

China-Vatican Deal: Determining Factors and its Implications

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Compared in terms of nuclear might, economic power, and territory, no two countries differ far more exceedingly than China and the Vatican City. But they seem to share a lot more in common, when measured as two political systems with cultural wealth and an indelible historical presence. Therefore, the deal between Xi Jinping and Pope Francis, over who has the right to select the Catholic bishops is so noteworthy. The Holy See and People's Republic of China (PRC) reached a historic agreement to mend the rift that began when the communists came to power in 1949. Despite this positive development, the agreement is being questioned for its lack of transparency as neither side has made the details of it public. It remains to be seen if the Pope would have the authority to veto a candidate favoured by Beijing? Also, some bishops of the unofficial 'underground' church will have to step aside in favour of state-sanctioned ones, and that will be a bitter pill for some Chinese Catholics¹ to swallow.

A Century-Old Issue

It was under Mao Zedong the PRC expelled the last Vatican diplomat in 1951, and exerted

its right to appoint Catholic bishops. As an effort to create an independent church free from outside interference, the Communist Party of China (CPC) created its own state-backed Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA) in 1957. The CPCA does not acknowledge the authority of the Pope, instead it holds its loyalty towards the Party. However, the believers of the Catholic faith who refused to renounce Rome or recognise a state-ordained leadership created clandestine 'underground' churches. These 'underground' churches have operated in secret without government oversight, for generations, claiming spiritual faithfulness to one God and fidelity to his representative on earth, the Pope. Over the years, the 'underground' Catholic churches were raided and their followers were persecuted from time to time. Moreover, Beijing continued to unilaterally name the bishops and sequestered those who defied government oversight.

Since both the CPCA and the Catholic Church appointed their own bishops, it led to overlapping sets of 'underground' and official bishops in the Chinese parishes. It festered disunity and confusion among the believers. The division pitted the bishops who were appointed by the Chinese state but unrecognised by the Vatican, against 'underground' bishops who see themselves as

¹ Chinese Catholics loyal to the underground Churches.

loyal only to Rome. Such a dynamic resulted in disagreements over who has the ultimate authority in the appointment of bishops in China.

Thawing of relations between China and the Vatican

Since the deal between Xi Jinping and Pope Francis, there is a thawing of relations between the Vatican and China. Capping months of speculations, an opaque and ambiguous agreement was signed on 22 September that seemed to have ironed out decades of diplomatic stalemate². There have been negotiations between the two, to end the antagonism between the bishoprics and to unify the Church. The CPC has always been firm that it should be the Chinese authorities, and not a foreign power (the Vatican) responsible for choosing religious leaders in their country. But the Vatican has for just as long defied the norm. Under the agreement announced, the Pope would formally recognise the legitimacy of seven bishops appointed by the Chinese government in exchange for a say in the appointment of bishops in Chinese Catholic churches in the future. Though, it appears that the Pope would retain his veto power to choose bishops, only from the shortlisted nominees recommended by the CPC. Also, any bishop recommended by Beijing would be thoroughly vetted. It would be ensured that the Christian activities do not undermine the authority of the party-state apparatus. Thus, there is still uncertainty on how the Vatican's role will pan out in the administration of Chinese Catholicism.

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² The stalemate over the appointment of bishops for 12 million Catholics in China

An uneasy rapprochement in the light of new regulations and tightening control of the Party

The rapprochement between Beijing and the Vatican, most likely, will not be a gentle one. It has come at a time when the CPC has adopted a heavy-handed approach towards the underground churches with the intentions of neutralising them for once and all.³ An array of events in the recent time indicate that the Party is dismissing the status quo and seeking to consolidate its control over these formerly independent congregations. The recently issued document on policy- 'Religious Affairs Ordinance', and White paper titled 'China's Policy and Practice of Guaranteeing Freedom of Religious Belief', stipulates that for the CPC management of religious activities is imperative, as it perceives religion to be a potential conduit for outside forces to subvert its rule. Religions such as Christianity, which have cultural centres outside of China, are particularly susceptible to forebodings of foreign meddling. With regards to Christianity, the Chinese authorities are anxious that Western emphasis on universal values overly influence the Chinese Catholics. They view Christianity as an example of the 'collusion' between destabilizing domestic elements and foreign anti-China forces, wants to promote a kind of 'counter-infiltration' by injecting Chinese values into the activities of fast-growing Christian congregations (*China Christian Net* 2015).

The Party also drew a new legislation on 1 February, to intensify the government's regulation on religion and impose explicit restrictions on any unofficial religious gathering. It also called upon all religions in China to be 'Sinicised'⁴. The 'Sinicisation of Christianity' would be consistent with its drive

³ An example of such a crackdown is the detention of Guo Xijin, a catholic bishop recognised by the Vatican and not by the official state-sanctioned Catholic Church in China. Bishop Xijin was detained during the Easter festivities when he refused to perform his services alongside the state-approved bishop.

⁴ 'Sinicize' — to become Chinese: In other words, to come under closer government control. a process intended to shape religious traditions and doctrine to better conform with Chinese society and CPC objectives.

to push Chinese nationalism. Fenggang Yang⁵, a leading expert on Christianity in China, maintains that the new regulations are intended to castigate the churches run by priests and bishops that are not sanctioned by the official, party-organized religious associations⁶. According to Yang, the party fears the connection between religion and civil activism, as large faith-based organizations pose a threat to centralized control of both political and social power. In this context, it becomes clearer that the CPC's tightened grip on religious movements is merely one aspect of a broader campaign to exert its control over the Chinese society.

Xi administration's push towards Christianity with 'Chinese Characteristics'

President Xi has tried to make Christianity more compatible with Chinese values. This seems to be behind the much harsher tactics that Beijing has employed against 'underground' churches. The aggressive 'Sinicization of Christianity', which started in 2013, is evident from the new policy of the so-called *wujin* ('five penetrations' or 'five introductions') and *wuhua* ('five transformations'), which was initiated in Zhejiang Province⁷ (*Initium* 2015). *Wujin* consists of the following: 'Policies, laws and regulation of the party-state must be introduced into churches; the culture of popular science should go inside churches; the idea of the construction of harmony must go inside churches'. *Wuhua* includes 'the localization of churches: the regularization of the management of churches; the *bendihua* [indigenisation] of theology; and rendering church doctrines *shiying* ['compatible']' (*VOA Chinese* 2015; *Radio Free Asia* 2015).

⁵ Director of the Center on Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University

⁶ Government-approved Christian organizations in China include the Catholic Patriotic Association, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee and the Christian Council.

⁷ Xi, who was Party Secretary of Zhejiang from 2002 to 2007, apparently wanted to start this experiment in a region which has centuries of interaction with Christian organizations in the West

The phraseology of these new policies is laden with jargons. For instance, the promotion of 'popular science' presupposes that churches are spreading 'unscientific' creeds or even cults. The concept of 'harmony' has been interpreted as values that are in compatible with CPC doctrines and the party's ideals about social stability. The *wuhua* has even more far-reaching consequences for the development of Christianity in China. 'Localizing and indigenizing' church doctrines and activities means they should be in sync with the values—including both traditional Chinese norms and socialism with Chinese characteristics—that the Xi leadership is ferociously spreading in Chinese society (Wo-Lap Lam 2016).

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Thus, the moves to disperse or disband the underground church are well in conformity with President Xi Jinping's policies. It has been during Xi's tenure that the party designed a thorough internet censorship regime, clamped down on human rights lawyers, set up a high-tech surveillance state in the far-West province of Xinjiang⁸ and forced ideological restraints in private businesses and universities.

Party's Control of the Religion: Re-invigorating the UFWD

Furthermore, the recent reshuffling within China's bureaucracy does not seem to bode well for the religious devotees in China. The State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA)⁹, a government office has been

⁸ Xinjiang centred around the Uyghurs, a Turkic minority ethnic group who make up the largest group in the region. The Uyghurs demand a separate state from the mainland China.

⁹ SARA- State Administration for Religious Affairs — the institution strictly supervises each religious sect, and the religious devotees must be subservient to the nation

incorporated in United Front Work Department (UFWD), a Communist Party organ directly under the control of the Party's Central Committee. The delegation of the religious affairs to the UFWD, signals the intent of the CPC to consolidate religious activities under its purview. Xi Lian, a professor of world religion at Duke University maintains that, 'The Party is in some ways distrustful of the religious affairs bureau for fear that some people in that agency may have the kind of training that makes them more open to or sympathetic with different religious groups. But now the United Front is going to take over and impose the iron will of the party' (Allen-Ebrahimian 2018).

UFWD would administer the religious activities and excoriate any religious organisation that challenges the principles of the Party, including the underground churches.

People's Republic of China is governed by dual-parallel structure — comprising of party organs and government bodies at every level — from grassroots level village committees to the highest echelons of power. It is believed that the Party organs are relatively less transparent in their functioning than the government bodies. It is likely that UFWD, a party organ, will discreetly play a key role in ramping up pressure on religious groups. Even as the potential warming of relations between Beijing and the Vatican received attention as an indicator of a change in the CPC's attitude toward religion, the CPC's UFWD has been behind the scenes to ensure that no authority is higher than the Party in the eyes of religious Chinese (Catholic and, others).

The empowering of the UFWD to manage the religious affairs leaves very little room for speculation about the implications of it for the Catholic Church of China. Such an administrative control over religious groups would ensure the restraint of an organisation from competing with the party-state apparatus. It implicitly signifies more direct control of the

party and marginalisation of the dissidents who do not toe the party line. Thus, UFWD would administer the religious activities and excoriate any religious organisation that challenges the principles of the Party, including the underground churches.

Vatican's dilemma or the controversial deal?

The Vatican-Beijing deal has come at a time when the freedom of religious expression has been more muzzled than it has been in decades. Especially, in the wake of a flurry of reports of state persecution of Uyghur ethnic minority in Xinjiang and crackdown on 'underground' churches. The churches have been decreed by the state to hang President Xi Jinping's portrait and to display the Chinese flag. The prelates and pastors are prodded in examinations, on the directives of the CPC—on religious matters and socialist beliefs. They have also been compelled to distribute government propaganda on socialist values to their devotees. Subsequently, the agreement enraged those who have resisted Beijing's edicts on religion for years, and feel that there can be no compromise with the Chinese government. The persecuted Catholic followers feel that the agreement has disregarded and dishonoured their years of sacrifices.

Moreover, the Vatican is entangled with a severe dilemma about its faith's liturgy and doctrine—especially, in exercising new means of appointments of bishops—in the Chinese society. The devotees of the faith are frightened of the compromises that these warming of ties might bring. Other than that, there also many burning questions about the freedom of the Chinese Catholic Church. Will it be free from government's political interference or will it be tied down by the shackles of the government, ideological fenders, and Party-imposed "Chinese Characteristics"?

The maxim of the Vatican-China accord seemed to be troubled from the outset of the negotiations, as both parties entered the dialogue with a different mindset. The Holy See appears to be negotiating with a focus on ecclesiastical objectives, while Beijing considers the deal to be a means of achieving

and support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.

its key political objectives. Behind-the-scenes discussions are customary for the Vatican but doing so could put it at a disadvantage in this case. Beijing is quite unrelenting and resolute about negotiating bilaterally, particularly with regards to sensitive issues. It believes, and for the most part rightly so, that through bilateral negotiations it gains greater leverage. A case in point being the South China Sea issue—Beijing has persisted on negotiating bilaterally and has avoided settling the territorial disputes multilaterally.

The CPC also might use the agreement to do the same. It is not inconceivable to imagine a situation where, after striking a deal on the appointment of bishops, the discussion eventually turns to how the Vatican must consider dropping ties with Taiwan if it wants to expand activities or else lose its gains in China. However, the Vatican authorities stated that the accord does not amount to the establishment of diplomatic ties with China nor is it predicated on immediate cutting off relations with Taiwan.¹⁰

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Delicate Diplomacy: The Holy See and Taiwan

Meanwhile, Taiwan is home to around 300,000 Catholics which makes about 2 percent of the total population—including its Vice-President Chen Chien-Jen. The Vatican is Taiwan's only diplomatic ally in Europe, and the only developed western nation that formally recognises the Republic of China (ROC).¹¹

¹⁰ The Beijing government had set two conditions for reestablishing the relations: that the Holy See "not interfere in religious matters in China" and that, in line with Beijing's One-China policy, it break the ties with the Taipei government.

¹¹ The Vatican first established diplomatic ties with the Republic of China (ROC) in 1942, during World War II. The papal representative was expelled from the mainland, after the Communist forces defeated the

Vatican's recognition of Taiwan confers some moral credence and sustenance to the latter's small Catholic population. However, the development of covert talks and the lack of details regarding the specificities of the negotiations have feared some analysts that the Holy See's recognition of Taiwan could be in jeopardy. The warming ties between the Vatican and Beijing has set off alarm across the Taiwan Straits. Any disavowal of the Vatican's recognition of Taiwan would be a significant win for Beijing. As China still considers Taiwan to be a renegade province to be reunified¹² with the mainland, by force if necessary.

China also refuses diplomatic recognition to any country that acknowledges Taiwan as an independent nation. It has adopted a strategy of limiting the political space for Taiwan and has come to engage in a diplomatic-tug-of-war with the country. China has so far successfully 'poached' three diplomatic allies of Taiwan this year – the Dominican Republic, Burkina Faso, and El Salvador — and some fear Taipei may lose another soon. But there is more than simple recognition at play in these obfuscating relations between Taiwan and China. As of not long ago, China and Taiwan accepted an informal diplomatic-truce, wherein both agreed not to coerce countries to overturn diplomatic recognition. However, since the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)—which favours independence—has taken control of Legislative Yuan (central parliament) and the presidency, China showed its dislike by breaking off the truce.

As of President Tsai Ing-wen's inauguration in 2016, China successfully persuaded five countries to change sides. The major bone of contention between Tsai and the mainland is, although she does not seek an official declaration of independence, she has refused to define Taiwan as part of 'one China' policy.¹³

Nationalists in 1949. Since then, the Vatican has continued to recognise the legitimacy of the ROC on Taiwan.

¹² Under its 'one China policy'.

¹³ Taiwan's leading party, the Kuomintang (KMT), and the Chinese government both subscribe to an agreement called the '1992 consensus', which says that there is only one China. Taiwan's other major political party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) which is now in

These outstanding tensions between China and Taiwan play an important role in Beijing's calculus, especially when it comes to Vatican-China deal. Therefore, the deal has brought Taiwan on edge. It fears that the accord might falter its diplomatic relations with the Vatican.

However, Taipei feels comforted from the remarks made by Matthew S.M. Lee, ambassador to the Holy See, who stated that the Vatican, 'told us the agreement is aimed at handling Catholic religious affairs in China and carries no political or diplomatic connotations' (*Focus Taiwan* 2018). Nevertheless, should forsaking the diplomatic recognition of Taiwan turns out to be instrumental to the agreement, the loss of Vatican as an ally of Taiwan would be perceived as a much greater defeat than any of the recent defections by Taipei's other allies. More importantly, should the Vatican fall short of using the full extent of its powers to stop the growing persecution of those who practice religion in China, and fails to uphold its long-standing diplomatic recognition of the ROC, it will lose its moral authority and trust among the Taiwanese Catholics.

Conclusion

The motivations for the accord are different for both the Vatican and China. The primary and imminent concern for the Vatican in China, is ecclesiastic and not political. This is an important distinction. The Vatican seems occupied with the canonical regulations and laws of the Catholic Church. It cannot perceive a Catholic church functioning in isolation from Rome and it instigated the Vatican to come to a reconciliation with China. For the Vatican, as long as the Pope has the final say in perpetuating apostolic succession through episcopal appointments, all the other issues can be resolved. And China seems concerned with the necessity of consolidating support among the Catholic communities as well as a need to create a unified Catholic Church in the country, which would facilitate governmental control over its activities. It wants to earn international respect as it demonstrates religious tolerance, and settle the strife amongst the devotees of the

power, rejects both the 1992 consensus and the one-China principle.

underground church. Nonetheless, the road ahead is likely to be long as each actor will need to balance short-term interests with the medium and long-term effects such an agreement may have on their internal legitimacy and international credibility. The issues at stake are entangled in a web of uncertainty that extend well beyond the confines of Vatican-China relations. ■

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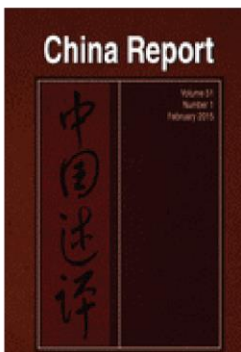


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