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'THE ISSUE OF THE DALAI LAMA'S REINCARNATION HAS GAINED A HIGHER PROFILE'

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The issue of the Dalai Lama is attracting increased attention in recent months. Conscious of the XIVth Dalai Lama's advancing age, many in the Tibetan community in India and abroad are concerned about whether the succession will be smooth. There is a widespread feeling among the Tibetan diaspora that China will create problems, including attempts to fragment the Tibetan community in exile. Apparently recognising this, the Dalai Lama's new book titled 'Voice for the Voiceless: Over Seven Decades of Struggle with China for My Land and My People', which was released on March 9, was categorical that the next Dalai Lama will be born in the "free world".

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reacted promptly and said: "the Dalai Lama "is a political exile who is engaged in anti-China separatist activities under the cloak of religion". "On the Tibet issue, China's position is consistent and clear. What the Dalai Lama says and does cannot change the objective fact of Tibet's prosperity and development." The statement reiterated that "The Chinese government issued Regulations on Religious Affairs and Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas, and respects and protects this method of succession. The reincarnation of Living Buddhas including the Dalai Lama must comply with Chinese laws and regulations as well as religious rituals and historical conventions, and follow the process that consists of search and identification in China, lot-drawing from a golden urn, and central government approval".

This is a crucial time for the Tibetans inside China and abroad. Questions in the minds of the majority of Tibetans and many others centre on the institution of the Dalai Lama and the future of the Tibetan people, who venerate the Dalai Lama as the patron saint of Tibet and living reincarnation of Avlokteswara. The three main questions are: whether the XIVth Dalai Lama will reincarnate and, if so, where; whether he will make a clear break with tradition and choose to be reincarnated as someone other than a Tibetan or as a woman; whether he will select a suitable young lama as his emanation; and whether he will discontinue the tradition of the Dalai Lama and dissolve the institution. Each of these decisions will have repercussions. The Dalai Lama's latest book, though, points to continuation of the institution of the Dalai Lama and reincarnation of the XIVth Dalai Lama.

There are reports that Tibetans, at least in India, intend to write to the Dalai Lama in the coming weeks and months pleading that he announce plans for his succession. They are of the view that

an early announcement will give time for preparations for the succession regardless of the mode the Dalai Lama chooses. It will also facilitate recording of clearcut directions on the method to be followed and procedure for selecting the young Dalai Lama in case the XIVth Dalai Lama decides to be reincarnated. This will be important to prevent China from introducing complications in the process and putting up a rival, or attempting to prevent the exiled Tibetan community from selecting the reincarnation. China's effort will, as repeated often, of course be to impose their choice of reincarnation on the Tibetans inside China and on the wider exiled Tibetan community. The Chinese have already done this with the Xlth Panchen Lama, though the latter has not yet been accepted by the Tibetans as the Panchen Lama but only as a "learned" monk! A lot will depend on where the reincarnation, or emanation, is found.

The Dalai Lama has made various statements at irregular intervals on the subject. His latest book now reiterates statements he made earlier. Illustrative are his statements in: 2007, to Fox News in the US that "If I die while we are still refugees, my reincarnation, logically, will come outside Tibet, who will carry out the work I started"; also in 2007 when he was 72, he was quoted by Newsweek as saying that "he refuses to be reborn in Tibet so long as it's under Chinese control"; on September 24, 2011, he said "I shall leave clear written instructions about this. Bear in mind that, apart from the reincarnation recognized through such legitimate methods, no recognition or acceptance should be given to a candidate chosen for political ends by anyone, including those in the People's Republic of China". His latest book now reiterates statements he earlier made.

Meanwhile, in the hope of getting the Dalai Lama back to China before he pronounces his final decision on his reincarnation, the Chinese have resumed using psychological methods and are urging the Dalai Lama to return and spend his final days in comfort at home. In July 2024 there was a low-level contact between the Chinese and Tibetans in Kathmandu. Commenting on the death of the Dalai Lama's elder brother Gyalo Thondup, who was very close to him and had previously acted as his unofficial envoy in talks with Chinese officials, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun said on March 10 that China is open to talks about the future of the Dalai Lama so long as he abandons his position of splitting the "motherland". Gyalo Thondup died in Kalimpong in February 2025. The XIVth Dalai Lama was born in Taktser in Amdo in north-eastern Tibet in 1936. He was taken away from his parents and family by the monks entrusted with the task of "discovering" the reincarnate Dalai Lama. The family joined him in Lhasa much later, but the young Dalai Lama stayed alone in the Potala Palace in Lhasa. While the Dalai Lama has said he would like to go back to China, the Chinese are pointing to the ancient Chinese practice of returning to one's native land to end their days in comfort.

There are unconfirmed reports suggesting that the Chinese communist authorities may be uncertain about the loyalties of Gyaltsen Norbu, the Chinese-appointed Panchen Lama. If this is correct it will introduce complications for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Instructions have repeatedly been conveyed to him by different CCP leaders, including Li Qiang, the current Chinese Premier when he was Shanghai Party Secretary in 2021, TAR Party Secretary Wang Junzheng in July 2024, and Politburo member and Head of the United Front Work Department (UFWD) Shi Taifeng earlier this year. They have "advised" Gyaltsen Norbu to continue his studies

and make efforts to adapt Tibetan Buddhism to Chinese communism with socialist characteristics.

Most recently Politburo member and Minister of the CCP CC's United Front Work Department Shi Taifeng met Gyaltsen Norbu on February 13, 2025, in Beijing. Shi Taifeng extended Spring Festival and Tibetan New Year greetings to Gyaltsen Norbu and Tibetan Buddhist personages. Affirming Gyaltsen Norbu's "achievements" in the past year, he expressed the hope that Gyaltsen Norbu would earnestly study Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era. He encouraged Gyaltsen Norbu to further improve his political literacy, knowledge level, and Buddhist scholarship, strengthen his political beliefs, and always maintain high consistency with the Party Central Committee with Xi Jinping at its core in terms of thought, politics, and action. Gyaltsen Norbu was asked to consciously forge the consciousness of the Chinese national community and actively participate in building the Chinese national community. Shi Taifeng told him to play an active role in systematically promoting the Sinicization of religion in "our country" and strengthening the rule of law in religious affairs governance.

There has also been a surprisingly extensive shake up in the leadership of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) in recent months. Che Dalha, a 68-year old Tibetan cadre who joined the Communist Youth League (CYL) in 1979 and was regarded as an upward mobile cadre who had the distinction of being the first Tibetan to be appointed Mayor of Lhasa, was suddenly "removed". Months after his disappearance, it was officially announced in January 2025, that Che Dalha was under investigation for corruption. Soon thereafter the Central Discipline Inspection Commission (CDIC), the party's internal disciplinary body, and the National Supervisory Commission, China's highest anti-corruption agency announced that TAR Party Secretary Wu Jingye, who was selected by Chinese President Xi Jinping. was suspected of "serious violations of laws and regulations" and placed under investigation. On July 24, he was expelled from the CCP and on December 24, the Supreme People's Procuratorate announced his arrest. There is speculation that reasons other than corruption were responsible for their being investigated and removed.

Meanwhile the decision by the Trump Administration to revoke all grants including funding of US\$11,600,000 to the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) at this time would have caused a degree of consternation in the community. It is to be seen whether it is restored after a 3-month review. Prior to the election of Donald Trump as US President, the US Congress had passed resolutions expressing support for the Dalai Lama's choice of his successor and the procedure he chooses. The Tibet Resolve Act was unanimously passed in 2024 and this could be a factor favouring restoration of the grant to the Tibetans. While it would be a definite lever in the hands of the US to pressurise the Chinese, if not restored it could also be used to negotiate and strike a bargain, or compromise, with the Chinese.

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