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CHINA: A post-Communist managerial state and freedom of religion or belief

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Violations of freedom of religion or belief in China have continued, yet religious communities of all kinds have been growing rapidly. The Chinese Communist Party's attitude toward religion – and so towards the fundamental human right of freedom of religion or belief – has reflected the views of Chinese political elites from the 19th century onwards that religion is "superstition" and a barrier to modernisation, Forum 18 News Service notes. This has led to a political approach that could be characterised as "managerial", which allows the state to retain the will and power to control religious communities. The managerial approach in today's China is more practical and flexible than the ideologically-oriented approach of the Cultural Revolution. It leaves room for religious believers and communities to manoeuvre and even grow. Indeed, there is evidence of influences from religious believers among Communist Party officials. The long-term impact this may have on freedom of religion or belief and related human rights remains to be seen. But the future of religious freedom in China is not necessarily bleak.

Violations of freedom of religion or belief in China have been widespread, persistent, and egregious. Recent widely-reported incidents have reinforced this view. Despite this, religious communities of all kinds have been growing rapidly. An answer to this puzzle lies in the fact that the Chinese Communist Party's attitude toward religion – and therefore towards the fundamental human right of freedom of religion or belief – has, to a large extent, reflected the views of the modern Chinese elite and the Communist state's institutional predecessors that religious beliefs have been impediments to modernisation. This has led to a political approach that could be characterised as managerial, which allows the state to retain the will and power to control religious communities.

The managerial approach that one can observe in China is more practical and flexible than an ideologically-oriented one in that the state does not view the eradication of religious beliefs as the ultimate political end. This leaves room for religious communities to manoeuvre and even grow. In this respect, the future of religious freedom in China is not necessarily bleak.

A picture of contrasts

On 9 February two Tibetan Buddhist monks were killed in Sichuan Province by Chinese security forces for their participation in a 23 January protest against China's rule over Tibet, Radio Free Asia reported. A day before the killing, another Tibetan monk attempted a self-immolation in Qinghai province for the same reason. On 17 March, a Tibetan farmer became the most recent case of self-immolation. This brought to 29 the number of Tibetans known to have attempted self-immolation over the past year, of which 21 are known to have died, according to FreeTibet.org. Many were monks, former monks or nuns.

Meanwhile, DossierTibet reported on 11 February that hundreds of Tibetans were held in Lhasa after they returned in January from attending a religious gathering in India. Even more recently, according to Human Rights Watch, the Chinese government has changed its management policy with respect to Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. Effective January 2012, instead of employing "loyal" Tibetan monks, the state would appoint government officials to manage those monasteries.

While the Tibetan Buddhists struggled, the Chinese Protestants were facing their own challenges. As a result of government intervention, the capital Beijing's Shouwang Church has continued to be deprived of access to a permanent physical home. In the process, church members have been subjected to police arrests and other forms of harassment as they tried to assemble for worship outdoors. Even foreign Protestant Christians seemed unable to avoid the government's repressive measures. According to the China Aid Association, a Canadian businesswoman of Chinese descent was kidnapped and denied food and water for two days by Chinese security agents in January 2012 after visiting the leader of Shouwang and a house church in Shanxi Province.

By most accounts, the attitude of the Chinese Communist Party to religious freedom has not changed in recent years (see F18News 13 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=910). Violations of religious freedom have persisted alongside other human rights violations. Amnesty International, for example, wrote in its 2011 report: "The Chinese government responded to a burgeoning civil society by jailing and persecuting people for peacefully expressing their views, holding religious beliefs not approved by the state, advocating for democratic reform and human rights, and defending the rights of others." Similarly, Human Rights Watch stated in its 2011 report: "China continues to be an authoritarian one-party state that imposes sharp curbs on freedom

of expression, association, and religion."

Yet, while the Chinese government and its agents perpetrate these religious freedom violations, religions in China have experienced growth and vitality that have not been seen for decades. In addition to the extraordinary growth in the number of religious believers, religious venues and activities have been highly visible.

Protestant churches across China are packed with worshippers on a regular basis. The enormous state-permitted Beijing Haidian Christian Church, located in the heart of China's Silicon Valley, is filled wall-to-wall each Sunday with worshippers. Forum 18 has on one occasion witnessed a member of the church staff passing out leaflets about the church's services to pedestrians in the busy commercial area surrounding the church. Shanghai's famed Community Church, which is located in the area known among foreigners as the old French Concession, has routinely witnessed a large number of participants in its Sunday worship services. Many have to sit in the church's courtyard due to the lack of seating inside the sanctuary. Even unofficial churches have been packed with people. Forum 18 has attended one such house church in Beijing's Haidian District.

The Christian community has not been the only Chinese religious community that has experienced tremendous growth. For example, Forum 18 has visited Buddhist temples across China, from Beijing to Chongqing, which is China's largest city with nearly 30 million residents extended over more than 80,000 square kilometres (31,000 square miles). Whether incense burning has been sustained (xianghuo wang) has commonly been perceived as an indicator of the vibrancy of a Buddhist temple. By this measure, Chinese Buddhist temples have achieved tremendous vibrancy. The throngs of people who visit those Buddhist sites to offer prayers and consult Buddhist monks further attest to Buddhism's popularity in China.

The self-immolations by Buddhist monks and other Tibetans, and the experience of the Shouwang Christian Church have demonstrated the ongoing limits to religious freedom in China, even as religious communities have at the same time been vibrant and growing. As the state and its agents have been the primary perpetrators of religious freedom violations, these contrasting situations suggest a need for a deeper understanding about the Chinese Communist state and its attitude toward religion.

A managerial state

An understanding of the development of the Chinese Communist state's religious policies must recognise that its attitude toward religion has, to a large extent, reflected the views of the modern Chinese elite and the Communist state's institutional predecessors. Put simply, since the middle of the 19th century, Chinese thinkers and members of the political elite have been disdainful towards religion and religious believers. The elite has consistently seen religion, or "superstitions" as they characterised religious beliefs, as the obstacle to China's modernisation. In their eyes, spiritual beliefs have made China less resistant against the onslaught of modern Western countries and less capable of adopting new technologies and associated ideas and practices to face western colonisation of China.

Chinese Communist leaders have been no different. The earliest Chinese Communist leaders were direct ideological descendants of the non-Communist Chinese modernisers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For the Chinese Communist leaders, including Mao Zedong, the most important priority was to modernise China and turn it into an advanced country that could compete effectively against the Western colonisers. In a related fashion, just as China needed to undergo modernisation, it was also necessary for it to become truly independent vis-a-vis foreign, notably Western, governments. Anything that stood in the way of achieving this objective should be removed.

This perspective has resulted in pragmatic – in terms of the elite's understanding - state behaviour toward religions and religious believers. On the one hand, the Communist state engaged in systematic repression of religions and religious believers. For example, soon after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the Communist state engaged in a systematic effort to wipe out indigenous spiritual beliefs, because they were perceived to be associated with local traditions that had hindered development progress. Likewise, the state systematically repressed and co-opted foreign religions, notably Christianity, in an effort to remove any channels through which hostile foreign forces could overturn the newly-established Communist regime and the socio-economic system that it was trying to create.

On the other hand, the Chinese Communist state has allowed religions and religious practices to continue in regions populated by ethnic minorities. The official reason for this approach was that religious beliefs and practices constituted the cultural core for many ethnic minorities. So to adhere to its policy of allowing ethnic minorities greater autonomy, the state allowed religions to continue in ethnic minority regions. To put it more bluntly and in practical terms, the Chinese Communists allowed religions in ethnic minority communities, because the state did not have the capacity to eradicate them without causing such an enormous disaster. In other words, the Chinese Communists were very pragmatic.

The Cultural Revolution of 1966-76 represented the peak of ideological fury in Communist China. During this period religious communities and believers were driven underground. However, the Cultural Revolution was not the end of the Chinese Communist experience. Indeed, one can now see that the Cultural Revolution represented an unusual period in the short history of the Chinese Communist state.

Pragmatism returned with the reform era, when China's political leaders made a conscious decision to set aside ideological considerations and return to the task of modernising the country. Following the state's recent emphasis on "social management" as the key political task, the Chinese Communist state has become a "managerial state". Reflecting this shift in the state's primary political interest, since the beginning of the 21st Century, Chinese Communist leaders have emphasised the importance of maintaining social stability, even when such a policy approach could harm the nation's modernisation.

Ideological rhetoric has not and will not disappear completely in China. Echoing other senior Chinese political leaders, Vice Minister Zhu Weiqun of the Communist Party's United Front Department stated in December 2011 that communism and religion are incompatible and that members of the Communist Party must disavow religious beliefs. Such statements are interesting for many reasons, one of which is that they clearly indicate that members of the Communist Party have been following religious beliefs (see F18News 13 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=910).

In a series of writings that culminated in the book entitled *Democracy Without Accountability*, China scholar Lily Tsai has noted that local Party officials have participated in local religious practices and even adopted religious beliefs. Over the past ten years, reports have circulated inside and outside China that Protestant Christians have been working at the highest level of Chinese government. In addition, many practitioners of the spiritual movement Falun Gong were apparently senior members of the Chinese military and the Chinese government. In fact, Falun Gong's founder had originally received state support for his organisation and activities. In other words, the Falun Gong movement and other qigong (philosophical and health) movements were promoted by the Communist state (see F18News 31 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=292).

It remains to be seen what impact religious belief among officials may have on the view held by Chinese political elites since the 19th century that religion is "superstition" and a barrier to modernisation. Similarly, it is not clear to what extent official thinking has reflected the view of the Chinese elite. Yet, a change in this elite view could have a very positive impact on the future of freedom of religion or belief and interlinked human rights in China.

In contrast to statements such as those by Vice Minister Zhu Weiqun, other senior Chinese political leaders have made very different statements. For example, Hu Jintao, the President of China, has reportedly stated that religions could contribute to social stability. And Wen Jiabao, the head of the Cabinet, was reported in February to have emphasised the need to protect the religious freedom of Tibetan Buddhists when meeting the state-approved Panchen Lama.

It is wise to be hesitant before making a blanket assertion that all official statements hostile to freedom of religion or belief, such as Zhu's, are merely rhetoric. There are die-hard ideologues in China arguing for the need to eradicate religion, but they are a dying breed. But Zhu is probably not one of them, since his statement was followed by the argument that allowing Communist Party members to adhere to religions harms the Party's organisational integrity – a pragmatic, not an ideological, argument. Zhu was primarily, if not solely, concerned about the negative effects that religious belief could have on Party members' esprit de corps. As a senior Party official, and a leader of the top Party agency with jurisdiction over religious affairs, Zhu's public statement was probably carefully vetted and so may provide a good idea of the Party-state's current view.

The Chinese managerial state and freedom of religion or belief

The Chinese Communist state has gained considerable fame for its role in leading China's economic transformation. In following this path, the state has not been guided by its proclaimed Communist ideology. Virtually every Chinese citizen Forum 18 has met in China, including government officials, have when these matters have been discussed said: "No one believes in Communism anymore in China." This defining characteristic of the Chinese Communist state's contemporary approach follows its inheritance from non-Communist Chinese modernisers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

What happened to religious freedom in the early years of the People's Republic was the consequence of a modernising non-democratic state guided by a long-held elite view of religion as "superstition", but which had a limited capacity to effect systemic changes. In that context, the state had allowed religion to continue when it had no power to change the status quo. But where religion and religious believers were seen as a barrier to state initiatives, then the state took action to serve its own ends. Marxist ideological rhetoric against religion has been at its most prominent when elite political struggles have seen an attack on religion as useful in serving the goals of political factions.

Since the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese Communist state has shed almost all its Marxist ideological baggage. Its central concern has been the modernisation of the country, and, perhaps even more importantly, remaining in power. The state sees the precondition for this as the maintenance of social and political stability. Therefore, religious communities, religious believers, and religious practices have been allowed to exist and even grow so long as they do not impede the state's goal of modernising the country while ensuring the continuing rule of the Communist Party.

This approach has recently been seen when the State Administration for Religious Affairs, along with the Communist Party's United Front Department, the State Council's Development and Reform Commission, and other relevant state agencies, announced in late February a new policy regarding religious groups' involvement in charitable activities.

On the one hand, Chinese religious groups were encouraged to establish foundations and non-profit organisations to serve the needs of the society and its members. This reflects the state's recognition that religious groups can contribute positively to social development and so assist the government. On the other hand, religious groups were warned against sharing their beliefs while engaging in charitable activities, and engaging in activities that would "destroy social order, harm the physical health of Chinese citizens," and behaving in such a way that would "harm the national interest [and] the public interest of the society". The state has a continuing concern about foreign connections, so religious groups engaged in charitable activities "must not be controlled by foreign forces and must not receive foreign aid, contributions, and offers of collaboration that involve [pre-determined] political and religious conditions".

The Chinese managerial state retains the will and power to control religious believers and communities, and this may be a source of pessimism about the future of religious freedom. Indeed, many may dispute the notion that China is a managerial state. However, this managerial state is more practical and flexible than an ideologically-oriented state, as can be seen by contrasting the China of the Cultural Revolution with today's China. And there is within it much room for religious communities to manoeuvre and even grow.

In the current context, political limits to freedom of religion or belief remain in China. But within those limits religious believers and communities have the opportunity to grow and spread their influence. Therefore, the future of religious freedom in China is not necessarily bleak. (END)

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

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