Uyghur Muslim clerics targeted in China crackdown

Imams not complying with the Communist Party’s religious regulations in the Xinjiang region have been sent to political re-education camps.



Reports are emerging from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region that imams who are not toeing Chinese President Xi Jinping’s Communist Party line have been sent to political re-education camps, which have proliferated at a clipped pace over the past several months in the western area.

And with the promotion of the region’s hard-line leader, Chen Quanguo, to the broader politburo during October’s Party Congress - a move which many rights monitors both predicted and feared - the crackdown on ethnic Muslim minorities in Xinjiang is likely to become worse.

According to [Radio Free Asia](http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/xinjiang-imams-10162017132810.html) (RFA), Chen at the end of September ordered officials to crack down on imams that did not comply with the Party’s religious regulations in the run-up to the Party Congress. They were also told to keep closer tabs on the education centers.

A spokesperson for the World Uyghur Congress group verified to RFA that these missing imams were subjected to brainwashing and abuse that forced them to relinquish their religious beliefs and that the education centers were “bursting at the seams.

Henryk Szadziewski, senior researcher at Uyghur Human Rights Project, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group said that Chen's elevation to the 19th Central Committee only intensifies the concern over the direction of human rights in Xinjiang.

“In Chen, Xi has an effective partner in implementing a security state,” he said.

Szadziewski said that Xi’s primary motivation for the continued crackdown in Xinjiang is the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a signature infrastructure project establishing major trade routes from Beijing to Europe and Africa. As part of the BRI, China is aggressively developing Xinjiang into a major trade hub between China and Eurasia.

The ambitious foreign policy was added to the Chinese constitution during the Party Congress, along with Xi’s own name and ideas. “Xi's personal link to the BRI and its narrative of geopolitical change means there is a lot at stake for China's president in control over Xinjiang,” Sadziewski said.

But rather than engage ethnic Muslim minorities in the process of transformation, Sadziewski said, Xi has effectively expelled Uyghurs from decision-making in the region, marginalized genuine expressions of Uyghur identity and restricted Uyghur fundamental rights.

“The high securitization in Xinjiang is the means through which the Uyghur expulsion from their region has occurred,” he said.  “Now that Xi has strengthened his position in China and the Party, the outlook for an improvement in the rights situation in Xinjiang looks negative.”

[RFA](http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/elderly-10262017150900.html) has also verified reports that the education camps are holding elderly people upwards of 80 years of age among the estimated thousands in detention and that there are virtually no Han - the Chinese ethnic majority - to be counted.

Muslim Uyghurs interned for allegedly extremist or politically incorrect views are exposed to Chinese propaganda across the region. In Hotan (Hetian) both women and children have been observed enduring hard labor.

The children of those detained in the camps have been reportedly [held in overcrowded orphanages](http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/children-10182017144425.html) akin to “farm animals in a shed” in Xinjiang’s northwest, a source verified to RFA.

“This is yet more evidence that Beijing seems to have calculated that stamping out any and every form of unauthorized type of Islam is seen as a major priority in terms of national security,” said William Nee, China Researcher at Amnesty International.

“This sort of heavy-handed, life-destroying type of policing of people who are nominally supposed to be fellow citizens is almost bound to cause greater resentment and anger, and is probably sowing the seeds of long-term instability and conflict, even if it gets short-term results,” Nee said.

Xinjiang is home to some 10 million Uyghurs and other ethnic Muslim minorities, including ethnic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, who have also been recently targeted for detention. According to an article published in a Xinjiang-based state newspaper in April, more than 2,000 had been "trained" in a Hotan facility.

Detention centers often register as “career education centers” to evade problems with the law, as China has legally abolished labor camps.

According to state-run news agency Xinhua, Chen rose from serving in the People’s Liberation Army and working at an automobile parts plant in the 1970s. He served various high positions in Henan and Hebei provinces until he was promoted to run Tibet, where he effectively transformed the region into a police state.

Chen was moved from Tibet to his post in Xinjiang, where he appears to be replicating heavy-handed, repressive governance. Yang Xiaodu, who also governed Tibet - for about a quarter of a decade until 2001 - was, like Chen, promoted to the broader politburo.

Chinese authorities continue to justify security crackdowns in Xinjiang with allegations of hostile foreign influence in the region, including the threat of IS-inspired terrorism. However, the government's claims seem to lack apparent evidence because information is so tightly controlled in the region by authorities.