

Freedom of faith is a sacred right.

"Bishop Ma's suppression is a blight for all citizens", writes Shi Feng from Shanghai, China

I witnessed the historic moment on July 7 when Auxiliary Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin of Shanghai pledged to defend his faith.



In that moment, he pointed his finger to the sky and declared, "People look at appearances, but God looks into our hearts. The truth is there. We make a plan and God accomplishes it."

When I recall this moment, warmth fills my heart. I saw the image of Jesus in Bishop Ma, and it gave me tremendous strength and a firm conviction that he is the backbone of the paralyzed China Church.

Bishop Ma has been under house arrest since his episcopal ordination, but the terror this inspired is not new for the China Church.

Priests and nuns in the diocese have routinely been interrogated and forced to attend brain-washing "learning classes." Major and minor seminaries have been suspended and the superior general of a

nun's congregation has been removed from office. These acts are part of a well-planned course of revenge.

In the face of political power, we lost the battle. We were like muted lambs. But in fact, we have actually won. Our faith is purified. Our spirit is uplifted. And the Communist Party has lost the nobility that a big nation should possess, along with judicial impartiality and the heart of its people.

During the difficult years since the founding of the People's Republic, the Communist regime has trampled our religious belief in the name of patriotism. Since the adoption of an open-door policy in the late 1970s, the party has maintained an iron grip on religion.

Bishop Ma's situation is simply another example of a religious matter turned into a political struggle by government authorities. Not only did they exploit his freedom and offend his human rights, but they also violated all citizens' rights to enjoy religious freedom, which is stipulated in the constitution.

After the leadership transition of the Communist Party's politburo, the government's puppet-organizations the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) and the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church of China revoked Bishop Ma's appointment.

CCPA Vice Chairman Liu Yuanlong explained the move as an internal affair of the China Church. When political violence is exerted, such a claim is misleading. If it was merely a harmless internal matter, why was Bishop Ma placed under house arrest? And when will he be free?

If a citizen has violated the law, the judiciary should start legal proceedings. Bishop Ma is neither a political prisoner nor a criminal. Authorities have not laid any charges against him. He is only pursuing his political freedom. He did not break the law, and yet he has been deprived of personal freedom.

Denying people's rights and freedom protected under the constitution and focusing power in the hands of a select few shows contempt for justice. Hasn't Xi Jinping, the newly elected secretary general of the Communist Party, stated previously that no one is above the constitution?

A high-profile campaign against corruption began after the national congress, and many saw this as progress towards judicial reform – particularly among internet-savvy young people who responded not with cynicism but with hope of true change.

These bloggers and other online activists are not violent. They merely want all the basic rights a person is entitled to under the constitution.

As an inhabitant of China (I don't say citizen because as a Catholic I am denied the proper treatment that all citizens should enjoy), I need these rights. So does Bishop Ma.

Shi Feng is the penname of a layperson in mainland China

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