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CHINA: Xinjiang - How long will arrested Sufi Muslims be held?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Forum 18 News Service has been unable to find out why the government of the Ili-Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture of China's north-western Xinjiang Region banned the Sala Sufi Muslim order as a "dangerous" group in August. "I'm not prepared to voice an opinion on whether or not this order is harmful," a professor from Beijing's Institute of Nationalities told Forum 18. But she denied that if any practitioners had been arrested it was for their religious beliefs. The German-based World Uyghur Congress says 179 people have been held. Local Muslim Abdu Raheman told Forum 18 that the practitioners were seized by the security services. "There was no court case against them, so no-one knows how long they will spend behind bars." He views the moves - which also include closures of mosques and seizures of religious literature - as part of a campaign against local Huis, ethnic Chinese Muslims. "The religious practices of the Huis bring out the international nature of Islam, and that aggravates the authorities."

Local Muslim Abdu Raheman has confirmed to Forum 18 News Service that the government of the Ili-Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture of China's north-western Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region banned the Sala movement - a local Sufi Muslim order - in August and that an unknown number of its followers have been arrested. "It wasn't the police who arrested them, but the security services," he told Forum 18 on 21 September in Ghulja (Yining in Chinese), the capital of the prefecture which lies close to the border with Kazakhstan. "There was no court case against them, so no-one knows how long they will spend behind bars." He said that virtually all of those arrested were Huis, ethnic Chinese Muslims who make up about eight per cent of the prefecture's population.

The local paper, the Yili Daily, reported last month that high-ranking prefectural officials held a special work conference on the Sala "threat" on 17 August. Zhang Yun, who is in charge of supervising the prefecture's religious affairs, warned government and communist party officials of the "dangerous" nature of Sala and said it had to be banned along with other illegal religions. Sala leaders were accused of "cheating and deceiving the masses, and inciting them to worship their religious leaders", and of pressuring followers to make donations to the organisation. Officials also accused its leaders of encouraging "trans-provincial worship" and "threatening social stability". However, official publications made no mention of any arrests. The German-based World Uyghur Congress later reported that 179 practitioners had been arrested.

Forum 18 was unable to find out why state officials had banned the Sala order. "Sala is a Sufi order that came to China from Central Asia," Ding Hong, a professor at the Beijing Institute of Nationalities, told Forum 18 from the capital on 23 September. "I'm not prepared to voice an opinion on whether or not this order is harmful. But I am sure that if some member of the order has been arrested, it was not for their religious beliefs."

"I'm sorry, but I am too busy to answer your questions," Dimu La Ti, rector at the Humanities College in the regional capital Urumqi [ÙrÙmqi], told Forum 18 on 24 September. Forum 18 also telephoned the Beijing Institute of Social Issues the same day, but was told to send a formal written query and to give a detailed description of Forum 18 News Service's activities.

According to Chinese official sources, Sala was founded in the early 20th century in Qinghai province south-east of Xinjiang and has thousands of adherents, primarily from the Muslim ethnic Hui and Salar communities in Qinghai province, as well as in neighbouring Gansu province.

"Sala is a Sufi brotherhood which has similar rituals to those of the Sufi Qadiriyya brotherhood," Abdu Raheman, the owner of Ghulja's largest honey-producing company, told Forum 18. He stressed that virtually all the followers of Sala in the Ili-Kazakh autonomous prefecture are, like him, ethnic Huis.

Raheman believes the authorities are restricting the rights of Muslims of all ethnic background but are particularly harsh with the Huis. "The authorities want to suggest that Islam is the national religion of Turkish-speaking people who live in China - the Uyghurs, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz," he claimed. "The only thing distinguishing the Huis from other Chinese is their faith. The religious practices of the Huis bring out the international nature of Islam, and that aggravates the authorities."

He also confirmed that the authorities have launched a campaign to track down unauthorised religious literature. "The security services are searching for unauthorised religious books in Islamic bookshops and in private homes," he reported. "I personally know

four Huis who have been arrested because they were found to have ancient religious books in Uyghur."

Abdu Raheman reports that the authorities have closed at least two Hui mosques in the past three months - one in the village of Tekes 200 kilometres (125 miles) south of Ghulja and another in the village of Huocheng 100 kilometres (62 miles) north-west of Ghulja. The first mosque was closed because three Chinese had converted to Islam, he said, while the second was closed because the authorities felt the mosque building was too large (for earlier mosque closures in the area see F18News 4 April 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=537>).

Abdu Raheman claims that there is far less provision for Muslims' rights in Xinjiang than in the central parts of the country, which are more economically and socially developed. "In Henan province, children can attend Arabic-language schools which operate quite legally, but the Xinjiang authorities have ordered that pupils from the autonomous region be taken out of the school."

Raheman believes the authorities are unhappy with his critical comments and are trying to put indirect pressure on him. "Just recently, the authorities ended a rental contract for a cottage, for which I had a 50-year agreement. As a result, my family has had to move elsewhere."

The government tightly controls the practice of religion in Xinjiang, particularly among ethnic Uyghurs, who now make up some 42 per cent of the regional population.

In addition to the most recent arrests among the Sala practitioners, elsewhere in Xinjiang the authorities arrested a Uyghur religious instructor, Aminan Momixi, and 37 of her students aged between 7 and 20 after bursting into her home on 1 August, the World Uyghur Congress reported. Police accused her of "illegally possessing religious materials and subversive historical information". The Uyghur Human Rights Project reported that police in central Xinjiang detained three Uyghurs on 20 July for possession of the Mishkat-ul Misabih, a religious text describing the life and work of the Muslim prophet Muhammed (see F18News 1 September 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=641>).

For more background information see Forum 18's Xinjiang religious freedom survey at

<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=414>

A printer-friendly map of China (including Xinjiang) is available from

<<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=china>>

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