

China's crackdown continues as Christianity thrives

China's crackdown continues as Christianity thrives. Even state-sanctioned churches feel government's wrath



Chinese pastor Gu Yuese was detained and accused of misuse of funds on Jan. 27. Two days later, pastor Li Guanzhong was placed under criminal detention. Then less than a month later, pastor Bao Guohua and his wife Xing Wenxiang were sentenced to 14 and 12 years for "corruption" and "gathering people to disturb social order."

All four individuals are Protestant church leaders. All are based in Zhejiang Province, just south of Shanghai. All belonged to churches legally recognized by the government, and at least two held key positions in official religious associations.

They are accused of various crimes, but they have one more thing in common: they opposed the authorities' campaign to remove crosses from churches in their home province of Zhejiang.

As many as 1,700 crosses have been removed from Catholic and Protestant churches in Zhejiang since early 2014. Many churches tried to negotiate with the authorities. Some later organized peaceful protests or wrote letters opposing what they see as a violation of their religious freedom, as did

overseas Catholic and Protestant clergy.

Zhang Kai, a Christian lawyer who provided advice and assistance to Zhejiang churches, was detained in August last year and in late February made a televised "confession" that colleagues and supporters believe was forced.

Gu and Li held positions in the China Christian Council, one of two state-sanctioned associations that oversee Protestant activities in China, while Bao and Xing also belonged to state-registered churches. To some, it seems that the Chinese government has turned on its own churches and church leaders. Why, after years of pressuring unregistered "house churches" to join the state-approved associations, have the authorities begun persecuting those within the system? This question needs some unpacking.

Firstly, there is another question behind it: is this the work of the Chinese central government? Although there are different theories about the Zhejiang cross removals, most agree that the campaign was launched by provincial authorities, rather than at the national level.

Nevertheless, a campaign this far reaching and long running, which has provoked strong reaction from both local Christians and the international community, must have at least the approval of the central leaders, even if it didn't originate in Beijing.

There are, to be sure, divisions and factions within the Chinese Communist Party, but we can at least say that the provincial authorities do not appear to have been reined in from above.

A second question is whether the pastors are really the government's "own" people. This is the crux of the matter.

The Chinese Christian Council and the Three Self Patriotic Movement, and the churches and leaders under them, belong to the state in the eyes of the government. They are allowed just as much freedom as the state allows: they are certainly not allowed to oppose government policy. In speaking out against the cross removals, Gu and his colleagues crossed a line. The authorities reacted with extreme actions to match their extreme anger.

For those officials who see religion as something to be controlled and managed, the timing could not be worse. Christianity is thriving: observers note there are more Christians than party members in China nowadays, and even the party has of late acknowledged the presence of religious believers within its own ranks.

Yang Fenggang, director of the Center on Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University, has predicted that by 2030 China will be home to the largest Christian population in the world with more than 247 million faithful.

The majority of Chinese Christians do not see their faith as politically subversive: as one Chinese Christian observed: "[After Zhejiang] Christians began to ask, 'Why doesn't the government let us do what we want with our own money? We are not political.'"

The government, however, has a tendency to see any large group as a potential threat. The

state-sanctioned associations can be seen both as a recognition that religious belief survived the decadelong Cultural Revolution ending in the mid-1970s and an attempt to manage and contain it, to bring religious activity under the oversight and even the control of the state. Over time, some registered churches were able to negotiate more space for their activities. This may be the first time, however, that church leaders occupying senior positions in official Christian associations have spoken out publicly and collectively in direct opposition to the actions of the authorities.

Many questions remain. It is not clear whether the detention of the Zhejiang pastors is a knee-jerk reaction by offended provincial authorities or a central decision that indicates a possible change in policy toward the state-sanctioned churches nationwide.

It also is not certain to what degree actions by authorities will cause Christians in Zhejiang and elsewhere to rethink their own relationship with the state, and how this might affect the future of Christianity in China.

One thing is clear: the detention of mediators such as Gu, and the continuation of the cross-removal campaign in the face of massive opposition, has led to a breakdown in trust between the churches and the authorities in Zhejiang Province.

For all the state rhetoric around social harmony and social stability, this encounter between the state and religion has hugely undermined both, and the full consequences have yet to be seen.

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