



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

ICT joins in marking the imprisoned Panchen Lama's 31st birthday

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April 28, 2020

For the 25th year in a row, the Panchen Lama spent his birthday as a captive of the Chinese government.

As the Tibetan spiritual leader—Gedhun Choekyi Nyima as he is known—turned 31 on April 25, the International Campaign for Tibet and its members took action to call for his freedom.

ICT's president took part in an online event hosted by the Panchen Lama's home monastery, while ICT members wrote petitions to Vice President Pence to urge him to make greater efforts to push for the Panchen Lama's release.

The Panchen Lama, one of the most important figures in Tibetan Buddhism, has not been seen in public since the Chinese government kidnapped him and his family in 1995 when he was only 6, making him the youngest political prisoner in the world.

Online discussion

To mark the Panchen Lama's birthday, Tashi Lhunpo Monastery hosted an online panel discussion. Tashi Lhunpo is the Panchen Lamas' traditional seat and has been re-established in India following China's brutal annexation of Tibet.

Zeekgyab Rinpoche, the abbot of Tashi Lhunpo, welcomed the gathering, while the keynote address came from Lobsang Sangay, president of the Central Tibetan Administration, which provides democratic representation for the Tibetan people in exile.

Matteo Mecacci, ICT's president, spoke on the panel alongside Tenzin Dorjee, the first Tibetan American commissioner on the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom; Sophie Richardson, China director of Human Rights Watch; and Arif Virani, a Canadian member of parliament.

“By kidnapping the 11th Panchen Lama ... the Chinese government made its objective very clear,” Mecacci said during the discussion. “They want to control and dominate Tibetan Buddhism as a tool possibly to control Tibetan society at large. But they do that, and they're willing to do that, by disregarding and, in the end, destroying the traditions and teachings that are now benefiting the lives of millions of people around the world who practice Tibetan Buddhism.”

Succession of the Dalai Lama

After China kidnapped the Panchen Lama, it replaced him with its own selection who is being used as a mouthpiece for the Chinese Communist Party.

According to Tibetan Buddhist tradition, Panchen Lamas and Dalai Lamas are involved in the identification of each other's reincarnations. In fact, China abducted Gedhun Choekyi Nyima just days after the Dalai Lama recognized him.

Tibet advocates fear atheist China will use its own selected Panchen Lama to help in its strategy to appoint an illegitimate successor to the Dalai Lama in the future.

To combat that, ICT is pushing for the adoption of the Tibetan Policy and Support Act, which—among many other provisions—will make it official US policy that only Tibetan Buddhists can decide on the Dalai Lama's succession.

If any Chinese officials attempt to name their own Dalai Lama in the future, they will face sanctions under the TPSA.

The House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved the TPSA in January. Now the Senate needs to pass it—and President Trump needs to sign it into law—before the end of this year, or the bill will have to start over again in the House in 2021.

Videos of Nobel Peace laureates

Leading up to the Panchen Lama's birthday, ICT engaged its members through a series of videos of Nobel Peace Prize laureates speaking about the Panchen Lama and Tibetan religious freedom.

The videos feature professor and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel (who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986); former East Timor President José Ramos-Horta (1996); Northern Irish peace activist Mairead Corrigan Maguire (1976); Irish politician John Hume (1998); South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1984); and the Dalai Lama (1989).

Each clip comes from "Tibet's Stolen Child," a 2001 documentary that ICT produced.

Support from US leaders

ICT was also pleased to share a video from Rep. James McGovern, D-Mass., the chair of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, who adopted the Panchen Lama as a prisoner of conscience through the Defending Freedoms Project.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has also advocated for the Panchen Lama at the highest levels of the US government.

At the National Prayer Breakfast in February, Pelosi led the gathering in a prayer in which she said "Let us pray for the Panchen Lama and all the Tibetan Buddhists in prison," while President Trump, who was sitting nearby, bowed his head and closed his eyes.

ICT is now collecting petitions to send to Vice President Pence to ask him to raise the Panchen Lama's case in public again and to push Chinese leaders for the Panchen Lama's release. By mid-afternoon on Monday, nearly 900 ICT members had already filled out the petition.

Pence previously addressed the Panchen Lama's kidnapping at the State Department's Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in 2019.

ICT's petition page includes a special message to ICT members from Zeekgyab Rinpoche, the Tashi Lhunpo abbot.



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