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CHINA: How believers resist state religious policy

By Magda Hornemann, Forum 18

The new Religious Affairs Provisions, to go into effect on 1 March 2005, have been claimed by Chinese officials to represent a "paradigm shift" in official thinking about religious affairs. But most analysts agree that they represent almost no real change. However, the rules do offer insights into the "everyday forms of resistance" that religious believers - such as 'underground' and 'overground' Protestants and Catholics, Falun Gong practitioners, Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists - practice against arbitrary state regulations and oppressive actions by officials. Chinese believers are not just passive victims of the state's repressive religious policy. While few are openly defiant, they are certainly resisting - in many cases quite effectively. It is still too early to see who will eventually win in this continuing struggle between a state with ever-declining control over society and a society becoming more assertive in protecting its rights against the state.

In November 2004, China's media announced that the State Council had promulgated new Religious Affairs Provisions, to go into effect on 1 March. Although Chinese officials claimed that the new regulations represent a "paradigm shift" in official thinking about religious affairs, most analysts agree that the new rules represent almost no real change from existing government regulations, policies and rhetoric.

The state remains insistent on maintaining its control of the legality and legitimacy of religious organisations, requiring all religious organisations to obtain approval from the state before they undertake any activities. The new rules even singled out the Muslim, Tibetan Buddhist and Catholic communities in specifying requirements for religious pilgrimages and clerical appointments. While one article in the provisions stipulated that government officials (there was no mention of Communist Party officials) would be held legally accountable for abuses, there is no assurance that this accountability will be enforced.

All in all, the new Religious Affairs Provisions appear to reiterate existing regulations without any evidence that the Communist rulers have yet undergone the claimed "paradigm shift" in their attitudes to religious matters. Indeed, the newly-promulgated regulations provide additional evidence that government suspicion of the "subversive" nature of religion has, at best, not diminished and that the state remains unwilling to surrender its control of religious affairs.

This unchanging attitude is reflected in a secret Communist Party document circulated to party and government agencies in May 2004. This document - newly disclosed by the US-based China Aid Association - revealed the extent of the ruling party's new campaign to "strengthen the research, propaganda and education of Marxist atheism" while combating "cultic organisations", "ignorant superstitions" and "Western enemy forces that use religion to 'Westernise' and 'divide'" China.

Over the years, the Chinese government has provided ample documentation for those interested in understanding its religious policies. Unsurprisingly therefore, most published analyses and reports on religious freedom in China have focused on what the state is doing. Yet, while the plight of the victims of those policies has been noted, how these individuals have coped with the repressive environment in which they live and the "resistance" they have adopted in the face of state abuses have not been systematically analysed.

One reason for the dearth of reporting on this subject is that relatively little information is publicly available about large-scale protest demonstrations by religious communities and individuals. While the Chinese government maintains regular statistics on the number of "mass group incidents" - a euphemism for large-scale protests or unrest - there is no indication whether mass demonstrations in the name of religion are included in this category. Instead, most of the government-reported incidents appear to involve labour strikes, student demonstrations and ethnic unrest.

It is possible that few public demonstrations have been staged solely for religious reasons. Other than Falun Gong practitioners' well-known public displays of civil disobedience in the early days of the state's repression against the movement, and periodic protests by Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists, which also involve the important political issue of autonomy or independence vis-a-vis China, no significant public demonstrations are known to have been mounted in the name of religion or religious freedom within recent memory.

Yet it is clear that religious communities and believers are engaged in what social scientists and historians have called "everyday

forms of resistance" against arbitrary state regulations and oppressive actions by officials. Such everyday resistance takes place regularly, but generally avoids direct confrontation with state authorities. This resistance is quiet, out of the public spotlight and essentially evasive in nature. Yet, it is precisely these everyday forms of resistance that cause headaches for the government because the Communist regime can never be certain that its repression will ever completely eradicate religion. Hence the need for periodic campaigns to uphold "Marxist atheism" and to crack down on "superstitions" and "cults".

What are examples of this everyday resistance? Laws and regulations may provide some insights, because in authoritarian states they are adopted primarily to address "problems" regimes confront. Laws and regulations also contain stipulations which religious communities often try to resist. So the recently-promulgated religious affairs provisions may provide insights into how religious communities and individuals resist the state's demands.

It is well-known that central to the Chinese state's effort to control religious communities is the requirement that religious organisations register with the government. Yet, equally well-publicised is that many religious groups are unwilling to do so for doctrinal reasons and out of concern that registration would result in greater state intervention in the internal affairs of those communities. Of course, that it is often difficult to register with the government has also contributed to the decision by many religious groups not to register.

Instead of directly confronting the political authorities over the state's denial of the "legality" to meet, most of these religious groups have chosen to meet clandestinely. The burgeoning underground Protestant communities are a clear illustration of this.

These underground groups congregate regularly in the homes of individual believers, where they meet for worship services and fellowship in secret. The documentary film "The Cross: Jesus in China" - released by the China Soul for Christ Foundation in 2003 - gives an impression of these meeting locations, which change constantly. Meetings are held with such great secrecy that few outsiders are permitted to visit them. Several years ago, members of one Protestant congregation took a foreign television crew to their meeting place only after blindfolding them to ensure that they would not be able to find the location again.

That the great majority of underground Protestant communities are located in rural parts of China has helped their rather successful evasive tactics. The authorities often find it difficult to maintain effective constant surveillance of these communities, given the large geographical areas they would have to monitor. Yet Protestants in urban areas unwilling to worship in state-approved venues also meet in private homes or other non-registered places, with ever greater frequency.

On 24 December 2004, a group of Christians was planning a Christmas Eve celebration at a Beijing restaurant, Agence France Presse reported. Unfortunately, the authorities got wind of the planned meeting, prevented the organisers from leaving their homes and forced the restaurant owner to cancel his agreement to rent the restaurant to the Christian group.

Another provision of the recent regulations requires religious organisations to obtain state approval to establish religious educational institutions. This onerous requirement is compounded by the authorities having limited the number of religious education institutions that are permitted to function, which has resulted in insufficient numbers of trained clerics and other personnel to meet the needs of growing religious communities.

To circumvent this restriction, religious communities have established their own non-state approved religious training institutions. Again, the Protestant communities serve as a useful illustration. As depicted in various reports and the above-mentioned film on the underground Protestant communities, many young men and women have been trained in this manner. They are the famous itinerant preachers that have roamed the Chinese countryside. In many known cases, Chinese clerics and lay people from outside China have taken part in many of these training sessions as instructors and purveyors of instructional materials.

Religious communities have also provided instruction to children under 18 years of age despite government regulations that prohibit such practice. Catholic youths are known to study catechism in private homes during the summer, while Protestant youths have participated in holiday Bible schools. In July 2002, more than 20 Catholic youths were arrested in Fujian province for attending a catechism class.

This stealthy provision of religious education to minors is not confined to Christian communities. Uighur Muslims continue to operate, in secret, religious schools for their children despite government regulations that prohibit them (see F18News 28 September 2004 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=421>). According to some reports, as many as hundreds of these institutions may be functioning today.

Another "old" theme of the new provisions is the requirement that Chinese religious organisations should function independent of "foreign forces", a particularly challenging requirement for religious communities with recognised leaders outside China. For the Chinese Catholic community in the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA), particularly its bishops, government restrictions have meant that they must either sever all ties with the Vatican or seek papal recognition privately. According to analysts, more than half China's current Catholic bishops have secured papal consent after their consecration in the state-approved CPA.

However, several years ago CPA bishops showed willingness to express their displeasure about state practices. On 6 January 2000,

five bishops were consecrated in Beijing by state authorities without obtaining prior approval from the Vatican. It later emerged that several bishops, as well as teachers and seminarians of the CPA national seminary in Beijing, refused to attend the ceremony to express their disapproval, thereby dampening the state's initial enthusiasm for this act.

Like the Catholics, Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns face similar dilemmas. Though pressured by the Communist state to denounce the Dalai Lama, the great majority have refused to do so. While these monks and nuns might not have chosen to confront the Chinese authorities directly on this issue, as many of their fellow monks and nuns have done, they have demonstrated their resistance to government pressure in more subtle ways.

In 2001, the government launched a major effort to expel hundreds of monks, nuns and Buddhist scholars from the monastic institute and nunnery in Ganzi Prefecture in the province of Sichuan. Before the government campaign was initiated, the institute - founded in 1980 by the now-deceased Khenpo Jigme Phuntsog - was the largest centre of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibetan-populated areas with several thousand monks, nuns and scholars in residence. According to the Tibet Information Network, government authorities required the expelled individuals to sign a document before they left that included a denunciation of the Dalai Lama. Yet, many nuns apparently left the institute without signing.

The Chinese state's pressure to de-legitimise the Dalai Lama pervades Tibetan society, including the ban on displaying his photograph in homes. Yet while many Tibetans have chosen not to display photographs openly in their homes, they have also not discarded them. There is little indication that the Tibetan people's loyalty to the Dalai Lama has declined. Over four decades since the Dalai Lama was forced to flee Tibet, the Chinese Communist regime has yet to eradicate effectively his political and spiritual influence.

Another long-standing state restriction on religious freedom that is reaffirmed in the new provisions is the stipulation that religious materials may be printed only by state-approved agencies. While religious literature can be obtained from state-recognised religious organisations, many unregistered groups refuse to do so for fear of exposing themselves. Even if they are able to obtain literature from the state-approved agencies without scrutiny, not enough literature is printed to meet the needs of unregistered religious communities.

Government-authorised printing presses may not be printing enough religious materials to meet the needs of China's religious communities, both registered and unregistered. The Amity Printing Company - authorised by the government to print Bibles and other Christian literature since 1987 - claimed that it printed approximately 30 million Bibles between 1987 and 2003. However, some foreign groups, such as Christian missionary organisation Open Doors, argue that this is insufficient to meet the needs of an unregistered Christian community that is said to be growing by millions every year (though the extent of such growth is disputed).

One result is that many unregistered groups have chosen to print their own literature. Unregistered house church pastor Cai Zhuohua was arrested in November 2004 for possessing illegally-printed materials. Others have resorted to smuggling printed literature from outside China. In 2002 a Hong Kong man was arrested for smuggling literature based on the writings and doctrines of deceased Protestant preacher Watchman Nee to Nee's adherents inside China.

Clerics in state-recognised religious institutions who secretly maintain connections with and help unregistered religious communities have also employed such evasive tactics. Again, the Protestant community is a case in point. It has been widely reported that many pastors and teachers at the national Nanjing Theological Seminary have secretly provided religious instruction to pastors and members of unregistered Protestant communities while maintaining their official posts.

Even as believers use stealth to evade government control, many have recently also become more willing to risk providing information about the extent of state repression to individuals and agencies outside China. Perhaps the most enduring symbol of such courage is Rebiya Kadeer, the well-known Uighur Muslim arrested in 1999 and sentenced to eight years in prison for passing newspaper clippings to her husband, who lives outside China. A more recent case involved a Uighur Muslim teacher, Abdulghani Memetemin, reportedly sentenced to nine years in prison for providing information about state repression of Uighur Muslims to Uighur human rights groups in Europe.

As state repression continues, reports have increased that a greater number of religious believers are adopting more confrontational, but non-violent, means to address the wrongs they have suffered.

These individuals are engaged in what Kevin O'Brien, a political scientist and expert on Chinese politics, has termed "rightful resistance". According to O'Brien, "rightful resisters" "assert their claims largely through approved channels and use a regime's policies and legitimating myths to justify their defiance." Unlike everyday resisters, rightful resisters "seek rather than avoid the attention of elites". However, for such resistance to emerge, the "discontented community members must first become aware that they have been granted certain protections".

Indeed, awareness appears to be growing that laws are meant to protect the rights of the citizens and are not simply policy instruments for the state. Western media have reported an increasing number of cases in which Chinese peasants and labourers have employed laws and regulations to seek redress for perceived injustices. Likewise, some religious groups have apparently become

involved in educating their co-religionists about the use of laws as a means to seek redress.

However, such efforts are not without costs. In 2003, fellow Christians in the unregistered churches actively sought assistance in preparing the legal defence of Pastor Gong Shengliang, the founder of the South China Church. In September, Xiao Biguang, the coordinator of Pastor Gong's legal defence, was arrested on charges of leaking state information.

Yet, these failures have not deterred religious believers from continuing the effort. On 7 January 2005, the Chinese version of the Epoch Times, which is reportedly funded and operated by Falun Gong practitioners outside China, reported that a Chinese lawyer had written an appeal to China's parliament and its standing committee chairman on behalf of an imprisoned Falun Gong practitioner. Although the letter did not appear to challenge the official "cultic" designation of the Falun Gong movement, it did accuse state officials of violating the constitution and criminal code by depriving the Falun Gong practitioner of due process.

More specifically, the lawyer argued that the lack of appeal and verification mechanisms to address the charge of "using cultic organisations to destroy the enforcement of state laws" against Falun Gong practitioners is unconstitutional. In addition, state officials failed to present identification when they arrested the practitioner. Moreover, the practitioner's spouse and children were denied their request to visit him during his incarceration. Furthermore, state officials forged his signature and his application for a court trial was refused without any due process. Finally, his lawyers must obtain the approval of the "610" office - an agency set up with the specific intent of dealing with issues related to the Falun Gong - to visit the imprisoned practitioner.

Finally, technology is contributing greatly to the independent capacity of religious communities and individuals to resist the state. In December 2004, the Chinese government's chief Internet watchdog, the Reporting Centre for Illegal and Harmful Information, reported that it had closed over 1,000 websites that contained "harmful information" on topics that include "religious cults" and "superstition".

The reporting centre did not publicise specific information about websites that were shut down for containing illegal religious information (the centre's website did provide lists of pornographic sites that were closed). Forum 18's own research has also yielded little information about the extent to which Chinese religious communities, particularly unregistered ones, operate published websites. However, that research has also revealed that an increasing number of individual believers are using the internet to communicate with each other and with those outside China. The government's continuing need to crack down on these websites testifies to the state's difficulty in maintaining social control in the information age (see F18News 21 July 2004 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=366>).

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

A printer-friendly map of China is available from
<<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=china>>

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