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Pope Francis cheers at the participants as he arrives to preside over a mass at the Steppe Arena in the Mongolian capital Ulaanbaatar, Sept. 3, 2023. (AP/Ng Han Guan, File)

by Associated Press

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China and the Vatican have agreed to extend [a provisional agreement](#) on the appointment of Catholic bishops in China for four more years, officials said Tuesday.

The 2018 agreement, extended twice previously, was an attempt under Pope Francis [to bridge long-standing differences](#) over control of the church in China. There have been disagreements since, but they have so far not derailed the fragile rapprochement.

“The two sides will maintain contact and dialogue following a constructive spirit and continue to advance the improvement of China-Vatican relations,” China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian said Tuesday while confirming the extension.

The Vatican said that it “remains dedicated to furthering the respectful and constructive dialogue” with China, “in view of the further development of bilateral relations for the benefit of the Catholic Church in China and the Chinese people as a whole.”

Francis has reached out to China during trips to Asia both this year and last year, [repeating his desire to visit the country](#) on a flight home from Singapore last month.

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The Vatican's relations with China were severed more than seven decades ago when the Communist Party came to power. The country's estimated 12 million Catholics were divided into a state-recognized church and an underground one that stayed loyal to Rome.

Relations were stymied over China's insistence on its exclusive right to name bishops as a matter of national sovereignty, while the Vatican insisted the pope has the right to name the successors of the original Apostles.

The 2018 agreement sought to find a middle ground, although Rome has acknowledged it was a bad deal and the only one it could get. The Holy See's outreach to China under Francis has drawn criticism, especially from American conservatives who have accused the Vatican of selling out the faithful who have been forced underground.