

A Path Forward to Peace and Stability in Asia and the World: The Vision of the Dalai Lama

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It is my privilege to be speaking at this panel discussion in Prague, being held on the sidelines of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance Ministerial Conference that the Czech Republic is hosting. This discussion on Tibet is topical given that the overall theme of the ministerial conference is “Freedom of Religion or Belief under Authoritarian Regimes.” Indeed, Tibet and the Tibetan people are under the authoritarian rule of the Chinese Communist Party.

Coming to the topic of the side event itself, H.H. the Dalai Lama has consistently promoted initiatives that are pragmatic, practical and mutually beneficial. We can understand such a vision of his through his four principal commitments of promoting human values, religious harmony, preservation of Tibetan culture and promotion of ancient Indian wisdom.

I would like to address the issue by focusing on the survival of the distinct Tibetan religious identity, which has impact beyond Tibet. I will do that first by laying out what the Chinese Government’s current policy on Tibetan religion is. This will be followed up by outlining some of the developments in Tibet, focusing on misuse of religion for political purposes and usage of new technologies in the suppression of Tibetan religious practitioners. I will conclude with some recommendations that the international community, specifically delegates to this ministerial conference, could consider.

Policy changes from physical destruction of Tibetan Buddhism to one of control

The traditional Tibetan religion is Bon, but today most Tibetans follow Buddhism. Since its introduction in the seventh century, what became Tibetan Buddhism has also spread beyond Tibet, to the Himalayan region, China, Mongolia, the republics of Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva in present-day Russia. In the post-1959 period, sizable followers of Tibetan Buddhism can be found in many countries in the west, too.

Through the centuries, Tibetan scholars have highlighted the rich philosophy of Tibetan Buddhism, which has shown its potential to enrich the spiritual, social, and cultural fabric of the society where they flourished. Tibetan Buddhism also organically developed a process and a system with clear outlining of responsibilities of the clergy and that of the devotees. The Tibetan nation benefitted from this as can be perceived through the various Tibetan dynasties and subsequently during the period of the rule by the Dalai

Lamas, until the Chinese takeover. Traditional followers of Tibetan Buddhism outside of Tibet, too, benefitted from this practice, as is evident from present-day Bhutan, the Himalayan region of India, Mongolia, the Russian Federation, etc.

But the Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1959 altered the situation. Chinese Communists first saw Tibetan Buddhism as an ideological enemy and worked towards its total annihilation. This happened before the Cultural Revolution, during it and even after it was over. Eventually, when the Chinese authorities realized that they could not extinguish the spiritual life of the Tibetan people through that approach they began to implement a different approach, from destruction of Tibetan religious institutions and system to one of insidious control and claiming the right to determine Tibetan Buddhists' own leaders and modes of practice. In Tibet today, the more important and fundamental traditional transfer of religious philosophy from teacher to the disciples is seriously threatened while the tradition is preserved in the Tibetan Buddhist community in the free world.

Making Tibetan Buddhism “Chinese” and subservient to the Communist Party

Following the assumption of office by President Xi Jinping, the policy has worsened with Sinicizing of Tibetan Buddhism, altering its very identity to make it subservient to the Chinese Communist Party. Traditionally the Tibetan monastic community is bound by spiritual codes of conduct developed through the centuries by the ecclesiastical community. However, today China requires the monastic community to hold the Communist doctrine and the Party as higher authority than Buddhist precepts even on spiritual matters.

This is also part of the overall policy of Xi Jinping to make Tibetans embrace a total Chinese identity, which in effect is Sinicization. Xi has launched “group study sessions” for the members of the politburo on topics that he believes is important. In his address to one such study sessions held on Oct. 27, 2023, Xi called for forging “a strong sense of community for the Chinese Nation, efforts should be made to let the people cultivate the awareness that people from all ethnic groups are in the same community, where they share weal and woe and the same future and stick together through thick and thin, and life and death.”

Xi further encouraged “people of all ethnic groups to identify themselves with the Chinese culture. And continuously enhance the recognition of Chinese culture among the people of all ethnic groups, effectively promote the popularize the standard spoken and written Chinese language and the use of unified state-compiled textbooks to ensure the facilitation shared communication of heart and soul through language.”

Over the years, the Chinese state has promulgated various regulations to bring Tibetan monasteries and monastics under tighter control by the State. Although the measures apply to all religious communities in the People’s Republic of China, the effect will be

more intense in Tibet owing to the crucial role religion plays as the cultural and social foundation in Tibetan society.

These include the Religious Affairs Regulations (Order No. 686) promulgated by the State Council in 2018, the 2019 Administrative Measures for Religious Groups, Measures on the Management of Religious Clergy of 2021, Administrative Measures for Internet Religious Information Services of March 2022, and the “Measures for the Financial Management of Religious Activity Sites” of June 1, 2022.

The 2019 measures mandated that religious groups “adhere to the direction of Sinicization of religions in China, embody the core values of socialism, and maintain national unity, ethnic unity, religious harmony and social stability.” Sinicization can also be found in the 2021 measures on religious clergy effectively imposing a political test to ensure clergies’ loyalty to the Communist Party.

On September 1, 2023, Order No. 19 of the State Administration for Religious Affairs came into force. “Administrative Measures for Religious Activity Venues” came into force. The order not only places all religions as subservient to the Chinese Communist Party but also mandates that they implement Xi Jinping thought.

This decree solidifies Chinese President Xi Jinping’s drive to “Sinify” all religions, a policy first initiated during a Central United Front Work conference in mid-2015, then reaffirmed during the National Religious Work Conference in April 2016 and finally publicly declared at the 19th Party Congress in 2017.

Claiming authority over succession of Tibetan Buddhist masters

The Chinese State issues regulations to claim authority in managing and approving reincarnate Tibetan lamas. These include the 2007 “Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism” (Order No. 5), and the 2017 Religious Affairs Regulation.

Under these strictures, the Chinese government requires Tibetan Buddhist monks to receive its approval before reincarnating—a demand literally antithetical to Tibetan Buddhist precepts. The most visible aspect of this is China’s assertion of its authority to select the next Dalai Lama. Since China has not been able to place the present Dalai Lama under its control, its plan is to impose its own future Dalai Lama that is subservient to the Communist Party of China. They tried doing so with the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama, the second most well-known Tibetan Buddhist leader, by kidnapping him when he was six years old and by appointing the atheist government’s own Panchen Lama.

The Dalai Lama has categorically maintained that only he can decide regarding his reincarnation. In 2011, he released a formal statement explaining the reincarnation system and how he intends to handle the issue of his succession. The Dalai Lama has also said that he would not be reborn under the current situation of Tibet under China. “The very purpose of the next reincarnation is to continue the legacy of the previous person,” he told the Sydney Morning Herald in 2021. “Therefore, if the next Dalai Lama is to be found while the current one is in exile still struggling for the freedom of the Tibetan people, and the preservation of Tibetan culture and religion, then obviously he will be reincarnated in a free country. That includes anywhere in the world where there is a sizeable Tibetan Buddhist community...”

By attempting to select the next Dalai Lama, the Chinese government also aims to extend its control over Tibetan Buddhism with clear geopolitical implications even on followers of Tibetan Buddhism in the Indian subcontinent, Mongolia, the Russian Federation, and other parts of the world.

Controlling Tibetan Buddhists through surveillance & new technology

Today, the Chinese regime is using a system that combines cutting edge surveillance technology with the deployment of tens of thousands of Party cadres in Buddhist institutions and people’s homes as part of its efforts to make Tibetan Buddhism fulfill its political agenda.

In Tibet today, the monks and nuns live in a suffocating environment under constant surveillance and control measures meant to limit their physical activities. CCTV cameras system is the single largest convenient tool used by China to develop an intrusive environment in not only the monasteries but in the whole of Tibet. The presence of ever-watching cameras within the monasteries produces a suffocating environment for the monastic community. Hikvision, a Chinese government-controlled entity is the leading company providing surveillance cameras and other tech tools.

Surveillance of internet and social media activities of monks have deeply affected the monastic community. During certain periods considered sensitive, Tibetans have been asked to keep their mobile phones always switched on to enable the authorities to monitor them easily.

On March 5, 2019, Chinese state media announced the rollout of 200 taxis in the Tibetan capital Lhasa equipped with facial recognition and real-time monitoring. It is thus possible for the authorities to monitor every conversation and the movement of individuals even while they are in taxi cabs.

Thus, the surveillance and control of the monastic community is done through a sophisticated network of both human and electronic means and includes the compilation of a database that contains all information on religious personnel. The methods deployed

on the monastic community are of dystopian proportions. In gist, not only are physical activities surveilled and controlled, but the institutional method attempts also to stifle the inner world of the monastic community through ideological control.

Recommendations

Governments should work multilaterally with like-minded countries and international bodies, including the EU and the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, to undertake coordinated initiatives in developing a united policy on religious freedom of the Tibetan people, including at the UN and other international and regional forums;

Governments should publicly support the traditional spiritual authority of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhists and counter Chinese interference in matters relating to Tibetan Buddhism, particularly in the reincarnation process, and consider imposing sanctions with respect to such Chinese officials who are involved;

The International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance should adopt a formal public position recognizing that the decisions regarding the recognition of Tibetan Buddhist religious leaders, including a future Dalai Lama, are exclusively spiritual matters that should be made by the Tibetan Buddhist community and the present 14th Dalai Lama;

Governments and IRFBA should ask China to end policies of “sinicization” that eradicate core tenets of Tibetan religion and culture, such as language, religious beliefs, and ways of life;

Governments and IRFBA should urge China to release Tibetan political prisoners, particularly those who have been imprisoned for upholding their religious rights, including the 11th Panchen Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima;

Governments and IRFBA should organize fact-finding delegations to Tibet to study the status of Tibetan religious freedom and to make appropriate policy recommendations;

Governments and IRFBA should ask China to end policies that uproot the use of Tibetan language, re-introduce Tibetan language as a medium of education in schools, and allow for privately run Tibetan language schools, particularly in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, as understanding of Tibetan language is fundamental to exercising religious freedom and the study of Tibetan Buddhism;

Governments should undertake concrete initiatives to pressure Beijing to engage the Dalai Lama’s envoys in direct, substantive dialogue without preconditions;

The International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance Steering Committee should establish contact and have an open and regular dialogue with the Dalai Lama and the

democratically elected Central Tibetan Administration based in India on common efforts to promote Tibetan religious freedom;

Member countries of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance and the EU, should following the U.S. initiative, decide on opening consulates in Lhasa to monitor developments relating the Tibetan people, including their religious freedom; and

Governments and IRFBA should avail themselves of the opportunity of the upcoming fourth cycle of the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of China in January 2024 to raise the issues of Tibetan religious freedom and seek China's commitment to respect them.
