



Chinese Communists' Persecution of Cardinal Zen Continues as He Stands Trial

SINGAPORE — Notwithstanding a slight Covid-19-related delay, the high-profile trial of Chinese Cardinal Joseph Zen and five other defendants is still slated to occur this week at the West Kowloon Court in Hong Kong.

The much-anticipated trial was postponed after the judge presiding over the case, Permanent Magistrate Ada Yim Shun-ye, tested positive for Covid-19, according to local media reports, such as those from *Sing Tao Daily*.

The 90-year-old Cardinal Zen, Hong Kong's archbishop emeritus, was originally supposed to stand trial on Monday (September 19) because of his position as a trustee of a pro-democracy legal fund. According to the prosecution, the cardinal did not file for local society registration for the now-defunct 612 Humanitarian Fund between July 16, 2019, and October 31, 2021. The fund, for which Cardinal Zen assumed a leadership role, offered legal and monetary aid to pro-democracy protesters opposing a hot-button bill in 2019 that permitted extradition to mainland communist China.

The defense is slated to assert in the September trial that the fund had a right to associate under Hong Kong's Basic Law, which has been in force since the British gave Hong Kong to China in 1997.

Based on the defense arguments, the charity did not have to register under the Societies Ordinance. Moreover, the defense hopes that the ordinance will be interpreted to consider the right of citizens to associate as enshrined in Hong Kong's Basic Law.

Cardinal Zen and five others were arrested in May under a pro-Beijing national-security law for allegedly collaborating with foreign forces. This national-security law was implemented by Beijing in Hong Kong in 2020 to censor the pro-democracy movement.

In essence, this law outlaws behavior or activities regarded as treason, secession, sedition, subversion, foreign interference, and terrorism. To add fuel to the fire, the law also indicates that the government in Beijing can set up agencies to meet the security needs of Hong Kong, as and when the regime regards it as expedient.



AP Images
Cardinal Joseph Zen



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Various pro-democracy activists and national leaders have lambasted the law as undermining freedoms promised to Hong Kong when it came under Chinese rule. Some even expressed worries that articles in Hong Kong's Basic Law that safeguard freedom of speech, freedom of worship, and freedom to assemble would be neglected.

Cardinal Zen's trial has been touted as a dry-run to display how Beijing regards this recent national-security law in Hong Kong. Observers have been also monitoring closely if the rights prescribed in this restrictive law will be safeguarded.

Without the national-security law indictment, Cardinal Zen and other defendants could only face a fine of up to \$1,750.

Besides the cardinal, others on trial include barrister Margaret Ng; singer-activist Denise Ho; cultural-studies scholar Hui Po-keung; ex-legislator Cyd Ho; and activist Sze Ching-wee. Sze functioned as the fund's secretary general before it shut down in October 2021.

Cyd Ho has already been imprisoned for his role in a demonstration. Various other pro-democracy activists, such as Catholic media magnate Jimmy Lai, will also serve jail time on the same charge.

Each of the defendants pleaded not guilty following their detention in May, and Zen himself was out on bail briefly after his May arrest.

The trial, conducted in Mandarin Chinese, is expected to be prolonged for an additional two and a half days for closing arguments in English. These legal proceedings, which critics have noted as an act of aggression against freedom, could lead to severe fines or jail time.

Hong Kong is a special administrative region of China, with its own form of government. What's more, Hong Kong citizens have historically retained more freedom of religion than in mainland China, where religious believers are regularly monitored by the iron grip of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

However, Beijing under Xi Jinping has attempted to increase surveillance and restrictions over religious practices in Hong Kong on the pretext of ensuring national security.

A vocal promoter of religious freedom and democracy, Cardinal Zen, who led the Hong Kong diocese from 2002–2009, has been a staunch critic of the 2018 Vatican-Beijing agreement on episcopal appointments. That deal was purportedly meant to unite China's 12 million Catholics, who are split between the underground Church and the Communist-administered Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association. Yet the terms of the deal that also tried to facilitate the appointment of bishops for Chinese dioceses have never formally been publicized.

Cardinal Zen asserted that this deal gives the communist government in China more power to choose its own bishops, thus making many Chinese Catholics vulnerable to communist persecution.

By the same token, despite this deal, persecution of the underground Church persists, and based on some reports, has escalated.

Beijing ended diplomatic relations with the Vatican in 1951 and set up its own pro-Communist Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA), long deemed as a rival to Rome. For years, the CPCA has appointed and ordained bishops without the pope's approval. For a long time, the Beijing-backed authorities have also detained Catholics who affirm allegiance to Rome.

Of interest to American observers would be the announcement made by U.S. President Joe Biden's press secretary that Biden urged for the release of "those who have been unjustly detained and



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charged, like Cardinal Joseph Zen.” Similarly, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi criticized the cardinal’s arrest in a *Washington Post* op-ed, where she regarded Cardinal Zen as “the embodiment of moral fortitude.”

Earlier, at a congressional hearing, Representative Chris Smith (R-N.J.), co-chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, declared that religious persecution in communist China has “never been worse than it is right now.”

“Under ‘sinicization,’ all religions and believers must comport with and aggressively promote communist ideology — or else,” Smith lamented.

“Religious believers of every persuasion are harassed, arrested, jailed, or tortured. Only the compliant are left relatively unscathed. Bibles are burned, churches are destroyed, crosses set ablaze atop church steeples.”

Cardinal Zen’s arrest is starkly reminiscent of the persecution of Catholic bishops during the Mao Tse-tung era. For example, Cardinal Ignatius Kung was imprisoned for three decades for refusing to acknowledge the control of the Chinese communist regime over the Catholic church.



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