

Back to Islam

Testimony by Dr. Kahar Barat

Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations

Yale University

May 17, 2004

Thanks to the Congressional - Executive Commission on China for inviting me today to present testimony about the religious situation in East Turkistan. And also thanks to the Uighur friends for sharing ideas with me on this issue.

The Uighur territory was the easternmost border of Islamic Empire where religion had been loose, isolated and backward. Missionaries brought Islam to Kashgar in the 10th century. But the Islamization of the whole East Turkistan took more than 500 years as the widely displaced oasis population was converted one by one from Buddhism and Christianity. Preserving pre-Islamic and indigenous religious beliefs, the people created a moderate and liberal form of Sunni Islam. Under the patronage of Chagatai rulers, Islam gained a strong theocratic power. Central Asian Naqshbandiyya Sufism influenced, especially the Tarim basin, for centuries.

But the Manchurian invasion in 1759 blanketed the area with colonial non-Muslim administration and limited the Islamic authority to a secondary position. During early modernism period, some progressive merchants such as Musabay and Muhiti brought Jadidist teachers from Kazan, Istanbul and Moscow universities to open western style schools. From 1885 to 1916, there were already 16 new schools open in East Turkistan. A textbook publisher was established in 1910 in Kashgar.

Mao Zedong's religious policy was of a typical Soviet type simply eliminating religion from society. They trumpeted communism and atheism as progressive and Islam as feudal, backward and superstitious. That time each town had only one mosque, big cities had 2-3 mosques open mainly for funeral ceremonies. A more devastating attack came in 1967 - 1969 during Cultural Revolution when almost all mosques were destroyed, Imams were persecuted, and millions of books were burned.

As a result of 30 years of enforced atheism, the majority of Uighur people became separated from Islam. Younger generations grew up knowing nothing about the religion, and the Koran was not available. Despite all this, there had been always a small group of old people who kept praying secretly. Uighur people maintained their faith at a minimum level. No boy remained without circumcision, no one buried without prayer, and almost no Uighur ate pork even though some Uighur cadre raised pig.

Since the introduction of the open door policy in China, there was a short period of time in which Uighur Muslims could restore the mosques, some attended organized Hajj pilgrimage, and students went to al-Azhar and Islamabad universities to study Islam. To an unprepared Uighur nation, return to Islam caused a great excitement. Young and old desperately searched for a way to learn how to pray. Mosques were soon full again. Privately funded mosques were built everywhere. Many Uighur studied abroad or back from Hajj brought a new understanding about Islam on the contrary to communistic distortion, which was much open, intelligent and cosmopolitan. Koran was translated into Uighur in 1985 as well as Bukhari and other Arab classics. Some young Imams played an active role fighting against the social pollution and crimes, such as alcoholism, drug, prostitution, which is still a disaster in China. But the government

viewed the new trend as a threat, and responded it with a hard line repressive policy. Such new religious freedom lasted only 10 years from 1978 to 1988.

Sun Yatsin and Mao's nationalistic revolutions wiped out the royal clan and religion from China without hesitation. What that might bring to this strong nation is a historical myth. Does Chinese society need religion? Why did Falun Gong develop? Ever since, Han chauvinism became the leading ideology in all administration. The economic growth and social changes in China simultaneously brought a drastic assimilation of all minority cultures and even Chinese local cultures. If the situation continues as it is, within a century, we may see only 6 nationalities left, not 56, that will not bring anything positive to this society. China's reckless growth of population had already brought a disaster to all minorities and even themselves, now the ethnic assimilation is attacking the minorities in both quiet and violent two directions: either you give up your identity to become Chinese, or I will kill your language, religion and culture to make you a Chinese.

What we are seeing lately is the last scene of communism where the anti-Islamic ethnic killings happen in Bosnia and Chechen. China also operated a same war at its backyard by supplementing the military presence in Uighur area. Accusing of "religious extremists", "Islamic fundamentalists" associated with "separatists", they killed and arrested thousands of religious teachers and students. The 1995 Khotan incident was triggered by the arrest of Imam Abduqeyim Abdumijit. 1997 Ili incident was also started by the police arrest of some Uighur boys and girls while they were praying during the month of Holy Ramadan. Who is using the religion for what purpose?

Now all the state employees and students are strictly forbidden from practicing Islam. China's propaganda machine has been using their traditional methods, created an ethnic hatred, demonized Uighur image, translated Uighur resistance into international terrorism, and convinced the international community in many ways. Many Uighur people feel that they are betrayed by the world. Neighboring weak countries deported Uighur refugees back to China sacrificing lamb to the beast. Life has become so confusing for Uighurs that many have stopped going to mosque again.

In the meanwhile, Hui Muslims calmly watched the persecution of Uighur Muslims; they then started looking for a way to negotiate with the government. After 3 major experiments with Islam, going from one extreme to another, Chinese leaders seem to have come down to their last bargain: the religion must follow socialistic guidelines. Islamic practice is allowed only through officially trained Imams with new interpretations. Recently the Islamic associations started to compile "new interpretations" of Koran and standard Islamic textbooks. All local 470 Islamic associations are busy training young Imams. A new "interpretation" of Koran conference was held in Urumchi on September 9, 2003 implying the introduction of this new policy into the Uighur region.

We hope the US government will take appropriate action to stop the religious persecutions in China, and improve access to Uighur people to practice true religion.