



Tibetans in China: Making Sense of a Visit and Five Appointments

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Summary

It is imperative for all concerned to take steps to prevent the Tibetan movement from taking recourse to violence. To begin with, Chinese authorities should show magnanimity by resuming talks with the representatives of the Tibetan diaspora for their eventual return. To facilitate that process, China should also initiate a dialogue with India on the issue since it is home to the largest chunk of the Tibetan diaspora including the 14th Dalai Lama, which is one of China's main grudge against India. By doing that China would be providing an inclusive approach to solve the problem and not let the Dalai Lama and other resisting Tibetan expatriates remain forever shut out. That way China would be putting into action President Xi Jinping's recent statement that China and India should "properly handle problems and differences". India on its part should be ready with its proposals when China raises the issue with it. Its positions on relevant aspects like political aspirations versus economic incentives, religious sensitivities, public unrest, terrorism, refugees, the use of force, multilateral diplomacy, etc. should be well articulated and conveyed. India should also convince the Tibetan diaspora within its territory that a political consultative mechanism along the lines of the 14th Dalai Lama's Middle Way is the only viable way forward at this juncture for engaging with the Chinese authorities. To that end, all quarters of the Tibetan diaspora should also strive to create and sustain an environment conducive for the holding fruitful talks with the Chinese authorities. Their political and cultural aspirations may not fructify in absolute perfection at one go. It can only be a gradual evolutionary process for which unfettered interaction with the larger population is essential. An exiled status would most certainly not earn them any autonomy at all. That would be the feasible and positive way forward, addressing the hopes of a people, burying the hatchet between two important neighbours and stabilising the region.

The one factor on which Tibet's future as a distinct political entity would depend more than all others is China's approach to the Tibetan issue. In recent weeks Chinese authorities undertook two major actions that relate to the present and the future of their Tibetan population. The first was the visit by Yu Zhengsheng, the newly selected member of the Politburo Standing Committee of the 18th Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, to the Ganzi (Garzê in Tibetan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan province on 6-7 January 2013.¹ The second was the election/nomination of five Tibetan Buddhist Reincarnates into various organs and levels of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) between January and March 2013. The latter move saw the election of the 11th Pagbalha Hutuktu Geleg Namgyai as one of the 23 Vice-Chairpersons of the 12th CPPCC National Committee, the election of the Chinese Panchen Lama as a member of the Standing Committee of the 12th CPPCC National Committee, the election of the 12th Samding Dorje Phagmo as a member of the Standing Committee of the CPPCC, the election of the Dupkang Tupden Kedup as a member of the CPPCC Standing Committee (all these during the March 2013 session of the 12th CPPCC National Committee), and the nomination of the 7th Reting Rinpoche Lodro Gyatso as a member of the Tibet People's Political Consultative Conference Committee.² All these have far reaching consequences for the 5.4 million Tibetans residing in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu and Yunnan within China and the roughly 160,000 Tibetan diaspora residing outside China.

Yu's Visit

The visit by Yu Zhengsheng saw him interacting with local Han and Tibetan officials, Buddhist figures and the local people in three villages and the capital Kangding (Dardo) of Ganzi Prefecture. His interactions and remarks related to "the local and ethnic issues under the new circumstances" and China's approach to the low socio-economic indicators, religion and politics of Tibetans. Yu told the Tibetan Buddhist representatives that he expected

¹ Xinhua, Qiushi Journal, 9 January 2013, available at http://www.qstheory.cn/yw/201301/t20130109_204315.htm, accessed on 10 January 2013.

² *Zhongguo Renmin Zhengzhi Xieshang Huiyi di Shierjie Quanguoweiyuanhui Zhuxi, Fuzhuxi, Mishuzhang, Changwuweiyuan mingdan*, Xinhua, 11 March 2013; "List of 12th CPPCC National Committee Chairperson, Vice Chairpersons, Secretary General and Standing Committee Members", available at <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2013/0311/c64094-20752579-4.html>, accessed on 18 March 2013; "Panchen Lama takes higher advisory post," Xinhua, China.org.cn, 12 March 2013, available at http://www.china.org.cn/china/NPC_CPPCC_2013/2013-03/12/content_28219883.htm, accessed on 18 March 2013; Claude Arpi, "China's Living Buddhas," *The Statesman*, 17 March 2013, available at http://www.thestatesman.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=448114&catid=38, accessed on 18 March 2013; "Post-90s Rinpoche becomes youngest Tibet CPPCC delegate," *China Central Television English News*, 24 January 2013, available at <http://english.cntv.cn/20130124/103509.shtml> accessed on 19 March 2013.

them to continue adhering to patriotism and understand that the various nationalities of China can live well only when China remains united and strong and the Tibetan people are stable and growth-oriented. Only then, he opined, Tibetan Buddhism too can have a bright future; and only with “deep attainments”, can Buddhism manage its monasteries well and draw the faith of the population. He expressed hope that the Tibetan population continues supporting the government’s administration of the monasteries and that the nuns and lamas would also abide by Chinese laws. Yu further said that the Chinese government would further strengthen its administration of the Tibetan monasteries and also provide them with public facilities to make Tibetan Buddhism and Socialism more relevant to society.

Poverty, unemployment and the poor health of the local Tibetans were all obvious to Yu, who stated that only improved infrastructure, public services and higher incomes of farmers and herders would bring about development. In his view, special focus has to be laid on solving pressing problems like improving vocational education so that young Tibetans can compete in the job market; and more has to be done for employing Tibetans throughout China so that Tibetan household income rises through such employment. He also noted that health services of the Tibetan region need extensive overhaul.

Yu also took stock of the role and functioning of the Communist Party branches in the Tibetan region. He clearly said that Party officials would have to improve their working style – they need to sincerely serve the local population by visiting villages and households and solve the actual problems of the people; they should also publicise the “Enrich and Benefit the People” policy of the Party as well as spread legal awareness. He also noted that it is essential to deepen the fight against the “Dalai Lama’s organisation” by creating favourable socio-political conditions through economic growth and improving the Tibetans’ livelihood.

Before analysing Yu Zhengsheng’s visit to Ganzi, it has to be borne in mind that this is the first visit to a Tibetan area by a top fifth generation leader (i.e. member of the Politburo Standing Committee of the newly constituted 18th Party Central Committee) who shall probably oversee Tibetan matters for the next five to ten years. It also needs to be noted that Yu Zhengsheng has been appointed as Chairman of the CPPCC National Committee (China’s legal advisory body) on 11 March 2013, thereby giving him ample authority for the same.

Ganzi is home to one of the largest number of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, lamas and nuns outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region. The ratio of the Buddhist establishment to the population probably exceeds that of TAR itself. However, Ganzi has been restive with Tibetan demonstrations and self-immolations since February 2009. After Aba (Ngaba) and Qiang Autonomous Prefectures, it is Ganzi that is on the Chinese regime’s radar because of its opposition to certain aspects of the Chinese administration. Till date Chinese authorities have appeared clueless on how to check a form of protest that is as equally peaceful and

violent as self-immolation. That is what the Xinhua report meant when it referred to “the local and ethnic issues under the new circumstances”.

China’s approach is archaic – presenting economic solutions to political problems. This approach involves better infrastructure, better healthcare, better education, better public services and the like. Most of that will also be heavily subsidized. That’s what the “Enrich and Benefit the People” policy is all about. Besides, it is also clear that the Party is alienated among the Tibetan population and that its officials lack the will or motivation to work at the grassroots to improve the living standards of the Tibetans. That lack of proper education and employment has led to the marginalisation of Tibetans in China is clearly evident.

Coupled with that are Yu Zhengsheng’s statements that Chinese authorities would continue to control Tibet’s religion with their controversial methods of administering Buddhist monasteries, which is one factor that is driving lamas and nuns to desperation. Yu’s repeated emphasis on adherence to laws underscores the line of the Chinese authorities. Further, the manner of reference to the Dalai Lama also shows that for the Communist Party of China the Tibet issue is still a personal one against the Buddhist leader. It is amply clear that the Party would not have any of the “Middle Way” or “Genuine Autonomy within the Chinese Constitution”. Nor does it appear to be in a mood to heed calls from its Tibetans for the return of the Dalai Lama simply because once the Dalai Lama returns to Tibet he would be an alternate and obviously higher authority for the Tibetans than the Party itself.

Yu’s words also belie the hope of any resumption of talks between the representatives of the Chinese Communist Party and the Envoys of the Dalai Lama, which has remained frozen since the ninth round of discussions in January 2010. The Chinese rationale for such an approach might be simple: make hay while the sun shines. In other words, while the situation is largely under their control and time is on the Party’s side, measures to improve the socio-economic conditions of the Tibetans would start yielding results and enable the weaning away of Tibetans from opposition activities.

The Five Appointments

As regards the election/nomination of Tibetan Buddhist figures into the Chinese politico-legal advisory body – the CPPCC – it is part of an old strategy of the Communist Party of China to gain thorough control over the Tibetan people through the political authority of the Tibetan Buddhist clergy and monasteries:

Among the five Buddhist clergy mentioned above, the office of the Panchen Lama ranks number two after the Dalai Lama in the hierarchy of Tibetan Buddhists. Then comes Dorje Phagmo at number three who is also a *Tulku*, i.e. a lama (in this case a nun) of deep learning capable of controlling his/her reincarnation. Thereafter, Pagbalha Geleg Namgyai and Reting Rinpoche are each a *Hutuktu*, eight of whom the Chinese claim are eligible to become regent to the next Dalai Lama and run the affairs till the Dalai Lama is old enough

to hold office independently.³ All these personalities have repeatedly supported the Chinese policy of upholding social stability, denounced self-immolation and have even criticised the Dalai Lama at times.⁴

It is a given that the Chinese authorities would retain the final approval of the selection of the 15th Dalai Lama and would most certainly not accept any decision in this matter from the 14th Dalai Lama or his disciples among the Tibetan diaspora unless an agreement were to be reached between the two sides. This position is clear from Chinese laws such as the Tibet Autonomous Region 2006 Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism and the July 2007 State Administration for Religious Affairs Regulations. The controversial selection of the 11th Panchen Lama also acts as precedence to the intent of these Chinese laws. The above mentioned Chinese laws would also come in the way of accepting a Dalai Lama through the process of *Emanation*, which the 14th Dalai Lama had indicated as a possibility in his September 2011 statement. Although *Emanation* can provide with an adult Dalai Lama foregoing the uncertain period of the new Dalai Lama's minor age and the need of regent(s), that it would be a transition directly from the 14th Dalai Lama to the 15th precludes its happening based on the current Chinese position.⁵ Therefore, it is certain that in the selection and consequent treatment of the 15th Dalai Lama, the senior Tibetan clergy in the Chinese political offices mentioned above would play a decisive role as per the directions and approval of Chinese authorities.

How would the domestic Tibetan communities and their diaspora react to the possible Chinese selection of the 15th Dalai Lama is a question live with anxiety. Besides, governments in countries with sizeable Buddhist populations and having links with Tibetan Buddhism and the Dalai Lama would also have to factor in the sensitivities of their peoples on the issue, which then would become a matter of foreign policy for them. China's TAR 2006 Measures rule out the possibility of appointing a Dalai Lama from outside the TAR. The possibility of the 14th Dalai Lama or his representatives going into TAR and finding his reincarnation that too with Chinese approval appears remote in the current circumstances. Rather it seems quite likely that the 15th Dalai Lama would be chosen with Chinese approval like the 11th Panchen Lama was.

That leaves us with the unpleasant situation where violence may not remain limited to self-immolation by individuals. That violence is not alien to the Tibetans is well documented in

³ "Post-90s Rinpoche becomes youngest Tibet CPPCC delegate," available at [http:// english.cntv.cn/20130124/103509.shtml](http://english.cntv.cn/20130124/103509.shtml), accessed on 19 March 2013.

⁴ "Female living Buddha condemns Dalai Lama - Xinhua," *Reuters*, 29 April 2008, available at <http://in.reuters.com/article/topNews/idINIndia-33305820080429>, accessed on 20 March 2013.

⁵ Robert Barnett, "Between the Lines: Interpreting the Dalai Lama's Statement on his Successor," 14 October 2011, available at <http://www.thechinabeat.org/?p=3873>, accessed on 21 March 2013.

history. It has been earlier disclosed that elements within the more radical Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC) think that a violent struggle may have better prospects vis-à-vis China and the world particularly in view of the international treatment of the Palestine Liberation Organisation and its leader Yasser Arafat.⁶ It has also been chronicled that latent militancy in Tibetan habitats in China is indeed one of China's vulnerability.⁷ Both domestic and expatriate Tibetan groups and individuals may thus resort to violence to protest against the process of Chinese approval of a reincarnate.

Such a denouement may further escalate and affect many areas across the world. First among which would be the entire Tibetan habitat and Himalayan region shared by China, Nepal, India and Bhutan. Other areas of such unrest could be Chinese establishments co-located with sizeable Tibetan populations. Needless to say, such acts would invariably be dealt initially with force by various security agencies thus initiating a spiral of violence. This could eventually metamorphose a by-and-large peaceful political struggle into a violent one. And since there is no dearth of terrorist organisations today, one cannot rule out the possibility of violent Tibetan elements liaising with such groups to establish another a militant organisation of their own, one that could have adverse domestic and foreign policy implications for many countries.

Conclusion

To prevent the slide towards violence, it is imperative for all concerned to take steps for avoiding such a situation. To begin with, Chinese authorities should show magnanimity by resuming talks with the representatives of the Tibetan diaspora for their eventual return. To facilitate that process, China should also initiate a dialogue with India on the issue since it is home to the largest chunk of the Tibetan diaspora including the 14th Dalai Lama, which is one of China's main grudge against India. By doing that China would be providing an inclusive approach to solve the problem and not let the Dalai Lama and other resisting Tibetan expatriates remain forever shut out. That way China would be putting into action President Xi Jinping's recent statement that China and India should "properly handle problems and differences".⁸ India on its part should be ready with its proposals when

⁶ Jane Ardley, *The Tibetan Independence Movement: Political, Religious and Gandhian Perspectives*, (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), pp. 57-58.

⁷ Mandip Singh, "Critical Assessment of China's Vulnerabilities in Tibet," *IDSIA Occasional Paper No. 30*, January 2013, available at <http://www.idsia.in/occasionalpapers/CriticalAssessmentofChinasVulnerabilitiesinTibet>, accessed 23 March 2013.

⁸ "Xi Jinping's interview with media representatives from BRICS countries," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PR China*, 19 March 2013, available at http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/zyxw_602251/t1022932.shtml, accessed on 20 March 2013.

China raises the issue with it. Its positions on relevant aspects like political aspirations versus economic incentives, religious sensitivities, public unrest, terrorism, refugees, the use of force, multilateral diplomacy, etc. should be well articulated and conveyed. India should also convince the Tibetan diaspora within its territory that a political consultative mechanism along the lines of the 14th Dalai Lama's Middle Way is the only viable way forward at this juncture for engaging with the Chinese authorities. To that end, all quarters of the Tibetan diaspora should also strive to create and sustain an environment conducive for the holding fruitful talks with the Chinese authorities. Their political and cultural aspirations may not fructify in absolute perfection at one go. It can only be a gradual evolutionary process for which unfettered interaction with the larger population is essential. An exiled status would most certainly not earn them any autonomy at all. That would be the feasible and positive way forward, addressing the hopes of a people, burying the hatchet between two important neighbours and stabilising the region.