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Real war on religion and a ticking Vatican PR bomb

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 13, 2012 All Things Catholic

America's annual celebration of Independence Day was accompanied this year by the U.S. bishops' Fortnight for Freedom, a round of prayer and advocacy dedicated to the preservation of religious liberty. The exercise renewed debate over whether there is or isn't a war on religion in America, fueled, of course, by the politics of the 2012 election.

There are undeniably important church/state issues in play in America, but if they constitute a "war," it's a metaphorical one, waged in legislatures and courthouses. Too often lost in the shuffle is the fact -- not a hunch, theory or conjecture, but hard empirical fact -- that in a growing number of other places, there's a decidedly literal war on religion under way. Its victims don't just lose government contracts or debates over insurance mandates; they're threatened, beaten, imprisoned and even murdered.

Here's a snapshot of what was going on around the world at the precise moment Americans were marking the July 4 holiday:

- Fr. Joseph Zhao Hongchun, apostolic administrator of the Chinese diocese of Harbin, was taken into police custody July 4 to prevent him from galvanizing opposition to the illicit ordination of a new Harbin bishop orchestrated by the government. He was detained for three days and released only after the ordination took place.
- New auxiliary Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin of Shanghai was placed under house arrest in a seminary after he publicly resigned from the government-controlled "Patriotic Association of Chinese Catholics" during his ordination Mass on July 7, which took place with the pope's blessing.
- Rev. Kantharaj Hanumanthappa, a Pentecostal pastor in the Indian state of Karnataka, was leading a prayer service July 4 when 20 radical Hindus stormed in to accuse the Christians of proselytizing, threatening them if they didn't leave. A police complaint was filed, but no action has been taken.
- The private home of Pastor Ramgopal, a Pentecostal minister in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, was raided by police allied with the Hindu radicals. The pastor was reportedly told, "Either you go away and never come back or we'll arrest you." He was released only after signing a statement promising not to lead any more prayer services in the area.
- A Catholic priest in Vietnam, Fr. J.B. Nguyen Dinh Thuc, was attacked by plainclothes police and thugs reportedly paid $25 a head to raid a missionary chapel in a rural area July 1. Their aim was to prevent the celebration of a Mass, part of what local Catholics describe as a policy of "religious cleansing" imposed by Hanoi. When the priest tried to make his way through the mob, he was beaten up, along with several laity who came to his rescue. Maria Thi Than Ngho, one of those laity, suffered a fractured skull in the melee. As of this writing, she remains in critical condition.
- Abdubannob Ahmedov, a Jehovah's Witness in Uzbekistan, saw his four-year prison term for "illegal religious activities" extended for another 30 months for alleged violations of prison rules.
- Yelena Kim, a Baptist in Uzbekistan arrested in late June for "illegally teaching religion," is now looking at three years behind bars after police raided her home and confiscated Bibles, hymn books and other religious materials.

- Ghulam Abbas, a mentally disabled man in a region of Punjab under Pakistani control, was thrown into jail July 3 after rumors spread that he had burned some pages from a Quran. Before any investigation or trial could take place, a Muslim extremist mob stormed the jail, dragged Abbas from his cell and burned him alive. According to local observers, it's at least the 35th extra-judicial murder to take place following an arrest under Pakistan's notorious blasphemy laws since 1986.

Deep thanks go to the Asia News service for bringing us these stories, which otherwise would be almost totally overlooked.

These accounts put flesh and blood on the most compelling Christian narrative of the early 21st century, which is the rise of an entire new generation of martyrs. According to the International Society for Human Rights, 80 percent of all acts of religious discrimination in the world today are directed at Christians, making Christianity by far the most persecuted religious community on the planet. Reliable estimates say that about 150,000 Christians are killed for the faith every year, which translates into 17 new martyrs every hour of every day.

The story of Abbas in Punjab is also a reminder that Christians aren't the only ones suffering, since reports suggest he was actually a Muslim. According to a recent study by a commission of the Catholic bishops' conference in Pakistan, at least 964 people were charged under the blasphemy laws between 1986 and 2009, of whom 479 were Muslims, 119 Christians, 340 Ahmadis, 14 Hindus and 10 from other religions. These arrests are often the pretext for mob violence and murder, as in the Abbas case.

The U.S. bishops, in collaboration with the Catholic University of America and Catholic Relief Services, are planning to hold a conference titled "International Religious Freedom: An Imperative for Peace and the Common Good" on Sept. 12 in Washington. Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York will deliver the opening address, and the Vatican's top diplomat, French Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, has been invited to give the closing speech.

Here's hoping a concrete plan of action results, because God knows people such as those ticked off above desperately need the help.

(For the record, I was invited to speak but was unable to accept because I'll be on my way to cover Pope Benedict XVI's Sept. 14-16 trip to Lebanon, which offers him a platform to address the crisis in Syria, another place where the fate of a Christian minority is hanging in the balance.)

Nguyen in Vietnam reportedly said after his beating on July 1, "To die on the altar would be such a blessing to me." His courage is admirable, but if American Catholics apply even a fraction of the time and treasure we've devoted to domestic politics, perhaps we can help ensure it doesn't come to that.

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The Vatican recently hired an American journalist, Greg Burke, as its new communications czar. Presumably, part of Burke's mandate is to defuse potential PR bombs before they go off rather than trying to clean up the debris afterwards, as has heretofore been the Vatican's *modus operandi*.

Memo to Burke: One such potential time-bomb is ticking right now in Slovakia.

On July 2, Archbishop Róbert Bezák of Trnava, the traditional cradle of the faith in this overwhelmingly Catholic nation of 5.4 million, was deposed by Pope Benedict XVI. The Vatican offered no explanation for the move, which followed an investigation on the pope's behalf by a Czech bishop in January.

Locals have rallied to Bezák's defense. On July 6, hundreds of Slovaks attended a rally in support of the

deposed prelate, carrying flowers and photos of Bezák that they placed on the square in Trnava's town center. An Internet petition backing Bezák has been signed by more than 6,700 people, and some parish priests have reportedly offered to resign in protest. Observers in Slovakia describe the Catholic rank-and-file as "puzzled, hurt and increasingly angry."

In the absence of any official rationale, the rumor mill has kicked into gear. Privately, Catholics sympathetic to Bezák have floated a theory that, if true, would be deeply embarrassing to Benedict XVI and the Vatican at a crucial moment.

Bezák was appointed in April 2009 to replace longtime Archbishop Ján Sokol, who had reigned in Trnava for 20 years. Sokol was a strong but controversial leader, known for his deeply traditional theological and political views. Among other things, Sokol was a vigorous defender of Jozef Tiso, a Catholic priest and Slovakia's president during World War II, when the country was a satellite state of Nazi Germany. (Under the Soviets, Tiso was convicted of war crimes and executed.)

Friends of Bezák, who's generally seen as a more moderate figure, say Sokol continued to be a major presence in the archdiocese after his resignation, reportedly maintaining a residence in the archbishop's palace. They also say that when Bezák started going over the books from the Sokol era, he discovered serious financial irregularities.

On July 6, civil prosecutors announced an investigation into alleged misappropriation of church funds under Sokol. Media reports say that decision was based in part on Bezák's findings.

The suspicion among Bezák's allies is that Sokol wanted to shut down this review by undercutting his successor, and that Sokol successfully enlisted friends in the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops to get it done.

At a distance, I have no way of knowing how much merit there may be to those charges, though some veteran church observers seem to take them seriously.

Should this theory be confirmed, it would obviously be bad news for the Vatican under any circumstances. At the moment, however, the timing could scarcely be worse.

Even as we speak, the Vatican is desperately trying to persuade the world that it's turned over a new leaf on financial transparency and accountability. On July 18, an evaluation of the Vatican should be released by Moneyval, the European arm of the Financial Action Task Force, the world's premier intergovernmental body in the fight against money-laundering. It marks the first time the Vatican has subjected itself to such critical outside scrutiny, and since the Vatican is expected to pass -- in the sense of avoiding a special review process for problem nations -- it shapes up as basically good news for Benedict's transparency campaign.

If, however, stories were to break around the same time that Benedict has fired a reforming bishop who wanted to clean house, and that he did so at the prompting of another prelate who presided over a financially corrupt regime (and who, to boot, has a history of defending Catholics with Nazi sympathies), it doesn't take a PR genius to predict that any good news would be lost in the resulting storm.

Right now, the Bezák story isn't making many waves outside Slovakia, largely because as of yet there's no way to either confirm or deny the suspicions floated by his allies. Burke and other senior Vatican personnel, however, would be well advised to get to the bottom of it quickly, and, at a minimum, to supply a convincing explanation for Bezák's removal. Otherwise, the rumors will simply metastasize.

The thing about ticking time-bombs is that, sooner or later, they have a habit of exploding.

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