



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

CECC urges action on Tibet, says House may vote on Tibet bill next week

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Congress and the Trump Administration should urge China to stay out of the Dalai Lama's succession plans, allow unrestricted access to Tibet and recognize the role Chinese policies play in Tibetan self-immolations.

Those are just some of the recommendations in the Tibet section of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China's (CECC's) new annual report, released today.

In a statement at the beginning of the report—which covers the time period of August 2018 to August 2019—CECC Chair Rep. James McGovern (D-Mass.) and Co-Chair Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) say human rights and the rule of law in China “continued to worsen” over the past year.

Speaking at a press conference today to release the report, McGovern talked about China's persecution of Tibetan Buddhists and mentioned that the new Tibetan Policy and Support Act could be taken up by the full House of Representatives next week. The House Foreign Affairs Committee passed it on Dec. 18, 2019, and a Senate version of the legislation has also been introduced by Rubio and Sen. Ben Cardin (D-Md.).

The report has many important findings, including that the Chinese government cracked down on previously allowed religious practices in Tibet during the reporting year while expanding mass surveillance there and damaging Tibet's environment, which plays a crucial role in the global ecosystem.

Tibet, a historically independent country in the Himalayan region of Asia, was annexed by China in 1959 and remains illegally occupied to this day.

Dalai Lama's succession

The report says that during the reporting year, the Chinese government continued its efforts to “Sinicize” Tibetan Buddhism, meaning to forcefully bring it under control of the Chinese Communist Party.

According to the report, these efforts included subjecting monks and nuns to “political education”; banning religious classes; and ordering Tibetans to replace photos of the Dalai Lama with images of Mao Zedong and current Chinese Chairman Xi Jinping. Tibetans were even required to prostrate and make offerings before the portraits of the Chinese dictators.

One of China’s most shocking attempts to dominate Tibetan Buddhism came in its repeated insistence that the eventual reincarnation or succession of the Dalai Lama—who has been forced to live in exile from Tibet for more than six decades—must comply with Chinese laws.

“The [Chinese] government’s position violates international standards of religious freedom, which guarantee the right of religious communities ‘to train, appoint, elect or designate by succession appropriate leaders,” the report says, quoting a UN declaration on eliminating religious discrimination and intolerance.

The bipartisan Tibetan Policy and Support Act, which McGovern and Rubio introduced in Congress in the fall of 2019, will make it official US policy that only the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Buddhist community can decide on his succession—and will sanction any Chinese officials who attempt to appoint their own Dalai Lama in the future.

The bill will also update the Tibetan Policy Act of 2002; prevent China from opening a new consulate in the US until a US consulate is allowed in Tibet’s capital of Lhasa; address water security and climate change in Tibet; formalize humanitarian assistance to Tibetans; and push China to negotiate with the Dalai Lama and Tibetan leaders without preconditions.

Freeing Tibetan political prisoners

A preview of what China might attempt to do once the Dalai Lama, now 84, eventually passes away can be seen in its kidnapping of the Panchen Lama, one of the most important figures in Tibetan Buddhism.

Immediately after the Dalai Lama recognized a six-year-old boy as the reincarnated Panchen Lama in 1995, the child and his parents were abducted. None of them have been seen in public since.

In place of the real Panchen Lama, China appointed its own fake Panchen Lama, who serves as a mouthpiece for the government in Beijing.

Noting that the real Panchen Lama—whose whereabouts and wellbeing are unknown—would have turned 30 last year, the report says the US government should “[c]ontinue to request that the Chinese government invite an independent representative of an international organization to meet with” him.

The US should also urge China to release Tibetans who are “currently detained or imprisoned for the peaceful exercise of their human rights,” the report says.

That would include Tashi Wangchuk, a Tibetan businessman who was sentenced to five years in prison in 2018 after he appeared in a New York Times video talking about the importance of preserving the Tibetan language.

Freedom and reciprocity

The report notes that China continued to restrict Tibetan language instruction during the reporting year.

China also further repressed Tibetans’ freedom of speech and assembly, as well as their freedom of movement. The report says Chinese officials imposed onerous requirements on Tibetans who sought to travel to India for teachings by the Dalai Lama and allegedly destroyed the passports of Tibetans who returned from the teachings in 2018.

Even Tibetans who tried to travel within Tibet faced security checkpoints, close searches, frisking and other burdens.

At the same time, China continued to deny foreigners access to Tibet. This denial, the report says, helps China “to conceal human rights abuses and environmentally damaging large-scale projects, such as river damming and mining, and to promote the claim that Tibetans benefit from and support the [Communist] Party and its actions.”

In December 2018, Congress unanimously passed—and President Trump signed into law—the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act, which denies entry to the US for the Chinese officials responsible for keeping Americans out of Tibet.

In March, the State Department released a report saying China “systematically impeded” travel to Tibet by US diplomats, journalists and ordinary citizens.

Criminalizing ordinary behavior

During the reporting year, China also used an “anti-crime and vice” campaign to criminalize ordinary social activities in Tibet, the report says.

For example, a group of Tibetan villagers were reportedly accused of starting an “evil organization” and sentenced to prison for three to seven years for writing a petition to reclaim village property that had been expropriated by government officials.

Officials also reportedly posted notices asking Tibetans to inform on others involved in “splittism” (meaning efforts to free Tibet from China), “connections with the Dalai clique,”

advocacy for “freedom to use one’s language” and “espousing causes like economic freedom, right to livelihood, environmental protection, [and] cultural freedom,” along with other dubious offenses.

Chinese officials used pervasive surveillance to spy on and intimidate Tibetans, the report says. Their methods included artificial intelligence, a “grid management” system, big data centers and security cameras. They even allegedly secretly installed surveillance apps on Tibetans’ phones.

Self-immolations continue

Given this atmosphere of immense repression, it’s not surprising—but nonetheless tragic—that two Tibetans committed self-immolation during the reporting year, lighting their own bodies on fire in a desperate attempt to bring attention to their people’s suffering.

The two Tibetans who self-immolated were Dorbe, a 23-year-old who died on Nov. 4, 2018 while saying “May the Dalai Lama live long! May we soon behold his golden countenance!”; and Drugkho, a young man who set fire to himself on Dec. 8, 2018.

Since the end of the reporting year, a former monk named Yonten, 24, self-immolated on Nov. 26, 2019, becoming the 156th Tibetan to self-immolate in Tibet and China since 2009.

The report recommends that the US government urge China to “recognize the role of restrictive [Communist] Party policies and government measures, and the increasing securitization of Tibetan autonomous areas of China, in Tibetan self-immolations and protests.”

Exacerbating climate change

Tibet’s environment also suffered under Chinese rule during the reporting year. According to the report, “[s]cientists and Tibetan groups note that many government actions on the Tibetan plateau exacerbate climate change, resulting in glacial melting, permafrost degradation, and desertification of grasslands.”

A big part of the problem was China forcing Tibetan nomads to leave their ancestral grazing lands and live on settlements, despite the fact that scientists around the world—including in China—have reached a consensus that indigenous stewardship is vital to the health of ecosystems.

Many resettled nomads were forced to pay for their new homes and faced financial hardship because they lost their means of supporting themselves.

As the report notes, Tibet is the source of many of Asia's major rivers. More than 1 billion people downstream receive water from Tibet, making China's authoritarian rule there a threat to stability in the region.

Quotes

At the press conference today for the report's release, commissioners of the CECC addressed China's oppression in Tibet and shared their support for the Tibetan people.

CECC Chair Rep. James McGovern (D-Mass.):

"The notion that a government can come in and appoint a religious leader and that it would have any credibility at all is ridiculous. It is ridiculous. We find all of this very offensive as people who believe in religious freedom. But here's the deal: What's changing now is that China needs to know there'll be a consequence. It will be more than just a press release saying that we object to this. It will be a consequence, and it will be people who will be sanctioned, and that there will be other consequences as well. We want a good relationship with China, we want a productive relationship with China. We have no quarrel with the Chinese people. It is with Chinese leaders who are trying to suppress individuals' right to freedom of religion, freedom of expression, freedom to be able to be who they want to be. So this legislation, my hope is that it will be considered next week, and Marco Rubio has the identical bill in the Senate, and I expect it will pass in the Senate as well."

CECC Co-Chair Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.):

"Throughout last year, Chinese authorities subjected Tibetans to a continuing campaign of Sinicization to make Tibetan Buddhism supportive of the Communist Party of China. Religious leaders were forced into political education classes, monks were evicted from their monasteries, and portraits of the Dalai Lama were replaced by those of Mao and Xi Jinping."

International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) President Matteo Mecacci:

"The Chinese government continues to oppress the Tibetan people and to crush their vibrant culture; it does this through a centralized and authoritarian form of government that clearly represents a tangible security threat, not only to the Tibetans, the Uyghurs, the people of Hong Kong and the Chinese people themselves, but to the world. Beijing's plan to totally control Tibetan Buddhism by selecting the successor of His Holiness the Dalai Lama is not—unfortunately—a bad joke, but the exemplification of how far it can go to maintain power by crushing people's values and belief systems. The pillaging of Tibet's unique environment, resulting from the lack of any meaningful involvement of the Tibetan people in managing their ancestral lands and natural resources, threatens the entire planet's ecosystem, and should not be ignored.

The new report from the CECC provides a number of urgent recommendations that the US government should follow to support the just aspirations of the Tibetan people. I thank Rep. James McGovern and Sen. Marco Rubio, as well as the other members of the CECC and their

staffs, for creating this unique report, and look forward to working with them to try to put their recommendations into action.”