



CHINA-VATICAN ACCORD: IS IT TIME FOR THE DALAI LAMA TO RETURN TO TIBET?

BY SOURABH GUPTA

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In late-September, the Roman Catholic Church headed by Pope Francis and the People's Republic reached an important 'provisional accord' on the appointment of bishops in China.

As per its terms (which have not been publicly disclosed), Beijing is to officially recognize the Pope's standing for the first time as head of the Catholic Church in China as well as the final authority in deciding the appointment of bishops in the country. For his part, Pope Francis is to lift the excommunications of seven bishops installed by the state-controlled Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA) and formally recognize them as leaders of their dioceses. The fate of three dozen or so Vatican-approved bishops, some of whom are in prison and not recognized by the CPCA, is unclear. The larger hope though is that as the splintering of the Catholic Church in China is reversed, the above and underground churches will in time reconcile. That the provisional accord appears to be holding can be gauged from the presence of two CPCA bishops, whose excommunications were lifted as per the agreement, at a synod in Vatican City earlier in October.

The accord's public reception has been wildly divergent. *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican's official newspaper, labeled the moment "a date in history" and described the accord as "a truly important step in the history of Christianity in China." At the other end of the spectrum, Joseph Zen Ze-kiun, the outspoken retired bishop of Hong Kong, scathingly dismissed the agreement as Francis' Faustian bargain to obtain Xi Jinping's blessing as the Roman Catholic pontiff. Latin American liberation theology might also have played a role, he added, given the pope's Argentine origin and leanings. For its part, Beijing has

maintained a studied silence aside from acknowledging the accord.

Be it a landmark or a treasonous rapprochement, the China-Vatican bishop appointment agreement has a critical bearing on the fortunes of two key Asian leaders. For Tsai Ing-wen, president of Taiwan, the agreement likely foreshadows the (gradual) beginning of the end of the Vatican's representation in Taipei. For the Dalai Lama, the ramifications are more profound. His Excellency, after all, faces an identical challenge with Beijing on the recognition of *tulkus* (or "living Buddhas") in Tibet. The issue reached a low point during the autumn of 2007 when China's State Administration of Religious Affairs mandated that monasteries applying for *tulku* reincarnation had to be registered in China and no overseas-based individual or organization would be allowed to tamper with the process. The failure to arrive at a consensual Panchen Lama pick in the mid-1990s speaks to the same problem. At a time when China's ethnic minorities policy in Xinjiang has little to recommend – to say the least – there are three sobering lessons from the China-Vatican accord.

First, for the Vatican, the lasting highlight of the accord is that the Pope's formal – if nominal – preeminence on all matters ecclesiastical on China's sovereign territory is formally confirmed for the first time. This is no small matter. That Beijing has been tight-lipped about the accord is in no small measure a product of this concession. At first blush, this bodes well for the Dalai Lama. In principle, there should be no good reason why His Excellency's preeminence on all matters within the preserve of Tibetan Buddhism could not be similarly confirmed. Given that the Dalai Lama is double-hatted in Tibet's theocratic political structure as its secular leader however (unlike the Pope), it is very unlikely that Beijing will recognize his religious preeminence unless His Excellency is again ensconced in the Potala Palace in Lhasa. His days in exile will need to be brought to closure.

Second, for the Chinese Communist Party, the lasting benefit of the accord is the Vatican's implicit recognition – via shared control over the appointments process – of the Party's overall "guiding" role in harnessing religious belief to "help [maintain] social harmony, modernization [and a] healthy civilization," a key principle of Beijing's post-1980s religious policy. The exercise of this "guiding" role over religion, in Tibet especially, dates back to imperial times – in particular, to the *bhikshu-danapati* relationship between Tibetan priest and secular patron (ruler). Introduced by the Mongols, the priest-patron relationship was not initially set out as

one between superior and inferior. Following the elimination of the Mongol khanate threat in the early-to-mid 18th century however, China's Qing rulers grafted a hierarchical cast on Beijing-Lhasa relations, even as the symbolism of *bhikshu-danapati* was preserved. Drawing lots from a ceremonial 'Golden Urn' to select a high lama came to symbolize both the reality of Chinese authority over Tibet as well as its sponsorship of the personnel-selection process. No less than the Qing Dynasty then, China's communist rulers will insist on retaining their overarching "guiding" role over religion in Tibet and a veto, in particular, on all personnel-related matters. Patriotism – as in opposition to ethnic separatism – rather than high religious virtue will be the touchstone for recognition and advancement.

The sternest test for the Dalai Lama flowing from the Vatican-China accord is likely to present itself in the realm of diplomacy. Beijing is in principle a fair-minded negotiator, willing to meet its opposite number half-way – and even beyond. Beijing is by no means a fair-minded interlocutor however when it comes to laying the difficult groundwork to facilitate a negotiation. It (effectively) insists that the opposite number be the first-mover to seek out the negotiation, that it pledge a show of good faith, and that the burden of proving sincerity by-and-large rests on the opposite number's shoulders. Francis showed himself to be equal to the task. On entering Chinese airspace in April 2014 on his way to Seoul, he posted a message of goodwill to President Xi. Indeed, of the 10 countries that he flew over to reach Seoul, only in the case of China and Mongolia did he drop all references to "God." Earlier that year, he also exchanged letters with Xi and he has assiduously continued to pursue rapprochement – the suppression of the rights of Chinese Christians notwithstanding. The Dalai Lama is no diplomatic slouch. Whether His Highness is capable – or even willing (at a time when China's minorities policies in Xinjiang have rightly been called into question) – to surmount this high bar to instill confidence in the diplomatic bridge-building outreach, remains an open question. The choppy history of failed attempts at reconciliation weigh heavily on the present.

The Dalai Lama faces a difficult choice between two dispiriting options. If he bites the bullet and returns home, his religious prerogative will likely be admitted but Beijing will insist on its overarching 'guiding' role over religion in Tibet. He will have to work out an arduous compromise with Beijing on the question of preserving the autonomy and practices of Tibetan Buddhism (on the political and territorial limits of Tibet's autonomy, the gap between Beijing and

Dharamsala is currently unbridgeable). If he remains in exile, his alternatives narrow – and worsen – with each passing year. And His Excellency is not getting any younger.

The Dalai Lama would be well-served by taking a hard re-look at his options, including that of returning to the Potala at an early, politically-feasible date.

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