



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Legislative landmark: US Congress passes Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act

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In a triumph today for American citizens—including lawmakers, activists and human rights advocates concerned about the decades-long repression in Tibet—the United States Congress unanimously passed a bill that takes direct aim at the Chinese government’s unfair treatment of Americans and pushes back against its isolation of Tibet from the outside world.

The US Senate approved the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act ([H.R. 1872](#)) on December 11, 2018. It now goes to the desk of President Trump, who is expected to sign the bill into law.

The Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2018—which was introduced in the House of Representatives by Reps. Jim McGovern (D-Mass.) and Randy Hultgren (R-Ill.) and in the Senate by Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) and Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisc.)—is bipartisan legislation designed to address China’s exclusion of American journalists, diplomats and citizens from Tibet.

“The Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act is an important statement of our values, and I am happy to see it sent to the President’s desk before the end of the year,” said Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.), one of 14 cosponsors of the bill. “This legislation is simply about fundamental fairness. Chinese citizens enjoy broad access to the United States, and I think that is terrific. But, it is unacceptable that the same is not true for US students, journalists or diplomats going to Tibet, including our Tibetan-American constituents just trying to visit their country of origin. If China wants its tourists, officials, journalists and other citizens to be able to travel freely across the US, American citizens must be able to travel freely in China, including Tibet. The International Campaign for Tibet should be commended for its work on this bill and for being a steadfast champion of fairness and decency for all people, including Tibetans.”

The bill received support from both sides of the aisle in Congress. After the Senate Foreign Relations Committee passed the Act on Nov. 28, 2018, Sen. Rubio, who introduced the companion bill in the Senate, tweeted that it was “important legislation based on the principle of reciprocity, which has long been missing from our relationship with China.”

Campaign to pass the bill

Since 2014, the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT)—in coordination with Tibetan-American associations and Tibet support groups— has led the effort to approve the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act. ICT is a nonprofit, membership-based organization in Washington, DC that advocates for human rights and democratic freedoms for the people of Tibet.

Several thousand ICT members and American citizens contacted their members of Congress to ask them to support the bill.

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“This is truly a historic moment in the United States’ support of the Tibetan people and for its strategic security interests in the region,” said ICT President Matteo Mecacci. “By passing this landmark bill, which implements the diplomatic principle of reciprocity, Congress is saying loud and clear that Tibet’s future is and will continue to be a foreign policy priority for the US. Furthermore, the American people’s overwhelming support for Tibet shows that the citizens of the free world are opposed to unfair policies that foster Beijing’s authoritarian rule and influence all over the world.”

What the bill does

The bill requires the Secretary of State to assess the level of access to Tibet for US citizens within 90 days of the enactment of the legislation and to send a report to Congress identifying Chinese officials who are responsible for keeping Americans out of Tibet, a historically independent country that China has occupied for nearly 70 years. The Secretary of State will then ban those officials from receiving visas to enter the US.

The bill is predicated on the widely accepted diplomatic principle of reciprocity, based on which countries should provide equal rights to one another’s citizens.

When it comes to Tibet, Beijing does not reciprocate. Although Chinese citizens, journalists from state-sponsored propaganda outlets and bureaucrats of the Chinese Communist Party travel freely throughout the US and lobby the American government on Tibetan issues, Beijing effectively prevents American diplomats, politicians, journalists, aid workers and tourists from entering Tibet—except on strictly controlled official tours that hide the truth about the immense suffering there.

Human rights crisis

Right now, a human right crisis is taking place inside Tibet. The Chinese government continues to violate the Tibetan people’s basic freedoms, arrests them for such crimes as celebrating the Dalai Lama’s birthday, tortures them for protesting peacefully and even murders them if they try to flee into exile. Hundreds of Tibetan prisoners of conscience are locked up in Chinese prisons, where torture is endemic, and have no access to any meaningful legal defense. According to the 2017 Freedom in the World Report by Freedom House, a US think tank, Tibet is among the least free territories in the world.

Given that level of repression, it’s no surprise that [155 Tibetans have resorted to the tragic act of self-immolation since 2009](#), lighting their own bodies on fire in a final, desperate attempt to get the world’s attention.

Just a few days ago, a [young Tibetan man named Drugkho lit himself on fire](#), reportedly calling out for freedom in Tibet as he did. Last month, a 23-year-old Tibetan named Dorbe self-immolated in the Tibetan region of Amdo, saying “May the Dalai Lama live long!” [as he died](#).

Despite many attempts, almost no Beijing-based foreign journalists have been able to travel to Tibet to cover the remarkable stories of the self-immolators.

Pressuring China

One of the effects of the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act will be to put pressure on the Chinese government to revise its policies that prevent Americans from traveling and freely interacting with the Tibetan people by depriving Chinese officials of the privilege of traveling to the US.

The bill also reflects growing frustration among US lawmakers and the Trump Administration with Beijing's double standards and lack of respect for reciprocity when it comes to the exercise of civil liberties by US citizens in China.

Politicians from both parties and the Administration have also been increasingly outraged at Beijing's unfair policies and have demanded that the Chinese government reciprocate on issues of trade as well as access to Tibet.

Support for Tibetan-Americans

Over the past year, Tibetan-Americans and Tibet supporters throughout the country have reached out to their members of Congress to ask them to speak up for access to Tibet and to support the bill. On social media, they've used the hashtag #AccessToTibet.

Bhuchung K. Tsering, Vice President of the International Campaign for Tibet, thanked Congressmen McGovern and Hultgren and Sens. Rubio and Baldwin in particular for getting the bill passed.

“The Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act will benefit all of us in the Tibetan-American community who have been cruelly denied the right to visit our families and ancestral land,” Tsering said. “Now that Congress has passed the bill, it is imperative that President Trump sign it into law and that the State Department take every measure to identify and hold accountable the Chinese officials who are responsible for discriminating against Americans and Tibetans.”