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Pope Francis holds a letter presented by Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kiun, retired bishop of Hong Kong, during his general audience in early January at the Vatican. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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Finally, the Vatican has done a deal with China, or rather with the ruling Chinese Communist Party that has been conducting an escalating program of repression against religion.

The deal is already drenched in controversy and opposed by many Chinese Catholics and anti-pope conservatives. But the Vatican hopes it is just the first fruit of a long campaign, begun 25 years ago when the Vatican withdrew its nuncio from Taiwan.

The most recent negotiations were conducted under the supervision of Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, Pope Francis' trusted No. 2 man who negotiated an agreement with the communist rulers of Vietnam back in 1996.

Speculation about the deal reached fever pitch in mid-September when it was leaked to the Wall Street Journal. The agreement was announced Sept. 22 in a short, detail-free but nuanced announcement.

Indeed, the regularization of bishops' appointments was always the central goal of these talks that have taken five years to bear any fruit, despite too many misguided reports that the Vatican was prepared to go as far as cutting diplomatic ties with Taiwan. The Vatican is the only state in Europe that continues to recognize Taipei.

The deal is seen as just a first step by Rome to exerting more influence on the Chinese church. As promised, few of its details have been made public. It is believed the agreement gives the pope final veto power over the nomination of an episcopal candidate sent to Rome, putting in ink what has been effective practice for some years

For its part, the Vatican has officially recognized eight bishops previously not recognized by Rome and/or previously excommunicated. One of those bishops died

in 2017.

This is one of the key points of the deal that has angered leaders of China's so-called underground Catholics, leaders who have refused to join the Communist Party-controlled Catholic Patriotic Association. Various estimates, including by the U.S. government, say underground Catholics make up as much as 50 percent of the country's estimated 10 million -12 million Catholics. The same estimates say Protestants outnumber Catholics by about 50 million.

Leaked information of the deal triggered a resistance movement whose case had been publicly and aggressively prosecuted by Hong Kong's politically active retired bishop, Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kiun, 86, who was born in Shanghai.

"They're giving the flock into the mouths of the wolves. It's an incredible betrayal," he told the British news agency Reuters, adding that Parolin should resign.

"I don't think he has faith. He is just a good diplomat in a very secular, mundane meaning."

Zen, who is a regular participant in pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, has taken his case to Pope Francis, but promised to fall silent if the deal were signed. Zen has long said that such a deal would see underground Catholics melt away, either to their own private places or even to join Protestant churches, yet it is unclear how many Catholics he speaks for.

And while there are no other signs that Zen is more broadly opposed to the pope — he speaks publicly and privately with great respect and kindness toward him — he is quickly finding himself with perhaps unwanted supporters.

Church conservatives who are pushing back against the pope's pastoral agenda have flocked to Zen's cause, sensing a fresh front on which to fight Pope Francis.

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They highlight what they say is the deal's effective complicity with the escalating repression of Western religion in China, where online Bible sales and evangelization have been banned, minors forbidden to attend services and, in some of the more Christian provinces, crosses torn down and churches demolished.

But it is Beijing's increasingly horrific pogrom against ethnic Muslim Uighurs in the northwest province of Xinjiang, as much Central Asia as it is China, that casts the biggest human rights and religious persecution shadow over the deal and provides ample fodder for critics. Surveillance techniques used in Xinjiang have already emerged elsewhere; the government has installed closed-circuit TV cameras in some Catholic and Protestant churches.

Uighurs have been subjected to nine years of extreme repression that has seen the banning of many traditional Islamic practices, mass disappearances, thousands jailed and hundreds sentenced to death in stadium trials. In the past 18 months it has culminated in concentration camps that human rights agencies estimate hold up to 1 million Uighurs.

The Vatican-China statement says the deal is "pastoral, not political." Yet everything is political in the context of the Communist Party, and Beijing's endgame would appear to be ending Vatican ties with Taiwan, which was taken over by mainland nationalists after they lost the civil war to the communists in 1949.

For Beijing it's all about power and control, legitimizing its state-run church; for the Vatican it's about officially giving the government-recognized church at least spiritual communion with Rome.

"The shared hope," the statement said, "is that this agreement may favor a fruitful and forward-looking process of institutional dialogue and may contribute positively to the life of the Catholic Church in China, to the common good of the Chinese people and to peace in the world."

Indeed, the Vatican immediately announced the new Diocese of Chengde in Hebei, the northern province that researchers believe holds the largest number of Catholics. Diocesan borders have long been another area of dispute between the two sides.

Pope Francis was instrumental in brokering a deal to break a decadeslong diplomatic deadlock between the U.S. and Cuba.

This deal has been described as interim, with reports saying it holds for two years, and that time frame may tell the tale. In that light, perhaps a more considered move would be to ignore the wave of hysteria already swelling and support Pope Francis' hope for further progress.

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