

China

Online hostility towards 'underground' churches in Hebei amid COVID-19 outbreak

February 2021

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Introduction

New research points to a sudden and significant increase in online hostility towards Christians. In a new and worrying trend, some internet users in China have alleged that the January 2021 coronavirus outbreak in Hebei Province originated in a church, causing a storm of online hostility towards Christians, with some online commentators calling for such churches to be completely disbanded.

Online speech is strictly controlled in China, and observers point out that in other contexts, this kind of social hostility, especially when it concerns anything approaching criticism of the authorities, would be quickly censored. Despite this, comments were visible for several days. CSW staff estimate that there were over 1,000 similar comments before they were censored. Most of the comments against Christians have now been removed, and some state media have also issued articles dispelling rumours that the latest outbreak was introduced to the region by a foreign priest. Nevertheless, some observers believe there could be a 'hidden hand' behind these comments, manipulating the conversation. In addition, there are fears that the authorities could use the social hostility to justify further suppression of unregistered churches.

'Betraying the nation': online accusations against Christians

According to CSW staff and other observers, in Hebei, a province neighbouring Beijing, the level of social hostility, slander and discriminatory language against Christians surged when 'underground' congregations were rumoured to be the origin of a new outbreak of COVID-19 in that province. The term 'underground churches' in this context refers to independent churches outside of the state-sanctioned Three Self Patriotic Movement, but has negative connotations: this term is not used by Christians, who use a term usually translated into English as 'house church' or 'family church'.

According to one observer:

'The rumour started when the Beijing government announced the suspension of religious activities and a thorough investigation into all "illegal religious activities" in rural areas on 8 January 2021. Since then, Sina Weibo (a Twitter-like platform in China)

has been inundated with posts by users accusing a Christian congregation of spreading the virus. Some of these accusations go far beyond the current outbreak by referring to the Boxer Rebellion¹ and the Siege of the International Legations.² They blame Christians for "betraying their own nation", undermining their culture and "jeopardizing the sovereignty and security of the motherland".'

Many netizens even ask the authorities to crack down harder on Christians, and compare the current situation to the Qing Dynasty, alleging that Christians at that time were more powerful than the emperor, and that today Christians are similarly powerful and 'arrogant'.

For instance, one such post alleges that the 'underground' church in Shijiazhuang, Hebei's provincial capital, has been active for decades. The user claims that for the past 20-30 years the local authorities have failed to find a way to handle the situation, implying that the government is not strong enough to contain the churches, which now do whatever they like. Another comment claims that people belonging to the 'Abraham-religion' (Christianity) are very arrogant: they believe they are chosen by God and are above other people.

In addition, CSW staff and observers note the sudden appearance of videos on Chinese TikTok claiming that 'underground' churches have been established for money-making purposes. According to these posts, some 'uneducated' people give one quarter of their income to the churches, despite being in impoverished circumstances. According to one observer, 'these kinds of videos have triggered a lot of hate speech towards "the greedy underground churches"'. In China, all social media platforms are tightly controlled by the government and the party. It is impossible for all these comments and videos to go public without Big Brother's [the Chinese Communist Party's] consent.'

Christians who have witnessed this increase in online social hostility are deeply worried about this development. Some believe the CCP must be involved in some way. Since the Chinese authorities have also used disinformation to slander Falun Gong practitioners, Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists and other religious communities before, some believe that a 'harsh storm against them is steadily brewing'.

1 An uprising in 1900 which tried to expel foreigners – including Western missionaries – from China. During the uprising, foreign Christians were killed and churches burned down by local militias.

2 During the Boxer Rebellion, soldiers placed foreign legations in the capital under siege for 55 days.



There is a long history of government persecution of Christians, and particularly Catholics, in Hebei Province, including the imprisonment of clergy. Most notably, Bishop James Su Zhimin was detained on 8 October 1997 in Hebei and his current whereabouts are still unknown. Prior to this occasion, he had been arrested at least five times and spent over two decades in prison. His nephew Su Tianyou has appealed for information about his uncle's whereabouts and wellbeing: at present it is not even known whether he is still alive.

As one well-informed observer concluded: 'Since Xi Jinping came into power, the regime has demolished thousands of churches and Christian crosses. A large number of clergy have been imprisoned or simply disappeared. This year, two Chinese nuns working in the Vatican's unofficial diplomatic mission in Hong Kong were detained and placed under house arrest after they returned to Hebei province.'

'The recent development in Hebei should be of serious concern to democratic governments. We need to do our best to help these victims.'

Recommendations

To the international community

- Carefully monitor online hostility towards Christians and other religious communities particularly in connection with COVID-19, working with human rights organisations and activists, and faith communities, to gather accurate information.
- Where online hostility amounts to incitement to violence or where human rights violations occur in connection with online hostility, raise these cases directly with the Chinese authorities and continue to monitor follow up actions.

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