

The EU must oppose China's interference in the Dalai Lama's succession

Friday 1 April 2022, by [METTEN Vincent](#) (Date first published: 6 July 2020).

On 6 July 2020, Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, will celebrate his 85th birthday. Unfortunately, this year again, he won't be able to spend it with his people in his Potala Palace in Tibet, but will have to make do with celebrations organised in Dharamsala, in northern India, where he has been living in exile for more than 60 years.

From his Indian home, the Tibetan spiritual leader can contemplate the daunting Himalayan range that he crossed in March 1959 to flee the Chinese occupation (of his country) that Mao Zedong began some 10 years earlier. Since then, China has only increased its control and now manages the country with an iron fist. Tibet, which is today isolated from the rest of the world, has become a kind of police state, with the control and surveillance measures developed there now replicated against Uyghurs in Xinjiang. What is at stake today is the very survival of the Tibetan culture, language and religion.

Despite his repeated requests, Beijing has never allowed the Dalai Lama to go back to Tibet, leading to frustration and suffering among his people, who remain deeply devoted to him. Proof of this devotion are the more than 150 cases of Tibetans who have self-immolated since 2009 to protest against their lack of freedom and ask for the return of their spiritual leader. This has been one of the biggest waves of self-immolation as a form of political protest ever witnessed globally.

Although Tibetans are known for being nonviolent, Tibet's future will likely be turbulent if the Chinese government continues its current course. How will the nearly six millions Tibetans from U-Tsang, Amdo and Kham — the three main regions of Tibet — react if the Dalai Lama dies in exile, separated from his people? There is no doubt that his death will set off a wave of extreme unrest with unforeseeable consequences.

A key issue that will arise when he dies will be the question of his succession. China has indeed announced its plans to appoint his successor and has enacted various rules and official measures to pave the way for this.

The Dalai Lama is one of the main reasons why Tibetans have resisted against their Chinese oppressors in a peaceful way over the last six decades. But after his death, when Beijing will have installed an illegitimate successor, Tibet risks falling into large-scale turmoil that could destabilise the whole region.

In 1995, Chinese authorities arbitrarily detained Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, a six-year-old boy recognised by the Dalai Lama as the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama — Tibetan Buddhism's 2nd most important religious figure — and installed their own candidate instead. This precedent hints at Beijing's determination to try to control the appointment of a future Dalai Lama.

On his side, the 14th Dalai Lama, who gave up his political power in 2011, stated that if a decision to

continue the institution of the Dalai Lama is made, the responsibility shall primarily rest with the Gaden Phodrang Trust. This trust, which he created in 2015 to support the tradition and institution of the Dalai Lama in religious and spiritual duties, will be informed by his written instructions. In the past, the Dalai Lama has said on several occasions, to the great displeasure of Beijing, that if he were to reincarnate, it would not be in Tibet under Chinese control, but in a free country such as India.

As the Dalai Lama is aging, it is crucial that the international community anticipates these developments and adopts public positions stating that his succession must be decided by the Tibetan Buddhist community and the intention of the current Dalai Lama only. No foreign government, especially the Chinese communist government, can interfere in the issue of his succession. At stake is the future of international human rights standards and norms and religious freedom — which are actually guaranteed by article 36 of the Chinese Constitution. Not acting would legitimise new norms that place the interests of a political party over the right to freedom of religion and belief, and would represent a great threat for human rights not only in China but also worldwide.

As of today, several countries have already taken position on this issue: the United States, followed by the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany, have stated that it is up to the Tibetan religious community to choose its future Dalai Lama, rejecting China's claim. It is crucial that other governments, as well as the European Union, follow this path and express similar positions.

The EU could go one step further and — as the Tibetan Policy and Support Act currently in the US Congress proposes — recognise any Chinese official involved in identifying or installing a government-approved candidate as a future 15th Dalai Lama, contrary to the instructions of the current Dalai Lama, as a serious human rights violator. This decision could be accompanied by a number of sanctions, including for example denying those officials access to European territory or freezing or confiscating their financial assets abroad.

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P.S.

• FIDH. 06/07/2020:

<https://www.fidh.org/en/region/asia/tibet/the-eu-must-oppose-china-s-interference-in-the-dalai-lama-s>