

China vs The Lama and Tibet: He may be good, but he's no politician

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NEARLY a decade ago, while staying with a nomad family in the remote grasslands of northeastern Tibet, I asked Namdrub, a man who fought in the anti-Communist resistance in the 1950s, what he thought about the exiled Tibetans who campaigned for his freedom. "It may make them feel good, but for us, it makes life worse," he replied. "It makes the Chinese create more controls over us. Tibet is too important to the Communists for them even to discuss independence."

Protests have spread across the Tibetan plateau over the last two weeks, and at least 100 people have died. Anyone who finds it odd that Speaker Nancy Pelosi has rushed to Dharamsala, India, to stand by the Dalai Lama's side fails to realize that American politics provided an important spark for the demonstrations. Last October, when the Congressional Gold Medal was awarded to the Dalai Lama, monks in Tibet watched over the Internet and celebrated by setting off fireworks and throwing barley flour. They were quickly arrested.

It was for the release of these monks that demonstrators initially turned out this month. Their brave stand quickly metamorphosed into a protest by Lhasa residents who were angry that many economic advantages of the last 10 or 15 years had gone to Han Chinese and Hui Muslims. A young refugee whose family is still in Tibet told me this week of the medal, "People believed that the American government was genuinely considering the Tibet issue as a priority." In fact, the award was a symbolic gesture, arranged mostly to make American lawmakers feel good.

A similar misunderstanding occurred in 1987 when the Dalai Lama was denounced by the Chinese state media for putting forward a peace proposal on Capitol Hill. To Tibetans brought up in the Communist system - where a politician's physical

proximity to the leadership on the evening news indicates to the public that he is in favor - it appeared that the world's most powerful government was offering substantive political backing to the Dalai Lama. Protests began in Lhasa, and martial law was declared. The brutal suppression that followed was orchestrated by the party secretary in Tibet, Hu Jintao, who is now the Chinese president. His response to the current unrest is likely to be equally uncompromising.

The Dalai Lama is a great and charismatic spiritual figure, but a poor and poorly advised political strategist. When he escaped into exile in India in 1959, he declared himself an admirer of Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent resistance. But Gandhi took huge gambles, starting the Salt March and starving himself nearly to death - a very different approach from the Dalai Lama's "middle way," which concentrates on nonviolence rather than resistance. The Dalai Lama has never really tried to use direct action to leverage his authority.

At the end of the 1980s, he joined forces with Hollywood and generated huge popular support for the Tibetan cause in America and Western Europe. This approach made some sense at the time. The Soviet Union was falling apart, and many people thought China might do the same. In practice, however, the campaign outraged the nationalist and xenophobic Chinese leadership.

It has been clear since the mid-1990s that the popular internationalization of the Tibet issue has had no positive effect on the Beijing government. The leadership is not amenable to "moral pressure," over the Olympics or anything else, particularly by the nations that invaded Iraq.

The Dalai Lama should have closed down the Hollywood strategy a decade ago and focused on back-channel diplomacy with Beijing. He should have publicly renounced the claim to a so-called Greater Tibet, which demands territory that was never under the control of the Lhasa government. Sending his envoys to talk about talks with the Chinese while simultaneously encouraging the global pro-Tibet lobby has achieved nothing.

When Beijing attacks the “Dalai clique,” it is referring to the various groups that make Chinese leaders lose face each time they visit a Western country. The International Campaign for Tibet, based in Washington, is now a more powerful and effective force on global opinion than the Dalai Lama’s outfit in northern India. The European and American pro-Tibet organizations are the tail that wags the dog of the Tibetan government-in-exile.

These groups hate criticism almost as much as the Chinese government does. Some use questionable information. For example, the Free Tibet Campaign in London (of which I am a former director) and other groups have long claimed that 1.2 million Tibetans have been killed by the Chinese since they invaded in 1950. However, after scouring the archives in Dharamsala while researching my book on Tibet, I found that there was no evidence to support that figure. The question that Nancy Pelosi and celebrity advocates like Richard Gere ought to answer is this: Have the actions of the Western pro-Tibet lobby over the last 20 years brought a single benefit to the Tibetans who live inside Tibet, and if not, why continue with a failed strategy?

I first visited Tibet in 1986. The economic plight of ordinary people is slightly better now, but they have as little political freedom as they did two decades ago. Tibet lacks genuine autonomy, and ethnic Tibetans are excluded from positions of real power within the bureaucracy or the army. Tibet was effectively a sovereign nation at the time of the Communist invasion and was in full control of its own affairs. But the battle for Tibetan independence was lost 49 years ago when the Dalai Lama escaped into exile. His goal, and that of those who want to help the Tibetan people, should be to negotiate realistically with the Chinese state. The present protests, supported from overseas, will bring only more suffering. China is not a democracy, and it will not budge.

P.S.

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* Patrick French is the author of "Tibet, Tibet: A Personal History of a Lost Land."