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CHINA: For religious freedom, patience may be the virtue

By Magda Hornemann, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

As China's National People's Congress passed constitutional amendments addressing the issue of human rights, outside the congress doors the secret police was crushing possible dissent. Religious believers, including a Catholic bishop and a Protestant house church leader, were among those detained. Two other Protestants who researched the 2003 crackdown on unofficial churches in Hanzhou had just been indicted, while hundreds of thousands of Falun Gong practitioners, thousands of Protestants and many Vatican-loyal Catholics and other believers languish in prisons and labour camps. Communist ideological opposition to religion remains strong, despite attempts to couch it in milder terms, combined with fears - rooted in Chinese history - of foreign religious involvement. The Party also fears rival organisations with the power to mobilise adherents. Few believers expect anything more than incremental improvements.

When the legislative session of China's 10th National People's Congress concluded in Beijing on 14 March, delegates counted among their achievements the passage of several amendments to the state constitution. In particular, two amendments caught the eye. One added to Article 13 the explicit provision that "citizens' lawful private property is inviolable", reflecting the government's determination to continue its policy of economic liberalisation and, in the process, bolstering the key component of Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents" theory - the inclusion of the "bourgeoisie" in the Communist regime. It is therefore little wonder that observers both inside and outside China greeted the passage of this amendment with much optimism.

However, the other amendment, or more appropriately "addition" to the constitution, encountered considerably greater scepticism: "The State respects and safeguards human rights." Observers are understandably unimpressed with this new provision. After all, the constitution already includes many provisions for the "respect for" and "protection" of various civil liberties and human rights, including religious freedom. Yet, the Communist party-state continues to violate these human rights.

This latest constitutional addition seems to be merely another symbolic gesture from the Communist dictators. Still, notwithstanding doubts about just how this latest change would be reflected in actual practices, the need that the Communist regime felt to include this commitment may indicate at least some interest on the part of the Hu Jintao government to address widespread concerns about its human rights record. At the very least, it reflects increasing debate among officials and scholars on the need for reforms, particularly in the legal sector, to eliminate government abuses and violations of human rights.

However, one should not hold one's breath in anticipation of any immediate change. The reason is apparent. Just as the legislature approved this constitutional revision, the state public security apparatus was busy outside the Great Hall of the "People" to prevent any demonstration or dissident activity that could "hinder" the legislature's ability to proclaim that the state is ready to protect the human rights of its citizens. According to the US-based Human Rights in China, the Beijing city government deployed some 1,000 public security officers to deter unwanted dissident activities. As part of the security measures, foreign Internet sites were blocked, while potential dissidents and activists around the country were arrested, detained or placed under surveillance. Meanwhile, political prisoners continue to fill prisons and labour camps. The irony is clear for all to see: human rights were violated just as the government proclaimed publicly that it would "respect" and "safeguard" human rights.

This effort to curb dissident activities was also extended to believers. On 5 March, the day the National People's Congress opened, Roman Catholic Bishop Wei Jingyi of Qiqihar in Heilongjiang province was arrested. On the same day, the police arrested, detained and beat Hua Huiqi, an unofficial house church leader in Beijing. Just a little over a week before the opening day of the legislative session, international media reported the indictment of two members of the unofficial Protestant Church. They were charged with collecting "state secrets" after conducting research about the large-scale government crackdown on unofficial Protestant congregations in summer 2003 in the city of Hanzhou in the southeastern province of Zhejiang.

Indeed, believers have suffered greatly as a result of government repression. According to Falun Gong practitioners, ever since the government crackdown against the group and its practitioners began in 1999, more than 900 have died as a result of police brutality, while hundreds of thousands have been arrested and detained without due process, with over 100,000 sent to labour camps. In addition, more than 1,000 Falun Gong practitioners have been forcibly admitted to psychiatric hospitals to coerce them to renounce their belief. Meanwhile, thousands of Protestants affiliated with unofficial congregations are in prisons or labour camps. According to the US-based Cardinal Kung Foundation, all Roman Catholic bishops who expressed open allegiance to the Vatican while

refusing to associate with the state are imprisoned, while scores of priests and laypeople have been arrested and detained. All the while, the government exercises strict control over Tibetan Buddhist-populated areas and Xinjiang, where the Uighur Muslims continue to be victims of the regime's ongoing "assimilate or eliminate" campaign.

How to account for the Communist regime's policy of repression against religions? Certainly, a major factor can be found in the Communist ideology. The atheistic nature of Communism assures that a Communist regime's relationship with religious organisations and persons will be antagonistic. As an official policy codified in various party regulations and documents, the Communist Party bars its members from adhering to any religious belief or participating in religious activities.

Twenty years after Deng Xiaoping initiated liberalising reforms, the Communist Party's most ardent ideologues maintain that Communism and religion are diametrically opposed. This fundamental view is reflected in official media and discussions within the Communist Party-state. In November 2003, a Chinese "scholar" contributed an article to the People's Daily, the Communist Party flagship newspaper, entitled "An Historical Study of the Communist Party of China's Theory and Policy Concerning Religion". "To uphold the fundamental opposition in world outlook of Marxism and religion," the scholar wrote, "it is of course essential to uphold the fundamental opposition of science and religion. Religion is an illusory, inverse reflection of the external world, whereas the task of science is to understand the objective world in accordance with reality, advocating seeking truth from facts and pursuing objective truth."

Indeed, many ideologues continue to view religion through the Marxist framework, arguing that the "problem" of religion would disappear once the fruit of economic modernisation becomes more widespread.

Yet, even as the party-state continues to pay lip service to the ideologues among its ranks, it is also clear that an increasing number of party and state officials and intellectuals are less comfortable than before about being perceived to adhere to such a strong ideological position. However, the ruling elites are not replacing their faith in Communism with new-found religious beliefs: far from it. The state continues to view religion with considerable hostility. The difference now is that such hostility is couched in milder terms.

In December 2001, the central government held its first national religious affairs work conference in over a decade. Jiang Zemin, as head of the Communist Party and the country's president, delivered "important" remarks acknowledging that religion will long continue to exist in China and in the world. Cautioning against underestimating the impact religion has on China's political, social and economic developments, he called for the "strengthening" of the party-state's work on religious affairs. Zhu Rongji, who was the third most senior Communist Party leader and the state premier, followed up Jiang's remarks with even harsher comments, calling for continued strong crackdowns against "cults" and "illegal religious activities".

These recent comments by senior leaders suggest that there are other dimensions to why the Chinese Communist party-state so fundamentally opposes religious organisations and activities. Ideology aside, practical reasons can explain the party-state's policy. The Communist Party is known as a "mass" party: its ability to mobilise the masses, particularly the peasantry, was the key ingredient to its success in achieving political power. Its ability to maintain power, therefore, must necessarily be based on its capacity to retain sole control of that mobilisational mechanism.

In the two decades since Deng initiated economic liberalisation and re-opening to the international community, religion has become firmly established and religious adherents are on the rise. Non-government sources estimate that Protestant Christians alone may account for as many as 80 million, nearly 10 percent of China's population. Falun Gong practitioners made similar claims about the size of the group's membership in mainland China at its height in 1998. Even the state's conservative estimates indicate that there are at least 100 million believers of all faiths throughout China, including regions like Tibet and Xinjiang where many residents harbour strong anti-China sentiments.

Whatever the actual number may be, one should not be surprised that the party-state is concerned about the impact that religion has on China's development or, more specifically, the development of the Communist Party. The party-state will not ignore other organisations that have a demonstrated capacity to mobilise the masses effectively. For this reason, the leadership under Jiang Zemin was shocked and disturbed that 10,000 Falun Gong practitioners could suddenly appear on the doorsteps of its compound. To make matters worse, these peaceful demonstrators showed up in precisely the same place that students had staged their initial appeals just ten years earlier. There is an additional ironic twist to the emergence of groups like the Falun Gong. In the late 1980s, in a campaign to mobilise indigenous culture in the face of foreign "spiritual pollution", the government actively promoted qigong, a form of Chinese exercises the principles of which provided a base for the later emergence of Falun Gong. Little did the state realise then that these organisations would eventually acquire an independent attitude to the state.

This suggests another important element contributing to the government's religious policy - history. China has a long historical tradition. Chinese are intensely interested in history. Even those whose professions may be in the field of science and technology espouse a genuine interest in it. For the Chinese, the present is unmistakably intertwined with the past, and the past offers lessons for the future. The Communist leaders are no different. They are keenly aware that throughout China's long history, many popular rebellions and insurrections took place in the name of religion. The most recent, in the middle of the 19th century, lasted for nearly 20 years and witnessed a rebel force occupying nearly all of southern China. The Taiping Rebellion, led by a disgruntled Confucian

scholar who claimed to be Jesus Christ's Chinese brother, taxed the resources of the Manchu government. The central government was able to crush the rebellion only thanks to foreign assistance and the rebel force's internal fissures. These historical lessons are not lost on today's leaders and even intellectuals. The elites are not shy about pointing out these historical facts when confronted with accusations that the state is repressing religion.

Organised internal dissension in the name of religion, however, is only half the story. China's modern history has been characterised as much by internal divisions as by its semi-colonial status vis-a-vis the Western powers. The West's economic and military push into China during the 18th and 19th centuries was accompanied by Christian missionaries. While it is true that among the Christian missionaries were many with less interest in the condition of Chinese "souls" than in seeking private gain, many others contributed greatly towards helping China become more modernised than ever before. Still, the nationalism from which the Communist regime derived its legitimacy is based on a sense of victimisation from exploitation by Western powers, whose actions were, more perceived than in reality, facilitated at least in part by foreign missionaries. This perceived connection between foreign governments and religious groups in their societies was so strong that the regime, as soon as it came to power, established "patriotic" religious organisations with the primary aim of ensuring that Chinese religious organisations would no longer come under the influence of foreign religious groups.

For this same reason, the state reacted vehemently when on 1 October 2000 (the founding date of the People's Republic of China) the Pope canonised over 100 Chinese and Western Roman Catholics. Many of the new saints had lost their lives in the 1900 Boxer Rebellion, a state-sponsored anti-foreign movement that used violence against foreigners and their Chinese sympathisers. Similarly, the Chinese government continues to insist that any normalisation of relations between China and the Vatican must include the Roman Catholic Church's assurances that it will not interfere in the affairs of the Catholic Church in China.

This fear and belief that religious organisations might be connected with foreign entities promoting activities antithetical to Chinese interests have apparently gone beyond traditional Western religions like Christianity. Even Falun Gong, a spiritual group that has indigenous Chinese roots, has been a victim of this perception. For example, one Chinese Falun Gong practitioner who resides outside the country claimed that during a recent visit back home to China, he was arrested and interrogated by officials who identified themselves as agents of the state security apparatus responsible for the state's counter-intelligence and counter-espionage efforts. According to this practitioner, these officials insisted that the Falun Gong organisation must have been on the payroll of the US Central Intelligence Agency with the aim of subverting the Chinese government.

These accounts indicate that the regime also views religion through the lens of nationalism and, by extension, territorial sovereignty. Indeed, this is the framework through which the Communist party-state views believers and activities in ethnic minority "autonomous" regions like Tibet and Xinjiang. In Tibet - where the Dalai Lama is the spiritual leader and, in the minds of most Tibetans, the real political leader - the Communist regime has cracked down harshly against all Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns who refuse to renounce their allegiance to him. In Xinjiang, where the Uighur Muslims, a Turkic people, make up the largest ethnic population and among which there is increasing nationalist sentiment, the Chinese government has used its "cooperation" with the US-led global anti-terrorism campaign as a justification for intensifying its crackdown against the Uighurs. This is why Rebiya Kadeer, at one time the wealthiest woman in Xinjiang, continues to languish in prison accused of providing "state secrets" - newspaper clippings - to foreigners.

To implement its repressive policy, the Communist regime has promulgated various regulations and created government institutions. It has also used the "patriotic" organisations as a means to ensure that the party-state retains complete control over the religious sector. The regulations cover a range of activities, from the registration of religious facilities, the "appropriate" relationship between Chinese religious organisations and their foreign counterparts, and what constitute "cults" and "cultic" activities. The institutions make up an extensive network of party and state agencies. In some cases, like the campaign against the Falun Gong, China's most senior leaders are apparently directly involved in taking decisions. Other cabinet-level agencies like the public security and state security ministries are also involved, particularly in tackling organisations and activities that have not been officially sanctioned.

Generally, the Communist Party's United Front Work Department acts as the key policy coordination agency while the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) of the State Council, the government, is the primary agency responsible for implementing religious policies. Recently, hints have emerged of considerable tension within the government about the appropriate religious policies, as well as between the party and the government. According to a February 2004 Compass Direct report, the United Front Work Department and the SARA have disagreed over whether Protestant house churches might register directly with the government without going through the state-sanctioned Protestant organisation, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). Yet, at least for now and on the surface, the party and the state share a consensus on the need to maintain control over religion.

Just as there may be different attitudes within the party-state about the appropriate religious policies, different religious communities have also reacted differently to the regime's repression. The most obvious difference seems to be that between the Falun Gong movement and the unofficial Protestant house churches. As noted earlier, Falun Gong practitioners have demonstrated their willingness and the organisational strength to confront state repression. Even after the state crackdown began in 1999, Falun Gong practitioners regularly appeared in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, the site of China's greatest mass demonstration in the past two decades, to push their case for official recognition of the movement's legitimacy. Whereas the Falun Gong practitioners have displayed surprising organisational capacity, Protestant house churches seem to possess very little cohesiveness. Indeed, with tens of

millions of members among their congregations, this community has the potential to become a major social force.

Yet, the house churches, at least until now, seem genuinely uninterested in confronting the state. In fact, its leaders have advocated a separation of church and state. Moreover, some house church leaders say their groups are more concerned about internal divisions and attacks by "heretics" and "cults" like the "Eastern Lightning" (whose leader has claimed she was Christ incarnate) than they are about state repression. The house churches have not made any effort to reach out to other religious groups and indeed have tried to cooperate with the state to halt the spread of "cults" like the Eastern Lightning which, they maintain, has used violence to abduct house church leaders and members.

As the above indicates, religious conditions in China remain complex and potentially volatile. This volatility is likely to increase as religion becomes more widespread throughout China and if the Chinese government remains focused on exercising complete control over religious organisations, individuals and activities. Moreover, advances in information technology have made Chinese believers increasingly aware of the support they enjoy among transnational actors like foreign religious organisations, human rights advocates and governments.

In the long run, how religious conditions develop in China will depend greatly on how these different variables interact. In the short run, however, the actions of the Communist party-state will remain decisive. While the new administration led by President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabo may usher in positive changes, such changes are likely to be incremental, particularly since the new leaders are still trying to consolidate their political power. Like all things in China, we will just have to wait and see.

A printer-friendly map of China is available from

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=china>

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f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY