



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Dalai Lama succession interference raised at religious freedom hearing

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December 14, 2022

China's efforts to interfere in the succession of the Dalai Lama and violate the religious freedom of the Tibetan people led to calls for action by the US government at a hearing today.

International Campaign for Tibet Interim President Bhuchung K. Tsering testified at the hearing of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom today, Dec. 14, 2022, about the Chinese government's "policy of altering the very identity of Tibetan Buddhism to make it subservient to the Chinese Communist Party."

The hearing, titled "China's Religious Freedom Violations: Domestic Repression and Malign Influence Abroad," was led by Commission Chair Nury Turkel. Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., addressed the hearing, as did several other Commissioners and witnesses from NGOs and other groups.

"In recent years," Tsering said, "particularly following the assumption of office by President Xi Jinping, the Chinese government's policy on Tibetan religion has moved from total destruction of Tibetan religious institutions and systems to one of insidious control in an attempt to serve its own political objectives, which includes Sinicizing Tibetan Buddhism and co-opting the right to determine Tibetan Buddhists' own leaders and modes of practice."

Tsering pointed to several regulations the government in Beijing—which has illegally occupied Tibet for over 60 years—has promulgated to subjugate Tibetans' Buddhist faith and "Sinicize" their religion, meaning to bring it under the control of the Communist Party.

Dalai Lama succession

Some of those regulations ludicrously claim the party has the authority to manage and select reincarnate Tibetan lamas.

"Under these strictures, the Chinese government requires Tibetan Buddhist monks to receive the State's approval before reincarnating—a demand literally antithetical to Tibetan Buddhist precepts," Tsering said. "The most visible aspect of this is China's atheist, authoritarian government asserting its authority to select the next Dalai Lama." Tsering referred to the 2011 statement by the Dalai Lama in which he said only he had the authority to decide on his reincarnation and submitted the statement for USCIRF's record.

Tsering noted that China already interfered in the succession of the Panchen Lama, the second most well-known Tibetan Buddhist leader, by kidnapping the 6-year-old boy recognized as the reincarnated Panchen Lama and replacing him with a patently false substitute controlled by Beijing.

Among his recommendations to the Commission, Tsering urged the US to fully enforce its recent laws on Tibet, including the Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020, which dramatically upgraded US support for Tibetans and made it official US policy that only the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Buddhist community can decide on his succession. If any Chinese officials try to interfere in that process, the US will sanction them.

The US also passed the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2018, which pushes China to give Americans the same level of access to Tibet that Chinese citizens have to the US.

Techno-authoritarianism

Tsering also testified about China's techno-authoritarianism in Tibet and in the Tibetan exile community. He shared a disturbing story about a young participant in ICT's Tibet Lobby Day earlier this year who received a series of derogatory comments within hours of posting a video of herself in Tibetan clothes on TikTok.

“In a heartbreaking moment, she relayed that she had started to even doubt who she was, what she was,” Tsering said. “That’s not surveillance. That's digital harassment of a young American. And it reflects the lengths to which the [Chinese Communist Party] will go in its agenda to uproot Tibetan identity as a people.”

Promoting a resolution to the Tibet-China conflict

Tsering applauded the Biden administration for recently sanctioning two Chinese officials for their serious human rights abuse in the Tibet Autonomous Region, which spans about half of Tibet.

He also urged the Commission to endorse the Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Conflict Act, which will pressure the Chinese government to resume negotiations with the Dalai Lama's envoys on a resolution to China's occupation of Tibet.

Tsering said the US Senate should introduce a similar bill, which Reps. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., and Michael McCaul, R-Texas, introduced in the House in July.

Full testimony

Read the full testimony submitted for the record below.

Testimony of Bhuchung K. Tsering, Interim President of the International Campaign for Tibet at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom hearing on “China’s Religious Freedom Violations: Domestic Repression and Malign Influence Abroad”

December 14, 2022

I would like to thank the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for giving me the opportunity to testify on the increased restrictions on Tibetan Buddhism under the rule of President Xi Jinping.

In this testimony I will expand on the policy of altering the very identity of Tibetan Buddhism to make it subservient to the Chinese Communist Party, as well as comment on techno-authoritarianism in Tibet. I am submitting the full text of my testimony for the record and will provide a gist at the hearing.

In recent years, particularly following the assumption of office by President Xi Jinping, the Chinese government's policy on Tibetan religion has moved from total destruction of Tibetan religious institutions and systems to one of insidious control in an attempt to serve its own political objectives, which includes Sinicizing Tibetan Buddhism and co-opting the right to determine Tibetan Buddhists' own leaders and modes of practice.

This policy is being implemented through a series of initiatives: Religious Affairs Regulations (Order No. 686) promulgated by the State Council in 2018, the 2019 Administrative Measures for Religious Groups, Measures

on the Management of Religious Clergy of 2021, Administrative Measures for Internet Religious Information Services of March 2022, the “Measures for the Financial Management of Religious Activity Sites” of June 1, 2022.

Over the years, the Chinese state has promulgated various regulations to bring Tibetan monasteries and monastics under tighter control by the State, including directing the financial affairs of monasteries. Although the measures apply to all religious communities in the People’s Republic of China, the effect will be more intense in Tibet owing to the crucial role religion plays as the cultural and social foundation in Tibetan society. The measures in Tibet reflect the Communist Party of China’s agenda for Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism and its institutions.

The 2019 measures demand religious groups “adhere to the direction of Sinicization of religions in China, embody the core values of socialism, and maintain national unity, ethnic unity, religious harmony and social stability.”

The theme of Sinicization can also be found in the 2021 measures on religious clergy effectively imposing a political test to ensure clergies’ loyalty to the Communist Party. The 2021 administrative measures also include the compilation of a database that contains all information on religious personnel, including recording "rewards" and "punishments" received.

Adding to the government’s already vast powers to monitor, control and limit religious practice, the new measures further institutionalize the suppression of Tibetan Buddhism, the primary faith in Chinese-occupied Tibet and a growing spiritual practice in the United States and many other countries.

The measures also reaffirm the State’s role in managing and approving reincarnate Tibetan lamas under the 2017 Regulation on Religious Affairs, the 2007 Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism and other regulations.

Under these strictures, the Chinese government requires Tibetan Buddhist monks to receive the State’s approval before reincarnating—a demand literally antithetical to Tibetan Buddhist precepts. The most visible aspect of this is China’s atheist, authoritarian government asserting its authority to select the next Dalai Lama. They tried doing so with the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama, the second most well-known Tibetan Buddhist leader, by kidnapping him when he was six years old (the youngest political prisoner ever) and by appointing a patently false substitute controlled by the Chinese Communist Party.

Since China has not been able to place the present Dalai Lama under its control, its transparent plan is to ensure the next will be subservient to the Communist Party of China. Not only do the Chinese government’s claims completely disregard centuries-old Tibetan religious tradition; they also violate the universal principle of religious freedom.

The Dalai Lama has categorically maintained that only he can make a decision regarding his reincarnation. In 2011, he released a formal statement explaining the reincarnation system and how he intends to handle the issue of his succession. I have attached the statement here and would like to submit it for the record.

Therein, the Dalai Lama says, “It is particularly inappropriate for Chinese communists, who explicitly reject even the idea of past and future lives, let alone the concept of reincarnate Tulkus, to meddle in the system of reincarnation and especially the reincarnations of the Dalai Lamas and Panchen Lamas. Such brazen meddling contradicts their own political ideology and reveals their double standards. Should this situation continue in the future, it will be impossible for Tibetans and those who follow the Tibetan Buddhist tradition to acknowledge or accept it.”

By attempting to select the next Dalai Lama, the Chinese government also aims to extend its control over Tibetan Buddhism with clear geopolitical implications even on many Tibetan Buddhist institutions in the Indian subcontinent, Mongolia and other parts of the world where there are followers. If not challenged vigorously by free countries, this decision would affect the religious freedom, not only of Tibetans, but also of millions of followers of Tibetan Buddhism worldwide.

On the issue of techno-authoritarianism in Tibet and in the Tibetan community abroad, the U.S. and international bodies must recognize and investigate the continuity between past forms of oppression and present-day forms of persecution as fueling the same agenda to dismantle Tibetan identity. New, dangerously potent techno-surveillance and oppression are now being perpetrated behind a digital iron curtain in an attempt to hide reality on the ground and further extend the CCP's long arm of authoritarianism. We also must take seriously the pervasiveness of the surveillance in and outside of Tibet and the harm it's doing psychologically—perhaps most distressingly to our younger generation. I will give just one example to illustrate this point. During our annual advocacy day this year, we learned that one of our participants, a young student, had received a series of derogatory comments within hours of posting a video of herself in Tibetan clothes on TikTok. The posts ranged from standardized CCP propaganda to slurs, and more. In a heartbreaking moment, she relayed that she had started to even doubt who she was, what she was. That's not surveillance. That's digital harassment of a young American. And it reflects the lengths to which the CCP will go in its agenda to uproot Tibetan identity as a people.

In the wake of the recent protests in Chinese cities against COVID restrictions, we saw reports of Chinese officials threatening the public through search of their mobile phones. For Tibetans this search of their personal phones, belongings and monasteries is the norm. Even today, the very possession of a portrait of the Dalai Lama is regarded as a

crime and subjected to punishment. We also have heard reports of Chinese authorities banning Tibetans from circulating Buddhist prayers over social media or messaging platforms.

In this connection, we commend the Biden Administration for including Wu Yingjie and Zhang Hongbo, two senior Chinese officials, in its recent list of Treasury Department sanctions for their abuse of Tibetan human rights. The Chinese government should be held accountable for violating international laws and China's own laws when it comes to the rights of the Tibetan people.

Recommendations

1. Urge the Biden Administration to monitor, as per the Tibetan Policy & Support Act of 2020, Chinese officials' violation of Tibetan religious freedom, including interference in recognizing a successor or reincarnation of the 14th Dalai Lama and any future Dalai Lamas and consider imposing sanctions with respect to such officials under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (22 U.S.C. 2656 note) and applying the relevant section of the Immigration and Nationality Act (8 U.S.C. 1182(a)(2)(G)) with respect to such officials.
2. Urge the Biden Administration to work multilaterally with like-minded countries and international bodies, including the EU, to undertake coordinated initiatives in developing a united policy on religious freedom of the Tibetan people, including at the UN and other regional and international forums.
3. USCIRF to endorse H.R.8365 - Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Conflict Act, which challenges abuse of Tibetan rights, including religious freedom, and recognizes that China has failed to meet the expectations of the United States to engage in meaningful dialogue with the Dalai Lama or his representatives toward a peaceful settlement of the unresolved Tibet-China conflict.
4. Call on the United States Senate to introduce legislation similar to H.R.8365 – the Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Conflict Act.

5. Call on Congress to pursue appropriate legislation to put in place meaningful barriers for the spread of techno-authoritarianism by China to other nations, including the United States.
6. China should be urged to release Tibetan political prisoners, particularly those who have been imprisoned for upholding their religious rights, including the 11th Panchen Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima.
7. USCIRF to organize a delegation to Tibet and also recommend that the Congress does the same to seek access to Tibet as part of the implementation of the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act.
8. Urge the State Department to make greater use of the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act by publicly releasing the names of Chinese officials impacted by it in the hopes of gaining greater access to monitor the conditions in Tibet, including the practice of Tibetan Buddhism and the situation in Buddhist monastic establishments.
9. Urge the United Nations to conduct an analysis of forced separation of children from families to boarding schools where they are taught only in Mandarin as part of the CCP's agenda to eradicate Tibetan identity. This also should include a full investigation of DNA and other biometric collection as a modern form of what is widely regarded as a precursor stage to—if not part and parcel of—severe forms of crimes against humanity, namely “classification and separation”, and
10. Advocate further for the U.S. Congress, EU, UN, and other international bodies to mount forceful opposition to the CCP's imposition of modern-day slavery in Tibet, including forced displacement of nomadic peoples to enclaves divorced from their centuries-old culture which provide little or no meaningful employment opportunities.



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