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CHINA: Xinjiang - What you can't do in a mosque

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In Xinjiang region, Forum 18 News Service has seen an instructional display outlining banned activities. Such instructional displays are normally hidden from the public, and are thought to apply in mosques throughout China. Among banned activities are: teaching religion "privately"; allowing children under 18 to attend a mosque; allowing Islam to influence family life and birth planning behaviour; propaganda associated with terrorism and separatism; religious professionals acquiring large sums of money; the declaration of "holy war" (jihad); and promoting "superstitious thoughts". These displays are not compulsory in non-Muslim places of worship and Forum 18 found no such displays in Xinjiang's two Orthodox churches. Also, the mosque's "democratic management committee" must conduct regular sessions propounding legal regulations and party policies. Such party-appointed committees oversee activities in places of worship and are also known to exist in Tibetan Buddhist temples.

On 21 September, Forum 18 News Service studied a display that the authorities have ordered local imam Musu Ma to hang in his office in the Dungan mosque in the town of Burqin, 100 kilometres (60 miles) west of the district centre of Altai [Altay], in the far north of China's north-western Xinjiang-Uighur autonomous region. The display – believed to be typical of those required by the authorities in mosque offices and normally hidden from public view – spells out what the authorities will not allow in a mosque, including teaching religion "privately", allowing children under 18 to attend and allowing Islam to influence behaviour in the areas of family life and birth planning.

The Dungan mosque serves mainly members not of the Uighur population (the largest Muslim community in Xinjiang) – or at least the majority of worshippers are not Uighurs. Most of the Muslims who attend, according to the display, are Hui – Muslims of Han Chinese ethnicity – and Dongxiang.

Musu Ma reported that similar displays hang in the offices of virtually all the imams of Xinjiang's mosques. Such displays are known to exist in Hui mosques in Beijing and elsewhere in China, while places of worship of other ethnic minority faiths – especially Tibetan Buddhist temples – are believed to have similar displays.

At the top of the Chinese-language display at the Dungan mosque are photographs of the mosque leaders while underneath are photographs of officials of the mosque management committee.

The display is divided into sections setting out the restrictions on the mosque's activity. The top right hand section lists the five items that should not be brought into the mosque, including personal and family disputes; disputes over marriage and birth planning; youths under the age of 18; and statements and "illegal propaganda materials" associated with the "three forces" of terrorism, "splittism" (the official term for separatism) and extremism.

The display sets out the prohibition on religious professionals acquiring large sums of money and material goods for presiding over weddings, funerals and other ceremonies. It also warns against performing the reading of the "Nikha" (the Muslim marriage contract) to couples who have yet to receive marriage certificates from the state authorities.

In addition to the other prohibitions, one section lists a further ten items that must be resolutely cracked down. These include the propagation of ethnic separatism, the declaration of "holy war" (jihad) and inciting religious fanaticism; using religion to intervene in administrative, judicial, education, marriage, and birth planning matters; using religion to promote reactionary views such as "pan-Islamism" and "pan-Turkism"; holding "private" religious classes and acquiring "private" students in religious venues and by religious professionals; and promoting "superstitious thoughts".

Also required, according to the display, is that the mosque's "democratic management committee" (DMC) should conduct regular sessions for religious professionals and lay persons propounding legal regulations and party policies. Such committees are party-appointed bodies that oversee what goes on in each religious venue.

Similar "democratic management committees" are known to exist in Tibetan Buddhist temples. The International Campaign for Tibet reported that they have been set up "in all monasteries and nunneries" in Tibet to implement Party policies and regulations. "DMCs act as the eyes and ears of the Party in monasteries and nunneries," it reported. "In conjunction with ad hoc government

'work teams', DMCs search for suspected dissidents in monasteries and nunneries. A number of monks and nuns have been expelled from their institutions and even arrested on the recommendation of their DMC."

Forum 18 notes that national-religious committees, which form part of the administration of every city, at least in areas of China with large ethnic minority populations, also maintain control over the lives of believers. Communities may only function once they have registered with the national-religious committee, and their leaders have to be drawn from people whose candidacy has been approved by the authorities. The leaders of all religious communities have to attend meetings of the national-religious committees. At the meetings, officials explain to leaders of religious communities what policy they should pursue with believers (see F18News 20 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=414).

The display also requires all religious venues to display land certificates, building certificates, imam qualification certificates, operating permit, joint management contract, and the appointment certificate of the head of the religious venue.

Musu Ma told Forum 18 that the mosque can conduct marriage ceremonies and celebrations of childbirth only with the specific permission of the authorities. He also emphasised that the authorities do not prevent children from being circumcised.

Forum 18 saw posters in mosques in Kashgar (southern Xinjiang) in 2003 stating that underage children were not allowed to attend mosque, but did not see such posters this September in the cities of northern and central Xinjiang. Believers who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 that such posters are not generally hung at mosque entrances, but usually there are displays in the imams' offices containing detailed instructions from the authorities, which will only be shown to foreigners with the utmost reluctance.

Interestingly, such displays are not compulsory in non-Muslim places of worship. For example, Forum 18 found no such displays in Xinjiang's two Orthodox churches, in the towns of Ghulja (Yining), capital of Ili-Kazakh autonomous prefecture, or Urumqi [Ürümqi].

For background information see Forum 18's Xinjiang religious freedom

survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=414 and survey of the prospects for religious freedom in China at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=292

A printer-friendly map of China is available from

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

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