

Two-year Talks Impasse Frustrates Exiled Tibetans
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Beijing appears to be waiting for the 14th Dalai Lama to die

Exiled Tibetans are growing increasingly frustrated with stalemated negotiations with the Chinese government, which appear unlikely to turn productive any time soon as Beijing seems content to simply stall until the death of the 14th Dalai Lama, who will be 77 in July.

Beijing has closed its doors for talks with envoys of the exiled spiritual leader ever since the 10th round of talks failed in January 2010, in which the Chinese demanded changes in exile policies as a prelude to any further talks. The exile community is facing the fear that the talks will never resume, with both elder and younger generations who had hoped for a breakthrough in the two year-long impasse beginning to lose hope.

"Over the past two years so much has happened inside Tibet and also in exile that there is a need that talks should happen and produce some results," says Tenzin Choesang, a young exiled Tibetan.

Despite pressure by world governments and prominent western leaders, however, the Chinese haven't budged even as during the past year 30 Tibetans burned themselves to death in protest against the Communist regime's harsh repression religious and civil freedoms. In April, 12 Nobel Peace Laureates wrote an open letter to President Hu Jintao of China, urging him to engage in "meaningful dialogue" with the Dalai Lama to ease Tibetans' frustrations over Chinese policies.

In addition, parliamentarians from around the world recently adopted the Ottawa Declaration in which they offered to work with the Chinese National People's Congress to seek to identify ways to honorably settle the Tibetan dispute. But along with mass anti-China protests by exiled Tibetans around the world, these declarations have produced no results. Many Tibetans sense defeat over the fact that even massive protests in world capitals have failed. In an effort to take the propaganda offensive and prove the legitimacy of its own brand of Tibetan Buddhism, Beijing allowed its own picked Panchen Lama, Gyaltzen Norbu, Tibet's second-highest religious figure, to appear outside the Chinese mainland for the first time.

Lobsang Sangay, the young and energetic prime minister of the Tibetan government of exile has attempted to take a constructive approach, but has not been able to break the ice. He is facing growing criticism among many Tibetans that despite his domestic successes he has failed to engineer a new round of talks.

"The Chinese are not interested to resolve the issue of Tibet through negotiations. That's a proven fact," said Tenzin Nyinje, a young Tibetan in Dharamsala, the exile capital. "Tibetans inside Tibet do not want to live under the Chinese regime, as shown by the self-immolations."

Young Tibetans, he said, are frustrated, confused and distracted. He called for what he called a "total freedom struggle, without compromising on the principles of independence

and non-violence.” He cited the Indian independence leader Mahatma Gandhi, “who never gave up on independence and the principles of non-violence means of struggle.”

For the Chinese, however, the exiled government is as illegitimate as its demands. Over the years Beijing has initiated many new projects to boost social and economic development in the region but exiles complain that the rapid development, Han migration and cultural and religious restrictions are eroding the way of life.

Even the Dalai Lama, who gave up his political role as head of Tibetans last year, has little hope.

“Recently things have become very, very difficult but our stand – no change,” the Dalai Lama told the World Summit of Nobel Peace Laureates in his last US visit. “Independence, complete independence is unrealistic – out of the question.” He reiterated that his non-violent “Middle Way” of seeking change from Beijing still has the support of 90 per cent of Tibetans.

The Communist regime in Beijing says talks will only go ahead when the Dalai Lama and exiled Tibetans stop demanding a free Tibet or a higher degree of autonomy and end all anti-China activities. Beijing’s response is mostly in terms of economic weight. The government recently stated that the Tibet’s economy grew by 11.4 percent year on year to reach RMB13.3 billion (US\$2.1 billion) in the first quarter of this year, marking it a big development in Tibet.

“The Middle Path Policy has whatever support it has as a result of its being the policy of the Dalai Lama,” said Elliot Sperling, an associate professor and expert on Tibetan-Chinese relations at Indiana University in the US. “It’s no great secret that were the Dalai Lama not pushing this policy, support for it would never have been strong. Even now, many, if not most of those who publicly support the policy invariably do so with reference to the Dalai Lama, not to the logic, if any, of the policy alone.”

The talks, Sperling says, have gone nowhere by design. China is not interested in reaching a settlement which brings the Dalai Lama back to Tibet and has simply drawn out the talks while waiting for him to pass away. “This has been stunningly obvious for years and years. The exile leadership is so invested in a failed policy that it cannot face up to the fact that it has led the Tibetan movement into a dead end.”

The exile government remains optimistic given the change in Chinese leadership to occur this year and pitches talks as priority. In a recent press conference Lobsang Sangay said, “In China the leadership changes will take place by the end of the year. New nine leaders will take over and the Chinese government is focused on the domestic politics and power shift that will occur. We are very hopeful that very soon they will focus on the important issue like Tibet and then we will continue to maintain dialogues to solve this issue, since January 2010 the envoys of His Holiness the Dalai Lama were not able to have a formal meeting with their counterpart.”

“From our side we still maintain the middle way policy, whereby we would like to have dialogue and to solve the Tibetan issue peacefully with the Chinese government,” Sangay added.

Lobsang Tenpa, an exiled Tibetan and a PhD candidate in Tibetology in the University of Wien, Austria says:, "Until the handing over or changes of leadership in the coming months in Beijing, there aren't any possibilities to resume the "dialogue" between Beijing and Dharamsala. Even then, the Beijing is not likely to give consent to Tibetan issue in the near future. However, the last 5th "Tibet Work Forum" 2010 decision to implement a same policy in all Tibetan autonomous regions in China shows Tibetans in Tibet voices against Chinese Govt. is working, which is further supported by the "middle-way" policy of one administration region of all the Tibetan autonomous regions in China."

The situation within the exile community on Tibet talks is shady, perhaps if the community could come up with new strategies in engaging the communist government there could be a chance of breakthrough in the long impasse else Beijing seems to have waiting to watch how the exiled Tibetans will bat for their field for a future without their spiritual head the 14th Dalai Lama.

Analysts believe it is unlikely that the two parties will reach any agreement in the short term and that the Beijing's motive is just to see the Tibetan religion's most prominent face die in exile on the presumption that everything after his death will die with him, burying the issue.

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