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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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CHINA: Xinjiang - Linked religious practice and state control levels?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

China maintains few controls on religious life in the mountainous Altai [Altay] region in the far north of Xinjiang, Forum 18 News Service has noted, apparently because there are only low levels of Islamic, Buddhist, Pagan, Orthodox and Pentecostal Christian religious practice among the majority ethnic Kazakhs, as well as among Chinese and most other local minorities. In contrast, Forum 18 has observed strict controls in nearby mosques amongst the Muslim Dungan people, and the visit of a Russian Orthodox priest, Fr Vianor Ivanov, was met by the authorities arresting him, as well as questioning virtually all the several dozen elderly Orthodox believers in the city Fr Ivanov visited, before deporting him.

The Chinese authorities maintain far fewer controls on religious life in the mountains and foothills of Altai [Altay] in the far north of the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region than elsewhere in the region, Forum 18 News Service found on a visit to the remote area in the second half of September. This appears to be partly because, as Forum 18 observed, religious practice is extremely low among the majority ethnic Kazakhs, as well as among Chinese and most other local minorities.

The mountainous Altai region is divided between four states - Russia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and China – yet essentially forms a single unit because of its geographical and ethno-cultural peculiarities. Chinese Altai has very little in common with the rest of the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region (historically known as Eastern Turkestan) and resembles its neighbours – the Altai and Tuva autonomous republics of Russia, and Mongolia - more than the Central Asian countries.

Over sixty per cent of the population of Chinese Altai consists of Kazakhs, with the Chinese coming second numerically. Also living in the area are several hundred Tuvins, whose ancestors fled to Chinese Altai after the colonisation of Tuva by Tsarist Russia, as well as several hundred Russians, Mongols and Dungans.

The local Kazakhs who have preserved their semi-nomadic way of life are not, as a rule, deeply religious. Among the Kazakhs, Islam is practised at a superficial level in everyday life and is closely bound up with pagan rites. Visiting Kazakh villages, Forum 18 saw many people smoking, including elderly women, while alcoholism is a serious problem. Neither of these phenomena is at all characteristic of the Uighurs living in Xinjiang's central and southern regions, who are noted for their high level of religious observance.

Also noticeable is that, unlike the Uighurs, the Kazakhs prefer to send their children to Chinese-language schools. This has resulted in large-scale assimilation of Altai's urban Kazakhs by the Chinese. It is probably the low rate of religious observance among the Kazakhs that explains why, in practice, the work of Kazakh mosques is hardly subjected to control by the Chinese authorities.

By contrast, Dungan mosques in the area are subjected to fairly strict control. On 21 September, in the Dungan mosque of the town of Burqin, 100 kilometres (60 miles) west of the district centre of Altai [Altay], Forum 18 saw an instructional display outlining banned activities, which the authorities had compelled the local imam, Musa Ma, to put up in his office. Banned activities included 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" (see F18News 28 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=421).

However, the imam-hatyb of the ethnic Kazakh mosque in Burqin, Emanzhi Takhty, told Forum 18 that there was no such display in his mosque and the authorities had not instructed him on how the community's life should be regulated. "We are not as religious as the Dungans. Our mosque is closed during the whole week and it's only for Friday prayers that about thirty people come," he told Forum 18 in the town on 29 September.

Takhty said he does not need to check whether the Kazakhs who get married at the mosque have been registered at the Registry Office. "That's because, unlike the Dungans, who only take seriously a marriage ceremony performed according to Sharia law, Kazakhs always register their marriages at the state institutions. Nor did anyone tell me children were forbidden to come to the

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mosque, though in practice minors very rarely come to the mosque."

The Tuvins are even less religious. Although formally Tuvins are Buddhists of the Lamaist persuasion, they are more pagan in their ritual practices, including those of shamanism. On visiting two Tuvin villages, Kanas and Koma, Forum 18 could find no Buddhist shrines, as the local inhabitants do not appear to need of them. The only form of religious rite practised by the local inhabitants which Forum 18 could discover was the annual ritual of worshipping the hills, pastures and lakes, which takes place at special sacred sites. As the Tuvins explained to Forum 18, the authorities do not prevent them carrying out this ceremony.

The local Russians also have a low level of religious commitment. Until the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76, Russians formed a sizeable part of the local population. An overwhelming proportion of the local Russians were Old Believers, whose ancestors had fled to this area to escape persecution by the Tsarist authorities in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries. A few purely Russian villages - Kom, Kalton, Chunkur and Kok-tagai - even existed in Chinese Altai. However, during the Cultural Revolution, practically all the Old Believers emigrated to the Soviet Union.

The Russians had quite a strong influence on the culture of the native peoples of Chinese Altai. Local inhabitants told Forum 18 that it was the Russians who taught local Kazakhs and Tuvins to build wooden houses with timber frames (the outer appearance of Kazakh and Tuvin villages is practically indistinguishable from traditional settlements of Siberia) and to use Russian bathhouses. Quite a few words have entered the languages of the Kazakhs and Tuvins of Chinese Altai from Russian, including "mashina"(car, machine), "shofyor" (driver, chauffeur), "rul" (steering wheel), "gazeta" (newspaper), "vilka" (fork) and "butylka" (bottle).

Local people told Forum 18 that, until the Cultural Revolution, the village of Kom was divided into two parts: Russian and Tuvin. The Russian Kom had over a hundred houses. As all the Russian families had many children, the total number of Russians was about a thousand. "The Russians did not have a church and used to come together for services in their homes," village resident Tursanbekhan told Forum 18 on 22 September. "However, they had a cemetery of their own. After the Russians left, the crosses on their graves rotted away and the graveyard became completely neglected. Nowadays even the traces of the Russian graves can hardly be detected any more – the local inhabitants let their cattle graze there."

There are now fewer than a hundred Russian "half-castes" (one of whose parents is Chinese) in Chinese Altai and almost all of them are Orthodox by denomination. "There was no Orthodox church in Chinese Altai even before the Cultural Revolution, now there are very few of us left, so we don't try to open an Orthodox church," Vasily Tolkachev, an active member of Burqin's Orthodox community, told Forum 18 on 20 September. "However, on all religious festivals we come together and hold a service ourselves. The Chinese authorities do not try to stop us from doing so. What's more, as Orthodox Christians, we are even supposed to have an additional day off work for Easter."

The Chinese authorities' relatively liberal religious policy in Altai is explicable, as they strictly control only the more influential religious communities who might pose a threat to the monopoly of the state Communist ideology. For example, the Chinese authorities exercise strict control over Xinjiang's Uighur and Dungan mosques, as well as local Chinese Protestant communities, who have links with their fellow believers abroad (see F18News 20 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=414).

Despite the fact that in law religious communities can function only once they have registered with the state, the authorities usually shut their eyes to the activities of unregistered religious communities among national minorities, if their members are elderly people. "The authorities do not prevent about ten Russian old women or men, who are Pentecostals, meeting for a religious service, even if their religious community is unregistered," one local Pentecostal who wished not to be identified told Forum 18 in the town of Ghulja (Yining in Chinese), the capital of Xinjiang's Ili-Kazakh autonomous district. "Clearly they realise that the Russian Pentecostals are not dangerous in any way. As soon as these old people die, the Russian Pentecostal community will cease to exist."

Speaking to Forum 18 on 5 September in Ghulja, the local church warden, Galina Merkuleva, also confirmed that, even before the authorities returned and registered the local Orthodox church in 2002, they did not stop the Orthodox believers assembling. This attitude on the part of the Chinese authorities can be explained by the fact that the Orthodox community of Ghulja consisted of only several dozen elderly people. However, in December 2003, the authorities detained visiting Kazakhstan-based Fr Vianor Ivanov, keeping him under house arrest, as well as questioning virtually all the Orthodox believers in the city, before deporting him to Kazakhstan (see F18News 9 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=406).

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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Copyright Forum18 News Service 2004 - Page 2/3

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