A small concession

A court releases a ‘rebel’ Catholic bishop from parole conditions

By Louise do Rosario

China’s recent release of a former Roman Catholic bishop from parole conditions points to a continuing, albeit slow, improvement in Peking-Vatican relations. However, normalisation of diplomatic relations between China and the Vatican is not likely in the near term.

On 5 January, the Shanghai Higher People’s Court released Bishop Ignatius Gong Finmei, 87, from his parole conditions, declaring him a completely free man two years after his release from jail. Gong was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1955 for high treason because, Chinese officials say, he opposed the government’s land-reform programme and encouraged young Catholics from joining the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), trade unions and the army, which was then participating as a “volunteer” force in the Korean War.

A November 1987 meeting between the Philippines’ Cardinal Jaime Sin and CCP General Secretary Zhao Ziyang in Peking is believed to have been instrumental in removing the restrictions placed on Gong. 30 Giorni, a Vatican-based religious monthly, reported recently that Zhao indicated to Sin that Peking was ready to drop its 30-year-old demand that the Vatican break relations with Taipei before resuming bilateral relations. The Chinese Foreign Ministry has denied the 30 Giorni report, saying it was “without basis.”

In 1957, Peking cut formal ties with the Vatican and set up the government-supervised Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, which appoints Chinese bishops. Catholics proclaiming allegiance to the Vatican were subjected to persecution. Gong was appointed a bishop by the Vatican.

Analysts doubt there has been any real change in Peking’s stand on the Taiwan issue. Peking has not made any concessions in its campaign to isolate Taiwan diplomatically. China views the Taiwan problem as a domestic affair and does not tolerate outside interference. There are no strong political or economic reasons for Peking to compromise its position for the Vatican, analysts say.

During Sin’s Peking visit, China issued a statement restating its position that, “if the Vatican is sincere about improving relations with China, it should take practical steps to cut off [its] so-called diplomatic relations with Taiwan.” However, Sin said then that “Taiwan is no longer an issue,” but he did not elaborate.

Another major obstacle to improved bilateral relations is the rift between so-called patriotic Catholics, who practise their faith within the government’s approved church, and those who have remained loyal to the Vatican. There are 3.3 million Catholics in the government-sponsored church, official figures indicate. It is believed that there are several millions more in the unofficial “silent church,” which still looks to the Vatican for leadership.

The release of Gong from his parole conditions is viewed as a public-relations exercise rather than a major concession to the Vatican. “It’s a way of saying ‘we want to make improvements’ but without giving anything concrete away,” a source said.

A visitor who met Gong in Shanghai soon after his release from parole conditions described him as “alert and intelligent,” adding that he looked “quite healthy, though a little deaf . . .” Gong appeared “a little nervous and was cautious not to say anything that may bring harm to others,” the visitor said. When asked about his faith, Gong told the visitor: “If I do not believe in the pope, I’m not a Catholic. I’m still loyal to him.”

Gong made it clear that he has no relations with the patriotic church. Gong lives with 40 other priests, holds mass in private, practises taichi and reads the Bible every day.

There is no suggestion that Peking will release other imprisoned priests in the foreseeable future. Amnesty International, the London-based human rights group, has reported that at least 10 Catholic priests and lay Catholics, aged 50-80, were arrested in Shanghai in November 1981 for their “persistent refusal to cooperate” with the government-sponsored church. Two years later, they were brought to trial. One priest was sentenced to 15 years’ imprisonment.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

Letter from Reagan

US encourages private aid to Vietnam and presses MIA issue

By Christopher Goscha in Washington

In a move designed to give Hanoi greater incentive to speed up its promised accounting of Americans missing in action (MIA), the Reagan administration is encouraging the establishment of a private foundation to provide humanitarian aid to Vietnam. And in order to underline the administration’s support for such assistance to Vietnam, President Reagan himself has written to a private aid agency official who recently travelled to Hanoi to discuss aid. The unprecedented move reflected the administration’s hopes of achieving some noteworthy success in obtaining information about the MIAs before the end of its term in 1988.

A US State Department official confirmed that the legal process of setting up a non-profit foundation to oversee the gathering and channelling of private funds to non-government organisations (NGOs) doing rehabilitation work in Vietnam was under way. The US hopes to encourage increased, tax-exempt private and corporate contributions for humanitarian aid to Vietnam. Although short of providing direct aid, the establishment of such a foundation will symbolise an increased US concern for humanitarian help to Hanoi and will give the until now shunned Vietnam a new status concerning such aid.

In an effort to break the deadlock with the Vietnamese on the accounting of MIAs, Reagan sent his special envoy, John Vessey, to Hanoi to meet Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach on 2-3 August 1987 (Review, 8 Oct., ’87). But implementation of a joint agreement signed during the visit to speed up accounting for MIAs and to address Vietnam’s humanitarian concerns has been slow. Only five sets of remains have been returned out of the 70 agreed upon in August. Meanwhile,
Shy but not retiring

Army chief’s future leaves analysts guessing

By Pasuk Sricharoenchai in Bangkok

The prospect of Thailand’s army commander and acting prime minister, General Chavalit Yongchaiyut, stepping down from active service this year appears increasingly uncertain, contrary to previously held assumptions. Although the 55-year-old Chavalit remains insistently on his long-expressed desire to retire early—the mandatory retirement age is 60—there is a groundswell of support from both outside and within the armed forces. In these circumstances, local media interest in Chavalit’s future has increased, which is not surprising in the light of the political influence wielded by the army commander. At a time when the conduct of local political parties leaves much to be desired, the army as an institution remains an influential power broker. Solid backing from the army was one crucial factor behind Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda’s successful return to lead the country once again following the July 1986 general election.

At one time, Chavalit was tipped as a potential successor to the premiership in the post-Prem era, especially if Prem decided to resign after two major national celebrations: King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s 60th birthday in December 1987 and the king becoming the Thai’s longest-reigning monarch in July 1988. Now that Prem has indicated he intends to serve the full term until 1990, the current view is that Chavalit, after quitting the army, may be made defence minister. However, senior officers are understood to have privately asked Chavalit not to retire. The latest call was by deputy army commander General Wanchara Ranachan, during a meeting of about 100 top army officers on 30 December, which he disclosed to news- men the following week, saying they had “expressed a wish” for Chavalit to stay on. On 7 January Chavalit’s retirement plan took on a new dimension when some Bangkok newspapers headlined a statement by Interior Minister Prachuton Suntaranukoon which indicated that Prem wanted Chavalit to stay on. Prachuton said Chavalit could do more for the country by remaining in active service. In any case, a senior officer’s resignation has to go through several steps and must be approved by his superiors who, in Chavalit’s case, are Defence Minister Panjai Karnarat and Prem.

Chavalit is a product of the former army government which has attempted to portray the so-called “maverick general” who has attracted a lot of attention because his early retirement plan is unprecedented in an institution which has seen many previous commanders seek extensions of their term. He first broached the plan five years ago as deputy army chief of staff when he said he would retire at 55. After taking over the army top job in May 1986, he has stated often that he would remain in the post for only two years, meaning that he would retire at the age of 56. But Chavalit’s ambiguity over his retirement plans has given rise to some public anxiety, most forcefully expressed by army minister and respected elder statesman, to criticise him for not staying beyond 56.”

Sources close to Chavalit told the REVIEW that he wants to set an example to the younger generation and to take on the job for only two years, in order to allow upward mobility for the junior army hierarchy. At least one other top officer, armed forces chief of staff Gen. Sunthorn Kongsompong, recently followed the lead by announcing his intention to quit after two years.

Western military-affairs analysts have credited Chavalit with instilling professionalism in the army, and implementing a modernization program to turn it into a more efficient, less complex force. He has also won respect for spearheading the ambitious reform program to “green” the northeast region, part of his policy to engage the army in development projects (Review, 22 July ’87). The project would give him kudos on which to build a future political career that most analysts believe he has set his sights on, despite Chavalit brashing nide questions about his post-retirement plans.

Ironically, the same group of people who are clamouring for Chavalit to stay on are among the prime candidates to succeed him. These include Wanchai, Sunthorn and army chief of staff Gen. Charun Wongpinyat — all his classmates from Chulalongkorn Military Academy’s Class 1. In response, some local newspapers commentators have suggested that the Class 1 group is undecided about the post-Chavalit army leadership.