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Illustration 1: Sikyong Dr.Lobsang Sangay, (Photo Credit: The Tibet Post International, www.thetibetpost.com)

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This is an exclusive interview of Dr.Lobsang Sangay by Arnav Anjaria. Dr. Lobsang Sangay is the democratically elected Sikyong (Prime Minister) of the Tibetan Government in Exile, officially known as the Central Tibetan Administration. Elections received massive support of the large Tibetan Diaspora spread across South Asia, North America, South East Asia and Europe.

Tibetan Government in Exile was established in 1959 by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. Thus with the announcement of the Dalai lama to appoint his political successor, Dr.Lobsang Sangay was democratically elected as the Sikyong of the Central Tibetan Administration. He is the Sixth Sikyong of the Central Tibetan Administration, earlier Sikyong was known as the Kalon Tripa. The interview was conducted in his office in Dharamsala in June 2011 by Arnav Anjaria.

Q.) How do you see the Tibetan issue?

Dr.Sangay.) There is one country two system in China and in Hong Kong. Then Why not Tibet? That's the question. Because Hong Kong and Macau people are Han Chinese. But then the Chinese argument has been that Hong Kong has had a different business or commercial system under the British hence you recognize the difference. And gave them a different system. Then what about Macau? It didn't even have a functioning system of infrastructure. It was a crime infested colony. Most of the criminals from China ran away here. Then why does it deserve a one country two system? Then we the Tibetans have had different culture different tradition different system even different state because we had our own currency. We had our own judiciary; we had our own tax system. None of the cases went to China. We solved it ourselves. And compared to Macau we were in a much better position to claim for statehood even. If you've given one country two system status to Macau then why not Tibetans? And the answer is the same, because We Are TIBETANS. Because we are not Chinese. China's reputation will be tested by how they treat the Tibetans.

Q.) what are they afraid of?

Dr.Sangay) So its not a..People often say "oh" the solution to Tibet is very difficult. But it is not a difficulty in the legal framework. There is a legal basis for granting genuine autonomy. Article 12, article 4, it's not a question of institutional complexities. One country two system is already there in Hon Kong and Macau. And it is not a question of history or custom or tradition. We've had a distinct history, distinct culture, and distinct language. So the problem is not legal or institutional. The problem is simply political. Political problem because we are Tibetans and we are being Discriminated. So all we are saying is that the Chinese leadership should have the political will to solve the issue.

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There will be a huge dividend for them. You will gain respect from the international community. And they want respect; they are spending billions of dollars in buying or building a reputation of soft power. But you can't buy soft power. You have to earn it. Bollywood movies are more popular around the world than Chinese movies, why? Because there is free speech in India..There is diversity in India...and the movie is watched...and people feel it you know...its not the lack of science and technology or anything maybe Chinese technicians or Chinese movie makers...some are better than some Indians but but the final product accepted by all around the world because what you see in Bollywood movies are staged here but expressed freely. And in China the expression in the movie is also staged. So the receptivity is less. That's why the underlying lack of democratic foundation in China in general and you have democratic foundation in India and that's the strength. So India might not be economically and militarily at par with China but India will generally will have more respect from the international community because you have moral authority, there is diversity in place... there is free speech. Only in India. I always give this example..There was a gathering of some people in Delhi and George Fernandes was giving a speech about Tibet.. And after he finished his speech. I was a university student then. He asked after his speech.. "Is there anyone who wants to say something in support of Tibet?" And one man got up,one Indian man,a thin guy and said.. "When I become the next Prime Minister of India. My foreign policy will be this..my this..my that..and then my support for Tibet will be this..."

You know he gave the whole speech...interesting guy you know. George Fernandes asked him... "what do you do normally?" he said "am a postman at the moment...but I am launching a political party" only in India you see that you can 'gherao' and say what you want freely And none will put him behind bars. He was criticizing the government. That's India you know.

Q.) So is it going to be your priority, getting the talks going with China?

Dr. Sangay) From our side we are willing. That has to be the number one priority because to resolve the issue of Tibet is the number one priority. That's the core issue.

Q.) But if they don't respond then is there any chance of the movement becoming violent going back to the demand for independence?

Dr.Sangay.) no I think the movement becoming violent has a very slim chance. Because I believe in Non Violence. And ill do all it takes to see to it that remains non violent. And we are in India.. We are law abiding residents' of India. We also do not want to violate Indian laws as well. We don't want to create problems for India. So it will remain Non Violent. As for whether there will be a change in the issue or not. Is for the people to decide. And it's for the Parliament to decide. For how long we can go on. When do we change? If at all is for the people and the parliament to decide. At the moment Middle Way is the Policy and I have to implement it. And ill do so.

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Q.) But you come from the Tibetan Youth Congress which supports complete, total independence from China. Have you changed your thoughts or stand?

Dr.Sangay) Yes! That's why I am supporting the Middle Way now. I've evolve.

Q.) how do you reconcile?

Dr.Sangay.) well its like. When you're young..You're passionate. And with age you become more rationale and you become more pragmatic. But I do respect their work and I understand their frustration and their passion.

Q.) But now it seems divided, it almost is like a secular body now. The separation of the Church and the State. There will be more and more clamor for action. And I think you're going to now act like a politician. So there will be enormous pressure on whoever daunts your chair. Even five years from now. So the person will be under tremendous pressure to deliver like all other politicians are. So in than case if China doesn't respond then what happens?

Dr.Sangay) I ran election platform on the Middle way policy and I won the election. And ill be around for five years. If they don't like me then they can change me after five years. It's their prerogative.

Q.) but you're committed to the middle way?

Dr.Sangay) Yes! One has to because that is the policy of the Tibetan Administration. Even parliament has resolved on this stand, thus as the executive head I have to implement the bills passed by, the laws made by the legislation.

Q.) Are you going to make any special overtures to China?

Dr.Sangay) let's wait and see you know, during my inauguration I will give a speech... (laughs)

Q.) So far they haven't reacted very positively. They called the Dalai Lama's decision to quit or retire as a trick and you have been linked to a terrorist organization (laughs)...so their stand is full of negativity.

Dr.Sangay) Its part of their script...as I said. What comes from China is staged. So let's say this is the next chapter in their script. So maybe they are trying to rattle me because I am young. But that's not going to happen.

Q.) so that's the way you look at it?

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Dr.Sangay) Well that's generally the Chinese law. Tibetans have dealt with the Chinese for about thousand years. So we know pretty much...

Q.) how are you going to deal with the likes of N. Ram or Subramaniam Swamy?

Dr.Sangay) A vast majority of Indians have always been supporting the cause. There will be some people. Some people bound to be there and India's a democracy...

Q.) you don't take them too hard?

Dr.Sangay.) obviously you don't agree with them but you Indian ethos is that it's a democracy. And we also have our say. Vast majority of Indians have been supporting for which we are very grateful and we hope and appeal that they continue to support us. Its Incredible India and Incredible Democracy in India. Some people don't understand yeah we understand.. Haha

Q.) When it comes to passport what happens to a Tibetan? How do you travel?

Dr.Sangay) We have Indian government issued travel document. Identity certificate. It's issued In lieu of the passport.

Q.) what are the other priorities-age old priorities?

Dr.Sangay.) Return of His Holiness Dalai Lama to Lhasa is an important priority. Other internally I want to focus on education. I am saying this because I have become who I am because of education. I want to share my story and I have been sharing my story. And hopefully the younger generation will study a little harder...thinking that well if he can make it then perhaps I can make it even when our background is very similar. I literally resonate the life of a Tibetan in exile. So when I tell my story it more or less mirrors there's. And they would say that's exactly how I lived how I grew up and if he can make it to the Kalon Tripa then I can too.

Q.) you want to inspire them?

DR.SANGAY) Yeah yeah yeah and many youth have participated and they are quite encouraged as well.

Q.) but what do you plan to do? More concrete.

DR.SANGAY) Education is number one and create a culture where parent's teachers and everyone say the education is very important. They inspire the youth and then provide infrastructure and then facilitate through sponsorship, counseling, coaching etc...and as they graduate unto class 12th they take professional courses. So its something like our goal should be to have some 10,000 professionals in Twenty Years time in the Tibetan

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community. – Doctors, engineers, lawyers, MBAs, white collared, high paid salaried professionals. So if each professional contributes some \$1000 for the cause per year then we will have 10 million dollars which would be sufficient to cover the administrative cost of the Tibetan administration. So we can be self sufficient on our own. And then 10,000 professionals, their family will be taken care of. They can help the community and the movement more effectively. Thus that's a long term plan.

Q.) You already talked about this but the young Tibetans in some ways who have not been very happy with the stand that the Central Tibetan Administration has taken but with your election some seem to have been starting to associate them with you. So are you going to take more steps to reach out to them? Draw them more into the fray of CTA and involve them more.

DR.SANGAY.) I ran on a platform of Middle Way and overwhelmingly majority of them participated in it. In support of me. Hopefully they knew what my platform was. I think they are engaged actually. You know I go and talk to the youth all around and they are engaged and are very supportive of me. It's not that ill try and bring them to my fold, trying to push them over. Ill do what I continue to do and keep everybody united and that will be my primary goal. Because I don't see Independence and autonomy as division. I just see it as two different views. Two different ways of approaching things. Both can be argued as right- one from the matter of principle-Independence. And one from the matter of pragmatism- autonomy. So it's not a conflict. One sees it as the most pragmatic ways to do it as it stands today. And other says know we should think about what is our birthright and maybe we should go for our ultimate goal. So I always try to say that these are not conflict or divisions. These are two different views and both have validity. And I for one understand both sides because I have been on both and I resonate both sides. That's why I think people voted for me overwhelmingly. Because there was choice for self determination or independence by other candidates. Who stood for self determination. So people could have voted for them if that's what they wanted. But people voted for me because I am more action oriented. Which means who ever have organized or done something for Tibet I support it. I will not differentiate based on my ideology or philosophy. My ideology and philosophy if at all it's pragmatic which means anything for Tibet and Tibetan people. So that's what people see me coming from all the way so they seem to resonate with them.

Q.) Earlier the idea of a multiparty democracy in the Tibetan legislature was rejected though His Excellency Samdhong Rinpoche did support the bill. Are you in a way planning to rejuvenate the idea of a multiparty democracy?

DR.SANGAY.) Hmm I don't know multiparty but I think Two-Party is needed. Having said that I don't think parties can be formed through legislation. Parties have to be formed privately by parties. There's already one party called the National Democratic Party of Tibet. If others want then they should organize themselves and join the election and fight

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the election and see where it goes. That's how parties are formed. Party is always in the private sphere. You can't legislate and make parties you know.

Q.) But in Bhutan they have done that...?

DR.SANGAY.) What they have done is...preliminary rounds anyone can form party. In the final round you need cent percentage so in the final round it may be reduced to a two party contest. But none can say you cannot form any party, anyone can form any party. In this election also I realized that if you have two parties then you can have real good competition. Even now it was a good competition but the process was quite complex and at times absurd. I had to organize all my campaigns myself, individually. Travel to all these places; organize at the grassroots on my own. Even after I won the preliminary rounds. Now formally we are candidates still there was support mechanism from the government. That should change actually. After the preliminary rounds the government should provide support to each one of the candidate. And then all the events have to be automatically being organized in Tibetan areas. In this election when I went, I had to literally go find people, who would go make calls, run around and you call and organize and the officials were in a dilemma because they were not allowed to participate but they wanted to participate. So a lot changes have to be made. Though not through a legislation but through an election regulation.

Q.) Another thing is the six representatives in the parliament are representatives of the schools of thought within the Mahayana Buddhism. And there are a certain members of parliament in Diaspora who actually demand a reform on the basis of the place where the settlements are located in south Asia and in European countries. So how far you think this proposal can go?

DR.SANGAY.) It's for the parliament to decide. And I shouldn't comment on it. Already we do have representatives from Europe and North America. And some people are proposing that we have some from the East Asian countries as well. I think we should have, as for how we go about doing this is like this is a long. Ongoing debate whether we should have representation from the Nepalese settlements or not. I think let the parliament decide.

Q.) Sir, Tibetans have been a part of the Indian Army but it seems they do not get pension benefits and this something which has been a pending issue; will your government reach out to the Indian government over this?

DR.SANGAY.) No, our official statement on this issue has always been that yes there are some people of Tibetan origin like Ladakhis, Sherpas like that you know they have joined the Indian Army. And I have read newspaper accounts where they have participated in some wars Operation Vijay and then Kargil and all. That's our stand. Our official stand.

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Q.) You've had a very vigorous campaign; you must have closely witnessed the life of an average Tibetan in India. Apart from other issues they have some socio-economic issues..Are you also going to...?

DR.SANGAY) Yes definitely. Welfare of Tibetans will definitely be an important priority.. That's why I thought that education will be a short, mid and long term plan. And I know socio economic conditions of some Tibetans in some settlements are in quite dire state. The conditions in these settlements are very harsh. Some Tibetans in Nepal as well in the border areas of Tibet.

Q.) The elections were not allowed to be conducted freely in Nepal, thanks to the government there. So will the administration take steps to harmonize the relations with the Nepalese government?

DR.SANGAY) yeah we are trying. We had good relationship before and Tibetans were allowed to function quite freely before. At least humanely. Now the Chinese embassy in Nepal is the most powerful embassy even when compared to US or India. So their intervention is quite strong. Yes we want to look after the Tibetans in Nepal. And we want Nepal also, Nepalese people to remember that we have long relationship with the Nepalese people. As old as 2000 years. So our Tibetan-Nepalese relationship should continue in a harmonious way and Tibetans should not be treated unfairly in Nepal. Because Nepal is a democratic nation and they participate in democracy, they know the importance of or the value of democracy and what Tibetans were doing were essentially practicing democratic rights and Tibetan rights should be recognized and allowed.

Q.) You have stated earlier that Tibet should be the core issue for India to negotiate with China. Is it also that you would reach out to the Indian people so that they in turn can help shape the minds of the political executives. Which in turn can..?

DR.SANGAY) I don't know If ill go around trying to shape Indian peoples view but I have done and ill continue to do is travel around India, meet Indian people, Indian students and Indian academics and thank them for their support for all these years. Because I often say this that I grew up in Indian subsidized refugee camp. I went to Indian subsidized schools. I still travel on Indian subsidized Gas in train or plane. Whatever. I am very much grateful to India and the Indian people. And if they ask me about my views on China or India or Tibet, I will share to the best I could. With clear intention that I will not do or say to harm India's interest or India's security. We are here as a guest and we know it very well and we will do all we could, in fact help India's interest and security. So in that context I will travel around, I will reach out. And as I have done and express gratitude for Indian peoples support for all these years. And then I often say this actually. When it comes to cricket I think my heartbeat is as strong for India. Or for that matter there was a survey done of the most popular food in India. Indian preference, my taste is exactly same as Indians. Number one- Masala Dosa, Number Two Mutton Biryani. So very much. I was in Assam recently, near West Bengal and I

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said “macchli lao...masala waala (get some fish with spices) ” so for sure..Yeah definitely. So I mean I grew up here and I very much appreciate.

Q.)Do you think it should be environment that should be of primary concern for a certain quantum of time because Tibet happens to be the Third Pole. So what would be your government’s stand on this?

DR.SANGAY.) The political issue of Tibet is surely the primary issue and along with that the environmental issue is very important and affects India directly. They are damming major rivers and some say that the Hydro power project is as big, if not bigger as Yangtze River project. So whenever you dam a river, you control the flow of the river. Control the flow of the water. So that control is very powerful. So they can release water when it’s not needed. They can block water when it’s needed. So the environment is the major important thing. So Tibet has the source of all the major rivers. Indus River which flows to Pakistan and India. Brahmaputra, Mekong all the way. Yangtze...all the rivers. So one could say around fifty percent of the population drink Tibetan water. And as per Indian custom when a guest comes you say “paani pijiye (drink water)” and yes Indians drink Tibetan “paani” and we are given hospitality. But on the other side, across the Himalayas the Chinese drink lots of Tibetan water and we are yet to see the hospitality (laughs) . We want to say that could you please show the same hospitality that Indians show us.

Q.) Sir, under the leadership of Mr. Gyari the current committee that is negotiating with China, would there be a change in the committee or something?

DR.SANGAY) Not yet, actually I am yet to takeover. I am yet to review papers. Review the document. But as it stands today I have no plan to change anything as of yet. Now the Kalon Tripa has to appoint the envoys. Before it was his Holiness who used to appoint. You seem to know quite a lot huh...you’ve been here for sometime?

Q.) One more question sir,

DR.SANGAY) yeah...

Q.) Voices of dissent within the Tibetan community. Would they be entertained in a much better now then before?

DR.SANGAY) voices of?

Q.) Dissent...

DR.SANGAY) yeah...of course I am a believer in democracy

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Q.) Dawa Norbu in some ways was not well received for a certain point of time.

DR.SANGAY.) I hosted him at Harvard for about 6 months. I invited him. That says it all you see. Yeah definitely, I know him very well. Dawa Norbu...he was a professor at the Jawaharlal Nehru University and I invited him to Harvard for 9 months and literally I put him up at my place. But yeah I put him up for 6 months and then he left for India. During the elections I was criticized quite a lot by many people on facebook and websites and all but I hardly ever responded. Even if I responded I responded very politely. Because I have a bigger volume and I don't want to hammer or poke on different voices. I wanted them to have space for free speech. Even though I was criticized. If I would have responded to them harshly they would have been discouraged to criticize anyone. I made myself available. Because I am a public figure so well I dint respond. I could have, normally you do, you try to defend your dignity and reputation. I dint do much because that's when these people spoke for the first time. Young aggressive maybe indianized. Let them say what they want; I am not going to respond. Because we have to encourage this. The environment of dissent. Even though it's critical of me.

Q.) Sir How does your administration look at those developments in the Middle East with regards to the Arab Spring ?

DR.SANGAY) See, I support freedom. I support democracy. If there's any place anywhere who are fighting for democracy and freedom we show our solidarity. Yeah I think democracy is universal freedom is basic for human beings to have.

This interview was conducted by Arnav Anjaria, he is currently a research scholar at the Center for Regional Studies, University of Hyderabad. He has been associated with the Tibetan movement as an activist, journalist and as an academic commentator on the issues concerning Tibet. He is based in Hyderabad, India.