detention center where one of his cellmates was a 60 year old man who had been sentenced to six years for sharing a religious teaching with his daughter via mobile phone.<sup>41</sup>

### **An Accelerating Assimilative Campaign Targets Uyghur Traditions**

The Chinese government states that it wants to encourage religion in a local form, but this is belied by the treatment of Uyghur traditions. It would appear that when it says that it wants to encourage the localization of religion it does not mean allowing Uyghurs and others to practice their centuries old local traditions but rather to reinforce the state's ability to define and control how religion is practiced. The White Paper states that "normal religious belief" is protected, but the ability to define what constitutes normal belief means that the government can arbitrarily prevent citizens from worshipping in their preferred manner.

The government has banned numerous distinctly local Uyghur religious practices, for example the shrine festivals that once took place across East Turkestan. Shrine festivals enjoyed a revival after the Cultural Revolution, but one by one were banned beginning in the late nineties, while experts on the subject report that as of 2013, all major festivals appear to no longer be taking place. These festivals featured music and other cultural performances, and were a moderate and indigenous form of Islamic worship. The authorities fear of large numbers of Uyghurs gathering together and of any religious observation taking place outside their control has meant that they are now illegal.<sup>42</sup> The "localization," of religion that the government is seeking to promote does not in fact represent truly local traditions but rather officially defined "Chinese" ones, including promotion of classical Chinese philosophy and "advanced socialist culture." The government appears to be turning away from even nominal protection of minority ethnic identities and increasingly implementing assimilative policies. Characterizing traditional Chinese philosophy and cultural traditions as belonging to all citizens of the PRC, including ones who were never influenced by them, and imposing an invented

homogenous identity from above suggests that Chinese government policy is taking a disturbing ethnonationalist turn, with dangerous consequences for its ethnic minorities.

Commonplace rituals like weddings and funerals are being interfered with by the authorities. The de-extremification measures refer to “interfering” in weddings and funerals as an illegal extremist activity, while not defining what the interference consists of. The authorities monitor Uyghur ceremonies for any behavior they regard as suspicious, such as not crying at funerals. A list of forbidden baby names was released in May of last year, including many common Muslim names such as Muhammad and Fatima.<sup>43</sup> Uyghur language newspapers now regularly publish lists of individuals who have changed their names.<sup>44</sup> It is being reported that the authorities are extending their control over burial practices, setting up central burial centers in some villages to cremate remains, cutting out those who perform traditional burial rites.<sup>45</sup> The Chinese state is micromanaging every milestone in Uyghur lives from birth to death.

Unauthorized activities at weddings and funerals are among those listed in a list of 75 signs of extremism, which was published in 2014 and updated in 2017.<sup>46</sup> It asserts that the initial stage of extremism takes the form of rejecting official religious institutions and refusing to participate in “normal” religious practices, meaning that not entering official state-run mosques can also create suspicion. Closing restaurants during Ramadan, possessing anything with a star and crescent or Turkestan flag, teaching Arabic, Turkish or Urdu, not crying or wearing white at funerals, not singing, dancing, or drinking at weddings, and refusing government propaganda are all among the signs of extremism on the list. Displaying these signs is one of the ways government officials determine who will be sent to the re-education camps.<sup>47</sup>

Attempting to eradicate religious belief among the Uyghurs appears to be a key goal of these camps, according to the few who have experienced them and are in a position to speak out. One naturalized Kazakh citizen was imprisoned in the camps after he returned to China to sell his property. He was interrogated about his life in Kazakhstan and whether he performed daily prayer. Many prisoners in the camp he was imprisoned in were there because of their religious belief, and he said that lessons in the camps included being taught “not to be a Muslim.”<sup>48</sup> Anyone suspected of practicing religion is targeted by the official work teams rounding people up for the camps.<sup>49</sup>

Even as the space for any expression of Muslim faith has been eliminated from public and hundreds of thousands of people are imprisoned for violating the government’s highly restrictive rules on religion, the campaign to assimilate Uyghurs seems to be accelerating. Children are encouraged to recite Confucian and Taoist classical texts in a ritualistic fashion in order to “promote traditional culture,” often while wearing “traditional” clothing.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, while the government works to prevent Uyghurs from observing the customs of Ramadan, it is increasingly seeking to promote the celebration of Chinese holidays like Spring Festival (Chinese New Year), this year sending Han Chinese work teams to Uyghur households to ensure that Chinese customs were being observed.<sup>51</sup>





*Children in Aksu recite Chinese classics to reinforce their “Chinese identity”<sup>52</sup>*

## **Conclusion**

The central authorities have been signaling their approval of the current campaign. On a recent trip to East Turkestan, Wang Yang, currently chair of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, through which he is connected to the United Front Work Department, said that local authorities’ maintenance of high pressure towards the “three evil forces” has made society safer, decreased infiltration from extremists, and increased the security of cadres and masses of all ethnicities, saying that “the policies must continue to be experimented and perfected to study which methods can most effectively be normalized.”<sup>53</sup> He advocated for taking a clear stand on expressing support for correct thinking, clearly criticizing the wrong thinking of the “double pan” (pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism), to enhance positive energy in society, and to firmly occupy the fronts of public opinion and culture. He demonstrated the center’s belief that “anti-poverty” campaigns will discourage extremism and emphasized the importance of Party control, including the continued “reform” of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, meaning its consolidation and expansion into southern East Turkestan.

The government appears determined to eradicate Uyghur religious belief to the greatest extent possible as part of its efforts to assimilate them into a state defined Chinese identity. The “Sinicization” campaign is affecting all believers in China but the Uyghurs are a particular target due to their distinct ethnic identity. The re-education camps are the most extreme form of this, and are an attempt to eliminate Uyghur religiosity by force, exceeding any other anti-religion policy the Chinese government is currently pursuing. The White Paper on religious freedom was released against the backdrop of the ongoing crackdown and does not attempt to argue that believers such as the Uyghurs truly have the right to practice their faith as they see fit, but says that they must “be subordinate to

and serve the overall interests of the nation and the Chinese people...support the leadership of the CPC [Chinese Communist Party] and the socialist system” and “integrate religious teachings and rules with Chinese culture.”<sup>54</sup> This assimilative campaign is being violently enforced in the form of the reeducation camps imprisoning hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs across East Turkestan.

The elimination of Uyghur religious freedom and its replacement with a narrow set of central government approved “Sinicized” religious observance is a violation of human rights that are guaranteed at both an international level and at the state level in China’s own constitution. China’s constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief (Article 36), prohibits “discrimination and oppression of any nationality” and protects their right to their own languages and customs (Article 4).<sup>55</sup> Furthermore the religious regulations, assimilation campaign in the form of “Sinicization”, and the mass imprisonment of Uyghurs on the basis of their ethnic and religious identity are a abuse of their human and cultural rights, and are tied to the Chinese government’s violations of their freedoms of speech, assembly and movement. These rights are recognized at the international level in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The international community should strongly condemn the violations of these rights and consider taking action to pressure China to end its assimilative policies and adopt moderate policies which allow Uyghurs to maintain their traditional identity, including religion and language. The Chinese government’s current policies, particularly in their most extreme form, the re-education camps, are worsening the relationship between the Uyghurs and Han Chinese. The international community should be prepared for the possibility that the human rights situation in East Turkestan could deteriorate further in the coming months and years.

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