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CHINA: State attempts to control religious leaderships

By Magda Hornemann, Forum 18

Ten years ago, China kidnapped six-year-old Tibetan Buddhist Gedhun Choekyi Nyima and his family just after his recognition as Panchen Lama (they have not been seen since) and imposed a new puppet Panchen Lama. This is a dramatic example, Forum 18 News Service notes, of continuing Chinese efforts to control religious communities. Also, small numbers of Communist Party sympathisers, who may even be secret Party members, have been placed in the officially-recognised Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist, Muslim and Daoist leaderships. But these control attempts are increasingly ineffective for reasons such as the reluctance of ethnic minority religious leaderships, such as of the Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims, to associate with the state; the continuing strong growth of communities such as unofficial Protestants and Vatican-loyal Catholics; and a generally greater willingness to resist state control. Lower-level leaders have told Forum 18 that the Party might be able to slow and sometimes repress religious zeal, but it can no longer stop it.

Ten years ago last month, on 17 May 1995, the Chinese authorities kidnapped Gedhun Choekyi Nyima. Just three days earlier the six-year-old boy had been recognised by the Dalai Lama as the true reincarnation of Panchen Rinpoche, who had died six years before. His parents and other members of his immediate family were also seized. Now aged 16 – if he is still alive - the Panchen Lama's and his family's whereabouts are unknown. Half a year after the young boy's kidnapping, the Chinese government imposed their own puppet Panchen Lama on a reluctant Tibetan Buddhist community at a meeting they convened in Beijing. One monk chose suicide rather than denounce the real Panchen Lama.

"It is unfortunate that the Chinese government has chosen to politicise this issue," the Dalai Lama commented in 1995 of the recognition of the Panchen Lama. One obvious reason for its crude interference is that traditionally the Panchen Lama plays a crucial role in recognising the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. The current Dalai Lama, the fourteenth, turns 70 this July. When he dies, Beijing would love to seize the opportunity to neutralise an office they regard as crucial to the Tibetans' sense of identity as a religious and ethnic community.

Beijing's kidnapping of a helpless boy - called by many the "world's youngest political prisoner" - is perhaps the most blatant Chinese case of state meddling in religious affairs. But other evidence is emerging which shows that none of the five recognised religious communities - the Buddhists, Daoists, Patriotic Catholics, Protestants and Muslims - can escape similar interference and subversion. Indeed, the infiltration and manipulation of religion by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) can be traced back over half a century.

According to the internal version of the CCP Central Committee circular "Concerning Our Country's Basic Standpoint and Policy on Religious Questions During the Socialist Period" or Document 19 - issued in 1982 and still one of the key policy statements on control of religious affairs - "Party committees at all levels must powerfully direct and organise all relevant departments" to ensure that religious affairs are properly controlled.

These "relevant departments" are not only the overt organs of CCP control, such as the Religious Affairs Bureau (since renamed the State Administration for Religious Affairs) and the United Front Work Department. They also include the supposedly independent trade unions and "people's organisations" – among them all the "patriotic" religious organisations, the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA), the Protestant Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), and the Buddhist, Islamic and Daoist Associations. Despite the insistence of leaders of these religious organisations that they act independently, they are silent about the clear evidence of Document 19 that they are directed by the CCP at every level.

CCP religious policy was first forged in the crucible of 1950s Maoism, when China was allied with Stalin. Despite the genuine progress since Mao's death in 1976 - not least the opening of tens of thousands of temples, churches and mosques across China - the shadow of Maoism and Stalinism still falls across religious affairs. Varying degrees of persecution and repression over 56 years have honed the CCP's skills, though the lack of open government ensures that most documentary evidence is hidden from public view.

Despite this, many internal CCP documents have leaked out over the years showing conclusively that religious affairs are closely controlled. Recent examples are included in the 2002 collection "Religion and National Security in China: Secret Documents from China's security sector", edited by Shixiong Li and Xiqiu (Bob) Fu, Voice of the Martyrs (USA) and Jubilee Campaign (UK).

"Systematic training and education of a young generation of patriotic religious professional workers has real significance for the future face of religious organisations," Document 19 declares in section 8. The explosive growth of religion in China from 1979 made the CCP conclude that it must control this by placing key party sympathisers in top positions. The vast majority of priests, pastors, imams and other religious leaders in China are conscientiously seeking to do their best for their faiths in a difficult position under state control. However, there is evidence that a small number of CCP sympathisers, who may even be secret party members, have been infiltrated into top positions to control religious communities.

Disillusioned CCP functionaries from the 1950s onwards have left little room for doubt about the consistency of party attempts to control religious communities. "Xiao Feng", the pseudonym of a CCP official who set up the Guangzhou Religious Affairs Bureau, described how the TSPM - which still controls all official Protestant activities - "was initiated in 1950 by a group of leftist Christian leaders doing the bidding of the Party". The TSPM's leading initiator was Wu Yaozong and Xiao Feng claimed that both Wu and Zhao Puchu (until his death in 1990, the Chairman of the China Buddhist Association) were both secret members of the CCP assigned to infiltrate and control their respective religions.

Zhao Puchu sought to radically re-interpret Buddhism in line with the demands of the CCP, going so far as to claim that "the first Five Year Plan is the initial blue-print of the Western Paradise here on earth". Further, the ancient Buddhist ideal of compassion for all living creatures is to be directed only towards "good people" - certainly not to class enemies of the Party. "Not only is it wrong to be compassionate to bad people," he maintained, "but it is also wrong for bad people to be compassionate to anybody at all, because that might make them appear less bad."

Zhao's stress on Buddhism being re-directed to socialist reconstruction in the here and now has a parallel with the "theological construction" campaign set out by the then TSPM leader Bishop Ding Guangxun. This radically alters traditional Protestant theology in the interests of "making religion compatible with socialism". If it is true that both these "patriotic" leaders have for fifty years been serving the ultimate interests of the CCP, much about their behaviour is explained.

Wu Yaozong has become almost the "patron saint" of the Protestant TSPM and its top leadership. The TSPM and the China Christian Council (CCC) have published a steady stream of adulatory books, booklets and articles about him. Bishop Ding, Wu's successor as head of the TSPM until recently, has quoted Wu as saying that he [Ding] "had listened to too many foreign rumours that religion was persecuted in the [CCP] liberated zones". Ding quoted Wu as declaring: "As the Motherland is beautiful, even if religion is attacked I will still love the Motherland."

Careful scrutiny of provincial TSPM/CCC leadership lists well into the 1990s reveals that many of the top leaders (often holding the key post of secretary) came from this politicised background. Both Catholics and Protestants - priests, pastors and lay people - worshipping in the officially registered churches have often privately expressed to Forum 18 their concern that people who betrayed Christians in the past should be allowed to continue to hold leadership positions in the church.

Further illuminating evidence emerged during the brief political thaw prior to the massacre in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in June 1989. At that time, religious believers seemed on the brink of far more freedom from CCP control, with much greater openness than at any time since to discuss openly the relationship between the CCP and religious communities. This also opened a window onto the structures that the party still imposes to control religious communities.

Taking advantage of the liberal climate created at that time by Premier Zhao Ziyang, a few leaders in both the TSPM and the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) called for the abolition of the entire system of religious control the CCP exerted through the "patriotic" religious associations.

Bishop Ma Ji, appointed in March 1988 to lead the Patriotic Catholic diocese of Pingliang in Gansu in north-western China, wrote an open letter "My Statement" on 14 August 1988, soundly berating the CPA as a puppet of the government. Four Chinese Catholic bishops publicly supported the letter.

Some high-ranking members of the CPA, the China Catholic Religious Administrative Commission and the Episcopal Conference of China have abandoned "the most important and fundamental commandments and teaching of the Catholic church", Bishop Ma complained, despite oaths of celibacy at their consecrations and vows to remain in the service of the church till death. "Now some high-ranking members of the three organisations have openly rejected this teaching of the church; they have committed a breach of faith and broken their vows," he pointed out. "They married, became parents and still don the priest's vestments, celebrate mass, pray for the faithful and grant absolution, swaggering like real gentlemen."

The bishop lamented that "because of the threat of left-wing elements", Catholics had to "bear their anger" in silence. "However, now is the time for reform and openness." Yet he complained that "the banner of the 'Patriotic Associations' is left hanging high over the heads of the faithful, too sacred to be touched". He said that the Patriotic Catholics were the last to see that reform was needed. "We have the guts to take our stand and we resolutely say 'no'."

An elderly Protestant Christian Zhang Shengcai, a member of the National People's Congress, went even further, fiercely

denouncing the TSPM and the Religious Affairs Bureau. In a letter to Bishop Ding on 3 April 1988, Zhang stated bluntly "at the National People's Congress I accused the RAB and the TSPM of having persecuted the church of Jesus Christ for over 30 years and asked for their response. I am sending you a copy of this letter of indictment and I welcome you as a spokesman for the TSPM to make a defence of this criminal organisation." And he told Ding: "I can no longer patiently bear your conduct in trampling underfoot the Lord's Holy Church." The original Chinese letter was published in the Hong Kong magazine *Pai Hsing* on 1 August 1988, together with Ding's low-key response.

In a follow-up letter to Ding of 9 April 1988, Zhang further outlined what he believed should be the limits of party control. "We can uphold the leadership of the CCP in politics. In the great affairs of the nation we should walk in step with the Party. But in regard to spiritual questions, questions of faith, this is holy ground which cannot be intruded upon. We cannot just obey the Party in everything. We are theists, they are atheists. To allow them to interfere in our religious life without principles and uncontrolled is to surrender to atheism." Zhang complained that the TSPM and the CCC behaved just like government organs. "They often give orders to us Christians, saying if we disobey this it is disobedience to the Party. Their threats, equating themselves with the Party are unacceptable to those of us who are not members of the TSPM or CCC!"

In August 1988 a Protestant pastor who preached in TSPM churches but was sympathetic to the unregistered house churches wrote a long letter to a house church friend. He reported that "there are Party committees within the Protestant and Catholic churches as well as in Buddhism and Islam" and specifically quoted Zhang Paiming, deputy-head of the Fujian Provincial Religious Affairs Bureau, as telling a reliable and informed friend that "every religious sect has underground Party workers and a Party committee within it".

Zhang Paiming also said at this time that Bishop Ding, then head of the TSPM, "is the secretary of the Party Committee within Protestantism and is also the Secretary of the overall Party Committee controlling the major religions at the national level (Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Islam, Daoism). Ding is a veteran Party member. In the Party his position is higher than that of the Section Heads of the Religious Affairs Bureau or even the Head of the Religious Affairs Bureau."

Even today, 26 years later, the CCP system for control of religion still follows the pattern forged in the 1950s through the "patriotic" associations. In 1999 students at Nanjing Seminary - the flagship of TSPM political orthodoxy - issued a statement condemning the TSPM as having "betrayed the trust of believers and driven Christians underground" because of the corruption and alienation of the Three Self movement we urge the government to stop relying on it to lead Christians." Three graduate students were removed from the seminary (see the 2001 Forum 18 report at <http://www.forum18.org/Hearing20010305.html>).

In May 2002 new leaders were appointed for both the TSPM and the CCC. The appointment of Cao Shengjie as CCC head and Ji Jianhong as chairman of the TSPM was greeted with dismay both inside and outside of China, as a re-affirmation of political control of the hierarchy of both bodies. Cao had worked in the 1960s with Bishop Ding's mentor Wu Yaozong and she is an eager propagator of Bishop Ding's "theological reconstruction" which aims to, in Bishop Ding's words, "weaken all those aspects within Christian faith which do not conform with the socialist society". Ji, who comes from a conservative background in the Little Flock (one of China's largest indigenous churches), is an equally enthusiastic advocate of "theological reconstruction". He has described it as "the special vision that God has bestowed on the Chinese Church, and it is God's significant commission to us".

In April 2004, according to the Amity News Service, Ji "praised the Party and the central government for their success in implementing China's religious policy." This led a Hong Kong Chinese observer to comment that "all the new senior leaders as well as the new chief executive officers of the TSPM and CCC are known for their political loyalty to the Party rather than their pastoral competency."

As these illustrations suggest, since the establishment of the Communist regime in 1949 many senior leaders in Chinese Christian organisations have willingly sacrificed the interests of their religious communities to further the objectives of the Communist state (and in the process their own careers). However, the same cannot be said with a similar degree of precision when it comes to religious communities that are closely identified with "nationalities" (those with state-designated ethnic minority status), such as Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims. Even the state-recognised Panchen Lama cannot be said to be a "willing" participant in the Chinese state's repressive apparatus. In fact, no known religious leader from the Tibetan Buddhist and Uighur Muslim communities has demonstrated similar political and ideological loyalty to the state as Ding Guangxun, Ji Jianhong or Cao Shengjie.

One possible reason is that the religious leaders of these communities do not share the same ethnic Han Chinese identification as their Christian counterparts. Their respective religious affiliations form core components of their ethnic identities. In other words, not only do they have spiritual allegiances, they also have temporal allegiances that conflict with the Chinese state. This is particularly the case for Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns and Uighur Muslim imams, many of whom believe that Tibet and Xinjiang should be permitted greater political autonomy if not outright independence from China. Their strong ethnic identity means that most religious leaders in the Uighur Muslim and Tibetan Buddhist communities are unwilling to be seen as closely associated with the Chinese state, particularly one that has treated these communities so harshly.

One implication is that when it comes to the Tibetan Buddhists and the Uighur Muslims, the Communist regime must not only suppress the religious component of their identities, it must also make sure that their ethnic identities do not destroy the Chinese state. This "political" reason has been the primary motivation for the Communist regime's efforts to control these religious

communities. For the regime, religious practices in these communities are perceived to be indistinguishable from their political desires. Armed with this perception, the Communist regime has in recent years expended considerable resources to tighten and expand its control over the Uighur Muslim communities in China as a part of the campaign against alleged Uighur separatism. According to Human Rights Watch, since 2001, the Chinese government has stepped up its political "re-education" of all imams in Xinjiang.

Indeed, more than ever, political loyalty seems to have become the prerequisite for Uighur Muslim imams who wish to obtain and maintain state recognition. These re-education efforts are administered by the Party-appointed democratic management committees (which also supervise the operation of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries) that oversee the operation of the mosques (see F18News 28 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=421). Despite these efforts on the part of the Chinese state, evidence suggests that these draconian measures have not only failed to win the hearts of these nationalities, they have actually contributed to rising discontent, including among religious leaders.

There is no doubt that religious affairs are still tightly controlled and many of the top leadership in the "patriotic" associations still come from a highly politicised background forged in the 1950s or 1960s, which is increasingly out of touch with Chinese society's race towards modernity. It is equally clear that state policy has made a significant impact on these religious communities. For example, there is no question that the state's effort has created "distortions" – religious teachings and activities that are contrary to mainstream practices – among religious communities in China (see F18News 24 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=462).

State policy has not only hindered the development of religious communities in China, in some cases, by preventing religious communities in China access to their co-religionists outside the country, it has facilitated the growth of groups, such as the Eastern Lightning sect, that are harmful to the welfare of the Chinese people and contrary to the interests of the state in social and political stability.

Yet, evidence also demonstrates the limited effectiveness of the state's policy of infiltrating and subverting the officially-sanctioned religious communities. The strongest evidence for this is that since the end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, large numbers of Chinese have joined one of the many faith communities in China. Even by the government's conservative (and imprecise) estimate, approximately 200 million religious adherents (accounting for more than 10 percent of the population) were worshipping in state-authorised venues by the turn of the 21st century. Contrary to the Communist state's expectation, religion in China is far from dying out, forcing former Chinese President Jiang Zemin to acknowledge that religion will be in China for a long time to come. Yet, the fact that religion is thriving contributes to the view in some Party circles that it presents a threat to political and social stability – or at least, the continued dominance of the CCP.

In addition, even as the state commits more resources to ensure its control over religious affairs, religious communities have also begun to respond with greater willingness to resist state encroachment. The enormous growth of unauthorised religious communities - particularly the Protestant communities concentrated in the provinces of Henan and Anhwei but also underground Catholic communities loyal to the Vatican, which are concentrated in the province of Hebei - has demonstrated the strength of resistance against state measures. Ironically, other groups and individuals, particularly the Falun Gong, have displayed a willingness to challenge state policy directly by employing one of the Communist regime's newest instruments of repression - laws - against the state.

Even state-authorised religious leaders have openly and secretly defied the Communist state by defending the interests of and providing assistance to unauthorised religious communities (see F18News 18 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=491). Indeed, many present-day pastors and priests of the various faiths see the leaders who still occupy the key positions in the "patriotic" organisations as increasingly irrelevant. They have told Forum 18 that Party control of religious organisations might be able to slow and sometimes repress religious zeal – but can no longer stop it. (END)

For analyses of other aspects of religious freedom in China, see <http://www.forum18.org/Analyses.php?region=3>

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