

Would Mormons try to influence a Romney White House?

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WASHINGTON (RNS) When Switzerland passed new employment rules that ban foreign religious groups from sending unpaid missionaries, 13 Mormon members of Congress pleaded with the Swiss ambassador for an exception.

The Swiss ambassador sent a respectful, yet perfunctory, letter in response, and while some meetings took place, the rules went forward. Sen. Orrin Hatch, a Utah Republican and a Mormon, called it "very disappointing."

But for some, the fact that Mormon lawmakers waged the battle at all is troubling, and they point to it as evidence that if elected president, Mitt Romney may use his post to promote his faith and protect its interests.

"I think it is a very serious problem that would arise if he is president," said Fred Karger, a gay rights activist from California who is running a fringe campaign for the Republican nomination.

He argues top officials at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints coordinated the letter to the Swiss ambassador, and says it shows the influence the faith's First Presidency can wield simply by picking up a phone. That influence could grow greatly if, instead of calling senators, those church leaders could call the White House.

"How can a President Romney turn down a call from the First Presidency?" Karger asked. "He has been an obedient, faithful Mormon his whole life; he won't just disregard it. I think the separation of church and state is designed to prevent exactly that."

Mormon lawmakers and scholars say there is nothing illegal, unethical or untoward about the LDS Church petitioning its government for help on such matters. Still, they recognize that a Mormon in the White House would bring new levels of scrutiny from Republicans uneasy about the faith, and from Democrats concerned about its conservative political posture.

"In the event that Romney were elected president, both sides would be anxiously looking for any signs that he was promoting his faith or doing the bidding of the LDS hierarchy," said Grant Hardy, a history and religious studies professor at the University of North Carolina-Asheville.

Hardy, a Mormon, expects a Romney administration would be reluctant to nominate Mormons to top government positions or to invite too many to participate in White House events. And while most would expect him to work with prominent Mormons in Washington, such as Hatch, his interactions with Democratic Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who is also Mormon, would likely draw extra attention.

"Any reaching out to Harry Reid would be carefully scrutinized for indications of putting religious ties above party loyalty," Hardy predicted.

Romney's campaign did not respond to a request for comment, but the former governor of Massachusetts talked extensively about the intersection of his faith and politics in a 2007 interview with The Salt Lake Tribune.

"I don't try and distance myself in any way, shape or form from my faith, but my church doesn't dictate to me or anyone what political policies we should pursue," Romney said during his first run for the White House. "There has never been a time in my four years as governor, that anyone from my church called me or contacted me and asked me to take a position on an issue."

Alice Ross of Butler, Pa., is a Republican voter who says she won't support a Mormon presidential candidate, in part because she distrusts the top-down and tightknit structure of the worldwide faith.

"They are a very strong movement in America," she said. "The president would make decisions based on his Mormon beliefs, and that would not be good."

Ross participated in a Salt Lake Tribune national poll commissioned in mid-December that showed 60 percent of likely voters would be comfortable voting for a Mormon presidential candidate, but 26 percent were uncomfortable to some degree; 14 percent said they didn't know.

The survey asked the people who were uncomfortable with a Mormon candidate to explain why. The most common responses were polygamy, concerns the faith isn't Christian and that its members were too conservative.

Karger's constant jabs at Mormons stem from his involvement in California's Proposition 8 fight on gay marriage. As an activist, Karger was upset at the faith's hefty financial involvement in the 2008 ballot measure. He has since worked to highlight Mormon donors, leading to boycotts of their businesses.

Romney backers, including Hatch, say critics should examine Romney's tenure as governor, where he enforced abortion laws that he disagreed with and, while he fought against gay marriage, he didn't stand in the way of any same-sex unions after the state Supreme Court deemed them legal.

"Anybody who thinks Mitt Romney is governed by church leaders is just plain wrong," said Hatch, who said Mormon authorities don't pressure elected officials. "Give me a break. I've served in the Senate for 35 years now. I never had any leader in the LDS Church tell me what I've had to do. Never once."

Former Utah Sen. Bob Bennett, who is Mormon and a Romney supporter, said it shouldn't shock anyone that the LDS Church asks national politicians for help on occasion.

"Quite naturally any organization of that size is going to have issues requiring contact with their elected officials," he said.

Bennett said it wasn't uncommon for him to speak with foreign officials in places like Russia and Ecuador on matters involving missionaries or LDS land disputes. He predicted the LDS Church would be more hesitant to weigh in on a political issue if Romney was in the White House.

"I think the brethren would be sensitive to the fact they were dealing with a Mormon, and Mitt would be sensitive to the fact he would not want to subject the church to criticism," he said.

Hardy, the history professor, said he expects that gay rights and immigration are the two hot-button issues most likely to put Romney and the LDS Church in a bind.

Romney, in his 2007 interview with the Tribune, cited one example of taking a position that ran contrary to that of the church: legislation that would allow the sale of alcohol on Sundays in Massachusetts.

"I signed it," Romney said. "I believe that in our state allowing the sale of alcohol on Sunday is good for the consumer and therefore I didn't oppose it. That isn't saying that I disagree with my church. I simply did what I thought was in the best interest of the state, which I was elected to serve."