



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

As Tibetans thank America for 60 years of support, US leaders pledge continued commitment

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The Tibetan people thanked the United States for 60 years of friendship at a celebration on Tuesday night—and US leaders responded by pledging to maintain their support until justice and human rights come to Tibet.

“Bipartisan support for the rights of the Tibetan people is strong and is not going away. I hope the Chinese government is able to hear that message,” said Rep. Jim McGovern (D-Mass.), one of several members of Congress honored at the lively “Thank You, America” event on Feb. 12 in the US Capitol, where gratitude was shared through prayers, songs and speeches.

The event, hosted by the Office of Tibet, the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) and the Capital Area Tibetan Association, was held to express gratitude to the United States government and people for steadfastly supporting His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan.

“America has been there for us and has supported our just cause sincerely right from the start,” said the Dalai Lama, as he recalled, in a video message, American leaders’ interest in Tibet since 1942.

Two-way thanks

Although the event was designed to show Tibetans’ appreciation to the US, several American leaders said they were grateful to the people of Tibet.

“When you say ‘Thank you, America,’ we say thank you to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the people of Tibet...and to the Tibetans in the diaspora, who are working so hard to preserve the culture, the language, the religion, the strength of it all,” said House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.).

Pelosi was presented at the event with a large dharma wheel as a gesture of gratitude from the Tibetan people.

Pelosi’s colleagues on Capitol Hill singled out the Dalai Lama for praise.

“Think about how much impact the Dalai Lama has had on the world as someone who has been exiled from his country,” said Rep. Tom Suozzi (D-N.Y.). “Just the force of his wisdom and his ideas and his spirit have had such a tremendous impact.”

“As a student who participated in a nonviolent moment here in this country,” said House Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D), “I have long admired the example that the Dalai Lama has set for the world.”

Carl Gershman, president of the National Endowment for Democracy, added that the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people have a cause that is so just that both sides of the political aisle can agree on it.

“I want to thank Tibet,” Gershman said, “for placing before us an issue, the rights of the Tibetan people, where the distinctions between right and wrong, between oppression and freedom, is so clear that the issue can be a unifying cause in the United States for both of our parties at a time when we are very polarized.”

“Great sadness” in Tibet

Gershman added that the plight of Tibetans has awakened many Americans to the true nature of China’s hostile, authoritarian regime.

“In Tibet, you could feel the great sadness of the Tibetan people because they could not exercise their freedom of religion,” said Rep. Betty McCollum (D-Minn.), who traveled to Tibet in 2015 as part of a Congressional delegation led by Pelosi, who was then the Democratic Leader. “The destruction of Tibetan culture and the suppression of Buddhist monks and scholars must end.”

Matteo Mecacci, president of ICT, noted that, “Although we in the West have been privileged to experience firsthand the beauty of Tibetans’ culture of compassion and tolerance, thanks to the leadership of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and to an ever-growing and vibrant Tibetan diaspora, it is tragic to see that Tibetan culture is being stifled in Tibet.”

Mecacci added that China’s reckless development policies, along with global climate change, are grave threats to Tibet’s fragile ecosystem.

“This environmental crisis matters to the world, not just to Beijing or the Tibetans,” he said. “More than a billion people in Asia depend on water coming from the Tibetan plateau.”

China’s exploitation of Tibet’s rich natural resources has helped fuel China’s rise as a superpower. Now, the Chinese government is using its influence to try to reshape global norms on human rights and democracy.

“China isn’t just a threat to its own people. It’s asserted itself on the global stage as an economic power, as a military power, as a power that wishes to create a parallel international order that mirrors its shadowy value system,” Suozzi said, adding, “It’s up to the United States and all of us in the free world to continue to push back.”

National security interest

Referring to the [bipartisan Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act](#) (RATA), which was passed in December 2018, McGovern said, “No one should fall for the line that entire regions of China are off limits for security reasons,” said McGovern, who introduced RATA in Congress alongside Rep. Randy Hultgren (R-Ill.) and Sens. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) and Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisc.). “That kind of language tells me that bad things are going on that the Chinese government doesn’t want anyone to see, [which is] all the more reason to insist on going.”

The Bill calls for American journalists, diplomats and ordinary citizens to have the same access to Tibet that Chinese citizens have to the US, and requires the State Department to revoke or deny US visas for Chinese officials responsible for preventing Americans from entering Tibet.

Mecacci said RATA shows that access to Tibet is being recognized as part of America's national security interests. "Every US administration will continue to be concerned about that," he said. "And Beijing, I am sure, has taken note."

Decades of support

While RATA was a breakthrough, it was just the latest in America's decades of support for the Tibetan people.

Lobsang Sangay, democratically elected president of the Central Tibetan Administration, which represents the Tibetan people, said US support dates back to when President Franklin Roosevelt sent a letter and pocket watch to the Dalai Lama in the early 1940s.

During his video address, the Dalai Lama showed that he still uses the watch.

Sangay added that four sitting US presidents have met with the Dalai Lama. In 2007, President George W. Bush presented the Dalai Lama with the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian honor awarded by Congress.

In 2002, Congress passed the Tibetan Policy Act, which makes support for Tibet part of US law. The [recently passed Asia Reassurance Initiative Act](#) reaffirms American support for Tibet.

The US has also provided funding for Tibetan culture, healthcare, economic opportunities and democracy.

Sangay said he himself received a Fulbright Scholarship from the US that allowed him to study at Harvard Law School.

He said that the US government has continued to stand up for Tibet even as China has pressured the international community to ignore Tibetan issues.

"It is a difficult task to lead a freedom movement during a political climate where many of the world's leaders shy away from speaking about Tibet and human rights," he said. "However, each time I visit Washington, DC, the leaders of the United States of America welcome me as a Tibetan with open arms and say, 'Tell me what I can do for Tibet.'"

"Keep being strong"

Mecacci noted that there will be several important issues for supporters of Tibet to work on moving forward, including challenging China's claim that it alone has the right to select the Dalai Lama's eventual reincarnation.

Based on Tuesday's event, the Tibetan people can be reassured that their friends in the US will continue to stand with them.

Rep. Ben McAdams (D-Utah), a new member of Congress, noted that he worked with the Tibetan community in Salt Lake County, Utah, during his career as a local official.

"I know what it means to support the people of Tibet as the mayor of Salt Lake County," he said. "I look forward to learning what it means to support the people of Tibet as a member of the United States Congress."

Those comments from McAdams—who [took part in a Tibetan New Year celebration](#) in his home district last week—showed that America’s commitment to Tibet is unlikely to waver as a new generation rises to positions of leadership.

But Amb. Sam Brownback, a former member of Congress who now serves as US ambassador at large for international religious freedom in the State Department, showed that Tibet’s longtime friends will continue to stand alongside it too.

“I just want to recognize from being able to work for years with the Tibetan people, just how wonderful the Tibetan people are,” Brownback said.

He added words of inspiration for Tibetans’ as they continue their peaceful movement.

“You’ve been persecuted for years, for decades, yet you still persist,” he said. “Keep coming forward, keep speaking out, keep being strong for the faith and for your freedom in Tibet.”

The event began with a Buddhist prayer for peace by Khenpo Samdup and included musical performances. The students of the Capital Area Tibetan Association sang the American and Tibetan anthems. Representative Ngodup Tsering gave the concluding remarks.