News
Vatican



Cardinals from around the world process at the start of Mass for the election of the Roman pontiff March 12, 2013, in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican. Attending the service were some 170 cardinals, including 115 under the age of 80 who later entered the conclave in the Sistine Chapel. (CNS/George Martell, courtesy of The Pilot Media Group)



by Tom Roberts

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A group of Catholics calling itself the Better Church Governance Group is gearing up to compile dossiers "in the manner of political opposition research" on cardinal electors ahead of the next conclave, the gathering that elects a new pope.

Although its publicly available literature casts the effort as non-political and one that is interested in gathering and collating information, an early memo associated with the effort drew severe conclusions about one of its targets, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican secretary of state and a member of Pope Francis' Council of Cardinals.

In a response to an email inquiry about the project, the memo's author backtracked on his critique of Parolin as well as an inference that could be drawn from the memo that the group intended to influence the outcome of a consistory.

However, during a Sept. 30 "Red Hat Cocktail Party" launching the project and held on the campus of the Catholic University of America, the group's chief operating officer and development director made a presentation that asked at one point whether Francis would have been elected pope in 2013 had opposition research been available at the time to the gathered electors.

The group, in its printed literature, outlined its ambition to expand its research to the entire episcopacy, not just cardinals, and of becoming a permanent commission.

While the publicly distributed literature of the Better Church Governance group declares that its primary project, The Red Hat Report, "is not intended to be a political project — and will not endorse or attack any cardinal," the memo apparently circulated as part of a fundraising effort and sent to potential participants, strikes a distinctly different tone.

The letter, over the signature of Philip Nielsen, executive director of the governance group and managing editor of the Red Hat Report, speaks of the group as "a non-profit watchdog" organization comprising "academics, Vatican reporters, and about

thirty others" as well as anonymous contributors. NCR has received at least two copies of the letter.

According to an eight-point plan, the team will "audit" the cardinals "to name those credibly accused in scandal, abuse, or cover-ups; and to research who has responded strongly against corruption."

The group intends to "use this information to compose a dossier, assembled in the manner of political opposition research, on every cardinal elector, as well as on the influential or older cardinals connected with abuse or corruption."

In the final point of their plan, using Parolin as an example, the organizers outline their intention to use the information gathered "to edit the cardinals' English language Wikipedia pages. It is well known that at the last papal conclave many of the cardinals' secretaries used these pages to help the cardinals better know each other," writes Nielsen.

For example, he states, Parolin, "the very corrupt Vatican Secretary of State's Wikipedia page is currently very benign, with no links to scandal included despite the fact that he has repeatedly been linked with banking scandal's [sic] and was named in the Vigano letter." The latter statement is a reference to the controversial letter circulated by Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, former nuncio to the United States, who accused Pope Francis of mishandling the case of former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick and further called for Francis to resign.

"We can change that," writes Nielsen, declaring that by the next conclave, Parolin "needs to be known, worldwide, as a disgrace to the church. Our plan would be to make sure that his Wikipedia page shows 'Church Watchdog *The Better Governance Group*, names Parolin, 'Extremely Guilty of Abuse' etc. with a link to the report. At the same time we would add all the pull-quotes from other sources that connect him to all the financial corruption, etc."

Nielsen said each dossier would contain a rating — "severe guilt, credible accusations of guilt, clean" — for a given cardinal "based on our best evidence and the recommendations of best experts."

The report will "make it clear we are not trying for ideological tests" but rather "openness and truth" regarding scandals in the church. "We will obviously consult regarding the requirements of libel before publishing," concludes the fifth point.

In his response to questions sent by NCR in an email, Nielsen said that the "project team corrected a few of my early ideas" and changed the text of the memo.

"Most importantly," he wrote, "we have decided that our fundamental mission should have nothing to do with influencing any conclave. Many of our collaborators have emphasized this point to me since I wrote that memo. I accepted their correction and we have accordingly removed this goal from our project."

The same collaborators, he said, "pointed out to me that it was inappropriate for me to comment, either favorably or unfavorably, on the record of any cardinal."

The reference to Parolin, he said, "may indicate my personal bias at the time of writing," but, he added, in parentheses, "I have since gained a more rounded understanding of the cardinal."

A "media blitz" is planned for releasing the document containing the group's research at "an effective moment" before the next conclave.

Preparing for the media blitz will be the job of Jacob Fareed Imam, fellow and doctoral candidate in theology and religion at the University of Oxford. Imam, referred to only as Jacob in Nielsen's letter, "has applied for a deferral from Oxford to move to D.C. and become development director," according to Nielsen, who also announced that he is "about to quit my other job to manage the Report, which is the main part of the initiative."

Nielsen is director of research at the Center for Evangelical Catholicism, a nonprofit headquartered in Greenville, South Carolina.

Imam was featured in an April 23 article in The Troubadour Online, the student newspaper of Franciscan University of Steubenville, a long established center of conservative Catholic thought. A convert from Islam three years ago, he presented a talk at the university comparing the Bible and the Quran and the faiths' different views of God.

During his cocktail hour presentation, Imam explained that the group would begin investigations into the cardinals it considered likely *papabile*, or papal contenders, and work out through the rest of the cardinal electors, currently numbering 124.

In a recording of the presentation obtained by NCR, Imam can be heard listing a number of incidents in which he alleges Francis, as the then-cardinal archbishop of

Buenos Aires, Argentina, mishandled cases of sexual abuse by priests.

According to a person attending, a visual part of the presentation contained the statement: "Had we had the Red Hat Report, we may not have had Pope Francis."

In addition to Philip Nielsen, managing editors of the Red Hat Report include Timothy Nielsen and Imam.

Research editors are Jay Richards, a professor at the Busch School of Economics at Catholic University and host of an EWTN show called "A Force for Good," and Michael Foley and Melinda Nielsen, both of Baylor University.

A financial summary in an early prospectus envisioned a first-year budget totaling $483,000, but that increased in a handout distributed at the cocktail party to more than a million dollars.

The group is currently seeking full 501(c)(3) status which would allow the project to take direct donations. In the meantime, according to a description obtained by NCR, the Center for Evangelical Catholicism is acting as the group's "fiscal sponsor."

About 40 researchers are currently working on developing dossiers. The investigators include 10 former FBI agents, who are Catholic, according to Imam's presentation.

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Each cardinal is being investigated by a team of about six people, according to the organization. "Currently we are constructing the dossiers of the American cardinals. We will soon begin forming groups in Italy to begin researching their cardinals," according to a flyer introducing the organization. Imam, it says, "is traveling around the world organizing regional teams to research their home cardinals." The group expects to grow "exponentially" throughout the year and sees "the potential for expanding our work to include the entire episcopacy and becoming a permanent Independent Commission."

In his email answer to other questions, Nielsen noted that the term "Vatican reporter" did not refer to news reporters accredited by the Vatican but rather "some high-profile Vatican watchers," whose names he is not at liberty to reveal.

He also said the group is "not funded by, or associated with, any organization, and no single donor has contributed to more than five percent of our annual budget."

The group plans on going public the third week of October, at which time it will announce the names of collaborators and board members.

[Tom Roberts retired in 2018 as NCR editor at large. He is the author of *The Emerging Catholic Church: A Community's Search for Itself* (2011) and *Joan Chittister: Her Journey from Certainty to Faith* (2015), both published by Orbis Books.]

Better Church Governance flyer by National Catholic Reporter on Scribd

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