

Tibetan Conflict: Post-Dalai Lama Scenarios

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This year is the 54th anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan Uprising. The uprising culminated in the 14th Dalai Lama along with 80,000 Tibetan refugees seeking political asylum in India. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) marched into Tibet on October 7, 1950, a year after the establishment of the PRC. Tibet has been under direct control of China for more than 62 years.

Grievances against the Chinese government have led to escalated social unrest among Tibetans both in Tibet and in-exile. More than 100 cases of self-immolations by Tibetans is an evidence of such grievances. Most recently, in April 2013, two monks immolated themselves in Sichuan province. The main cause behind the escalation of self-immolations is perceived to be increased human right abuses in Tibet and the desire of those young monks to see the Dalai Lama return to his motherland.

The 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, is the sole torchbearer of the Tibetan struggle. His status as a Noble Laureate's has allowed the Tibet struggle to gather widespread support and sympathy from the international community and world leaders. He proposes a conciliatory 'Middle Path' approach, which advocates internal matters to be handled by Tibetans while foreign affairs remain in the hands of Chinese Communist Party.

On the contrary, China has never shown interest in negotiating with the Tibetan community in exile. Highlighting Tibet's economic transformation, Chinese leadership argues that China's Tibet Policy has not been to Tibet's disadvantage.

In 2011, much to the astonishment of China, 14th Dalai Lama renounced his political powers. He even went a step further by stating that there might be a possibility that the Dalai Lama institution will be abolished after he passes away. With the relinquishment of political responsibilities by him and appointment of democratically elected Prime Minister of Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), Lobsang Sangay, the entire issue has taken a new turn altogether. Nevertheless, many questions continue to linger vis-à-vis Tibet's fate and new leadership policies in Tibet.

The future of the Tibetan struggle is closely tied to the present Dalai Lama. As far as self-rule or independence is concerned, due to Tibet's strategic location, China's stand will continue to remain uncompromising. However, on the basis of the developments in Tibet along with leadership transition in China and the fact that His Holiness has relinquished his political power; two different post-Dalai Lama scenarios can be built. First is that the 14th Dalai Lama abolishes the institution of Dalai Lama. It will be pertinent to connect this scenario and Dalai Lama's devolution of political power with PRC's September 2007 *Reincarnation Law* which advocates for central government's approval for the next incarnation of the Dalai Lama. There is substantial evidence to suggest that as soon as the Dalai Lama passes away, in the

absence of the spiritual head, the Tibetan struggle will lose its non-violent character. Restive Tibetans might resort to violent measures against the Chinese government; hence, further worsening the situation. This will have a severe impact on Chinese domestic politics and foreign relations as a violent Tibetan struggle would pose a grave security challenge to China. In such a scenario, more and more troops will be stationed in and around Tibet and all protests will face a severe crackdown. Chances of the international community and major powers intervening in the matter of Tibet, which is proclaimed by Chinese as a core interest and internal matter of PRC, seem bleak.

The second and most probable scenario, as happened in the case of 11th Panchen Lama, is that China installs its own Dalai Lama and 14th Dalai Lama appoints his reincarnation before he passes away. Needless to say that it would be beyond the reach of the Chinese government appointed -Dalai Lama to gain recognition and legitimacy from Tibetans; thereby, deteriorating the significance of the most holy institution of Tibetan Buddhism. Such a scenario will rule out any prospects of reconciliation between the Tibetan government in-exile and Chinese Communist Party.

While the policies of the erstwhile leadership of China were relatively hardline; it is hoped that with the newly-appointed Chinese President Xi Jinping, China's fifth generation leader, coming to power, there would be some softening of policies towards Tibet. Given that protests in Tibet are still passive, it is the most viable option for China to revisit its Tibet policy and resolve the Tibetan issue while the 14th Dalai Lama is alive. While the post-Dalai Lama situation is open for speculations, it remains to be seen that how the change in China's leadership will impact the future course of action with respect to Tibet. Notwithstanding, it is the time that new Chinese leadership addresses the grievances of Tibetans and gives them freedom to choose their own fate.

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