

Press release

“China bets on the Islamic horse”

Study on how the People’s Republic deals with the Muslim minority – preference of Muslims for economic considerations towards Arab investors

Münster, 17 May 2016 (exc) With the aim of attracting investors from Arab countries, the People’s Republic of China purposefully presents itself pro-Islam, according to a study from the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”. “The Chinese state supports the ‘label of Islam’ in selected regions in order to thus improve the political and economic relations with Arab countries, particularly with petroleum exporting countries”, explains Islamic scholar and Sinologist Dr. Frauke Drewes. Islam is being highlighted as a common ground towards potential Muslim investors. “Communist China in particular supports the Hui Chinese Muslim minority in order to get rid of the image as a ‘country of disbelievers’”, according to the author of the dissertation study, “Orientalisiert – Kriminalisiert – Propagiert?” (Orientalised – Criminalised – Propagandised?) published by Ergon Verlag. Drewes here investigates the complex relations between the Chinese minority of 20 million Muslims and both the state and the majority society.

The study, which originated under the direction of Islamic scholar Prof. Dr. Thomas Bauer in the Cluster of Excellence’s Graduate School, closes a research gap as Islam in China has so far barely been investigated from the perspective of Islamic Studies and of Sinology. For the study, Drewes conducted qualitative interviews with Muslims and non-Muslims in Germany, China and Egypt. In addition, she analysed the online editions of the Chinese daily, “Renmin ribao” (people’s newspaper), which is the official voice of the Communist Party of China, from 2003 to 2011.

Islam policy of China not consistent – Uighurs heavily discriminated

The investigations revealed that the Chinese state’s Islam policy is by no means consistent: “While the Muslim group of the Hui, most of whom speak Chinese, is favoured for purely economic considerations, the Uighurs, who speak Turkic and who are not of Chinese origin, but who are also Muslims, are massively discriminated against”, according to Drewes. “On the one hand, the province of Ningxia, where the Hui Chinese live, is capitalised on towards international partners as a ‘Muslim region’, making it the gateway of the trading with Arab countries. On the other hand, the Uighurs in Xinjiang are being criminalised and barred from practising their religion, as is the case with pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina.” In Xinjiang, thus, cycle of protests and repression developed – for the state’s fear of extremism and separatism, which could destabilise the country.

The contradiction in how the state deals with the two groups is echoed in the attitude of the Han Chinese majority of the population, as the interviews revealed. “It does not safeguard the Uighurs against discrimination that both they and the Hui Chinese are equally characterised by being Muslims.” The Hui alone serve China to highlight, in its international contacts, the well-being of Muslims in its own country and the freedom of religion in order to claim to be a friend of Muslims all over the world.

The strategy of betting on the “Islamic horse” in international relations proves to be successful, according to the study. “Investors, trading partners and oil exporters from Islamic states let themselves in for the show and visit ‘Islamic projects’ in the model region of Ningxia”, says the Sinologist. “Gigantic projects emerge here: an entire ‘Islamic city’ and economic sectors that are interesting for Muslim countries, such as the trading with halal foods or with Islamic commodities.” Even the Olympic Games 2008 had been deployed to propagandise the image of Muslim-friendly China.

Inadvertent result: religiousness on the rise

“An inadvertent result of these politically and economically motivated activities is the growing interest in Islam in the region and increasing religiousness”, explains the author. “This is rooted not only in the state’s support of Islam, but also in the fact that new Arab business partners frequently bring donations for religious institutions such as mosques. In the light of the economic and political benefits, China puts up with this loss of control.”

The study, subtitled “Die Position von Muslimen in Gesellschaft und Politik der Volksrepublik China heute” (the position of Muslims in society and politics of the People’s Republic of China today), has been published as part of the Ergon series “Religion und Politik” (religion and politics), which is edited by the Cluster of Excellence. Through the interviews of Muslims and non-Muslims and the analysis of state-owned media, the author interrelates the insider perspectives of various majority and minority groups with the politically biased representation in the media, which is often characterised by an “Islam friendly rhetoric”. “The people’s newspaper in China downright avoids to associate Islam or Muslims with terrorism or other negatively connoted terms.”

Frauke Drewes had been a PhD student at the Graduate School of the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” from April 2010 to January 2014. She has been a research assistant at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts (Hochschule für angewandte Wissenschaft und Kunst, HAWK) since November 2015. (mit/ska/vvm)

N.B.: Drewes, Frauke: Orientalisiert – Kriminalisiert – Propagiert? Die Position von Muslimen in Gesellschaft und Politik der Volksrepublik China heute (Religion und Politik, vol. 12), Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag 2016, 423 pages, ISBN 978-3-95650-138-8, 65.00 euros.

Caption: Dr. Frauke Drewes (photo: Studioline Photography, Hanover), book cover (Ergon Verlag)

Contact:

Sarah Batelka
Centre for Research Communication
of the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”
Johannisstraße 1
48143 Münster
Phone: 0251/83-23376
Fax: 0251/83-23246
religionundpolitik@uni-muenster.de
www.religion-und-politik.de

Should you wish to unsubscribe to the press releases of the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”, please send an e-mail to religionundpolitik@uni-muenster.de.

The Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” of WWU Münster

Some 200 academics from more than 20 disciplines of the humanities and social sciences and from 14 countries do research in the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” of the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster (WWU). They deal with the complex relationship of religion and politics across epochs and cultures: from the ancient pantheon and Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the Middle Ages and the early modern period to the current situation in Europe, America, Asia and Africa. It is nationally the largest research association of its kind and of the 43 clusters of excellence in Germany, it is the only one to deal with religions. The federal government and the state governments support the project in the second phase of the Excellence Initiative with 33.7 million euros from 2012 until 2017.