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Pope Francis' Korea visit not without controversies

by Paul Hwang

Francis in Korea

Seoul, South Korea — As Pope Francis' mid-August visit to Korea draws closer, local Catholics are upbeat and busy in preparation. Christians and non-Christians alike here are showing interest as anticipation rises for the arrival of perhaps the most charismatic religious figure on the world scene.

The Korean bishops, meanwhile, are focused on the trip, with special attention being paid to the initial stimulus for the invitation, Asian Youth Day in Daejeon, Korea, which falls in the middle of the Aug. 14-18 papal journey.

Although there has yet to be any official announcement with regard to Francis' schedule, privately, plans are developing, and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea has officially acknowledged Francis will celebrate Mass in the Seoul cathedral and will preside at the beatification ceremony for 124 sainthood candidates, most of whom were martyred in 18th century.

Unlike his visit to Brazil, where Francis joined World Youth Day activities in July 2013, this papal visit has begun to spark controversy here, revealing long-festering church-state divisions and even some feuds among Korean Catholics themselves.

Representatives from various Catholic-related nongovernmental organizations held a press conference in March warning that Francis' visit should not be "misused" or "distorted" by Korean President Park Geun-hye. They fear Geun-hye could use Francis' visit to justify or cover up what they claim was a rigged 2012 presidential election: The groups say she used government organizations, including the National Intelligence Service and government prosecutors, to win the election.

Park was a four-term member of the Korean National Assembly when she ran for president. (Her father was Park Chung-hee, Korean president from 1963 to 1979.) Since the election, local Catholics,

traditionally active in Korean politics, have been protesting the election process.

Catholics make up more than 10 percent of the 50 million Korean population. Following the election, more than 11,700 laypeople, 4,500 religious and 2,100 priests joined a signature campaign claiming election fraud.

Those charges have increased tensions between Catholics and the Park government, leading some to call for her resignation. It is not uncommon for Korean Catholics to hold prayer rallies at the diocesan and national levels protesting political issues.

The Justice and Peace Commissions of the Korean bishops' conference and leaders in all 15 Korean dioceses, except the Military Ordinate, have joined in the protests.

Moses Kwon Oh-kwang, president of the Catholic National Federation for Justice, lamented in a March press conference that in the current plan, Pope Francis would greet Park in her office. He suggested that Francis avoid any formal presidential greeting and instead focus on the social needs of the people by visiting with the poor and needy of the nation.

In late April, Kwon and three other representatives from lay nongovernmental organizations met with Bishop Peter Kang Woo-il, president of bishops' conference, who is viewed as sympathetic of social justice issues. That meeting, however, did not lead to any changes in the papal itinerary.

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Francis will also visit the Catholic-operated Kkottongnae, or Flower Village, which provides services and shelter for the poor and homeless and is part of a wider charismatic renewal movement within Korea.

The founder-director of Kkottongnae was charged with embezzlement of state subsidies a decade ago. Some Catholics, especially religious, say Kkottongnae was put on the papal itinerary in part for its state connections and in part because of its tarnished history.

Finally, some lay Catholics have asked that the papal Mass for peace not be celebrated at the Seoul cathedral, but in a location closer to the border between North and South Korea.

Many lay Catholic groups see Francis' visit as too formal and too closely connected with state politics. So far, they say their voices have been largely neglected by the Korean bishop. As a result, they continue to gather signatures and prepare a direct appeal to the Vatican to modify the plans for the papal visit.

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