



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Positive outlook for Tibet bill at ICT youth summit

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June 4, 2020

US officials at an International Campaign for Tibet event on Wednesday assured Tibetan American youth their advocacy is making a difference and helping get bills through Congress.

In fact, Rep. James McGovern, D-Mass., said he believes the most comprehensive Tibet legislation in many years, the Tibetan Policy and Support Act, will pass Congress and become law before the end of 2020.

“My hope is that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will very shortly take that up, and it will move to the Senate floor, and it will pass,” McGovern, who introduced the TPSA in the House of Representatives, told the youths. “If there are differences between the [House and Senate versions of the bill], we will reconcile them in warp speed, and we’ll get that to the president, which I expect that he will sign it.

“I am very hopeful that we will get this through the entire process this year.”

The TPSA, which the House approved by an overwhelming majority in January, would dramatically upgrade US support for Tibetans, including by sanctioning any Chinese officials who attempt to interfere in the succession of the Dalai Lama, who is now 84.

Sam Brownback, the ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom and a former Republican senator from Kansas, added that the State Department, where he now works, views Tibet legislation as “very helpful.”

“It tells the rest of the world this is a bipartisan subject that will continue from [presidential] administration to administration, because there’s no division on it,” Brownback said. Tibet bills “usually pass by very large numbers in the Congress,” he said.

ICT Tibet Talk

McGovern and Brownback spoke as part of the International Campaign for Tibet’s Tibet Talks series, which shows live conversations about Tibet with inspiring thinkers, leaders, activists and artists.

Wednesday’s special edition of Tibet Talks brought the US leaders together with nearly 50 Tibetan American youth activists from around the country, ranging from high school students to college graduates and PhD candidates. The program was livestreamed on Facebook and on ICT’s website, where thousands more were able to watch and the recording is available here.

The gathering took place in lieu of ICT’s annual Tibetan Youth Leadership Program, which the organization was not able to hold this year due to the coronavirus pandemic.

“We thought it would be important to at least find an opportunity for some of our youth who are active all across America, have been engaged with activism, advocacy, and are leaders in their communities in many respects, to interact with” Brownback and McGovern, ICT President Matteo Mecacci said.

Youth leaders

Also speaking during the event were four graduates of the youth leadership program: Tenzin Rangdol (2015), Nima Binara (2001), Tenzin Pelkyi (2013) and Tenzin Jangchup (2013).

The four expressed joy that ICT was still able to host an event for youths this year, even though it had to take place online rather than in person.

“The fact that you’re continuing this program, which was so beneficial to myself and other young people across the country, is just really heartening,” said Pelkyi, now a senior legislative assistant to Rep. Al Green, D-Texas.

Rangdol, currently pursuing a master’s degree at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, thanked Brownback and McGovern for participating in the event.

“Thank you so much for joining us here today,” she said. “Thank you for all do for Tibet and, more broadly, for human rights around the world.”

Access to Tibet

Jangchup, now a doctor of pharmacy and regulatory officer with the US Food and Drug Administration, spoke about one of the injustices many Tibetans face in exile: the Chinese government’s refusal to let them visit their homeland, which China has brutally occupied for more than 60 years.

“As a Tibetan American who was born in exile in India and then grew up here in the United States ... I’ve never seen Tibet myself,” Jangchup said. “I’ve never had the opportunity to see Tibet.”

China not only keeps Tibet closed off to Tibetan Americans, but to virtually all US tourists, journalists and diplomats—even though Chinese citizens can travel freely through the United States.

To address that unfairness, McGovern and Rep. Randy Hultgren, R-Ill., introduced the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act, which denies entry to the United States by the Chinese officials directly responsible for keeping Americans out of Tibet. Sens. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., and Tammy Baldwin, D-Wisc., introduced the bill in the Senate.

RATA passed Congress in 2018 and became law at the end of that year.

RATA report

RATA required the State Department to provide a list to Congress by December 2019 of which Chinese officials it banned from entering the United States under the law. The department has not yet provided the list.

“We’re going to continue to work on this legislation and track it very closely and put out the reports required by Congress,” Brownback said.

McGovern stated that “We’re at the point where I think we need the administration to actually start naming names. My hope is that that will be forthcoming soon.”

Dalai Lama's succession

Binara, now serving as counsel at Google, spoke up about another of China's heinous human rights violations against the Tibetan people: its plan to appoint its own successor to the Dalai Lama once the Tibetan spiritual leader eventually passes away.

"This would grossly violate the right to religious freedom of Buddhists not just in Tibet, but also across Asia and even here in the United States," Binara said.

Brownback, who visited the Dalai Lama in his exile home of Dharamsala, India in October 2019, said he told the Dalai Lama during that trip "about our effort and our absolute position that this right to select his successor does not belong to any government around the world. This belongs to the Tibetan people and the Tibetan Buddhist system."

McGovern noted that when he visited Tibet with a Congressional delegation in 2015, "many of the Tibetan monks that we interacted with privately pulled us aside and asked us to please pass on their best regards to His Holiness the Dalai Lama."

McGovern added that he saw the people of Tibet were preserving their traditions and way of life, despite China's attempts to force them to assimilate into Chinese society.

"If the Chinese government's goal is to basically try to erase Tibetan history and culture, they're not succeeding," McGovern said.

Advice for youth

McGovern told the youths his trip to Tibet "only reinforced my commitment to be an advocate for human rights for the Tibetan people, and I'm so happy to be allies with so many of you. What you're doing is important work, it's the right work, so I thank you for that."

The congressman said Tibetan Americans' advocacy has helped lead to Congress passing more Tibet-specific bills over the past few years than at any other time in US history.

"Your activism and your energy has made all the difference in the world, and we just need to keep it up," McGovern said. "We need to keep members [of Congress] focused and educated on these issues. If we do that, I'm confident that we will make even more progress."

Brownback agreed that the outlook for future US support for Tibetans is promising.

"I do think we're at a point now of inflection where advocacy could be really important with this growing divide between the United States and China on a number of different issues," he said. "I think Tibet needs to be raised and highlighted as one of those issues of which we think that the Tibetan people

need to have more autonomy, they need to be able to practice their faith freely, the Dalai Lama needs to be able to go and return to his homeland if he would so choose."

Brownback also told the youths they can find plenty of opportunities to engage in advocacy within the US government.

“I think you find your path in,” he said. “You do an internship on Capitol Hill, you intern at the State Department ... I think you would find there’s open doors at a number of these places for people of passion and focus.”

Discussion with ICT

After the Tibet Talk, the Tibetan American youths had a private interactive session with Mecacci, ICT’s president, as well as ICT’s Vice President Bhuchung K. Tsering and Director of Outreach Tencho Gyatso.

The ICT leaders opened the floor for the youths to ask questions and seek advice.



International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) | 1825 Jefferson Place NW | Washington, DC 20036 | United States of America
Phone: (202) 785-1515 | Fax: (202) 785-4343 | info@savetibet.org

ICT Europe
Funenpark 1D | 1018 AK
Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Phone: +31 (0)20 3308265
Fax: +31 (0)20 3308266
icteurope@savetibet.nl

ICT Deutschland e.V.
Schönhauser Allee 163 | 10435
Berlin, Germany
Phone: +49 (0)30 27879086
Fax: +49 (0)30 27879087
info@savetibet.de

ICT Brussels
11, rue de la linière | 1060
Brussels, Belgium
Phone: +32 (0)2 609 44 10
Fax: +32 (0)2 609 44 32
info@save-tibet.eu