

International

Hong Kong and Taiwan Catholics upbeat over Vatican-China deal

China's Catholic Church pledges loyalty to Party

HONG KONG: Worshippers at masses in Hong Kong and Taiwan were largely upbeat yesterday about a new deal between China and the Vatican, despite fears Beijing is trying to increase control over the Church. Cardinal Joseph Zen, the outspoken former Bishop of Hong Kong, accused Vatican officials of "selling out" ahead of Saturday's agreement and in a blog post shortly after the announcement he raised concern over its impact. "What will the government say to Catholics in China? 'Obey us, the Holy See is already in agreement with us?'" Zen wrote. Comments on social media accused the Vatican of turning a blind eye to a "silent cultural revolution" in China, where churches have been destroyed in recent months and there has been a clampdown on Bible sales.

But churchgoers in Hong Kong gave the deal a cautious welcome. A parishioner who gave her name as Teresa at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Hong Kong said: "More contact is positive," adding she was not worried warming ties between Beijing and the Vatican would lead to interference in the semi-autonomous city's Catholic churches. Another who gave her name as Nikki said: "Any cooperation between the two sides has to be a good thing, as long as it's equal cooperation." In Taiwan, some worshippers worried the new deal meant the island would lose its only official ally in Europe.

Beijing sees self-ruling Taiwan as part of its territory and demands its allies sever official relations. The Vatican is one of only 17 countries that maintain diplomatic ties with Taipei instead of with Beijing. Online comments on Taiwan's Liberty Times

Facebook page accused the Vatican of "dealing with the devil". But churchgoers remained confident. "I think the pope's consideration in signing the agreement is to promote religious freedom rather than establishing diplomatic relations with China, so there is no need to politicize him," said parishioner Yuan Shi-min at Our Lady of Fatima in Taipei.

The Chinese Communist Party is officially atheist and religious groups are tightly controlled by the state. China's roughly 12 million Catholics are divided between a state-run association whose clergy are chosen by the government and an unofficial church which swears allegiance to the pope. The agreement struck Saturday aimed at resolving a decades-old dispute over who gets to name bishops, and could lead to a rapprochement for the first time since diplomatic ties were severed in 1951. Shortly after the deal was unveiled, Pope Francis recognized seven clergy appointed by Beijing.

Loyalty to Party

Meanwhile, China's Catholic Church reaffirmed

its loyalty to the country's ruling Communist Party yesterday, while welcoming a landmark deal struck with the Vatican on appointing new bishops. The Vatican on Saturday signed an agreement giving it a long-desired and decisive say in the appointment of bishops in China, though critics labeled it a sellout to the government. China's around 12 million Catholics have been split between an underground Church swearing loyalty to the Vatican and the state-supervised Catholic Patriotic Association. The Catholic Church in China said it would "persevere to walk a path suited to a socialist society, under the leadership



TAIPEI: Worshippers receive communion at the Mother of Fatima Church in Taipei yesterday. Worshippers at masses in Hong Kong and Taiwan were largely upbeat about a new deal between China and the Vatican despite fears Beijing is trying to up control of the Church. —AFP

of the Chinese Communist Party."

It "deeply loved the motherland" and "sincerely endorsed" the agreement, hoping relations between China and the Vatican would improve further, it added in comments on its website. The Vatican has said the accord, a breakthrough after years of negotiations, was "not political but pastoral", and

hoped it would lead to "the full communion of all Chinese Catholics." But prospects of such an agreement had divided communities of Catholics across China, some of whom fear greater suppression should the Vatican cede more control to Beijing. Others want to see rapprochement and avoid a potential schism. —Agencies



Cardinal accuses Vatican officials of 'selling out'

Maoist rebels kill Indian lawmaker

NEW DELHI: Maoist rebels were accused yesterday of assassinating a south Indian lawmaker and another former legislator in a brazen daytime ambush on their vehicle, police and media reports said. Kidari Sarveswara Rao, a member of the ruling party in Andhra Pradesh state, was shot dead near the coastal city of Visakhapatnam in what police say was a targeted hit on the sitting legislator.

Former lawmaker S Soma, who was accompanying Rao, was also gunned down in the attack blamed on Maoist fighters active in a forested belt of central and eastern India. E Naidu, a local police official, told AFP that Rao was on a Maoist "hit list" of powerful figures accused of having ties to bauxite miners in the mineral-rich state. "There were some 30 Maoists in hiding. They attacked suddenly, giving no time for them (Rao and Soma) to react," he said.

The Press Trust of India reported that a large group blocked the car and overpowered the bodyguards escorting the two officials, before turning their weapons on them. It was the first such attack in many years in Andhra Pradesh, once a hotbed for insurgents fighting for what they say are the land rights of marginalized tribal communities. —AFP

Maldives' Yameen eyes new term in controversial poll

COLOMBO: Voting began in a controversial presidential election in the Maldives yesterday, amid fears that the process has been rigged in China-friendly strongman Abdulla Yameen's favor. Yameen has imprisoned or forced into exile all his main rivals, and is expected to retain his hold on power in the Indian Ocean island nation. Foreign monitors and the opposition have slammed his government for its crackdown on opponents and the media, and urged the international community not to recognize the results of the election.

Before polls opened, police raided the campaign headquarters of the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), searched the building for several hours in a bid to stop what they called "illegal activities". There were no arrests. Despite the crackdown, hundreds of Maldivians headed to polling booths before voting began in the capital Male. "There is a lot of enthusiasm. Voters lined up to vote despite overcast weather," MDP party worker Shauna Aminath said.

Yameen has borrowed hundreds of millions of dollars from China to build up infrastructure, alarming the nation's long-time backer India. The European Union has

said it is ready to impose travel bans and asset freezes on individuals "if the situation does not improve", while the United States has warned it would "consider appropriate measures" against those undermining democracy in the country of 1,200 islands.

Some 262,000 people in the archipelago-famed for its white beaches and blue lagoons-can vote in an election from which independent international monitors have been barred. Only a handful of foreign media have been allowed in. The Asian Network for Free Elections, a foreign monitoring group, said the campaign was heavily tilted in favor of the 59-year-old Yameen. The network said it did not expect a fair contest. "In the absence of any scrutiny (of the elections) or pressure (on the government), sombre events surely loom ahead for the people of Maldives," it said on the eve of the vote.

Silencing dissent

In February, Yameen alarmed the international community by imposing a state of emergency, suspending the constitution and sending troops to stop members of parliament who were trying to impeach him. The chief justice and a judge of the Supreme Court were jailed along with Yameen's half-brother Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, president for 30 years until 2008 and the man who helped Yameen come to power in 2013. The UN said the arrest of judges was an "outright assault on democracy".



MALE: Maldives President Abdulla Yameen (center) arrives at a polling station in the capital Male yesterday. —AFP

Mohamed Nasheed, the Maldives' first democratically elected president from 2008-12 but now in exile, called Friday for the international community to reject the election results. "Mathematically, it is not possible for Yameen to win because all opposition parties are united against him," said Nasheed, who is based in Sri Lanka. "But the results they will announce will be different to what is actually in the ballot boxes."

Nasheed was forced to withdraw from the presidential race after the Maldives election commission disqualified him because of a 2015 terrorism conviction. The United Nations said the conviction and 13-year jail sentence were politically motivated, but Yameen's government has refused to abide by the UN ruling. The relatively unknown Solih has Nasheed's backing. There are no other candidates. —AFP

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