

VATICAN

China attempts to tighten noose around Catholic Church in Hong Kong

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**Riccardo
Cascioli**



Big manoeuvres around the Church in Hong Kong. Taking advantage of the transition period at the start of the new pontificate, the Chinese government is putting pressure on the Vatican to appoint a new auxiliary bishop who will be acceptable to the

communist regime. The objective is to deliver the final blow to incorporate the Church of the former British colony into the Chinese one, which is dominated by the Patriotic Association.

Once again, Peter Choi Wai-man (pictured in the centre, between Cardinals Parolin and Tong) is the subject of discussion. Currently one of the three Vicars General of Hong Kong, he is expected to be received by Pope Leo XIV on 4 October, alongside the Bishop Emeritus of Hong Kong, Cardinal John Tong Hon, for an audience regarding his potential appointment as auxiliary bishop.

It should be noted that Peter Choi's name has periodically appeared in the news for the past six years. This began with the sudden death of the then Bishop of Hong Kong, Michael Yeung Ming-cheung, on 4 January 2019. The secret agreement between China and the Holy See, mainly concerning the appointment of bishops, came into force a few months earlier. Although Hong Kong is outside the jurisdiction of the Chinese Church, Beijing has wanted from the outset to terminate the autonomy of the local Church in parallel with the political situation in the former British territory.

Consequently, the natural choice for bishop, auxiliary bishop Joseph Ha Chi-shing, who had expressed support for the Hong Kong democracy movement protests that broke out in 2019, was blocked. Monsignor Ha was also considered close to Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kun, the other bishop emeritus, who has never failed to voice his dissent from the communist regime and the China-Holy See agreement, which he sees as a sell-out of the Chinese Church to Beijing. This has obviously made Ha unpopular with the Chinese regime. Therefore, surprisingly, Cardinal John Tong, who was bishop of Hong Kong until 2017, was appointed apostolic administrator.

Tong's administration also served to identify the candidate destined to “overtake” Monsignor Ha. In February 2020, news circulated of Peter Choi's appointment as bishop of Hong Kong. The formalisation of this appointment was reportedly delayed due to the outbreak of the Covid epidemic. In reality, however, the appointment was delayed due to strong resistance within the Hong Kong Church, fears of an irreparable rift and the firm opposition of the then head of the Vatican Mission in Hong Kong, Ante Jozic, who was subsequently sent as nuncio to the Ivory Coast.

In February 2021, Choi's appointment was once again taken for granted, as finding another candidate amid Chinese vetoes and preventive renunciations was proving very difficult. However, this also came to nothing, and the situation was only resolved in May 2021 with the appointment of the current bishop, Jesuit Stephen Chow Sau-yan (then

created Cardinal on 30 September 2023). He had always kept a low profile and had never taken a position for or against China.

Having officially taken office in December, Bishop Chow has in fact adhered to the Vatican Secretariat of State's line, led by Cardinal Pietro Parolin, sacrificing the Church's freedom to the agreement with China. During this period, exchanges with the Chinese clergy intensified under the leadership of the Patriotic Association. Notably, the concept of the 'sinicisation of the Church' was assimilated, which attempts to pass itself off as a Chinese form of inculturation, but which, in reality, translates as the Church's obedience to the directives of the Communist Party.

Today, the question of the Holy See's agreement with China is one of the most challenging issues that Pope Leo has to address. The pro-Chinese wing of the Church is trying to play it by ear. In an interview with Elise Ann Ellen, which is included in a recently published [book biography](#) and was conducted in July, the Pope is very cautious. When asked if he already knows what his approach to China will be, Pope Leo replies: 'No, I would say that in the short term I will continue the policy that the Holy See has followed for some years. I don't claim to be any wiser or more experienced than those who have gone before me. I am also in constant dialogue with several Chinese people on both sides regarding some of the existing problems. I am trying to gain a clearer understanding of how the Church can continue its mission while respecting the culture, the political issues — which are undoubtedly of great importance — and a significant group of Chinese Catholics who, for many years, have experienced oppression or difficulty in practising their faith freely without taking sides".

These are measured words and a wait-and-see position, but one that the current Bishop [Stephen Chow has forced](#) towards absolute continuity with the previous pontificate. Cardinal Chow was received in audience on 2 September, immediately reporting that Leo XIV intends to continue in the direction marked out by Francis. However, according to our sources, on that occasion, Chow also requested a second auxiliary bishop to be chosen from among the diocesan clergy (there is still Monsignor Joseph Ha in office).

Two auxiliary bishops are nothing new in Hong Kong: Joseph Ha was appointed in 2014 alongside Stephen Lee Bun-sang, the current bishop of Macau. Only death prevented Bishop Yeung from appointing Peter Choi as auxiliary bishop in his place. The stalemate of the following years blocked everything. Now, Bishop Chow would like to reinstate the position of auxiliary bishop.

The purpose of the audience scheduled for 4 October, at which Choi will accompany Cardinal Tong — who is also known for surrendering to Beijing — is likely to be this. Tong intends to present Peter Choi to the Pope by sponsoring his candidacy for the position of auxiliary bishop, which would be a significant gift to the Chinese regime.

If this were to happen, it would be a serious new defeat for the 'significant group of Chinese Catholics who have experienced a kind of oppression', as the Pope put it, and for the many Catholics in Hong Kong, including Cardinal Zen, who are paying the price for China's repressive policies in defiance of the agreement by which the United Kingdom returned the former colony in 1997. As we have [explained on other occasions](#), this is not just a local issue: at stake is the freedom of the Church against submission to political power.