

Muslim minorities targeted amid Chinese crackdown on religion

Thousands of Hui Muslims gathered at a mosque to prevent its demolition.

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No religion is above the law in China, said a newspaper of the ruling Communist Party, urging officials to stay firm while dealing with a protest over the planned demolition of a massive mosque in the northwest.

Thousands of Hui Muslims gathered at the towering Grand Mosque in the town of Weizhou in Ningxia, a region that's home to many from the small ethnic group, August 9-10 to prevent authorities from demolishing the structure, according to town residents.

Ma Sengming, a 72-year-old man who was at the protest from Thursday morning until Friday afternoon, said the group shouted "Protect faith in China!" and "Love the country, love the faith!" More than 100 police officers surrounded the mosque but did not attempt to stop the protest, according to Ma.

"People are in a lot of pain," Ma said. "Many people were crying. We can't understand why this is happening."

Public demonstrations are rare in China, where the government is often quick to quash any hint of dissent. Under President Xi Jinping, the Communist Party is cracking down on religious expression and attacking what it calls radical ideas among the country's more than 20 million Muslims.

In the far western region of Xinjiang, following sporadic violent attacks by radical Muslim separatists, hundreds of thousands of members of the Uighur and Kazakh Muslim minorities have been arbitrarily detained in indoctrination camps, where they are forced to denounce Islam and profess loyalty to the party.

Authorities have also shut down Hui religious schools and Arabic classes and barred children from participating in Muslim activities.

Religious groups that were largely tolerated in the past have seen their freedoms shrink as the government seeks to Sinicize religions by making the faithful prioritize allegiance to the officially atheist Communist Party. Islamic crescents and domes have been stripped from mosques, crosses removed from churches, and Bibles seized. Tibetan children have been moved from Buddhist temples to schools.

At the mosque in Weizhou, where construction was completed just last year, long banners hanging from the second story read in Chinese: “Stick to directives of Sinicized religion.”

An imposing white building lit at night with gold, green, and yellow, the mosque dwarfs the surrounding brick and concrete homes. It has four minarets and nine domes tipped with crescent moons that would be at home anywhere in the Islamic world—but also large red and yellow Chinese flags fluttering from the ramparts and the wide central staircase.

The authorities planned to take down eight of the nine domes on the grounds that the structure was built larger than permitted, said Ma Zhiguo, a resident in his late seventies. But community members were standing their ground, he said, adding that the mosque conducts prayers attended by about 30,000 Muslims and was built using believers’ personal funds.

“How could we allow them to tear down a mosque that is still in good condition?” he asked.

In May, the county disciplinary inspection commission published a notice saying that Weizhou authorities had failed to properly inspect what it said was illegal expansion in the construction of the Grand Mosque. As a result of lax supervision, the notice said, four mosques in the county had received a total of 1.07 million yuan (\$156,148) in foreign donations. It did not specify whether the Grand Mosque was among the four.

Officials in the county and city propaganda offices said they were not aware of the situation. But the editorial in the party newspaper said that the authorities had to send a message to all religious groups: “Demolishing the mosque is sure to earn the ire of local religious followers. However, if the local government does not react to the

illegal act, it will fuel the idea that religions are superior over China's laws."

—Associated Press

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