

China Urges Vatican to Drop Taiwan Ties Day After Pope Elected

China hopes for improved ties with the **Roman Catholic Church**, it said on Thursday, a day after the election of the new pope, but it stressed the Vatican must take the initiative and end diplomatic relations with **Taiwan**.

China's 8-12 million **Catholics** are divided between the Communist Party-run **Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association**, that has installed bishops without Vatican approval, and an underground church, whose members meet in private, wary of state control.

China severed **diplomatic relations** with the Vatican shortly after the Communists took power in 1949 and has since demanded that it cut ties with self-ruled Taiwan, which Beijing considers a breakaway province.

"We are sincere in wanting to improve relations," Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying told reporters, offering congratulations to **Pope Francis**.

But the **Vatican** "must stop interfering in China's internal affairs, including in the name of religion", Hua said, adding that the Holy See must end diplomatic recognition of Taiwan.

"We hope that the Catholic Church, under the leadership of the new pope, can work hard together with China and create beneficial conditions for improving relations," she said.

Taiwan, for its part, said it believed its religious, academic and cultural partnership with the Vatican would deepen under the new pope.

Hua's comments reasserted China's stance that the Vatican and Pope Francis of Argentina, elected on Wednesday as the first

non-European pontiff in nearly 1,300 years, would have to make the first move.

Former Pope Benedict, the first pontiff in hundreds of years to step down, had encouraged reconciliation between the two sides of the divided Chinese church and engaged in a low-key dialogue with Beijing about political ties.

China's constitution enshrines freedom of religion, but stability-obsessed leaders in the officially **atheist** government are wary of the appeal of a higher moral power.

The **Vatican** has previously condemned what it called "external pressures and constrictions" on Chinese Catholics, and the government has detained Vatican-appointed bishops who split from the Catholic Patriotic Association.

Chinese Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin, ordained by the Vatican, has been held under house arrest at the Sheshan seminary in Shanghai since July, after he announced that he was leaving the association.

The Vatican had refused to recognize China's ordination to the state-run Church of Reverend Joseph Yue Fusheng, complaining he had not been blessed by the pope.

Catholic activists say other bishops have gone missing or have to contend with house arrest and surveillance.

The association told Reuters it had no immediate reaction to the pope's election. Joseph Kung, president of the Cardinal Kung Foundation in the United States, which advocates religious freedom for Catholics in China, said the new pope would likely be unable to mend fences.

"The **Chinese government** wants to do something contrary to the basic dogma of the church," he said by phone. "No pope can ever change it until the Chinese government wakes up."

Catholics prayed inside Beijing's sanctioned East Catholic Church on Thursday. Images of the pope were displayed on large

screens lining the central aisle under an ornate vaulted ceiling.

“It is normal that religion is not accepted in an atheist country, but we Christians believe in Jesus,” said Chen Jingshuang, who works at a cigarette factory in Beijing.

“We worship God directly.”

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