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CHINA: Should religious freedom be a "core interest"?

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Why does the Chinese state adopt measures that result in freedom of religion and belief violations? A fundamental explanation might be found among the Chinese leadership's concept of the country's "core interests", such as territorial integrity and social stability. Religious freedom might significantly improve if the Chinese state changes its view of the relationship between its "core interests" and religious freedom. Indeed, the Chinese leadership should seriously consider designating and implementing the protection of freedom of religion and belief as one of its core interests. Doing so will do more to bolster the state's stability and legitimacy than the use of violent force against unarmed civilians. It will require much courage and determination for the new Chinese leadership to accept this reality and take positive measures to respond to the situation. But a failure to do so may result in significant negative political consequences for the Chinese state.

What might lead to an improvement in China's freedom of religion or belief record? Are there any long-term factors that would influence China's new political leaders to improve the situation – or indeed to go in the opposite direction? Any analysis of such long-term prospects must take into account macro political factors, given that China's political establishment views religious freedom and related human rights through the lens of their perception of their political interests.

Increasingly, China's leaders have been stressing what they see as China's "core interests". If these interests are as important for the leadership as they say they are, the future of religious freedom in China is deeply connected to the relationship between this freedom and these core interests. In fact, it appears that religious freedom violations sponsored by the state are undermining China's core interests. If so, it will be in the interest of China's leaders to take effective measures to promote religious freedom.

Recent freedom of religion and belief violations

Dramatic improvements in the religious freedom of – for example - Falun Gong practitioners, Tibetan Buddhists, and Uighur Muslims, will be required before it can be said that there are very significant improvements in China's religious freedom conditions. Unfortunately, the religious freedom situation in 2012 demonstrates that such improvements have yet to be achieved.

Among numerous 2012 violations, a Christian Chinese-Canadian businesswoman was detained for visiting the Shouwang Church in the capital city of Beijing and another house church in Shanxi Province, while from January 2012 government officials were appointed to manage Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in place of "loyal" monks (see F18News 20 March 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1681).

In June, officials of China's State Security Ministry forced a Hong Kong-registered religious non-governmental organisation (NGO) to halt a scheduled training camp for mainland Chinese students (see F18News 12 July 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1720).

Catholic Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin was placed under house arrest after he resigned from the state-approved Catholic Patriotic Association (see F18News 26 November 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1771). In December he was stripped of his title by the state.

Furthermore, in a sign of the Chinese government's refusal to engage with the international community on the issue of religious freedom, it denied a request by the United States Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom to visit China in February 2012.

Explanations for freedom of religion or belief violations

Different explanations have been offered for why such religious freedom violations continue.

The most commonly cited explanation is communist ideology. Diehard believers in communism find repugnant any belief that is not atheism. But communism has a declining number of real believers in today's China. Even many Communist Party of China (CPC) members do not believe in communism, given the evidence that senior state officials often engage in "superstitious" practices.

Indeed, members of the banned Falun Gong movement originally included government officials and CPC members. Even though the CPC remains China's ruling party, communism exists in China mainly in name only (see F18News 20 March 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1681).

A related explanation is that such violations occur because of the absence of the rule of law, which also affects other areas of Chinese society such as NGOs (see F18News 12 July 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1720). This reflects the fact that the communist party-state is above the law and employs laws and regulations to serve state interests.

Other explanations are that such violations are the result of wider state policies. Thus, the state's wish to control the economy – also including the financial aspect of religious sites – promotes conflicts involving officials and religious communities (see F18News 12 September 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1741). Similarly, the state's control of the media to limit popular knowledge of religious beliefs, and curtail criticism of the state, seems to promote a climate of hostility to freedom of religion or belief (see F18News 21 May 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1704). State control of the internet also limits the ability of Chinese citizens to advocate for religious freedom (see F18News 29 November 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1771).

A fundamental explanation?

These factors are all important in understanding why religious freedom violations continue. But they do not fully answer the important questions: Why does the Chinese state think it necessary to control manifestations of freedom of religion or belief? Why does the Chinese state adopt measures that result in religious freedom violations?

A fundamental explanation for the state of religious freedom in China might be found among the country's "core interests".

China views its core interests as non-negotiable items that have direct and significant implications for China's overarching national interest as defined by the leadership. Officials increasingly refer to them explicitly in their rhetoric, and in official domestic and international documents. For example, the November 2009 US-China Joint Statement, issued during a meeting between Chinese President Hu Jintao and US President Barack Obama, includes this sentence: "The two sides agreed that respecting each other's core interests is extremely important to ensure steady progress in U.S.-China relations."

According to Michael Swaine, a China specialist affiliated with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "major official and unofficial [Chinese] media mentions of China's core interests in a foreign-policy context increased notably beginning in the early 2000s". In this analysis, published in the China Leadership Monitor by Stanford University's Hoover Institution in February 2011 (see <http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/article/67966>), Swaine noted that the notion of core interest had been employed earlier, "but primarily in a domestic context".

What are China's core interests?

The range of core interests is undefined and unclear, and is seen by some as expanding. Based on references in official speeches, Swaine identified "human rights" as a core interest relating to other core interests such as territorial issues like Tibet. In the Chinese government's "White Paper on China's Peaceful Development", issued in September 2011, the following core interests were listed:

state sovereignty;

national security;

territorial integrity and national reunification;

China's political system;

overall social stability;

and ensuring sustainable economic and social development.

The Chinese authorities consistently view freedom of religion or belief-related matters through the prism of "core interests". They have cited the need for social and political stability, and the maintenance of territorial integrity, as reasons for adopting measures that result in religious freedom violations.

Given this linkage, religious freedom might significantly improve if the Chinese state changes its view of the relationship between its "core interests" and religious freedom. We can get a sense of the possible changes if we look at the 2012 religious freedom violations noted earlier.

Were the Chinese government to see religious freedom and other human rights as contributing to national security and social

stability, then the case of the detention of a Christian Chinese-Canadian businesswoman for visiting the leader of the Beijing Shouwang Church and a house church in Shanxi Province might not have occurred.

If the Chinese government refrains from viewing Tibetan Buddhism through the sole prism of territorial integrity, then Tibetan Buddhist monasteries managed by monks would be likely to be the norm rather than the exception.

If the Chinese government changes its view that foreign religious organisations are agents of hostile foreign interests, then foreign religious NGOs would be free to conduct doctrinal and practical training sessions for Chinese religious believers and workers.

Similarly, the relationship between the Chinese state and the Holy See would improve dramatically, if the former no longer sees the latter as interested in subverting China's political system.

Finally, if the Chinese state does not use the vague political concept of "stability" to deal with religious organisations and activities, then prosecutions of religious groups and their members would be more likely to take place only if they harm the specific interests and well-being, notably the legal rights, of other people and themselves.

Rethinking religious freedom's relationship to core interests

It is thus possible that even non-democratic China might have much more genuine religious freedom. But it seems that the first step would be for the state to rethink the linkage between religious freedom and the Chinese state's core interests. How might this happen? To answer this question, we must address three issues: the legitimacy of China's core interests, Chinese officials' application of those core interests, and China's primary concerns that underlie those core interests.

First, there is nothing remarkable about these identified core interests, as they are shared by many other governments. So one can expect a high degree of consensus among the political elite, as well as ordinary citizens, that these are legitimate interests of any state.

However, in democracies, these core interests are generally accompanied by legal stipulations. Collisions between such core interests and religious freedom and other human rights arise when the limits of core interests are not well defined and when they are placed above the law. This appears to be the main problem with China's treatment of its core interests.

This gets to the second issue. Aside from core interests that refer specifically to Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan, none of the stated core interests has been openly defined by the state. Observed practices, which involve wide-ranging applications of these core interests, certainly do not suggest that they have been well defined. The core interests that refer to Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan appear to focus on their implications for China's territorial integrity, but they are often invoked by Chinese officials to have applications beyond the protection of territorial borders and the prevention of internal insurrections. One result is that Chinese officials have adopted measures that lead to religious freedom violations.

It is beyond the scope of this analysis to examine the kind of legal stipulations and process that would help ensure implementing these core interests does not violate religious freedom and other human rights. The experience of democracies suggests that numerous inter-locking legal review mechanisms are necessary. One example would be the way Ireland and Britain have approached the relationships between territorial integrity, national security, social stability, and human rights in Northern Ireland; both states have found that respect for human rights reinforces their other core interests. Having a sound legal review system in place does not free governments from legal and human rights problems in relation to core interests. But without a sound legal system governments can find that their core interests are undermined – sometimes dramatically so.

But the fundamental issue is not legal; the basic problem here is political, not legal. Does the Chinese state have the political will to develop a system of appropriate legal stipulations and review mechanisms to ensure that religious freedom and human rights of its people are assured as it addresses its core interests?

Answering this question takes us to the third issue, which gives further proof that the fundamental challenge is a political one. Setting aside for a moment whether one supports Tibetan or Xinjiang independence, it is important to recognise that China does have a reasonable strategic interest in Tibet and Xinjiang, not least as these territories are sources of important natural resources for China. Similarly, it cannot be denied that the Chinese state has a legitimate interest in social order, as it is governing a country that is the fourth largest in the world in terms of area and the largest in terms of population. For the Chinese state to exercise the political will to erect and enforce a system to safeguard religious freedom, it must see that its strategic concerns are addressed satisfactorily.

With respect to territorial integrity, by and large the issue has been resolved. The last major insurrection in Tibet took place in the 1950s, when the Dalai Lama fled Tibet. By all accounts, that insurrection occurred because rumour spread, probably by CIA-supported guerrillas, that the Chinese communist government was planning to forcibly relocate the Dalai Lama to Beijing. There has been no known foreign government-involvement in any insurrection in Xinjiang since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. There has been, however, serious unrest and the Chinese state has publicly linked the unrest to Islamic radicalism and terrorism outside China.

But it is important to note that much unrest in Xinjiang has been in reaction to state-sponsored discrimination and interference against the Uighurs. Similarly, the dramatic actions of the Tibetans, which have produced tragic consequences, have largely been responses to the Chinese state's refusal to recognise the Dalai Lama as a legitimate religious figure. Put simply, much if not most of the unrest in both places have not necessarily been about attempts to achieve territorial separation from China. Indeed, heavy-handed state crackdowns are likely to encourage a wish to separate from China. Moreover, given the importance of a stable China for regional and global stability, there is increasingly little likelihood of any foreign government being interested in supporting either the separation of Tibet or Xinjiang from China, or rapid radical change in China's political system.

If this assessment is accurate, instability in Tibet and Xinjiang is fuelled by the Chinese state's actions, notably its failure to recognise the right to religious freedom of Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims. The same conclusion can be applied to the religious freedom situation in the rest of China, which is dominated by Han Chinese. In other words, China's state-sponsored violations of religious freedom and human rights have constituted the primary factors that undermine the country's social and political stability.

Curiously, the Chinese state is already aware that failure to handle religion-related issues will negatively impact its core interests, notably social and political stability. For example, the 1982 party document on religious affairs, widely known as "Document 19" and which remains the leading state document on religious affairs, makes it clear that the adoption of "simplistic methods" to address religious issues will be "very harmful" to the interests of the state (see F18News 15 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=584). The document also notes clearly that "discriminating and repressing the masses of religious adherents .. can only enlarge the gulf between religious adherents and the masses of non-religious adherents. In addition, it will stimulate and intensify religious fanaticism and lead to seriously negative effects for the socialist enterprise."

The state's policies and practices, which have caused religious freedom violations, have clearly produced results that the document expressly warns against. Therefore, it is in the state's interests to adopt measures that lead to different results. Indeed, there are indications that some political leaders and their senior advisers are beginning to see that religious freedom and religious believers might contribute to the furtherance of social stability and other core interests of the state (see F18News 20 March 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1681). So it is certainly in the state's interest to adopt measures that foster greater religious freedom.

That the state has not adopted those measures is a reflection of the central state's inability and unwillingness to rein in the excesses of the individual local officials, which reflect the state's lack of confidence in the legitimacy of the political system. However, the Guangdong leadership's effective handling of a major village protest in 2011, which involved the sacking of the village officials and the holding of a village election to elect new village leaders, suggests that some senior Chinese officials recognise that "sticks" are not always the best means to protect the state's core interests. Such examples encourage cautious optimism about the future of religious freedom in China.

The future

The Chinese state, by its own actions, has caused religious freedom violations which have undermined its own core interests. No major power in the world wants to see a politically unstable and socially chaotic China. Hence, the Chinese government has little to worry about any foreign conspiracy to harm China's core interests, notably social stability and territorial integrity. Ironically, Chinese leaders should be more concerned about how the state's actions are producing the very scenarios that they want to avoid.

Therefore, it is in the Chinese state's interests to take positive measures to improve China's religious freedom condition substantively. In fact, the Chinese leadership should seriously consider designating and implementing the protection of religious freedom as one of its core interests. Doing so will do more to bolster the state's stability and legitimacy than the use of violent force against unarmed civilians. It will require much courage and determination for the new Chinese leadership to accept this reality and take positive measures to respond to the situation. But a failure to do so will not only result in more religious freedom violations; it may also result in significant negative political consequences for the Chinese state. (END)

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

A printer-friendly map of China is available from <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=China>.

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