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Anger at Beijing's grip on bishop elections

New regulations grant state-backed BCCCC final say on new bishops

ucanews.com reporter, Hong Kong

China

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Church observers in China have reacted strongly to a revision of the regulations surrounding the election of bishops, which they say grants the government-backed Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China (BCCCC) overarching control.

The new ruling, which was passed in April but has only recently come to widespread public attention, overturns a less strict regulation in place since 1993 surrounding elections in the Church. It is now attracting received strong criticism, not least for its stipulation that bishops must support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and its socialist system.

"The revision is a regression as it blocks the normalization of Church life in China," said Anthony Lam Sui-ki, senior researcher at Hong Kong diocese's Holy Spirit Study Centre. "But it also reminds Vatican-approved bishops to be brave and not to be frightened by the authorities."

He said the new regulation specifies that a diocese has to seek agreement from the Beijing-based BCCCC and religious affairs bureau to begin the process of electing and ordaining a new bishop, which is aimed at strengthening the authority of the two entities. It also dictates how to set up an election committee.

The old regulation, with only six clauses as opposed to the 16 clauses in the new one, required a diocese to only fulfill this procedure at a provincial level. Unless faced with pressure from Beijing, local officials may have turned a blind eye to this process if the local diocese had good relations with authorities.

Relations between China and the Vatican are now at their worst in half a century. Since 2011, illegitimate bishops have been inserted in all Vatican-approved episcopal ordinations while Vatican-approved bishops were pressured to participate in illegal ordinations without papal mandate.

In 2011, Coadjutor Bishop Joseph Sun Jigen of Handan was consecrated secretly eight days before his scheduled ordination on June 29 to resist an illicit bishop attending as a consecrator. The Vatican-approved bishop of the "open" community was then detained briefly and for a short period lived under surveillance.

"Some dioceses might be forced to ordain their bishops secretly to prevent an illicit bishop presence in Vatican-approved episcopal ordinations," said Kwun Ping-hung, a Church observer.

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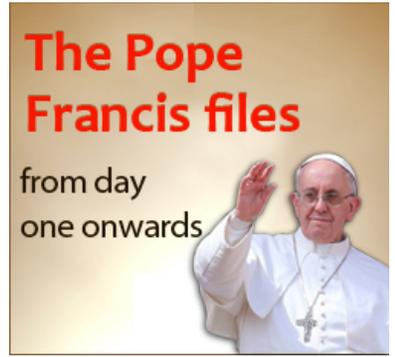
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