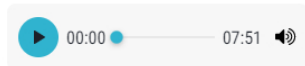


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Can Pope Francis and Xi Jinping find common ground?

by Mimi Lau

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A provisional deal to grant the Pope more authority in China has not amounted to much impact on the ground, and questions remain about the relationship moving forward.

When Beijing and the Vatican [reached a provisional agreement in 2018](#) over who had the authority to appoint Roman Catholic bishops in China, it signaled a possible breakthrough in a troubled relationship stretching back six decades.

It seems the signals were wrong.

Details of the pact – forged after more than three decades of negotiations – have never been made public. Still, the agreement marked the communist state's first indication it was ready to share some authority with the Pope over control of China's Catholic Church.

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A pact between China and the Vatican to grant the Pope more control over appointing bishops has not amounted to much. Photo: EPA-EFE/Vatican Media

The hope was the agreement would heal a rift from the 1940s, when Beijing kicked the church out of China and started an autonomous Catholic church that operates independently from Rome.

The schism directly affects around 12 million Catholics in China, about half of whom are part of a [so-called underground church](#) that looks to the Pope for authority. The other half attends Sunday mass in state-run churches controlled by Beijing's Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association.

It is understood that Pope Francis has veto power over bishop candidates proposed by Beijing, but this has never been tested.

Anthony Yao Shun was installed last August by Chinese authorities as bishop for Jining diocese in Inner Mongolia, but he was a bishop candidate chosen by the Vatican more than six years ago.



The Vatican is faced with a more dogmatic CCP leadership that feels under siege from internal and external threats.

- Lawrence Reardon, Chinese politics expert

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No new heads have been chosen for the 52 bishop-less dioceses in the two years since the agreement was signed, according to sources with knowledge of the negotiations, who declined to be named.

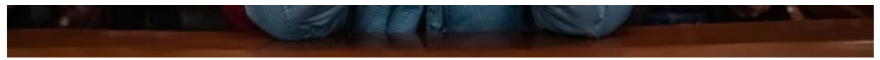
"Bishop appointments were supposed to be the first obstacle to be resolved under the agreement, but while China and the Vatican have come closer, they are not interacting and conversing on the same bandwidth," said one of the sources.

The 2018 provisional agreement expires in September, but Rome is reportedly ready to extend it by another two years, despite the Vatican being unhappy with what it sees as a failure by Beijing to fulfill its part of the bargain.

Sources said the Vatican had waited for a reciprocal gesture from Beijing after Pope Francis accepted eight bishops appointed by Beijing without his approval in December 2018, three months after the agreement was signed. One of the bishops had died before being appointed.

They said the onus had been on China to respond in kind by recognizing the same number of bishops, chosen by Rome, in the unregistered church. But China's delay in acting had generated an undercurrent of frustration, which has grown while Beijing was preoccupied with its [deteriorating ties](#) and trade conflicts with the US, as well as the [Covid-19 pandemic](#).





About half of China's Catholics attend state-run churches, while the other half are part of an underground religious network. Photo: EPA-EFE/Roman Pilipey

Lawrence Reardon, an expert on Chinese politics at the University of New Hampshire, said he was not surprised by the lack of a breakthrough in relations between the Vatican and the Chinese Communist Party.

"The Vatican is faced with a more dogmatic CCP leadership that feels under siege from internal and external threats," he said.

Despite the frustrations, there have been some signs of progress. Last month, Beijing recognized two authorities in the church loyal to the Vatican: Lin Jiashan, an 86-year-old archbishop of Fuzhou diocese in the southeastern province of Fujian, and Li Huiyuan of Fengxiang diocese in Shaanxi province in the northwest. Another bishop, Jin Lugang of Nanyang diocese in Henan province, was recognized by Beijing in January 2019.

But there are still 23 bishops chosen by the Vatican awaiting recognition by Beijing, according to sources. Beijing requires written approval for the clergy to join the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, followed by a pledge of loyalty and obedience to the party leadership.

The recent moves by China to recognize Vatican-appointed church leaders are expected to help move relations forward when Beijing negotiators meet their Vatican counterparts later this month in Rome.

The sides plan to discuss the extension to the agreement, which both sides are understood to be willing to go ahead with.



A man stands on the roof of his protestant church after government workers removed the cross in 2015. Photo: AP/Mark Schiefelbein

The *South China Morning Post* has learned that negotiators from both sides have met only once in the past 12 months, in November, after Beijing postponed discussions, citing emergencies.

A Beijing-based religious affairs researcher said China was moving slowly because "the Cold War mentality still looms large in its strategic thinking." But the researcher also said the Chinese leadership did have an interest in building ties with the Vatican because of its friendly relations with Taiwan.

"To China, the Vatican is a hot potato. On the one hand, China wishes to sever Taiwan's only European ally by building diplomatic ties with the Vatican, but the Vatican is not like Taiwan's other allies that will succumb to checkbook diplomacy," said the researcher, who asked not to be named because of

the sensitivity of the matter.

"And yet, Beijing is reluctant to move quickly ahead with the Vatican as it might trigger a growth of religious believers, which is not aligned to the interest of the mainland government."

Pope Francis has faced criticism within the church – including from two of his own cardinals – for sharing authority with a communist state. The attacks have included accusations of "selling out" the Chinese underground clergy, many of whom [served jail terms for remaining loyal to Rome](#).

Church followers are [still subject to arrest and persecution in China](#). Underground bishop Augustine Cui Tai, of Xuanhua diocese of Hebei province in northern China, has not been seen since he was arrested last month.

Another underground bishop, James Su Zhimin from Baoding diocese, also in Hebei, disappeared more than 20 years ago. Shanghai bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin remains under partial house arrest in the city's Sheshan Seminary.



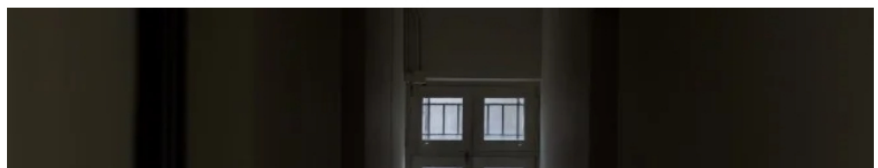
Pope Francis meets Taiwan Vice President Chen Chien-jen in 2018. Photo: Office of the President Republic of China

At the same time, Chinese authorities have acted to [contain the growth in numbers of religious believers](#) by banning minors from attending church services. Religious symbols over churches as well as mosques have been demolished or removed.

A source said the Vatican had adopted a quiet approach to avoid confrontation with China, as it would only trigger a harsh response resulting in more suffering for mainland Catholics.

Francesco Sisci, an Italian sinologist with Renmin University of China, said global conservatives were also calling on the Pope to stand up to China on other religious and human rights abuses, including the [treatment of Muslim Uygur people in the Xinjiang region](#).

"For the Vatican, issues with China are not just bilateral but multilateral. There are lots of forces pulling the Holy See in all sorts of directions so things might snap at any given time," Sisci said. "Beijing should not underestimate the value of friendship with the Vatican, especially in a time like this and should step up its game [by following through with the agreement]," he added.





Retired Cardinal Joseph Zen poses for a picture in Hong Kong . Photo: Bloomberg/ Paul Yeung

In addition to the Covid-19 pandemic and its economic disruption, China faces a chorus of international criticism. It has faced global backlash for weaponizing its trading clout, ignoring complaints of its Asian neighbors over the building of military facilities on disputed islands in the South China Sea, and for imposing a national security law on Hong Kong to curb dissent.

The Pope allows vocal critics, such as retired Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kun from Hong Kong and Myanmar's Cardinal Charles Maung Bo to "make the world aware of the pernicious nature of the party-state and exert external pressure on the Chinese party-state," said Reardon, from the University of New Hampshire.

"With the power of the Pope, he can stop Zen anytime he wants to, but he hasn't done that because his criticism is important. It serves him [by telling Beijing] you can have Zen, or you can have me, who do you want to deal with? I think this is the way the church is trying to tell the official Chinese church that we are one family and we need to work together."



Mimi Lau



Mimi is a contributor to Inkstone and a reporter at the South China Morning Post. An experienced and passionate journalist, she believes firmly in giving a voice to the voiceless.

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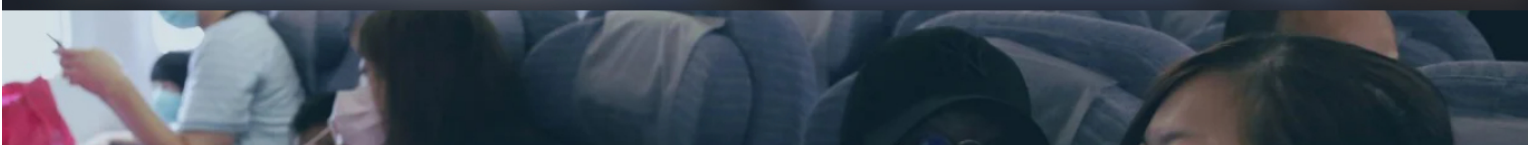
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Taiwan offers fake flights for people who miss flying

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by **Bonnie Au** and **Zinnia Lee**

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You can check in but you can never leave, at least for now, from Taiwan's Songshan Airport. The terminal in Taipei offered "fake" flights on July 2, 2020, to satisfy passengers hungry for a chance to travel as they wait for Covid-19 pandemic restrictions to be lifted. Thousands of people applied for "tickets to nowhere" that offered about 60 lucky passengers a chance to go through check-in procedures and board a plane that never left the ground.



Bonnie Au

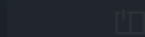
Bonnie is a contributor to Inkstone. She is a production assistant for the South China Morning Post.



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