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Freedom of Religion or Belief in 2017: A Dream for Unrepresented Nations and Peoples?


Religious Persecution on Uyghur in East Turkistan

Ladies and Gentlemen, good morning! I am honored to be here today. I thank UNPO and Non-Violations Radical party to organize this side event and invite me as a speaker.

At present, the fundamental human rights and the freedoms of the Uyghurs including civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights continue to be violated by Chinese Government. In particular, the Uyghur people’s right to freedom of religion has been routinely violated and the Uyghur people are unable to peacefully practice their religion, due strict control by Chinese authorities and religious repression.

China has tried to link normal religious expression among Uyghurs as something to something that sounds threatening. All of the restrictions that we see today (prohibitions on fasting during Ramadan, prohibitions on practicing religion outside the mosque, restrictions on the building or repairing of mosques, restrictions on children practicing religion) are falsely labeled as ‘counter-terrorism’ and peaceful religious practices are now put into the category of “religious extremism”.

The Chinese government has dramatically increased its repression in East Turkestan since the September 11th terrorist attacks. Unfortunately, the Chinese government has used the international war on terror as a pretext to crack down further on the Uyghur people. It was easy for China to label Uyghurs as terrorists because Uyghurs happen to be Muslims. The Chinese government has launched numerous strike hard campaigns on the Uyghurs, has arrested and detained thousands of peaceful Uyghur activists, and has executed hundreds of dissidents and religious figures, accusing them of being “terrorists” and “separatists”. In 2001, the Chinese authorities launched a wholesale attack on Uyghur culture, language, religion and national identity, and began implementing openly assimilatory policies that they wouldn’t dare to implement in the past.

In last three years, according to Chinese government reports more than 400 hundred people have been killed and approximately 600 people injured. Within the same period, thousands of people were arrested for political reasons, and more than 80 Uyghurs have been executed without due process
The government’s 2014 ‘strike-hard’ anti-terror campaign was extended, and wide-scale restrictions were imposed against Uyghur Muslims religious practices. Thousands were detained in security sweeps, some with deadly force, and jail sentences were given out for wearing religious attire, for taking part in religious gatherings or activities and were forbidden from fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. Even men's beards or women’s face veils were denounced as “extremist”, and some local authorities threatened action against Muslim business owners if they chose not to sell alcohol and cigarettes due to their religious beliefs. It has also been reported that Uyghurs, especially the few in government positions, were heavily pressured to break their fast during Ramadan and eat lunch or risk losing their jobs.

Under Xi Jinping, government repression and restriction of religious activities have increased dramatically. This was particularly evidenced in the National Conference on Religious Work in April 2016, the first to be held since 2000, which spelled out the country’s updated approach to religious activity. The Conference renewed calls to outwardly “shun” the practice of Islam in particular, as Xi remarked that citizens should, “never find their values and beliefs in this religion or any religion” and noted the importance of the “sinicization” of religion.

Every year, new legislation is passed which restricts religious activity further. In fact, just last week on September 7th, amendments to the Regulations on Religious Affairs were passed by the Chinese State Cabinet. These amendments essentially give the Chinese state total control over every aspect of religious practice in East Turkestan, as Article 12 effectively criminalizes all religious practice performed outside state approved sites. We will sadly see even more state interference and more religious activities banned. It also states that any religious material published online must be examined and approved by the Chinese government first.

Uyghur Muslims seeking to undertake the Hajj have also face severe difficulties. Under the new restrictions, Uyghurs are not permitted to undergo the pilgrimage independently, but must instead first get approval by the Chinese government. Each year Uyghurs are detained by Chinese authorities for attempting to do so with reportedly 100 individuals were detained at the Ataturk airport in 2016 and as many as 200 individuals were detained this year in 2017.

In a further insult to the dignity of the Uyghur people, back in February, 2015 the government forced imams to dance in a public square and to swear to an oath that they will not teach religion to children.

In order to undermine religion in East Turkestan, an additional focus has been made on the role of religion in relation to schools and with younger people. Students, children under 18, government workers, teachers, and members of the CPC in East Turkestan are not allowed to enter mosques, full stop. Any expression of religious activity in schools has also been banned and students have been jailed for wearing ‘Islamic clothing’ or merely for praying. The Chinese government is trying to undermine religion and Uyghur culture as a whole by targeting the younger generation.
China’s new anti-terrorism law means further repression. It will allow Chinese security forces to intensified its bloody crackdown in East Turkestan and Tibet to silence further the peaceful dissent. The definition of terrorism is vague enough to be interpreted by the Chinese law enforcement forces in any form they want.

What the new anti-terrorism laws and regulations, including the “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Regulation on De-extremification”, means for Uyghurs is more extra judicial killings, more enforced disappearances and more arbitrary detention, arrest and imprisonment of Uyghurs. China has used the narrative of ‘counter-terrorism’ as a justification for its crackdown on the peaceful practice of Islam and violence against Uyghur civilians.

The anti-terrorism law also permits the People's Liberation Army to get involved in anti-terrorism operations overseas. China want to extend its long arm to other countries to silence Uyghur and Tibetan and Chinese human rights activist and make difficult for them to carry out their activities.

Recently, the Chinese government has been targeting religious students who have studied abroad or have overseas ties. These students, whose only crime was pursuing an education, are often told to return to China and are arrested on their return. Many of those arrested have since disappeared. The Chinese government has also been pressuring other nations to forcibly return Uyghurs, studying in their country. Currently, there is an ongoing situation, where approximately 200 Uyghur religious were detained in Egypt at China’s request. In July of this year, 22 were forcibly returned and we received no information about their fate or whereabouts. The majority of those detained remain in detention centers in Egypt. If they are returned, they are at risk of torture, arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance.

Chinese authorities are tightening restrictions on religion at every level of society, and now even beyond its borders. Uyghurs are running out of any space to freely practice their religion, something that is a vital part of the lives of many Uyghurs.

I thank you for your attention.

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