

Religion on the sideline of China ‘Two Sessions’

The words ‘Two sessions’ stand for the 4th annual sessions of the 12th Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference held from 3-14 March and that of the National People’s Congress, held from 5-17 March.

Global Times in an Editor's note on March 1, in the list of the hot issues the nation will be focusing on in the Two Sessions this year, pointed out the discussion on the Law on Religion, in particular the need to modify China's 2004 Regulations on Religious Affairs. During the past year law experts have provided proposals on the issue of religion and government management, particularly about changing the management of religious property and regulations to combat religious extremists and opportunists.

The president of the CPPCC, Yu Zhengsheng (俞正声), in the Work Report mentioned few times Religions. Reporting on the work done in 2015, he emphasized the support to the initiatives of the China Committee for Religions and Peace and of the CPPCC Commission of Religious Delegates, the work for unity and harmony among ethnic minorities and religious believers and their adaptation to socialist society, for the implementation of the Rules for Religious Affairs, for the return of Churches’ properties and their charitable services. Concerning the future work, he pledged to continue the CPPCC’s the coordination work for the implementation of the government policy for Religions and minorities, for educating young religious leaders, for promoting the social role of religious institution and people, as well as their unity and harmony, in domestic and international exchanges.

During the meeting of the Committee for Ethnic and Religious Affairs of CPPCC, religious leaders shared various opinions of religious leaders on the coming revision of Regulations on Religious Affairs. According to them, the revised regulations, expected to be finalized and published within the year, would offer better protection to the interests of religious believers and institutions. A vice president of China Buddhist Association, was reported to say: “Some powerful people take away the temples’ tangible and intangible assets,” he complained. “It’s hard for Buddhists to protect their own rights...[because] there is no religious law in China.” (China Daily, March 9). This concern of the religious delegates, however, does not seem to be taken into serious account. The Law on Religion was not mentioned in the Two Sessions.

Religion was simply dealt with by the Prime Minister, Li Keqiang (李克强) in the Work Report of the Government, stating among the commitments for 2016: *We will fully implement the Party's basic policy on religion, regulate religious affairs in accordance with the law, promote harmonious relations between religions, and see that religious leaders and believers are actively involved in promoting economic and social development.*

In the report about the work of the national legislature, Cao Jianmin (曹建民) listed combatting cybercrime and ensuring national sovereignty in cyberspace as items topping the list of 2016 priorities. Prosecutors will also continue to follow up on cases

of corruption as part of the ongoing three-year-old nationwide anti-corruption campaign. Other groups are targeted as threat, and although he does not identify them in detail, he indicates all the "hostile forces" accused of seeking to end communist rule and plunge China into economic disorder and social division. They usually include agents of foreign governments, civil society groups who challenge the party's absolute authority (like the Turkic Muslim Uighur minority in Xinjiang), religious dissenters such as the Dalai Lama, the underground churches and the banned Falun Gong sect, as well as foreign religious operators.

As far as the direct involvement of the Catholic Church is concerned, on the sideline of the CPPCC Session, Bp. Joseph Fang Xingyao (方興耀), chairman of the Catholic Patriotic Association, told Hong Kong's Cable TV that the ongoing campaign in which 1,700 crosses have been removed and several churches destroyed in Zhejiang since late 2013 is not a national policy. He denied that the campaign represented religious persecution, and that Zhejiang's Christians and state officials should 'sit down and discuss' the campaign. "I think this will resolve the conflicts, - he said, in Beijing,

On March 16, China Daily reported the article "Churches face severe shortage of clergy in China", with the interview to the Catholic lay leader Liu Yuanlong (劉元龍), vice-president of the Catholic Patriotic Association, on the sidelines of the annual session of the CPPCC. "The shortage of new recruits is a major problem for the Catholic Church in China," he said; "some seminaries are smaller than a rural middle school and have just one or two newly recruited trainee priests each year... "The lack of attention paid to church recruits by bishops has also made the problem more serious." Quoting the data provided by the Catholic Bishops Conference, he said that there are "6 million-plus Catholics, served by 3,316 priests and 5,622 nuns, from 106 dioceses... and fewer than 800 trainee priests" (at present the official major seminarians are about 430).

Another decision of the National People's Congress indirectly concerning Religions is its approval of the Charity Law on March 16, with 2,636 votes in favor (92.49 percent of the total). The new law, that will take effect in September, eases restrictions on the fundraising and operational activities of charity groups, promises tax benefits for the sector, and will tighten supervision on their internal management. It adopts strict regulations to prevent fraud: recognizing that Internet fundraising is popular but also an easy platform for fraud, the law requires that charities post clear information either on their own websites or on gateways designated by the Ministry of Civil Affairs. Groups or individuals raising funds from the public without a license will have to return the donations and may face a fine of up to 200,000 yuan. Charities may have their registrations revoked if they engage in or sponsor activity deemed to undermine state security or public interests. (Sergio Ticozzi)