

**International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of religion or Belief
Prague, 28-30 November 2023**

**Panel on Misuse of Religion for Political Purposes and Building Resilience
28 November, 2023**

Statement by Telo Tulku Rinpoche

Dear esteemed guests, fellow delegates, and faith leaders, it is my honor to be with you to address the suppression of religious freedoms, which has had a critical impact on so many of the world's societies.

Former President Vaclav Havel understood this very well. He understood the power of the human spirit in building resilience and in coping with the injustices and cruelties of oppressive political regimes. He spoke about the “singular, explosive, incalculable political power of living within the truth” as a means of surviving oppression.

As I prepared today's speech, I was very moved as I recall in my early 20's the memory of His Holiness the Dalai Lama's first visit to the newly founded Czech Republic at the invitation of former president Václav Havel. It was a political and cultural milestone for us all to witness the visit of the Dalai Lama as one of the early significant acts as a newly liberated country. Since then, the Dalai Lama has visited the Czech Republic at least ten times—twice since the passing of former President Václav Havel—as a participant in conferences and ecumenical meetings within the framework of FORUM 2000. They were so close that the Dalai Lama even travelled to be with him a week before he died.

I am speaking to you today from my perspective as a tulku - in other words, a reincarnation of a Mongolian lama. I am of Kalmyk heritage and was born in America. I was fortunate to receive a monastic education in a Tibetan refugee monastery in India under the guidance of other Tibetan lamas, precious teachers who gave me extensive training in Buddhist philosophy and practice. These institutions were re-established in exile by Tibetan refugees as a means to preserve and promote Buddhist education, Tibetan language and culture, as well as to protect religious lineages. This was all made possible thanks to the visionary leadership of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama.

Just before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, I had the honor to be part of His Holiness the Dalai Lama on his first visit to republic of Kalmykia a region in the Russian Federation whose once-rich Buddhist heritage was destroyed by Soviet communist policies and severely impacted the community with the forced deportation of Kalmyk people to Siberia. I recall His Holiness the Dalai Lama saying to a journalist before his departure. “The People of Tibet and Kalmykia are like twin brother and sisters who has suffered tremendously under the rule of totalitarianism”

In 1992, I was elected by the people of Kalmykia as the Shadjin (Supreme) Lama of the Kalmyk people. As their spiritual leader, my role was to lead a Buddhist revival among the approximately 160,000 Kalmyk's who live in Kalmykia. Many years later I was appointed to the role of Honorary Representative of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to the Office of Tibet in based in Moscow, and have served in this capacity, both as a Representative of His Holiness and also mainly to help cultivate Buddhist education and support the traditionally Buddhist Republics in the Russian Federation such as Kalmykia, Buryatia, and Tuva to reconnect with their Buddhist heritage and identity.

From a personal experience, I have found that it is vital for religious leaders and spiritual educators to actively engage to help cultivate the conditions for a free society where religious and spiritual freedoms are allowed.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has promoted secular ethics, the importance of kindness and compassion, and has engaged with scientists and world leaders on the pressing issues of our time. From his example, we see that it is not enough only to engage with those who share the same religious faith. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has always said that prayers alone are not sufficient enough. We must engage with those who have different beliefs as well as those who has no religious beliefs. Buddhism is a culture and philosophy, not only a religion.

Those human values, of kindness, compassion and wisdom, are the foundation of a healthy society. Destroying those values creates harm and immense danger.

China has an agenda of ‘Sinicization’ in Tibet, with an objective of breaking and reshaping Tibetan Buddhism, and eradicating distinctive Tibetan identity. Their methods of control involve dystopian methods of high tech surveillance and control over monasteries and lay society.

Now, Tibetan Buddhism is being preserved and protected in exile, in our schools and monasteries, but also by brave Tibetans inside the PRC, who continue to protect the core values of our spiritual civilization against the odds.

The invasion and occupation of Tibet disrupted peace and stability in the region. The 1962 border war between China and India came three years after the Dalai Lama escaped into exile nearly 70 years ago.

The Dalai Lama's vision of Tibet as a zone of peace, with its fragile high altitude landscape protected and preserved for the sake of the world, would transform not only the lives of Tibetans in Tibet, but also far beyond its borders, across the Himalayas such as Nepal, Bhutan and the entire region. Including Mongolia, and Russia in many regions such as Kalmykia, where I come from.

From the moment that Mao Zedong declared to the young Dalai Lama that 'religion is poison', there have been systematic efforts to target Tibetans' spiritual culture. Before and during the Cultural Revolution thousands of monasteries were destroyed and religious texts burnt. Great religious teachers were imprisoned and forced to undergo hard labour. Today, even mild expressions of Tibetan cultural identity are criminalized. Draconian new regulations target Tibetans engaged in environmental protection or community initiatives, such as helping the poor and the homeless. burning of incense as a offering to the Buddha's. displaying prayer flags, and simply possessing a image of H.H. the Dalai Lama can result in imprisonment, and often monks are even prevented from praying for those who have passed.

Even aside from causing such human suffering, this jeopardies the very foundations of a stable society.

Tibetan Buddhist civilization has always reached beyond the high plateau - its influence is strong across the Indian and Nepalese Himalayas, in Mongolia, Russia, and central Asia, in traditionally Buddhist countries such as Japan and many others. It will remain a vital force in Asia and across the world. It is a fundamental counterpoint to authoritarian and despotic leadership. It bolsters resilience in the face of the oppressive forces seeking to divide our societies, to spread hate, to disrupt and change the world order.

The interference of the Chinese state with the practice of Tibetan Buddhism has also led to further complexities with Buddhist countries such as Mongolia, as well as Buddhist communities in the Russian Federation such as Kalmykia, Buryatia, and Tuva.

Mongolia, which is historically Buddhist, has also suffered immense religious repression and oppression under communism. Buddhism almost didn't survive the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, when thousands of monks were killed or taken across the border into Siberian gulags. This led to a massive decline in religious education and observance, as well as a disintegration of Buddhist and Mongolian cultural identity. After the collapse of communism in 1990, Buddhism in Mongolia has experienced a slow, yet gradual revival throughout the country. The official Mongolian government policy states that the Government does not administer or involve itself in religious affairs, as stated in the Constitution of Mongolia which ensures the rights of people to religious and non religious beliefs of.

The revitalization of Buddhism in Russian Republics such as Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva has also been a painful but enriching process.

As example, in 2023, the 10th incarnation of Jetsundamba khutughtu, historically the highest Buddhist authority in Mongolia, was announced to the people of Mongolia and the head of the main Mongolian buddhist monastery, a new Khambo lama of Gandengtegchilen monastery, was elected as due established religious process without any involvement of the Government of Mongolia. As well as in September of 2023, the Pope Francis the 1st of the Roman catholic church made an official state visit to Mongolia, which highlights the religious tolerance and freedom within Mongolia despite the majority of its population adhere to buddhism.

Today, we are thankful for the visionary leadership of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, whose efforts to preserve Tibetan Buddhist traditions in his extraordinary life in exile has enabled generations of Tibetans, Mongolians and other Buddhists to study and practice, while also establishing monastic institutions, libraries and educational systems that will grow as Buddhist education continues to evolve.

Three main points of concern that I have with the current state of continuous suppression of religious freedoms in Tibet, which extend to Mongolia and the Buddhist communities in the Russia Republics, are the following: 1) The future recognition and installation of the 15th Dalai Lama and the potential political, social and economic implications for Tibet and Mongolia, 2) The suppression of Buddhist education and cultural identity of Tibetans and Mongolians, 3) The suppression and control of monastic institutions and Buddhist communities.

I am saying this because, China has gone as far as to infiltrate in Mongolian Buddhist affairs.

Mongolia is a landlocked nation between two powerful neighbors, Russia and China. What Mongolia Buddhist faces now, with the recognition of a new spiritual leader, gives an insight into what Tibetans may face in future.

China has vehemently opposed any interaction between the Mongolian Buddhist and the office of the Dalai Lama, including encouraging the denial of entry of the Dalai Lama to Mongolia and threats of serious consequences.

The political and economic consequences are to be expected with consideration to China's economic sphere of influence, and due to their positioning as Mongolia's most important economic partner, accounting for more than 80 percent of total exports, 60 percent of imports and more than 40 percent of its GDP.

The emergence of the Tenth Bogd Khan has given Mongolia not only a high profile spiritual leader and important lineage holder of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, but also a precarious position amongst relations between Tibet and China. But it also gives us great hope.

China will undoubtedly attempt to install its own 'fake' Dalai Lama when the time comes.

But Tibetans as well as followers of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of the Himalayan region in India, Nepal, Bhutan, Mongolia and Russia will not accept this. We are facing a moment of great danger of religious freedom. But the Tibetan Buddhist civilization has deep roots - and many energetic young teachers, monks, nuns, scholars and Buddhist all over the world will only accept the truth based on history and pure lineage of the Buddhism.

I would like to conclude by mentioning that

Tibetan Buddhism has had and will continue to have a transformative impact on the lives of millions of Tibetans, Mongolians, Chinese and people around the world.

I see three important areas where the international community needs to act.

- a) Governments must call on China to end the persecution of Tibetans exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. The UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review of China in January 2024 is a good next opportunity.

- b) China must be made to understand that the succession of the Dalai Lama is the sole concern of the His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the Tibetans and people who are historically followers of Tibetan Buddhism
- c) Develop a better understanding of the importance of Inner Asia such as the Tibet, Himalayan regions of India, Nepal and Bhutan, Mongolia, and Russia for peace and stability in Asia and across the globe and support the Dalai Lama's plan for peace and stability for Tibet and the world.

Allow me to thank the Czech Government for providing me the opportunity to share my thoughts with you. Thank you for your attention.