

# Majority- Islamic Minority Relations in China

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The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) hopes to one day bring about the extinction of Islam in the People's Republic of China (PRC), and integrate Muslims into Communist society by 'ideological remoulding' or thought reform of the Muslim nationalities. This process of 'ideological remoulding' is to be accomplished through replacing the religious tendencies of Muslims with 'Socialist awareness' and 'patriotism'.

## United Front Policies for Ethnic Assimilation

The CCP's goal is ethnic assimilation of the Muslims into greater Han society. As a result, the CCP has used both the 'above' and 'below' united fronts to 'remould' the Muslim way of thinking and convert them to Communism.<sup>1</sup> Over the past 30 years both policies have failed and there is little unity between the Han and Muslim Nationalities.

After the War for Liberation, the CCP attempted to use the 'united front from above' policies to convert Muslims to Communism. Following this line Party officials tried to work with established Muslim leaders, in the hope they would lead the Muslim masses in a socialist revolution.

The CCP followed this line until the late 1950's, when it was decided that the united front from above policies were not bringing Muslims into the socialist camp fast enough. As a consequence, first, with the introduction of the Great Leap Forward and later with the introduction of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the Party has attempted to use the 'united front from below' policies to force the Muslims to adopt communism as a way of life. The 'united front from below' Party line, called for the by-passing of established Muslim leaders and going directly to the Muslim masses to inspire within them socialist patriotism, through the continuous use of class struggle as a basis of social change.

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1 C. Ahmad Winters, *Mao or Muhammad: Islam in the People's Republic of China*, (Asian Research Service, Hong Kong, 1979) pp. 27-41.

## The Cultural Revolution

This Party line was disastrous and led to numerous Muslim revolts in areas where Muslims were the majority nationality. The 'united front from below', policies failed for several reasons. First, this policy failed because 'class struggle' is an alien concept to Chinese Muslims because traditionally, local Muslim leaders are elected by the people in the communities in which they reside. Moreover, since the leadership in the average Muslim community moves downward from 1) the Brotherhood leader, 2) to the *Giao zhu* 'masters of religion' (each of these Ahongs had several districts under their spiritual jurisdiction), 3) to the mosque Ahong, and 4) to the respected commune and/or block elders (in urban centres), meant that when Muslim leaders were persecuted by the Communist during the 'united front from below' periods the Party alienated the Muslim masses. The Muslims felt alienated because they felt that the removal of leaders chosen by the the Muslims themselves from administrative post, indicated that the Muslim masses lacked a voice over their own political affairs. Secondly, CCP persecution of local Muslim leaders which were elected by the Muslims themselves, along with the closure of mosque during the GPCR, forced the Muslims to fight back.

The Muslims were forced to fight against communism due to the concept of *jihad*. Under the terms of *jihad* a Muslim must fight if his rights to practice Islam are threatened. Finally, this, plus the Communist aim to destroy religious belief among the people of China, and assimilate Muslims into greater Han society has led to a lack of unity between the Han and the Muslim Nationalities.

The activities of the Red Guard during the GPCR and Han chavinism, are the major reasons behind the present national unity campaign mounted by Beijing. Party members agree that the unity of all nationalities in the PRC, is vitally important for China's future economic development.

Most Muslim shops and businesses remained open only in Xinjiang during the GPCR. During the GPCR, Islamic behaviour was denounced as "bourgeois" and "reactionary". The Party line held that religious belief, was "superstition".

In many Muslim regions in the northwest, Red Guardsmen had to be sent in by rail due to a lack of cadres in northwestern China, especially to Xinjiang and Ningxia to carry out GPCR activities. The situating of non Muslim guardsmen in traditional Muslim areas promoted widespread unrest. This unrest resulted from the fact that the radical conservative Red Guard, knew practically nothing about Islam, and the strong feelings of community within many Muslim locales which made radical activities by local Muslim cadre members, if there were any, highly unlikely. This led to frequent confrontations between Han and Muslims from 1966-1981, in the

Northwest and Yunnan as the Muslims resisted Beijing's attempts at ethnic assimilation.

The excesses of the GPCR, created mistrust of the government among Muslims, and encouraged political and ethnic tensions in Muslim regions of China. The Uyghurs have become recognized as the most "troublesome" minority in the PRC. Turmoil in Xinjiang rose to such an extent during the GPCR, that Red Guard activities were ended in the province by mid-1969.

Although most Red Guard activities were discontinued after 1969, the Communist continued to savagely attack so called 'feudal' Muslim customs which were of Islamic origin. They also forced some Uyghurs to raise and slaughter pigs, and they outlawed the use of the Uyghur cursive script, and replaced it with a Latin script they could not read.<sup>2</sup>

### Soviet Agitation of Muslim Protest

The Chinese fear Soviet expansionism in the Northwest region bordering on Russia. Thus the Chinese government believes it is strategically important to assimilate Muslim minorities into greater Han society, without forcing them to become receptive to Soviet propaganda.

The Soviets exploited Red Guard excesses during the Cultural Revolution. After the fall of the 'Gang of Four', Muslim persecution by the CCP was highlighted on Soviet Radio programs beamed to Xinjiang, and in *Yeni Khayat* (New Life) an Arabic newspaper published by the Russians distributed in Xinjiang. This propaganda helped inflame the passions of the Muslims, who in the late 1970's and early 1980's began to demand more autonomy or an independent state.

The CCP concern about Muslim separatist sentiments in Xinjiang were expressed in September 1975, when party officials admitted they were going "to smash the subversions and sabotages engineered by the Soviet revisionist social-imperialism, and to defend the border area of the motherland", because Xinjiang is, "a steel-bastion of the northwestern border of China".<sup>3</sup>

### Han Chauvinism

Eventhough the Party blamed the problems in Muslim areas on the Soviets, Han chauvinism and Communist disrespect for Islamic traditions were the root cause be-

2 Clyde Ahmad Winters, "Chinese language policies and the Muslim minorities of Xinjiang". *Asian Profile* 10, no. 5 (October 1982), pp. 413-419.

3 *New China News Agency* (NCNA), Urumqi, 20. September 1975.

hind conflicts between Muslims and Han. Many of these conflicts go back to the late 1950's and early 1960's. For example, the repression of Kazakhs in the early 1960's forced the flight of 60,000 Kazakhs into Russia.

The Muslims and Han live in two different worlds. Xie Liangying, commenting on Han-Muslim relations, as Director of the Provincial Foreign-Affairs Bureau, in Urumqi, capital of Xinjiang in 1982, observed that "to us Chinese, the people here seem very different." He added "the women look almost western in their pretty dresses. The bread they make from local flour is much too sweet for our taste".<sup>4</sup>

Much of the problem revolves around the language barrier between Han and Muslims in the frontier regions such as Xinjiang and blatant discrimination. Butterfield Fox, a reporter for the *New York Times*, reporting from Xinjiang in 1980, said that "language appears to remain a key divide between the minority races".<sup>5</sup> Instead of learning minority languages, most Han working in Xinjiang know only a few phrases in Uygur, even though it is taught in the secondary schools. But minority people who attend secondary schools and colleges are forced to learn Chinese.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, visitors to Xinjiang, have complained that many of their Han interpreters did not know any words of the minority languages.<sup>7</sup> To remedy this situation Xinjiang University has begun to train minority interpreters to speak English.<sup>8</sup>

Han insensitivity to Muslim sensitivities, and the influx of 'heavy' Han settlement in Muslim areas in the 1950's and 1960's has engendered many of the separatist sentiments in Xinjiang. Much of the Han disregard for minorities is expressed through prejudice and racism. Two reporters for *Asiaweek*, reported on Han bias in 1979, when they wrote that "Traveling 'hard' class, without a guide, speaking Chinese and wearing Chinese clothing, we were frequently mistaken for Uigurs. The treatment meted out to us as Uigurs was shockingly different to that we received when our papers had to be produced and it was discovered that we were 'foreign guests'. This was not confined to bureaucrats and officials, but also took the form of jeering in streets and people even asking to change places in trains so as not to be next to 'Uygurs'".<sup>9</sup>

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4 James Wallace, "Peking's 'New Frontier': Where China, Russia vie", *U.S. News & World Report*, 8 March 1982, pp. 62-63.

5 B. Fox, "Moslem Prospering in Rugged China Border Area", *New York Times*, 29 October 1980.

6 D. Crook, "Notes on the New Marches: Xinjiang", *China Now*, March/April 1981, no. 95, p. 11.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 9-11.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

9 "We dance at our weddings", *Asia Week*, 21 December 1979, p. 36.

## Muslim Rebellions

In the past Muslims have revolted against the Communist regime, and regular army units have often been called in to squash rebellions in Yunnan, Ningxia and Xinjiang. In 1975, in Yunnan, maoist attempted to close mosques and turn Friday into a work day. This caused a rebellion and the so-called “Shajien incident”. The Shajien incident was a protest by Muslims for religious freedom. During this protest hundreds of Huis were massacred by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). The PLA, had to use light artillery and troops to suppress the revolt.<sup>10</sup> In January 1979, the government blamed this incident on the ‘gang of four’, and reopened a Muslim school in Kunming, capital of Yunnan, “as a sign of retribution”.<sup>11</sup>

When Deng Xiaoping, first came to power he announced the return of religious freedom to China’s Muslim minorities in 1978. But this proved to be only lip service, because many Party members in the Muslim autonomous districts continued to persecute Islam and Muslims until 1981.

By 1980, Muslims were demanding real religious freedom and more autonomy. That year their was political unrest among Muslims throughout China, especially in Kunming, Shajien, Guangxi and throughout Xinjiang.

Clashes between Han and Muslims in Xinjiang, ocured numerous times between 1978-1981. Armed clashes between Muslims and Han took place in both Aksu and Turban in April 1980, according to reports in the Soviet Press. In October 1980, a member of the CCP Politburo, Wang Zhen, visited the city of Aksu to call for unity.<sup>12</sup> Due to the tension in Xinjiang between the Han and Muslims, the major Muslim leader in China for the past 35 years Saifudin, was recalled to Beijing in 1980, because he was suppose to favor more regional autonomy for Xinjiang’s Muslims.<sup>13</sup>

## Party attempts to change Nationalities Policy

To find a means of pacifying the Muslims in Xinjiang, Wang Enmao, was reappointed First Secretary of the CCP Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Committee in January 1981. Wang, who administered Xinjiang for 20 years, returned to power in response to Muslim unrest in this strategic province, and to help curb big

10 C.S. Wren, “China’s minorities, once suppressed, are getting a place in the sun at last”, *New York Times*, 17 June 1982, p. 6.

11 *Asia Week*, 21 October 1979, p. 35.

12 Fox, *op cit*.

13 Crook, p. 12.

(Han) Nationality chauvinism and lessen local nationalism brought on by this chauvinism. Wang, apologised for the mistreatment of minorities by Party members affiliated with the 'gang of four'.

In the Kashi prefecture in Xinjiang, at Kashgar, violence erupted in October 1981. In this incident a Han youth shot and killed an Uygur peasant, who objected to the construction of a drainage ditch through Muslim property.<sup>14</sup>

The police ignoring the Muslim tradition of burying the dead quickly, took the dead youth's body to the morgue as evidence. This enraged the local Muslims who rioted, and killed two Han, while others were beaten. A mob took the deceased youth's body from the morgue and took it to the mosque. It took the grand Ahong of Kashgar, and the army to help restore order in the city.

### **End of Ethnic Assimilation Policies**

Many "leftest" Party officials are being replaced in Xinjiang. Deng, visited Xinjiang, to mediate disputes between Party members and Uygur leaders in the summer of 1981.<sup>15</sup> And by 1982, Wang Enmao, had began a process to purge from the region's Party "leftest" elements who had took part in beatings, smashing and looting during the GPCR.

In 1981, Deng finally stopped the policy of ethnic assimilation. This policy was reversed by Deng, due to the strategic importance of Xinjiang, and his desire to see the PRC develop economically. Moreover, Beijing does not want the Soviets to undermine CCP rule there, by stimulating ethnic tensions. Now both the Party, and state policies are aimed at promoting unity between the Nationalities.

### **Deng's Nationalities Unity Campaign**

Deng, has had a tremendous effect on Han-Muslim relations in the PRC. He is well liked by the Muslims due to his efforts to improve the standard of living of the Chinese people, and give more 'political freedom' to religious minorities in Muslim areas.

By the late 1970's it was becoming clear that the PRC economy was on the brink of collapse due to China's retardation during the Cultural Revolution. The annual growth rate of agriculture and industrial output value declined from 12.3 per cent in 1978 to 4.5 per cent in 1981. This steady decline in output led to an unemployment

14 C.S. Wren, "China's West is challenged by ethnic mix", *New York Times*, 10 July 1983.

15 Wallace, p. 63.

crisis in most sections of China. Decreasing job opportunities in the PRC caused a lack of faith in communist economic policies and increasing unrest among the youth.

To stop this decline Deng began an open door policy to attract western investment and technology to China. To acquire more Arab investment and Muslim participation in his efforts to modernize China, Muslims were given more freedom in areas where they remain a majority. Hui nationalities outside Ningxia and Yunnan still experience much discrimination as the Han try to force them to adopt their way of life in areas where they form sizable minorities.

Deng has based his policy reforms on three desires 1) better relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds; 2) maintain internal security in the border areas which are occupied by Muslim nationalities; and 3) encourage the Muslims to co-operate in the economic development of the border regions.

To find a solution to China's nationalities problems the government organized meetings between the administrators of minority autonomous districts, to discuss methods of promoting unity between the Nationalities. The government needs the co-operation of the Minorities for China to develop, because although the 55 minority nationalities in China comprise only 6.7 per cent of the population, they live on 60 per cent of the total area of China. Much of this land is rich in natural resources and grassland. Yang Jingren, of the Hui nationality and Head of the Department of United Front Work, of the CCP Central Committee and Minister in Charge of the State Nationalities Affairs Commission, observed that "Our grassland, forests and unreclaimed land, as well as much of the underground mineral deposits are mostly scattered in minority regions. Our modernization badly needs the support and participation of the National minorities in tapping and utilizing these resources. Nationwide modernization is impossible without minority peoples or minority regions".<sup>16</sup>

Thus future nationalities work will stress strengthened national unity, the promotion of minority economies and exploiting the intellectual resources in the minority regions. Special consideration will be given to developing minority education and culture to encourage scientific studies in various fields. Wang Enmao, recently observed that "It is necessary to grasp strengthening Nationality unity as the cardinal and major affair. Experiences of the past 30 years and more, and especially of recent years have repeatedly proven that Xinjiang can only have a political situation of sustained stability and smoothly carry out economic and all other work if the region correctly implements the party's nationality policy and does well in promoting nationality unity".<sup>17</sup>

16 "Working towards actual equality among the nationalities", *Beijing Review*, 31 October 1983, no. 44, p. 14.

17 "Xinjiang's Wang Enmao views nationality policy", Foreign Broadcast Info Service (FBIS)-Chi, Urumqi-PRC, 16 Feb. 1984, p.T3.

The CCP sees the solution to the nationalities question coming from speeded up economic and cultural development on the basis of self-reliance so minorities can catch up with the more technically and economically advanced Han.<sup>18</sup> This 'great leap forward in modernization' is based on the principle that all Chinese have contributed to the history and culture of China, and therefore all nationalities should be respected and obtain equality, through equal economic development.

The policies regarding the present unity campaign were formulated at the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th CCP Central Committee. They are aimed at bringing about rapid development of socialist modernization. Party and State policies for promoting unity between the Nationalities include the following:

- 1) commend people who promote national unity,
- 2) make people understand that the Hans are inseparable from the minority peoples and vice versa,
- 3) the customs and habits of all Chinese nationalities must be respected,
- 4) investigate and resolve all disputes left over from the GPCR,
- 5) give more leading post in autonomous districts to minority nationalities,
- 6) in autonomous districts make reductions and/or exemptions from taxes agricultural products to be purchased by the state,
- 7) increase subsidies,
- 8) link-up minority regions, with economically advance zones to develop co-operative economic and technical programs, and
- 9) introduce the production responsibility system to minority areas.

Chinese officials hope these policies will strengthen unity between the nationalities. Ismail Amat, Xinjiang's Regional CCP Committee Secretary and Government Chairman, observed that "The key to strengthening the unity of nationalities lies in correctly implementing the party's policy on autonomy for nationality areas is our basic policy for solving the nationalities problem. The cadres and party members of all nationalities, especially the leading cadres, must be leaders in implementing the nationalities policy and strengthening the unity of nationalities".<sup>19</sup>

These policies all appear to be progressive. It will take time before we can evaluate the success or failure of these policies.

The success of these policies will depend on how well the CCP can lessen tensions between the government and minorities caused by the Red Guard during the GPCR. There are two processes used to settle disputes left over from the GPCR. They are 1) the removal of all factors detrimental to unity between the diverse nationalities, and 2) disagreements between two parties should be resolved through

18 *Beijing Review*, 31 October 1983, p.15.

19 "Xinjiang's Ismail Amat on Nationality Unity", FBIS-Chi, Urumqi-PRC, 22 October 1982, p.T8.



joint negotiations based on understanding and accommodation by each party concerned.

Deng's economic policy to maintain steady economic growth are based on 'opening' China to the outside world. This policy encourages foreign investment in China. China's 'open door policy' also allows limited free-market economic activities within China.

The free-market system is well received in Muslim areas of China. Deng wants a free-market system to fuel development in the PRC, within the context of a fundamentally planned economy.

Under Deng's leadership Ningxia has become self-sufficient in grain and increased its industrial and agricultural output value as a result of Deng's economic policies. In addition, Xinjiang and Ningxia has increased economic co-operation with the Gulf Arabs.

The recent riots in Tibet, has caused concern among observers of Chinese affairs, relating to the CCP commitment to religious freedom. There is no doubt that the Communists want an end to religion in China. But, the Party's present repression of dissent in Tibet and its campaign against 'bourgeois liberalization' does not threaten the improvement of Han-Muslim relations. For example, during recent riots in the USSR republic of Turkestan after a local leader was deposed, the people were demanding "Let us join with China". This illustrates the attractiveness of Chinese reforms to Muslims in Central Asia.

Chinese trade and Gulf Arab investment in the PRC has also picked up. Even Saudi Arabia is increasing trade with China, as the present 'united front from above' policies of Deng, insure Muslims religious freedom in the PRC and keep down anti-PRC feelings among Muslim populations in Africa and Asia.

In November 1987, Deng stepped down from the Central Committee of the Communist Party, along with other older communist party members to rejuvenate the Party at the 13th National Party Congress. Zhao Ziyang, is the new party leader and deputy head of the Central Military Commission. Deng is head of the powerful Central Military Commission.

Zhao, was hand-picked by Deng in early 1987, to place him as party leader. Zhao sketched out a market driven PRC economy the same as Deng at the 13th National Party Congress. He will probably follow Deng's Nationality policies due to his long term goals for the economy.

## Final Remarks

The present nationality unity campaign is working in China. The economic situation in Xinjiang and Ningxia has radically improved. In 1982, for example, industrial and

agricultural production rose faster in minority areas than in the country as a whole, increasing by 29.2 per cent over 1978. In 1986, Ningxia's industrial and agricultural output value had surpassed that of Qinghai.

The Muslims are still not fully satisfied with present PRC policies. Muslim students in 1985 demonstrated against PRC nuclear tests in Xinjiang, at Tihua and Beijing. The students chanted: "Don't turn Xinjiang into a concentration camp". This along with the PRC policy of sending criminals to Xinjiang angers many Muslims.

Even with this problem, the economic success of Deng's policy in Muslim areas has improved Han-Muslim relations in China. The combined industrial output in 1985 in the five autonomous regions was 44.97 billion yuan. An Zhiguo, commenting on the economic progress in Xinjiang noted that "the strong unity between people of various nationalities in Xinjiang has contributed greatly to the remarkable progress the region has made in these past few years".<sup>20</sup>

Although the present Party line encouraging the strengthening of socialist material and spiritual civilization is stressed in China, in many minority nationality administrative districts this policy is placed second to economically developing the autonomous regions, prefectures and counties.

In Xinjiang, to encourage national unity Wang Enmao noted that, while working towards building material and spiritual civilization, The Party's work is primarily oriented towards economic development.<sup>21</sup> This attitude suggest that Han and Muslim minority unity will improve in the future, if the present nationality policies are strickly adhered too and fully implemented by Party officials.

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20 An Zhiguo, "Strengthening unity among nationalities", *Beijing Review*, no. 44, 31 October 1983, p. 4.

21 FBIS-Chi., Urumqi-PRC, 16 February 1984, p.T2.