

Statement by Nazila Ghanea, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, at a side-event during the 59th session of the UN Human Rights Council, organized by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 27 June 2025.

Check against delivery

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you to the organisers for their kind invitation to address this side event. It is timely in the context of the discussion concerning the succession of (His Holiness) the Dalai Lama.

The UN's special procedures mandate holders have for years raised their concerns regarding the continuous violations of rights of the Tibetan people.

In this context, the right to freedom of religion or belief of Tibetan Buddhists, particularly regarding the succession of the 14th Dalai Lama is a matter of continuous concern.

The reincarnation system is at the heart of Tibetan religious identity and for centuries, the recognition of reincarnate lamas (tulkus) has served as a spiritual and societal foundation, providing leadership, education, moral guidance, and cultural continuity.

The institution of the Dalai Lama holds a unique place in the Tibetan Buddhist belief system, its culture and identity. From the Fifth Dalai Lama in the 17th century, reincarnate lamas had been the core of the Buddhist establishment of Tibet.

In this context, it is a matter of concern that the Chinese government seemingly wishes to control or appoint a future Dalai Lama which will be a challenge to the faith, culture, and the very existence of Tibetan Buddhists as a distinct people.

I wish to note that Article 18 of the ICCPR states that that “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes the freedom, either individually or in community, with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

The freedom of religion or belief of Tibetan Buddhists includes the right to determine their clergy and religious leaders in accordance with their own religious traditions and practices as guaranteed by international human rights law. The 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief also provides the freedom to “train, appoint, elect or designate by succession appropriate leaders called for by the requirements and standards of any religion or belief”.

The Human Rights Committee has also affirmed that “the practice and teaching of religion or belief includes acts integral to the conduct by religious groups of their basic affairs, such as the freedom to choose their religious leaders, priests and teachers”.

In this context, I am concerned of the laws enacted by China limits the rights of Tibetan Buddhists.

In 2007, the Government issued the State Religious Affairs Bureau Order No.5 that specifically laid down ‘Measures in Managing the Reincarnation of Tibetan living Buddha’.

This law requires mandatory approval of the government for all reincarnations of living Buddhas, effectively granting state control over religious succession.

It also mandates that reincarnations must uphold the “unification of the state” and that reincarnations must happen within the territory of the People’s Republic of China.

In 2016, the Chinese Government published an online database of the State approved Tibetan Buddhist reincarnations with over 1300 biographies of living Buddhas residing in the country as provided by the Buddhist Association of China.

Ladies and gentlemen,

A discussion concerning the succession of the Dalai Lama cannot be had without mentioning the Panchen Lama, noting his critical role in the succession of the Dalai Lama according to Tibetan tradition.

In May 1995, six-year-old Gedhun Choekyi Nyima was recognized as the 11th reincarnation of the Panchen Lama by the current Dalai Lama. Shortly after this Nyima and his parents were taken away from their village by members of the Chinese Government. This year marks 30 years since the disappearance of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima. The Government of China has confirmed that he was taken away with his family but has refused to provide precise information on his fate and whereabouts despite multiple requests, including by the special procedures mandate holders.

I wish to reiterate that Tibetan Buddhists must have the right to make independent choices in relation to their cultural and religious expressions in accordance with international human rights law. Such choices include the right to select and appoint their own religious leaders.

I call on the Chinese government not to interfere in the identification and appointment of Tibetan Buddhist leaders, including any future ‘reincarnation’ of the current Dalai Lama, which must be determined by the Tibetan people.

I also call on the Chinese government to repeal the law concerning the ‘Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism and cease using of any government databases or registries to monitor, control or legitimise government approved ‘Tibetan Buddhist reincarnations.’

I repeat the call to the Chinese government to disclose the whereabouts of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima and ensure his physical and mental wellbeing.

Thank you for your attention.

ENDS