Amien Rais: kingmaker and pretender to the throne

Professor Muhammad Amien Rais is Chairman of the People’s Assembly (Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat, MPR), which discusses the broad outlines of the national policy and has the right to choose or depose the president. Unlike the national parlia-
ment, the MPR meets only at long intervals. In October 1999, Amien Rais chaired the newly elected MPR meeting that replaced the then President Habibie by Abdurrahman Wahid. In July 2001 he called together an extra session of the MPR that voted Wahid out again, in favour of Megawati Sukarnoputri.

Amien Rais’ political career started during the long rule of President Suharto (1966-1998), when he led the Muhammadiyah (one of the two biggest Muslim organizations in Indonesia), with a following predominantly consisting of modernist, urban Muslim (1993). He earned praise outside the Muhammadiyah for his open criticism of the autocratic Suharto. Rais’ finest hour came in May 1998 when protesting students and defecting collaborators convinced President Suharto to step down. During that crucial month in Indonesia’s history, Rais was the most vocal and popular opposition leader, and for a time it looked like he would become President. He joined the 1999 parliament elections with the newly established National Mandate Party (PAN). The PAN obtained a disappointing 7 per cent of the votes, so that Rais again missed the presidency at the MPR meeting of October 1999. He still aspires to the presidency and hopes that a direct election of the President will bring him more success.

If some people in the international community believe Indonesia is not doing enough to crack down on terrorism, I will take that as encouragement. But suppose Washington asked Jakarta to send military troops to Afghanistan or to other countries to fight against terrorism as a pretext, we will say no. Because we are not like America. We are our own. We are respecting America as the most powerful country in the world - we have to be realistic too - but we are not willing to bow again and again for the sake of satisfying the American wishes. Please understand. Yes, we want to coop-

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Taipei and/or Beijing?

The Vatican’s Dilemma

The year 2002 is a very significant year for the Republic of China in Taipei. It marks the sixtieth anniversary of ROC’s diplomatic relations with the Holy See and the ninety-first founding anniversary of the Republic of China, thirty-eight years the PRC’s senior. The Holy See conducts its foreign affairs to propagate religious faith in contrast to ordinary states whose objectives are to advance their political and economic interests. The Holy See, therefore, adheres to the principles of religious freedom as a norm for diplomatic recognition.

Beijing’s leaders do not believe in God or hold any religious faith. The PRC President, Jiang Zemin, reiterat-
ed this on many official occasions; he even openly claimed himself to be ‘atheist’ in Rome early in 1999. Bei-
ing’s leaders want all religions to be under the control of the Chinese Com-
munist Church (CCP) so that no religion will lead towards ‘social instability’. According to them, the CCP is the ‘Sav-
ior’ of the Chinese people, and their authority should not be challenged. President Jiang made it clear to Chi-

nese religious officials at all levels on 13 December last year.

‘Communist party members do not believe in any religion but treat religion as a sensitive point of view […] reli-
gions should never be allowed to be used for opposing the Communist Party leadership […] The principle of independence the Holy See wishes to see adopted in China’s foreign interference in China’s reli-
gious work should be absolutely pro-
boted […] the Party’s leadership over religion should be strengthened. The work on religion is closely linked to social stability, national security and reunification, as well as China’s rela-
tions with foreign countries.’

In addition, Article 10 of the Revised PRC Constitution of 1982 states that, “Citizens of the PRC enjoy freedoms of reli-
gious belief […] No religious affairs may be dominated by any foreign country.”

Under such circumstances, the Holy See can hardly normalize its relations with Beijing. As Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, former President of the Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace, said quite openly in a recent interview, ‘It is a long road from Bethlehem to Beijing, one strewn with advances and retreats.’ Then, what is the Holy See, a special religious entity, trying to do?

To the Holy See, the existence of diplomatic relations with Taipei is no longer as obstacle to the establishment of diplomatic relations with Beijing. Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the Vatican’s Secretary of State, indicated on 11 Feb-

uary 1999 that if there were freedom of religion on the Chinese mainland, the Holy See would move its ‘Nunciature in China’ from Taipei to Beijing, rather than today’s_empty. It was sensi-
tent that the Holy See was trying to initi-
ate immediate talks with Beijing on all Church matters regardless of the existing political system.

It seems to me that the present pri-

ority for the Holy See should be to re-

open a ‘constructive dialogue’ with Bei-
ing in order to minimize their differ-
ences over religious freedom. To some observers, this is an extremely sensitive issue at a time of an impend-
ing leadership succession and transi-
tion in Beijing.

H. E. Most Rev. Msgr. Jean-Louis Taur-
ran, the Vatican’s Secretary for the Rela-
tions with States, explained in an inter-
view with the China Times of Taipei on
3 June 1999, ‘For the Holy See, the first
aim of diplomatic relations, with China
as with other countries, is that of fos-
tering the life of the Church and of pro-
moting peace in the international con-
text through dialogue. With Taiwan our
relations are marked by mutual respect:
thanks to the guarantee of the principle
of religious freedom, the Catholic
community has not encountered diffi-
culties, and it has, moreover, con-
tributed efficaciously to the material
and spiritual good of the country.’

It is apparent that the Holy See would
like to have good religious as well as
political relations with both Taipei and
Beijing if at all possible. I was told by
Vatican officials that the Holy See
prefers not to make gestures that could
be interpreted as ‘hostile’ by either side.
They added at the same time, however,
that His Holiness Pope John Paul II
does not fail to express his appreciation
for the various initiatives and steps
which the two governments take for a
better mutual understanding.’

After Beijing’s and Taipei’s simulta-
neous accession to the World Trade
Organization (WTO), the Pope made an
encouraging statement in His annual
address to the Diplomatic Corps accred-
ited to the Holy See on 10 January of
this year.

‘I am also pleased to mention the good
news […] Since last November, dele-
egations of the People’s Republic of
China and the Republic of China have
taken their seats in the World Trade
Organization. May this positive devel-
opment help prosper all the efforts
which have been made on the difficult
path of rapprochement.’

In a letter from 30 January this year
to support the Pope’s World Day of Peace Message, President Chen Shui-
bian of the Republic of China on Tai-
wan thanked the Pope for His consid-
eration and encouragement. In the same
letter, President Chen also
assured the Pope by affirming ‘freedom
of religion will always be our primary
concern in the cross-strait’s peace
process.’

Two Dilemmas Rather Than
One

The Vatican faces two dilemmas:
first, how to reconcile the ‘official’
Church with the ‘Church of silence’ on
mainland China with the assistance of
the Catholic Church in Taiwan as a
‘bridge’ Church; second, how to main-
tain a balanced cross-strait policy - in
order not to make a choice between
Taipei and Beijing - in conformity with
the teachings of the Church – justice
and peace.

In the final analysis, the stumbling
block for the normalization of Beijing-
Vatican and Beijing-Taipei relations lies
in Beijing’s demands towards the Vat-
can and Taipei. Furthermore, Beijing’s
own political system of one-party rule
does foster change.

On resolving this problem, I
explained in the 2 November 1997 issue
of The Washington Times, in an article
entitled ‘The Holy See and the “other”
China on Taiwan’.

‘If only China were free, there would
not be the conflicts and problems beset-
ning Beijing-Taipei relations and Bei-
jing-Vatican relations now […] It is
worth noting that in this Eternal City
- Rome - there are two Chinese
Embassies: the Embassy of the People’s
Republic of China in Italy and the
Embassy of the Republic of China to
the Holy See. They exist in the same
peaceful manner as the Vatican and
Italy do.’

Beijing’s explanation for the current
absence of democratic ways in its poli-
tical life is that China is still a develop-
ing country and its people are not ready
for Western democracy. In his speech-
es at Harvard in 1997 and Cambridge
in 1999 as well as in his interview with
The Times in London in 1999, Presi-
dent Jiang Zemin said Beijing’s leaders
wish to achieve the major goal of build-
ing China into a prosperous, strong,
democratic and culturally advanced
modern country by the middle of the
twenty-first century. Thus, according to
President Jiang, China needs another
fifty years for political democratisation.

In his recent interview on 7 April
with the German newspaper Welt am
Sonntag, President Jiang reiterated his
position on normalizing relations with
Tibet, Taipei, and the Vatican. Taipei is
to accept Beijing’s so-called ‘one-China
principle’ and its ‘one country – two
systems’ approach to cross-strait unifi-
cation, in the case of the Holy See, Pres-
ident Jiang reiterated two precondi-
tions: severing diplomatic relations
with Taipei and non-interference in
China’s domestic affairs.

To the long-suffering Catholic
Church in mainland China waiting for
another fifty years is not a short time,
although a Vatican official told me that
the Holy See has ‘eternal patience’. Is
there something to do about this situa-
tion in the meantime?

I remember some twenty years ago
in 1982, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn,
Nobel-prize winner in literature, visit-
ed Taiwan and inspired us in his speech
entitled ‘To Free China’. He said:

‘…Your island is a “bastion of nation-
al rescue”. So be it! Not only defence,
not only self-preservation should be
your goal - but help, but the liberation
of your compatriots suffering on the
mainland […] In time of crisis, you have
the most formidable ally in the world:
one billion (now 1.3 billion) Chinese
people. Their sympathy is your moral
and spiritual support.’

I wish to conclude by quoting the
brief conversation I had with His Holi-
ness Pope John Paul II on the occasion
of the presentation of my Letters of Cre-
dentials more than 5 years ago. The
Pope said to me, “Taiwan is free!” I
responded, ‘Let’s join hands in making
mainland China free!’ The Pope
replied, ‘Our common desire! Our com-
mon desire!’ It is our common desire!’

It is my firm belief that, with God’s
blessing and our common efforts, the
people on the Chinese mainland will
regain their freedom and democracy €

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Editors’ note >

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