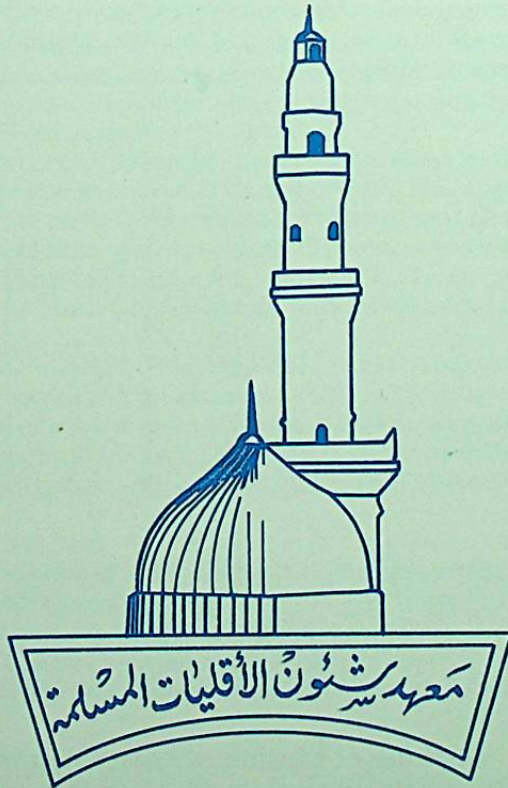


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Inside Chinese Turkestan : A Fresh Look

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Introduction

Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in China, recently witnessed an unusual occurrence. On December 15, 1985 more than four thousand students marched to the provincial headquarters of the Chinese Communist Party and presented a list of demands to Song Han Liang, the Party Secretary General.

A week later a similar demonstration took place in Beijing, the Chinese capital. Here some four hundred Turkestani students bearing placards walked in procession to the headquarters of the Chinese Communist Party at Zhong Nan Hai and delivered a memorandum. This led to a high level meeting at the Central Institute of Nationalities, but after a two-day deliberation the government decided to reject the student demands. Notwithstanding this rejection, Turkestani students a day later organized another demonstration in Shanghai.

Since the passing of the Mao Tse Tung era in China, the news coming out of that country, particularly with respect to its national minorities, had been quite encouraging. Both Muslim and non-Muslim observers had noted the relaxation of government policy in respect to religious freedoms and cultural autonomy. After the devastation wrought by the Cultural Revolution, mosques and places of worship were being restored, imams were being reinstated, religious schools were being allowed to re-open and minority languages and culture were being to some extent permitted to revive.

Naturally, therefore, this sudden outbreak of discontent on the part of the Muslims of Xinjiang came as a surprise to many. In the Muslim world this surprise was initially quite muted. The reason for this was that all reports of the incident especially in Muslim vernaculars cited Xinjiang as the location of trouble. Xinjiang is the official Chinese name for Eastern Turkestan, but it is not yet widely identified in the Muslim mind with the ancient homeland of the Turkestani Muslims in China.

Nevertheless, as more details of the events began to filter through, a genuine need was felt to re-examine the Muslim situation in Xinjiang and to locate and identify the factors that were responsible for this impetuous outbreak. Hence in this paper an attempt will be made to analyse in some detail the demands of the Turkestani students as presented to the Chinese authorities.

Student Demands in Xinjiang

The list of demands presented by Turkestani students to the government included the following:

- i. A halt to atomic experiments in Xinjiang.
- ii. An end to Chinese migration into Xinjiang from other parts of China.
- iii. Holding of free elections in the Province for selecting heads of

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rogen bomb (Sept. 29, 3 megaton intensity) its atomic experiments had already reached 250 kiloton intensity.

These experiments are still continuing in the Lup Nor district. Naturally, the people of Xinjiang are concerned about proper safety measures. Recently, the Chinese official press conceded that a nuclear mishap occurred in 1969 in Xinjiang when a pipe exploded in the experimental area and many workers were exposed to radiation. As late as November 5, 1985, Wu Shing, Chairman of the Committee for Science and Technology was quoted as saying that the development of nuclear energy in China is still in its primary stages and the Chinese are still lagging behind developed countries in the matter of safety systems (Mary O. Callaghan, *Arab News*, Nov. 5, 1985).

Concurrently, the international media has published reports of the increase in the incidence of liver, lung and skin cancers in the Xinjiang region and the damage to agriculture in the Tarim Basin (See *Arabia* Nov. 1981). Observers have noted that prior to 1960 there was no serious incidence of cancer in Xinjiang, whereas today it is a major contributing factor in the rising death rate in the province.

Whatever the facts of the matter, and despite Chinese assurances that full precautions for nuclear safety are always undertaken, the people of Xinjiang are alarmed at the possible relationship between the starting of nuclear experiments in Xinjiang and the increase in the incidence of cancer among its inhabitants. With the history of mutual suspicion, this factor has become a major concern for the Muslims of Xinjiang.

Autonomy in Xinjiang

However, the spark that ignited the demonstrations was the sudden removal of Ismail Ahmed, the head of the provincial government, from his position. Ismail Ahmed was on an official visit to Saudi Arabia. On his return he was summarily dismissed.

His place as provincial head was given to Tomur Dawamat, and Hamaduddin Niaz was made Chairman of the Permanent Committee of the Peoples Congress of the province. Two two appointments were akin to adding fuel to an already incipient conflagration.

Dawamat and Niaz are Turkestanians, no doubt, but both have long been identified in the popular mind with lack of sympathy for the Muslim cause and as overly loyal to Chinese interests in Xinjiang.

The people of Xinjiang have long desired a say in the selection of the head of their provincial administration so as to ensure that their interests are protected and their legitimate demands and grievances are honestly conveyed to the authorities in Beijing.

The demand for provincial autonomy by the people of Xinjiang has a long and chequered history. It dates back to the armed uprising of 1944 which ended with the signing of the January 2, 1946 accord between the central government represented by General Chang Chih Chung and Rahim Jan Sabir Haji, Sheikh Abul Khair Tura, and Ahmad Jan Qasimi on behalf of the Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Eastern Turkestan.

This Accord conceded the principle of autonomy for Xinjiang. Consequently, on May 31, 1947, Dr. Masood Sabri became the first head of the

- People's Committees and head of government.
- iv. Exemption of Muslims in Xinjiang from the birth control policy of the Chinese government.
 - v. Greater utilization of the resources of the Province in its own development and modernization.
 - vi. Greater share of employment opportunities for Muslim youth in Xinjiang.
 - vii. Increase efforts on the part of the government in raising the economic, educational and health standards of the people of the Province.

The Primary Issue

Before we enter into a discussion of these demands we would like to draw attention to an issue that is of utmost primacy in the relations between the people of Xinjiang and the Chinese government.

The people of Xinjiang consider themselves as different from the Chinese in race, language and history. They wish to be identified as East Turkestanis and as the original inhabitants of the region. As a people distinct in race and culture they demand their constitutional right to exercise national autonomy as approved by the Constitution of China.

China, on the other hand, since it took over East Turkestan in 1762, has treated this Muslim region as part of its territory and has regarded Turkestanis as an ethnic minority living on Chinese soil. It set this policy in motion by giving the region a Chinese name (Xinjiang) and prohibiting the use of its ancient name (Eastern Turkestan). So eminently successful has this policy been that rarely even in Muslim sources does one come across mention of Eastern Turkestan as a Muslim land and the historic home of a Muslim people. To most outside observers Eastern Turkestanis are one of many ethnic minorities scattered over the vast expanse of China.

This, as noted above, has been the primary issue between the Muslims of Xinjiang and the Chinese government.

Now, let us consider in some detail the demands put forth by the students of Xinjiang.

Atomic Experiments in Xinjiang

The Xinjiang region is rich in uranium. French experts estimate the deposits to be as high as 12 trillion tons. As early as 1950 under an agreement concluded with the Soviet Union (April 19, 1950) China started to mine these deposits. At present more than eight mines, four of them claimed by Chinese sources to be very rich, are in operation.

In 1960 at a location midway between the cities of Urumqi and Qumol, the Chinese set up a factory for processing uranium, together with another facility on the banks of the river Tarim for extracting plutonium.

The Russo-Chinese Accord of September 15, 1957 made Soviet scientific expertise available to the Chinese for setting up nuclear reactors. After the Russians left, the British took their place.

The Chinese exploded their first atomic bomb in the Lup Nor district of Xinjiang on October 16, 1964. As atomic bombs go, it was a minor affair, equivalent to twenty kilotons of TNT. But by 1969 when China exploded its first hyd-

scuffles and clashes are quite common. We came to know of two such incidents, one which occurred in 1980 in Aqsu when a Chinese shot a Turkestanian youth who had refused to vacate his theatre seat in favour of the former. The second incident relates to Kashgar in 1981 when a Chinese trampled a Turkestanian farmer with his automobile when he demanded wages for work done.

Government Settlement Policy

Another issue which the Turkestanians say alarms them greatly is that of increased Chinese migration into Xinjiang province. In the early days of Communist rule in Xinjiang, i.e., up to 1953 the Chinese in Xinjiang were approximately 6.63% of the population of the province. The Muslims, on the other hand, were 86.54%. However, by 1983 the ratio of Chinese had climbed to 40.27% and that of the Muslims had been reduced to 53.64%. These estimates are based on the official Chinese censuses of 1953 and 1983. There is a widespread feeling among the Turkestanian Muslims that even these figures do not accurately reflect the demographic distribution of Chinese and Muslims in the region. They claim that the actual number of Chinese coming into Xinjiang is at least three times higher than the official figures. This may or may not be the case. But even if the official figures are taken at their face value the trend, they maintain, is quite clear – the number of Chinese in Xinjiang is on a continuous rise. If this trend continues the day may not be far off when the Turkestanians would become a minority in their own homeland. This is a prospect that is quite unsettling to them and hence their vehement demand that the process of willfully upsetting the demographic balance of Xinjiang on the part of the government in Beijing should be brought to an end.

Birth Control Policy

The resistance to the birth control policy of the Chinese government from which Xinjiang was exempted till 1984 can also be understood in the same light. The Turkestanians of Xinjiang fear that the rule of one child per family may not only be a curtailment of their Shari'ah-given right, but also another invidious design to reduce their numbers and promote rapid sinification.

Exploitation and Use of Natural Resources

The people of Xinjiang know that their region is rich in mineral resources. But they also know that the benefit of these resources is enjoyed by others not them. For example, petroleum from the Kata Mai fields is pumped to Lanzhou, capital of Gansu province, where it is refined and exported to Southeast Asian countries. Jade is transported from Khotan to Nanking and Beijing. Similarly cotton is picked from the Altay fields and brought to Shanghai to be finished and shipped from there to the Soviet Union to pay off Russian debts. Xinjiang itself receives little or no benefit from this exploitation of its resources. In fact, the province is among the most backward in China. Emigrè Turkestanians who have had occasion to re-visit their homeland after an interval, report that the trend is toward further decline. Turkistani pilgrims who in recent years have come to Saudi Arabia report that electricity has not reached many cities in Xinjiang, let alone villages. Even in Urumqi, the capital, it is estimated that at least 30% of the residents are without the benefit of electricity.

Autonomous government. He was followed by Burhan Shahidi who continued in his position even after the Communist takeover of Xinjiang on September 24, 1949.

The reins of government in Xinjiang, in accordance with the 1946 agreement, remained in the hands of its people till 1955. In that year (October 1) the Communist rulers of Beijing unilaterally revised the articles of agreement thereby destroying the spirit of the Accord.

The region continues to be called the Xinjiang Uigher Autonomous Region. In practice, however, the province is divided into five autonomous districts called Zhon. There are also six local units called Xian which also are autonomous. This classification, it is said, is based on the tribal divisions among the people of Xinjiang. It overlooks the fact that Uighur, Kazakh, Kirghiz, Uzbek, Tatar and Tajik, one and all, belong to the Turkish race, are Muslims, speak Turkish and are, in every respect, one people with a common history.

Turkestanis Muslims argue that this official tribal classification and the administrative set-up developed to cope with it are designed to create and perpetuate differences among the Turkestanis and to destroy their sense of unity and identity.

Furthermore, the East Turkestanis contend that the spirit of the autonomy bill passed in 1952 and amended in 1954 has not been translated into practice. The government of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region is not formed by the choice of people of the region. It is the Central government of the People's Republic of China that hires and fires all functionaries. The majority of the members of the government, the People's Congress and the Permanent Committee of the Communist Party in the region are drawn from Chinese cadres. Thus, for instance, the CPC Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Regional Committee which is the highest body in the region, is headed by Song Han Liang an expatriate Chinese and a geologist. He heads a committee of 15 members only 4 of which are Turkestanis.

The Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Regional People's government, as noted earlier is now headed by Tomar Dawamat. It has 9 members, only 4 of them are Turkestanis.

The Standing Committee of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Regional Peoples Congress is led at present by Hamaduddin Niaz. It has 16 members, nine of these are Chinese.

Chinese have monopolized not only official ranks of authority and influence, but positions in almost all walks of life. The ratio of Chinese in factories and department stores is also on the increase, so is their representation in the labour force of the region in general. On my visit to the Tian Xian Weaving Woollen factory in Urumqi in 1984, I inquired of the Director of the Factory as to the number of workers in the factory. He replied that the factory employed 450 workers, only 15 of whom were Turkestanis.

These discriminatory practices have led to large-scale unemployment and poverty among the Muslims of Xinjiang and very adversely affected their economic status. It has also had social ramifications. Since the Chinese are in vested with authority, are given preference in jobs and positions and have as a result improved their economic standing, they have come to look down upon the indigenous Turkestanis. This leads to social tensions and conflict. Minor

pressure is exercised on Muslims to conform to the general precepts in matters of divorce and inheritance, as in matters of food and dress.

Muslim sensibilities in matters of faith and its practice are often violated by their Chinese compatriots. Recently the *Washington Post* correspondent in Beijing noted an incident in which some Chinese young people placed themselves flagrantly in front of a group of Muslims in prayer claiming that the Muslim religious prostration was in fact a form of Kow-too to the Chinese (Lena H. Sun, *Washington Post*, Jan 13, 1985).

Changes have undoubtedly taken place in the sphere of freedom of belief, nonetheless these are at present 15,000 political detainees in Xinjiang who have been charged with propagating reactionary, chauvinistic religious ideologies. On the other hand, articles and books attacking Islam and its principles and distorting its history and accomplishments continue to be published in all the languages of the Peoples Republic. A recent example is the *History of the Religion of Islam* by Chinese author Fang Xi published in 1981.

There is also greater activity on the academic and intellectual front; books, magazines and literature of other kind is being more freely produced. But the watchful eye of the censor is always there to ensure that the state ideology is not in any sense violated.

Reference has been made earlier to the restoration of the use of Uighur language in its traditional script by the Muslims of Xinjiang. The cultural mileau of the language is, however, constantly the target of attempts to sinify it. Arabic expressions are being replaced by Chinese on the plea that they are remnants of the past and do not reflect contemporary reality. Famous Arabic song tunes composed by the well-known Turkestani Muslim philosopher Abun Nasr al-Farabi and known in East Turkestan as "al-Muqamat al-Ithna Ashariya" have been so impregnated with Chinese tunes that their Arabic origins are no longer discernible.

The *Sheng Ming Journal* of Hong Kong in its September 1981 issue noted that the "The iron man of China, Deng Xiao Peng discovered that the Uigharians were plotting a revolt against the Chinese regime and that they were raising slogans like 'We want true autonomy', 'We don't want to be made slaves'."

This observation encapsulates the entire problem as the Muslim Turkestanis see it. Those who claim that in so far as curtailment of individual freedom and freedom of belief and practice in China are concerned, the worst is perhaps over, may be right. But as recent events clearly testify the Muslims of Xinjiang have still a long way to go before their basic human rights are ensured and their identity and human dignity are restored to them.

Conclusion

We in the Muslim world can only hope and pray that developments in all areas of Muslim settlement would take a steady course and the tensions and pressures to which Muslim minority communities are subject are amicably and satisfactorily resolved. In the case of certain authoritarian regimes this is perhaps all that could be done. But there is one aspect of this situation which needs to be seriously considered. We can at least make an effort to express our concern by obtaining accurate and reliable information as to what is actually happening in those remote areas of Muslims habitation. Unfortunately, this basic task in recent times has been relinquished by Muslims. If nothing else, this has to

Educational Backwardness

Chinese officials contend that the reason why key positions in government and the local administration are held by expatriate Chinese and most local Turkestanis have to be content with jobs of lower rank is because it is difficult to find skilled locals for positions of responsibility.

The fact of the matter is that government educational policy in the province has been erratic from the beginning. This has created a hiatus between the educational apparatus and the local Turkestanis. One clear example of this is the frequent changes in script that the Turkestanis have endured. During a thirty year period four changes in script have taken place. Prior to the year 1950 the Arabic script was prevalent in Xinjiang. This had been so since the advent of Islam in that region in 13th century A.D. However in 1950 by an official dictat Arabic was replaced by the Cyrillic script. Following deterioration in Sino-Soviet relations, the Russian script was again summarily changed into the Latin script. With the passing of the Mao Tse Tung era and the restoration of certain freedoms, the Turkistanis have been allowed to revert to their Arabic script. But what is in use in Xinjiang today is a distorted version of the Arabic script; it can in fact be said to be of an altogether new character. Thus for example, the ubiquitous Muslim opening recitation when rendered in the Chinese Arabic script in use today would look like this:

Nonetheless, although Turkestanis are permitted the use of their own alphabet, in practice official policy is not necessarily supportive of this change. The emphasis continues to be on the use of Chinese language and characters. In my travels through the airport of Aqsu, Kashgar and Urumqi in 1984, I found all notices and announcements being made in the Chinese language without being followed by the Uigharian version, although these are Turkestanis cities and are situated within the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region.

The Chinese author Shuwei Golu writing in the *Xinjiang University Journal* in 1982 on education in Socialist Xinjiang remarked that: "The number of Turkestani students in universities and institutes had reached 5,125 in 1979. Compared to Chinese students in any other province, this number was very low. Even compared to the neighbouring Republics of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in the USSR we find that East Turkestan is far behind. The ratio of educated in the province comes to 9.4 per thousand. The corresponding ratio in Kazakhstan is 157 per thousand and in Uzbekistan 174 per thousand".

In terms of religious education, despite the policy of relaxation that has been adopted under the new leadership in China, those under 18 years of age are still prohibited from attending religious instruction. The ultimate purpose of government policy continues to be the creation of a socialist state and the inculcation of atheistic and materialistic principles in its citizens. Hence it prohibits the opening of Islamic schools and the revival of general Islamic education except in government institutions where the curriculum is officially designed to produce Muslim cadres to fulfill government positions. At present, there is only one Islamic school in Urumqi, and its enrollment does not exceed 70 pupils.

Religious Freedoms

The government has also shown itself to be inhospitable to the idea of the Muslim Personal Law. It encourages marital ties between Muslims and Chinese and

change, if we have to have a future as an Ummah.

The obligations of Islamic fraternity are firmly rooted in the Qur'ānic injunction – "All believers are but brothers". They have been further reinforced in the saying of our Prophet Mohammad (SAW)

In their mutual love, affection and sympathy, Muslims are like the organs of the (human) body – when one of them is afflicted the whole body suffers and feels the pain.

May Allāh guide us to the right path.

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