

Islamic Revival under Socialist Regime of China: A Case Study of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

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Abstract:

Since the Urumqi incident on July 5, 2009, the Islamic Revival has been accelerating in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (hereinafter, Xinjiang or XUAR). On the other hand, since Xi Jinping became General Secretary of the Communist Party of China in 2012, religious control in Xinjiang appears to have been tightening. Although the Chinese Constitution formally guarantees freedom of religion, the Islamic Revival in Xinjiang has been under strict control and has thus not been able to develop in an unfettered environment. What is the legal basis for control over religious activities? Here, I review national and regional laws and regulations on religion, focusing on the XUAR Religious Affairs Regulations revised in 2014 and China's Religious Affairs Regulations revised in 2017. In particular, I consider the background in which the religious activities of minors in Xinjiang have been controlled under the XUAR Religious Affairs Regulations, taking into consideration the internal and external circumstances of Xinjiang.

Keywords:

Islamic Revival, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), Socialism, Religious Control, Religious Education

1. Introduction

In this paper, as a case study of the Islamic Revival of Muslim minorities, I examine the realities of the Islamic Revival in Xinjiang, focusing on religious control by the Communist Party of China (hereinafter, the Communist Party or CPC). In particular, I consider the current situation in which religious control has been tightened under the XUAR Religious Affairs Regulations revised in 2014¹ and China's Religious Affairs Regulations revised in 2017.² The former stipulates control over the religious activities of minors. I review this background based on the CPC's policy on religion, remarks by Party officials under Xi Jinping's leadership, and the geopolitical characteristics of Xinjiang.

2. Islamic Revival in Xinjiang

Xinjiang, located in northwestern China, is known as a region where Turkic Muslim minorities, such as Uyghurs, Uzbeks, and Kazakhs, have concentrated. Xinjiang, bordering on eight countries, including Kazakhstan and Pakistan, is under the socialist regime of China. Xinjiang is also a special area where the Turkic minorities, Islām, and socialism intersect.

Since the Urumqi incident occurred on July 5, 2009,³ some Muslims have come to find, through Islamic values, solutions to such issues as social upheaval due to rapid economic growth, conflicts, inequality of wealth, and moral corruption due to mass migration of Han Chinese, leading to the expansion of an Islamic "movement to make the world better." Along with this movement, Islamic study groups and schools have thrived underground. In addition, responding to the worldwide trend of Islamic Revival, new movements seeking places of worship overseas have begun to emerge. For example, some people have set out for the Islamic State (IS), which has intensified its activities from around 2012, and the flow of immigrants to Turkey has increased. In this environment, with the Islamic Revival rapidly growing, Xi Jinping became General Secretary of CPC in 2012 and has tightened religious control in Xinjiang. Consequently, the Islamic Revival in the region has not been able to develop in an unfettered environment but rather only under strict control.

3. "Freedom of Religious Belief" and Realities of Religious Control

China is ruled by a socialist regime, but it legally guarantees "freedom of religious belief" under Article 36 of the Constitution⁴. However, while this "freedom" is guaranteed, religion remains under strict control.

As a matter of course, Muslims adhere to the five pillars of Islām in striving to make their faith perfect and beautiful and to bring happiness to the lives of human beings in this world and the afterlife. However, it is difficult for them to do so in Xinjiang. No unauthorized organization or individual is allowed to receive *sadaqa* (alms-giving) from abroad, even if it wants to (Article 36 of the XUAR Religious Affairs Regulations). Minors are not allowed to enter a mosque to join *ṣalāt* (prayer) with other Muslims.⁵ In the first place, minors are prohibited from participating in religious activities themselves (Article 37 of the XUAR Religious Affairs Regulations).

Sermons are offered every Friday on *ṣalāt*. However, political propaganda is mixed into general sermons on such principles as having filial piety for parents and compassion for others. The *Qur'ān* and *ḥadīth* are cited to explain the Communist Party's advocacy of respect for science, the policy on ethnic minorities, patriotism, and loyalty to the socialist regime. The contents of those sermons, compiled by the China Islamic Affairs Steering Committee as an authorized subordinate organization of the China Islamic Association, are used uniformly in mosques across the country. Specific examples are given as follows:⁶

Righteousness is not that you turn your faces toward the east or the west, but [true] righteousness is [in] one who believes in *Allāh*, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the prophets and gives wealth, in spite of love for it, to relatives, orphans, the needy, the traveler, those who ask [for help], and for freeing slaves; [and who] establishes prayer and gives *zakāh*; [those who] fulfill their promise when they make a promise; and [those who] are patient in poverty and hardship and during battle. Those are the ones who have been true, and it is they who are the righteous. (2:177)

*The English translation of *Qur'ān* is based on the Hilali/Khan Saheeh revision.

[Like the words of the *Qur'ān*,] as a devout Muslim and a man afraid of *Allāh*, you must adhere to the five pillars of Islām, and at the same time, respect the old, love the young, make friends with your neighbors, cherish the good, relieve poverty, prevent crisis, save the day, help others willingly, reward virtue, punish vice, spread justice, fulfill promises, trade fairly, maintain order, create social well-being, develop the economy, build your hometown, unite with each other, and love your religion and love your country. Only through these ways can you make your faith perfect and beautiful and gain happiness in this world and the afterlife.

Words and phrases that mean loyalty and contribution to the “socialist state” in the context of China, such as economic development, hometown building, mutual unity, and “love your religion, love your country” are subtly mixed into sermons. Parents with minors will find that their children cannot make their faith perfect and beautiful.

4. Legal Basis of Religious Control

4.1 XUAR Religious Affairs Regulations

In China, religious laws and regulations have a two-tiered structure at the national and regional levels. Both the central and Xinjiang governments have formulated the Religious Affairs Regulations (hereinafter, Regulations), and the latest version of China’s Regulations was enacted in 2017, three years after the XUAR Regulations were revised in 2014.

It is worth noting that the XUAR Regulations say in Article 37 that “Minors may not participate in religious activities.” Not only must minors not participate in religious activities, nor should any organization or individual organize, induce, or force minors to do so under the same Article. Penalties will be imposed on those who violate this provision under Article 59. That is to say, the People’s Government religious affairs and education departments, at or above the prefecture level, will subject offenders to re-education by self-criticism and strictly order them to remedy their violations. Anyone who commits a breach of security control will be punished by public security agencies under law, and if the violation constitutes a crime, judicial bodies will pursue criminal liability in accordance with the law.

Control over the religious activities of minors has long been implemented by expanding the interpretation of law on the grounds of prohibiting obstruction of compulsory education for minors or guaranteeing the “freedom not to believe.” The XUAR Regulations have been revised to stipulate control over religious activities of minors following General Secretary Xi Jinping’s speech at the Second Central Xinjiang Work Forum in Beijing held in May of 2014.

We must diligently carry out our religious work, proactively guide religions to adapt to the socialist society, and make religious leaders and lay believers better play an active role in promoting economic and social development. The basic principles for dealing with religious problems are, that is to say, to protect lawfulness, stop illegality, contain [religious] extremism, prevent its penetration, and crack down on crime. We must guarantee the normal religious needs of lay believers, respect their customs and manners, and steadily disseminate a legitimate way for them to

correctly grasp religious common sense [i.e., indispensable religious knowledge], on the basis of law.⁷

What was emphasized in this Forum was to govern Xinjiang in accordance with law, in other words, to tighten religious control by law. General Secretary Xi Jinping's remarks were directly included in Article 4 as "protect lawfulness, stop illegality, contain extremism, prevent its penetration, and crack down on crime."

As a result, the religious activities of minors have become subject to the XUAR Regulations, preventing them from participating in religious activities, and also punishing those who have engaged in religious activities with them.

4.2 National Religious Affairs Regulations

China's Religious Affairs Regulations, as upper-level law, were revised three years after the revision of the XUAR Religious Affairs Regulations. What is worth noting is that a new chapter on institutions for religious education (Chapter 3) was established, apart from the chapter on religious bodies (Chapter 2) in China's Regulations of 2004.

According to the provisions of institutions for religious education in China's Regulations of 2017, "institutions for religious education can only be established by officially authorized religious bodies [in this case, China Muslim Association], but any other organization or individual shall not establish an institution for religious education" (Article 11). "Institutions for religious education shall implement specific systems for checking the qualifications of teachers, evaluating academic titles and making appointment, and awarding degrees to students, and the specific measures in this respect shall be formulated by the religious affairs department of the State Council" (Article 16). "To hire foreign professionals, an institution for religious education shall obtain approval of the religious affairs department of the State Council" (Article 17). In addition, "where a religious body intends to train religious personnel for three months or more, it shall apply for approval to the religious affairs department of a local People's Government at or above the level of a city divided into districts" (Article 18). Further, Articles 41 and 44 reiterate that "non-religious bodies, non-institutions for religious education, non-religious venues and non-designated places for temporary activities shall not organize or hold religious activities." And "where anyone, without authorization, makes arrangements for citizens to conduct religious training, the relevant religious affairs department shall, together with other relevant departments, order it or him to stop the activity and may impose on it or him a fine of not less than 20,000 yuan but not more

than 200,000 yuan concurrently; the illegal gains, if any, shall be confiscated; and if crime is constituted, criminal liability shall be investigated in accordance with law” (Article 70). Therefore, because they are national-level laws and regulations, those who cannot enroll in public religious schools all across the country will not have the opportunity to receive religious education.

The revision of China’s Regulations was triggered by the National Religious Work Conference in April 2016. In this conference, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized, “In order to improve religious work, it is essential to adhere to the Party’s basic policy of religious work, fully implement the Party’s freedom of religion policy, and manage religious affairs by law, adhere to the principle of independence and self-sufficiency and proactively guide religion and socialist society to adapt to each other.⁸” These statements revealed his intention to eliminate foreign influences.

4.3 Comparison of National and XUAR Religious Affairs Regulations

In comparing the Xinjiang Regulations with the national ones, it becomes clear that the Chinese government is attempting to isolate religious education and those who receive it (i.e., minors) from religion. Control over the religious activities of minors, which is stipulated in the Xinjiang Regulations, is not provided in the national ones. In other words, the clarification of control over religious activities of minors is specific to Xinjiang.

When considering the historical timeframes when the Xinjiang Regulations and the national ones were enacted, it is also worth noting that the former were enacted earlier. While the Xinjiang Regulations were enacted in 1994 and the national ones in 2004, the former were revised earlier (i.e., 2014) than the latter (i.e., 2017). The reason why China hastened to enact lower-level regulations is probably due to growing tension in Xinjiang.

It seems that the Urumqi incident in 2009 and subsequent disruptions of Muslim society, growing terrorism, and the rise of the Islamic State (IS) since around 2012 resulted in the revision of the Xinjiang Regulations in 2014.

5. Control over Religious Activities of Minors

5.1 Legal Basis

Then, what is the basis for the Chinese government to control the religious activities of minors in Xinjiang? Shewket Imin, a member of the Standing Committee of the CPC Xinjiang Committee, outlined this at a press conference at the State Council on June 2, 2016, as follows:⁹

Concerning the issue of “children” (as he expressed at this press conference) entering a mosque, the Chinese Constitution stipulates that citizens have the freedom to believe in religion and that education and religion should be separated. The Constitution of the People’s Republic of China says in Article 36 that “the state shall protect normal religious activities. No one shall use religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens, or interfere with the state education system.” The Education Law of the People’s Republic of China stipulates in paragraph (2) of Article 8 that “the state shall separate education from religion. No organization or individual may employ religion to obstruct activities of the state education system.” The Non-state Education Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China stipulates in paragraph (2) of Article 4 that “non-state schools shall abide by the principle of separating education from religion. No organization or individual may make use of religion to conduct activities that interfere with the state education system.” Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Chinese-foreign Cooperation in Running Schools says in Article 7 that “no foreign religious organization, religious institution, religious college or university, or religious worker may engage in cooperative activities of running schools within the territory of China.” And it also says that “Chinese-foreign cooperatively run schools shall not offer religious education, nor conduct religious activities.”

We have strictly adhered to national laws and regulations, and the autonomous district has never enacted any provision prohibiting women and children from believing in religion, but citizens must receive compulsory education before the age of eighteen on the basis of the Constitution.

The Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Minors says that “[the state, society, schools, and families] shall not commit any act that harms the healthy growth of minors.” And the XUAR Regulations on the Protection of Minors says that “any organization or individual shall not induce or compel minors to participate in religious activities, nor make use of religion to engage in activities to obstruct compulsory education for minors.”

To put it simply, Imin explained that the reason for control over the religious activities of

minors is to guarantee compulsory education. He also said that religious education for minors could be a hindrance to the state education system, and that the state must “protect” minors since religious education could undermine their “healthy growth.” Since religious belief itself cannot be prohibited, the state isolates minors from religion by preventing their participation in religious activities. However, if his explanation is correct, since compulsory education is a national enterprise, similar provisions should exist in national and other regional regulations. Religious affairs regulations are currently being enacted at each regional level, but, for example, the Inner Mongolia regulations do not have the above kind of provisions.¹⁰ Therefore, aside from the guarantee of compulsory education, there must be some other reason why those provisions are specifically provided in the XUAR Regulations.

5.2 Special Regional Characteristics of Xinjiang

A special characteristic of Xinjiang is its sense of geopolitical risk. Since the 1990s, the number of pilgrims to Makkah has increased in Xinjiang, mosques have been rebuilt and restored, and the Islamic Revival has become remarkable. After the Reform and Opening-up policy, the Baren Township riot occurred in 1990, which is said to be the first large-scale armed uprising advocating Islamic beliefs.¹¹ Four years later, the Religious Affairs Management Regulations was hastily enacted in Xinjiang. Then, with the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the Communist Party has become more aware of the geopolitical risk in Xinjiang. It also reaffirmed the five characteristics of religion: (i) the international characteristic that Islām is a worldwide religion; (ii) the ethnic characteristic that Turkic peoples are concentrated in Xinjiang; (iii) the mass-movement characteristic that Muslims have formed their own *Umma* or communities of believers; (iv) the long-term characteristic that it takes time to encourage Muslims to become non-religious; and (v) the complex characteristics of religious issues themselves. Roughly after 9/11, the mass migration of Han Chinese into Xinjiang has caused more friction between ethnic groups and growing dissatisfaction of the locals. In addition, local Muslims were left out in the cold from the benefits of extracting natural resources in Xinjiang. Under these circumstances, the Urumqi incident broke out on July 5, 2009. Since this incident, the Islamic beliefs of local Muslims have become stronger, and there have been movements to make the world better through Islamic values.

A white paper titled “Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang” published by the State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China shows the Chinese government’s perception of Islamic beliefs in Xinjiang as follows:

China is a unified multiethnic country, and various ethnic groups in Xinjiang have long been part of the Chinese nation. Throughout its long history, Xinjiang's development has been closely related to that of our eternally great country and the Chinese nation. However, in more recent times, hostile forces in and outside China, including separatists, religious extremists and terrorists, have tried to split China and break it apart by distorting history and facts. [...] They attempt to separate ethnic groups in Xinjiang from the Chinese nation and ethnic cultures in the region from the diverse but integrated Chinese culture.

In Xinjiang, different cultures and religions coexist, and ethnic cultures have been fostered and developed in the embrace of the Chinese civilization. Islām is neither an indigenous nor the sole belief system of the Uyghur people. Islām, fused with Chinese culture, has taken root in the fertile land of China and developed in a healthy manner in China.¹²

It should be noted that since the late 1970s and early 1980s, and particularly since the end of the Cold War, the surge in religious extremism around the world has caused a rise in religious extremism in Xinjiang. This has resulted in an increasing number of incidents of terror and violence that pose a serious danger to social stability and to the lives and property of people in the region. [...] Religious extremism is running counter to the teachings concerning patriotism, peace, solidarity, the golden mean, tolerance, and the good works advocated by Islām and many other religions, and it is essentially anti-human, anti-society, anti-civilization, and anti-religion.¹³

In short, the Chinese government recognizes that, although Xinjiang is a part of China and Islām, fused with Chinese culture, it has developed in a "healthy" manner while "religious extremists" have begun to harm the stability of society and the security of people after the collapse of the Cold War structure. As is clear from the words "the surge in religious extremism around the world," the Chinese government also perceives that the notion of religious extremism exists in Xinjiang and that extreme Islām "contaminated" with that notion might work toward dismantling China. It can be said that the Chinese government accepts only the kind of Islām that has been fused with Chinese culture and has "developed in a healthy manner" under the framework of "freedom of religion," and thus it allows religious education only at

public religious institutions. Probably, the Chinese government intends to block the passing of religious belief from generation to generation and, furthermore, to hasten the disappearance of religion by prohibiting minors from participating in religious activities and receiving religious education.

6. Bewildered Local Muslims

In a document published in 2015, Chan Qi raised critical questions about control over the religious activities of minors in Xinjiang: To what extent should minors' religious activities be allowed? Is it lawful for minors to engage in religious activities with their parents during ethnic minority holidays? Who is subject to punishment if such activity violates the law?¹⁴ According to the Xinjiang Regulations, if any organization or individual participates in religious activities with minors, it is considered an activity to "induce" or "compel" minors to participate in religious activities. Strictly speaking, even parents cannot perform religious rituals with their own children. In Xinjiang, as in other Muslim countries such as Turkey, parents try to make their children learn Arabic and recite the *Qur'ān* from infancy, and they preach religious ethics to children. If parents encourage their children to visit their nearest religious scholar for religious teaching, these parents might be considered to "induce" or "compel" children, or even "obstruct" the children's compulsory education. The religious scholar might also be subject to punishment for opening a non-public religious institution. Even at home, it is difficult for parents to pass on religious knowledge and ethical values to their children.

7. Conclusion

As discussed above, even if one adheres to the five pillars of Islām as preached in mosques, it is difficult to practice religious freedom because all religious activities are strictly controlled by laws and regulations. Due to the theoretically negative perception of religion and also to the geopolitical risk in Xinjiang, control over religious activities, mainly those of minors, has been increasingly tightened. In education, even in the home, parents are monitored and minors are isolated from religion by reason of their being at the age of compulsory education. Wang Zuo'an, director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs as of 2016, emphasized that religious work requires "guidance" through stricter legal controls.¹⁵ A concrete way to put this guidance into practice is to secularize minors by eliminating religious

education and activities. But conversely, the complete elimination of minors' access to religious education could render their religious knowledge "sterile," making them yet more susceptible to "extreme" religious thinking and hence hiding the religious education of minors underground. In summary, attempting to contain the influence of religion by strengthening laws and regulations could rather increase the risk to the Chinese government.

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Notes

- ¹ The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Religious Affairs Regulations, by the People's Government of Xinjian Uyghur Autonomous Region (<http://www.xinjiang.gov.cn/xinjiang/fsljzcfg/201705/ae7fb20c9864d78bdd37f1006f21a66.shtml>, last accessed on July 31, 2020).
- ² China's Religious Affairs Regulations, by the State Council of the People's Republic of China (http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content_5223282.htm, last accessed on July 31, 2020).
- ³ On July 5, 2009, Uyghurs and Hans clashed in Urumqi, the largest city in Xinjiang. Chinese officials have made a confrontational stance, insisting that the incident was orchestrated by "three forces of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism." Chinese officials have announced that 197 people have been killed and more than 1,700 injured (Local Magazine Editing Committee of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region edition, *Xinjiang Year Book 2010*,15), while the World Uyghur Congress, an overseas Uyghur organization, released data that differed significantly from that of Chinese officials by showing testimony that 800 to 1,000 people were killed and 2,000 to 3,000 injured (World Uyghur Congress, "Witnesses Testified the Case of the July 5th Urumqi Massacre, Part One" (<http://www.uyghurcongress.org/jp/?p=1122>, last accessed on August 31, 2020).
- ⁴ Article 36 of the Constitution of People's Republic of China: Citizens of the People's Republic of China shall enjoy freedom of religious belief. No state organ, social organization or individual shall coerce citizens to believe in or not to believe in any religion, nor shall they discriminate against citizens who believe in or do not believe in any religion. The state shall protect normal religious activities. No one shall use religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the state's education system. Religious groups and religious affairs shall not be subject to control by foreign forces.
For the translation into English, refer to Article 36 of the Constitution based on the website of the State Council of the People's Republic of China (http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/lawsregulations/201911/20/content_WS5ed8856ec6d0b3f0e9499913.html, last accessed on September 23, 2020).
- ⁵ When I visited Ili City and Yengisar County for surveys in August 2011, minors were already restricted from entering mosques. It is probable that the provision of the Regulations was broadly interpreted that minors' participation in group *ṣalāt* interrupts compulsory education.
- ⁶ *The New Collection of Wā'iz Speeches series (1-4)*, edited by China Islamic Religious Affairs Guidance Committee, Religion Culture Publishing House (2011), 17-18. See Japanese translation of *Qur'ān*, edited by Ko NAKATA, Kaori NAKATA, and Kazuki SHIMOMURA, *Nichia taiyaku Qur'ān*, Sakuhinsya (2017).

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- ⁷ “Xi Jinping: We must firmly establish a correct vision for the motherland and nation among the masses of all ethnic groups” on People’s Daily (<http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/0529/c1024-25083277.html>, last accessed on August 8, 2020).
- ⁸ “Xi Jinping attended the National Religious Work Conference and delivered an important speech” on People’s Daily (<http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0423/c1001-28299513.html>, last accessed on August 8, 2020).
- ⁹ “Laws and Regulations not Allowing Minor Students to Participate in Religious Activities” The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China (<http://www.scio.gov.cn/xwfbh/xwfbh/h/wqfbh/33978/34593/zy34597/Document/1479250/1479250.htm>, last accessed on July 31, 2020).
- ¹⁰ Regulations on Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Religious Affairs, *Inner Mongolia Daily*, 008th issue (December 17, 2019).
- ¹¹ An armed uprising in April 1990 in Baren Township, Akto County, near Kashgar. It is said that the “East Turkistan Islamic Party” was deeply involved in this riot, and that they have appealed against the mass migration of Han Chinese and birth control. This incident became widely known to Uyghurs abroad and awakened their nationalism and secessionism. See Naoko MIZUTANI, “A Consideration of the Baren Township Incident in Xinjiang,” *Modern and Contemporary China Studies*, Vol. 40 (2018), 62–80.
- ¹² The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang*, People’s Press (2019), 1–2.
- ¹³ The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang*, People’s Press (2019), 23.
- ¹⁴ Chan Qi, “Study on Xinjiang Religious Affairs Legislature: Concurrent Comments on Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Religious Affairs Regulations,” *Social Sciences in Xinjiang*, 1st Issue (2015), 106.
- ¹⁵ Wang Zuo’an, “A Key of Religious Work Lies in ‘Guidance’: Study the spirit of general Secretary Xi Jinping’s speech at the National Religious Work Conference,” *Study Times*, 001st issue (August 8, 2016).