



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Government leaders train Tibet supporters at ICT webinar

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“Never underestimate the power of a person to move mountains.”

That was the message former Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen delivered to Tibetan Americans and Tibet supporters at a special advocacy webinar last week organized by the International Campaign for Tibet.

Ros-Lehtinen, who retired from the House of Representatives last year after three decades, was one of several political leaders, government officials and activists to take part in the event, which provided training, advice and resources to more than 40 people representing nearly 20 Tibetan associations across the United States.

The event on Sept. 10, 2020 was part of ICT’s continuing efforts to empower the Tibetan American community—as well as its Tibet 2020 campaign, which aims to tell the candidates for president why Tibet matters this election year.

“Our special advocacy training webinar encapsulated so much of what ICT is all about: uplifting the Tibetan people, partnering with leaders on Capitol Hill and building toward a brighter future for Tibet,” ICT Director of Outreach Tencho Gyatso said. “We are deeply grateful to Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Congressional staffers Bethany Poulos and Jonathan Stivers, and every Tibetan association and Tibet supporter who took part in this event and made it a tremendous success.”

Advocating for Tibet

The webinar began with ICT Vice President Bhuchung K. Tsering delivering a presentation in the Tibetan language about the need for a change in the mindset concerning advocacy by Tibetan Americans.

Afterward, ICT President Matteo Mecacci provided advice and updates on key Tibet-related legislation in English.

Poulos, foreign affairs advisor to Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., then took questions from the participants about how they could persuade Congress to take action for Tibet, a historically independent country that China annexed more than 60 years ago.

Stivers, the staff director of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China for Rep. James P. McGovern (D-MA), also spoke to the participants to provide tips on what they can say when they meet with members of Congress and their staff.

Tibet Talks

Following that first session, Ros-Lehtinen joined the gathering and regaled the participants with stories of her enthusiasm for the Dalai Lama and her empathy for the people of Tibet.

Most of her remarks were broadcast live on ICT's website and Facebook page as part of ICT's Tibet Talks series, which presents conversations about Tibet with inspiring thinkers, leaders, activists and artists.

The conversation with Ros-Lehtinen also served as the first full episode of ICT's new Tibet Talks podcast, which is available to stream at www.savetibet.org/pod.

The next episode of Tibet Talks will feature Rep. Andy Levin, a first-term Democrat from Michigan who has supported Tibet for decades.

Bipartisan support

Ros-Lehtinen, who served as a Republican congresswoman from Florida's 27th district, explained how Tibet appeals to both conservatives and liberals.

A clear example of that is her close work with the late Congressman Tom Lantos, a California Democrat, to award the Dalai Lama the Congressional Gold Medal in 2007.

Ros-Lehtinen noted that Lantos was the only Holocaust survivor to serve in Congress, while her own family fled to the United States from Communist Cuba.

"Isn't that just amazing that we're both naturalized Americans, and we're writing the laws for other countries and our relations with them," Ros-Lehtinen said. "But we had this great love for the Dalai Lama, great admiration for what he stood for."

Ros-Lehtinen, the first Latina elected to Congress, added: "Tom Lantos and I worked well together. He was a Democrat, I was a Republican then when I was in the House. And it shows that people of opposing parties or different parties can come together."

Tibetan empowerment

Ros-Lehtinen said the way she and Lantos were able to take on major leadership roles in Congress even though they were both political exiles and immigrants speaks to what's great about the United States.

She added that she believes a Tibetan American will someday serve in Congress too.

She encouraged the Tibetan Americans listening to her speak to get involved in ICT's Tibet Lobby Days and especially its Tibetan Youth Leadership Program and Washington Internship Program for Tibetan Americans.

She noted that Rubio, now one of the most influential senators in Washington, DC, was at one time an intern in her office when he was a student.

"We have amazing leaders in the Cuban-American exile community," Ros-Lehtinen said. "Why won't the Tibetan American community do it? You can! And you will. And I'm very confident that that young leader is listening to us, or his grandparents or his aunt and uncle are listening to this."

Making a difference

Ros-Lehtinen added that even if they don't stand for election, the participants in the webinar could still make a difference.

"Any facet of public engagement in the political sphere is important," she said. "You don't have to be a candidate, you don't have to run for office, but there's so many ways that you can influence American policy toward China or American policy toward Tibet."

The coronavirus lockdown can actually make it easier for people to take part in the political process, because now they don't have to go to the expense of traveling to the nation's capital, she said.

"You don't need to go to Washington. You don't need a hotel room or a flight. You can do it virtually. Washington is open to everybody now."

She added that online petitions and meetings with Congressional staff are important ways to have an impact.

Tibetan Policy and Support Act

Ros-Lehtinen said an urgent need for Tibet supporters is to get the Senate to pass the Tibetan Policy and Support Act, a far-reaching piece of legislation that will dramatically upgrade US support for Tibet, including by making it official US policy that China has no right to interfere in the succession plans of the Dalai Lama.

"We've got to get it passed in the Senate," Ros-Lehtinen said of the bill. "So there's a lot that we can do, whether you're Tibetan or not, to make this a reality."

Healing the world

Responding to Ros-Lehtinen, Mecacci, ICT's president, said Tibetan culture and values can benefit the world in this historically difficult time.

"In helping Tibet," he said, "I think we are also helping ourselves."

"That is true," Ros-Lehtinen replied. "The world needs healing. We need physical healing from Covid, but we need a spiritual cleansing and a spiritual cleaning. And I thank the Dalai Lama for what he represents for the world: hope, perseverance and peaceful contentment."



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