

Chinese Muslims

Although the number of Muslims has been indicated to be around 28 million in China which is the largest nation in the world with a population of 1.36 billion, experts state this number to be open to manipulation. The fact that 47,437,000 Muslims constituted 10% of China's population in the year 1936, but then have been reduced to 10 million in 1953 to jump back to 20 million in 2000 gives rise to suspicion. This is due to the inclusion of only the Muslims belonging to the ethnic groups made up of mainly Muslims in China in the headcount and the exclusion of those who belong to the ethnic groups consisting of mainly non-Muslims. In consideration of the rate of the population increase, as well as the historical developments taking place in the country, the population of Muslims is expected to be around 100-150 million in China where the population has increased three to four times between the years 1936-2010.

There are in total of 56 ethnic groups in China, a country that borders many countries including Afghanistan, Butan, Myanmar, India, Kazakhstan, North Korea, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Vietnam. 91.6% of the country's population consists of Han Chinese, 1.3% of Zhuangs and 7.1% of other minorities (Huis, Uyghurs, Tibetans, Mongols, Kazakhs, Kyrgyzs, Tadzhiks, Uzbeks, Tatars, etc.). In China where Buddhism is the most widespread religion, Islam ranks the third after Christianity. The majority of the Muslim groups in China are located in the northwest region of the country (Xinjiang, Cansu, Qinghai). Although Hui Muslims who are ethnically Chinese, are relatively higher in number in the Yunnan and Henna regions, they nevertheless are widely dispersed throughout the country. There are 39,000 mosques and 42,000 imams in total in the country. 25,000 of the mosques are located in the Xinjiang region. Islamic education has been provided in these mosques since they were built. Although educational institutions of Islamic origin have been established at times, the education provided in mosques constitutes the foundation of the system even today.

Chinese Muslims have been influenced by local beliefs as well as transnational inclinations in their religious thoughts and practices. The profile of the Muslims in China includes Khadims, Menhuans (Sufi), Ikhwans and Salafis. Chinese Muslims, who have adopted Sunni Islamic tradition, are part of the Hanafi sect. Although there might be sects of Iranian origin among Chinese Muslims, there are not many Shiites in the country. Only the small group of Tadzhiks on the border of China and Afghanistan are Shiites of the Ismaili sect. Furthermore, the Sufis, i.e. the Menhuans, who migrated from central Asia to the northeastern region of China in the 16th century towards the end of the Ming Dynasty, propagated the Naqshbandi, Qadiriyya, Kubriyye and Ishakkiye sects.

Islam's Reach in China

According to Chinese records, Islam reached China in the 7th century during the reign of the Tang and Song Dynasties (618-1279). An economic and cultural bridge has been established between China and Arabia due to the traffic of diplomats and merchants across the centuries. Thanks to this bridge the ancient Chinese civilization gained a foothold in the other parts of the world, while the Islamic religion had an opportunity to spread in China. The historical records show that 39 Arabic envoys paid political visits to China while many Arab and Farsi merchants visited the country for commercial purposes between 651-798. Thanks to the good diplomatic and commercial relations established in this period, Islam had the opportunity to spread in China as a religion. Like many Arab merchants who visited Asia from the Arabic Peninsula, those journeying to China set up roots there and in the process, they established mosques, madrasahs and married locals to bring up their children in this country. Although these people had not tried to proselytize Islam outside of their group they nevertheless tried to adapt to the economy and culture of China. Islam started to spread in the East Turkestan region that is presently under the control of China in the 10th and 11th centuries.

The conversion of the Uyghurs, who populate the Xinjiang (meaning *new border*) region, to Islam happened in a different way than what the groups in other regions of China experienced. In this region, where the historical circumstances were different, first, the prominent people in society converted to Islam and later on Islam was announced as the state's religion. Islam was spread across the region by means of the proselytizing activities of the religious administrators.

After the Mongols overthrew the Abbasid Caliphate in 1258, the Yuan Dynasty established by Kublai Khan (1280-1368) took over control of the whole of China and distributed strategic responsibilities to Muslims of

Turkish and Iranian origin against the Chinese. The Mongols took advantage of the Muslims in various fields including art and culture during the reign of the Yuan Dynasty and as such, they created opportunities for the spread of the Islamic religion. The relations established by the Yuan Dynasty with the Muslim Turks were sustained during the initial stages of the Ming Dynasty that came after (1368-1644) and as the Turks were assigned important duties in the palace, the Muslims were allowed to freely circulate in the region. During this period Islam's reach in China quickly extended. Historical records regarding the Ming Dynasty state how Muslims were widespread in China during that period. The old mosques and tombs belonging to the Muslims in Beijing, Xi'an and the large cities on the southeast coasts are still preserved today. Great importance was placed on religion during the reign of the Yuan Dynasty. Mosques, madrasahs, and schools were built along with inns to lodge Muslim merchants. During these years, the Mongols, Han Chinese, and Uyghurs converted to Islam under the economic and political influence of the Muslims. As the reign of Mongols ended in the 14th century, the number of Muslims reached approximately 4 million, the highest of those minority groups in the country.

However, the Islamic religion, whose star shone during the reign of the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, had entered a period of serious decline by the end of the Ming Dynasty. Although the political, economic, social and religious freedoms of the Muslims were initially secured, a completely opposite policy was adopted later on. The administration started to place the Chinese migrants in the northwest and southwest regions in particular, where the Muslims were concentrated, in an effort to increase the Chinese influence. By this time the Muslims could no longer practice their traditions in cuisine, marriage, clothing, language, or culture. Under pressure, they were forced to take on Chinese names, wear Chinese clothes and marry Chinese people. Although this period of assimilation ensured that Muslims became more Chinese, these people still persisted in the practice of some of their customs and traditions and continued to use their own language with a high concentration of Arabic and Farsi words. The synthesis of these two cultures gave rise to the Chinese Muslims known as the Hui and Dungan. Due to the fact that Hui Muslims resemble the Han Chinese more in terms of their culture in comparison to the other Muslim groups in China, they are treated more preferentially than the other groups. Huis practice Islam according to the edicts of the Han lifestyle. Although this cultural assimilation was severely criticized by some Muslim reformists, thanks to this successful "integration" the Muslims are now viewed very differently from the 56 ethnic groups in China by the Chinese administration.

By the end of the 16th-century books on the history of Islam had started to be translated into Chinese from Arabic and Farsi and this led to the development of "Chinese Islam". In addition to the Hui people, other different minority groups started to accept Islam as their religion. Starting from this period, the Muslims as a part of Chinese society were represented in their Hui identity and played many important roles in various areas of social life.

As the Ming Dynasty reached its end in 1644, there was a serious increase in the number of Chinese Muslims. However, Islam which had been present in China for 1000 years as a religion was treated very unpleasantly by the Manchu administration, who established the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), to the extent that it would raise concerns among the Hui minority. In this period many religious practices, such as the pilgrimage to Mecca, sacrifice of animals, and establishment of houses of worship were all prohibited. As the violence and the conflicts among cultures and religions accelerated under the control of the Manchu administration in the 19th century, the Muslim minority was forced to rebel. This insurrection, named as the Dungan Rebellion in the historical records, began as a reaction to the religious and racial discrimination against the Muslim population. As a result of this act of rebellion that started in and spread from the northwest part of the country, a significant part of the Muslims was executed by the Manchu administration. It is said that 10 million Muslims were executed in the process.

By means of the Xinhai revolution that took place in 1911 under the leadership of Sun-Yat-Sen, the 2000-year long Chinese Empire was overthrown to be replaced with the Republic of China. Sun-Yat-Sen announced the principle of equality recognized among the Han, Mongol, Man, Tibet and Hui races populating China as a fundamental principle of the state. The Hui people, together with other groups, acquired their citizenship rights as well as the freedom to practice their religion. In this period, the Huis started to recover from their losses caused by the Manchu administration. In the first half of the 19th century, during the time of the world wars, new technologies were discovered and revolutionary visions were pursued by those who wished to advance the interests of their countries. The Muslims attempted to overcome their underdeveloped state, which had also been caused by the Manchu administration.

This period, in which collective work in all areas of life took precedence, was named the "New Muslim Cultural Movement". In this process education, academic work and country salvation societies were established. The Chinese Muslims again established various centers of education as they emphasized the

Islamic education with the purpose of propagating and reinforcing the religion in modern times. In particular, the slogan “education saves lives” adopted by the Xinjiang Muslims in modern times, as well as the new Islamic school education system of the Hui Muslims and other Muslim people, contributed greatly to the traditional Islamic culture in China.

In the Republican Period (1911-49) and during the administration of the Communist Republic of China established in 1949 by Mao Zedong, the Muslims were considered to be a “national” minority and were divided into even smaller groups in comparison to other ethnic minorities in the form of Huis, Uyghurs, Kazaks, Uzbeks, Kyrgyzs, Tadzhiks, Tatars, Dongxiangs, Salas and Baoans. In this period, the policy regarding the minorities was shaped with an understanding that they were an integral part of the Chinese nation, in political unity with the same, rather than being a group with different religious beliefs. On the other hand, the Chinese religious policy was determined on the basis of the following principles:

- The members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as well as the Chinese administration, were required to be advocates of Marxism and Leninism, besides being atheists.

- The entire population of the Republic of China was free to believe in a religion or not. Furthermore, all official religions were equally ranked and required to support national unity as their sole purpose.

- All religious organizations and activities were to be held at a national level, under the government’s supervision and outside intervention in religious activities was not accepted in any form.

- Religion was to be kept separate from education and politics.

- Under no circumstance was religion allowed to be used as a means to influence education and politics.

The schools providing Islamic education were established in the 1920s and 1930s when significant changes were experienced in the social life and education system of China. Traditional homeschooling had come to an end as modern Western-style schools were established. Some Muslim intellectuals established Islamic schools in succession in Beijing, Shanghai, Sichuan, Jinan, Yunnan, Ningxia and other regions of China. In these modern schools, in addition to teaching the Quran and language courses in Arabic and Farsi, lessons in science and art were also given. Some of the Muslim students graduating from these schools were sent to the Middle East - in the 1930s - to be educated in Arabic language and Islamic sciences.

The first national Islamic education institution, the Chinese Islamic Institute was established in Beijing in 1955 with the support of the state. The courses at the institute were divided between two fields; Islamic education and basic university education. In addition to this, nine more Islamic Institutes have been established in China since 1980. These are the Beijing Islamic Institute, Xinjiang Islamic Institute in Urumqi, Shenyang Islamic Institute, Xining Islamic Institute, Lanzhou Islamic Institute, Zhengzhou Islamic Institute, Kunming Islamic Institute, Hebei Islamic Institute and Qinghai Islamic Institute.

Modern Chinese Administration and Islam

Due to the need to establish and develop relations with Muslim countries, China avoided putting outright and violent pressure on its Muslim citizens. However, the Muslims were subjected to serious abusive treatment during the harsh ideological periods of pressure, such as the “Great Leap Forward” of the 1950s and the “Cultural Revolution” of the 1960s. During this period the land owned by the foundations was confiscated, all mosques except one in Beijing were burnt down, the Muslims were forcefully educated in Marxism, and Muslim villages were attacked.

In this process, the Chinese Islamic Affairs Institution was established to regulate and mainly control the Islamic practices within the country. This structure that was established in 1956 provided the final suggestions to the administration regarding the general policies on the new mosques to be built in the

country, the establishment of Islamic schools, and the legalization of some Islamic practices, such as the wearing of the veil that had been prohibited in state schools. This new establishment played an important role in supporting the Hui Islamic schools and China's relations with the Middle East.

Following the death of Mao in 1979 and the general opening up of China to the world, a softening in the policies on religion was experienced. While permission for a higher number of Muslims to go on pilgrimage to Mecca was given, a few new mosques serving the Hui Muslims were opened in the capital. The Chinese government had always preferred the Hui Muslims, who were kept under its control and were able to be assimilated, over the other Muslim groups in all facets of life. The result of this has been that the Huis speak Mandarin Chinese and have been able to lead a quiet life without interfering in politics or the administration.

On the other hand, the Uyghurs and Tibetans are those who have been subjected to the most severe treatment among the 56 ethnic groups in the country. The attitude of the government, especially in the regions occupied by these two groups, has been tyrannical to the extent that it has affected day-to-day life. This attitude displayed by the government against the Muslim Uyghurs and Buddhist Tibetans was due to their political stance of seeking independence, rather than their religious practices. However, the Chinese government is in the habit of using religious freedom as a sanctioning tool. East Turkestan, which today is home to the Uyghurs, constitutes the most productive part of China in terms of natural resources. Not wanting to lose this land, the government tries to suppress the people's cries for freedom in this region by resorting to force. The Uyghurs who do not integrate with the Han population that is continuously growing in numbers in the area and who live beyond the reach of the great Chinese Nation's purpose are exposed to religious roadblocks as a means of assimilation.

When Central Asian states such as Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan gained their independence in the 1990s, it propelled the Muslim Uyghur Turks inhabiting Chinese Turkestan into seeking independence too. This had led to a period of widespread violence in East Turkestan constituting the northwest and far western parts of China. The Chinese administration – as it did with the Huis – placed Han Chinese migrants in the East Turkestan region which is inhabited by Uyghurs in an effort to implement its assimilation policy. However, as a protest against this policy, in 1990 members of the East Turkestan Islamic Party arranged a 200-person march to the office of the local administration and requested that the collective migration of Han Chinese to Xinjiang region be stopped. In return, the Chinese government sent 500 soldiers to the region in an attempt to end the protests. This incident, in which 1,600 people – 107 of whom were Uyghurs – lost their lives, came to be known as the Baren Township Riot and constituted a turning point for the Muslim Uyghur people. As a matter of fact, after this uprising, the Chinese government started to implement even stricter sanctions on the Uyghurs based on the premise that they had upset peace and order in the region. Many policies against religious practices, such as the prohibition of fasting in the month of Ramadan, wearing the veil in public, and entering mosques for those under 18 have been put into action since then. The most important reason behind the sanctions implemented against the Uyghurs is the lack of political trust and confidence experienced by the central administration. Indeed, China does not apply the restrictive policies implemented in Xinjiang in other regions inhabited by Muslims.

During the time when many events were taking place in Xinjiang region in the 1990s, in addition to the bloodshed caused by the CCP army in Muslim towns, Chinese writers were penning articles against Uyghur Muslims belittling their beliefs. Since then, in an effort to establish control over Xinjiang, China has asserted that the advocates of independence were linked to global terrorist groups. The acts of violence that have taken place since the beginning of the 2000s have been linked to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, although there has been no concrete evidence as to the identity of the culprits. By making these types of allegations, the Chinese government tries to legitimize the sanctions implemented against and pressure applied on the Uyghur Muslims in East Turkestan in the international arena and attempts to persuade the world that it has no other choice if it wishes to preserve its national security. Although the attempts to link the actions of some terrorist groups and the democratic requests of the Uyghurs could arouse one's suspicions, it is necessary to pay attention to the distinction between the requests made by the terrorist groups and the people in the region to understand the conflict properly.

On the other hand, the differences between the religious beliefs and lifestyles of the Uyghurs and the Hui Muslims, who have become Hans themselves, cause tension between these two minority groups. It is noteworthy that the Chinese administration does not implement any sanctions against the religious ways of the Muslim Huis who live outside Xinjiang region and are widely dispersed across the country. The Huis who have equal rights as the Han Chinese in many areas of life such as education, healthcare, and work, also choose their spouses from among Han Chinese. These marriages help propagate Islam in China.

The Chinese government has no sanctions in place against the Han Chinese who later choose to become Muslims.

It can be said that only the Muslim minorities in Xinjiang region experience difficulties with education, healthcare and socioeconomic in the country. As the Han Chinese population has increased in Xinjiang region, the civil servant positions in the government have started to be filled by these people. On the other hand, the failure of the Uyghurs to learn Chinese plays a part in the situation. Presently, the Uyghurs make their living from agriculture and small-scale commerce. The region's natural wealth provides the resources necessary to sustain development in other regions, while Xinjiang region itself is deprived of this wealth and development.

In China where a single party administration system is applied, the CCP established in 1921 has sole political power. Any citizen of the country wishing to become a political party member has only one choice; the CCP. The Huis and Uyghurs are among the members of the CCP who now number approximately 90 million. However, to become a party member a Muslim is expected not to practice his or her religion openly and to become assimilated into Chinese culture. Becoming a member of the CCP is possible under these conditions, but it must also be said that the Uyghurs ostracize these people in particular.

The Beijing administration keeps Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, which is inhabited by Muslims, under systematic control in terms of religion and language. The religious education that found widespread acceptance across the country in the 1980s, was again prohibited in Xinjiang region due to the conflict of 1996. Unlike other regions in China, the opening of Islamic schools is prohibited in Xinjiang region. Only a Quran training institute located in Urumqi is allowed to operate under the control of the administration. It is almost impossible for poor Uyghur families to send their children to this privately owned school and therefore the families have to choose the state schools that provide free education. On the other hand, the probability of finding a job for an Uyghur graduating from Urumqi University is considerably low in comparison to a Han Chinese due to his/her insufficient language skills in Chinese. For this reason, it is very rare to find an Uyghur employed by a state-owned establishment in East Turkestan. These circumstances force the young people in the region to migrate to other countries or become members of some illegal groups.

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