

Straight Talk



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Standing Up for Freedom and Democracy in Tibet

With Sherap Therchin

The recent motion that was passed by the Special Committee on Canada-China relations supported the resumption of dialogue between the representatives of Tibet and the Chinese government. To discuss this motion, and what Tibet means for Canada-China relations, this Straight Talk features Sherap Therchin, executive director of the Canada Tibet Committee. This publication is based on a transcript of a recent discussion between MLI's communications officer Ai-Men Lau and Sherap Therchin.



Sherap Therchin joined the Canada-Tibet Committee in January 2018 as its Executive Director. He was born and grew up in Tibetan refugee communities in Nepal and came to Canada in 2015. In Nepal, Sherap worked as Assistant Deputy Director of the Himalayan Society for Youth and Women Empowerment where he designed and monitored projects to empower indigenous women. He later moved to India to serve as Deputy Chief of Tibet Fund India, with responsibility for oversight and evaluation of USAID projects supporting education and healthcare in Tibetan refugee communities.

MLI: On August 17, 2020, a motion put forth by MP Garnett Genuis was passed. The motion called for Canada to support the resumption of dialogue between representatives of the Tibetan people and the Government of the People's Republic of China, with a view to allow the genuine autonomy of Tibet within the framework of the Chinese Constitution.

Today, we are joined by Sherap Therchin, the executive director of the Canada Tibet Committee. Sherap will be discussing this motion and why Tibet is and should be a critical issue in Canada-China relations.

Could you start by telling us a bit about yourself and your work at the Canada Tibet Committee?

Sherap Therchin:

I started my work with the Canada Tibet Committee in 2018. The Canada Tibet Committee has been the voice of Tibetan advocacy in Ottawa for the last 32 years. Our primary role is to monitor human rights development inside Tibet and promote the support for Tibet in Canada through various means, whether it is contacting parliament, the government, civil societies, or the Canadian public in general.

MLI: What is the current situation in Tibet under the governance of the Chinese government?

Sherap Therchin:

In theory, the Chinese Constitution does promise democratic opportunity and political liberty to the Tibetan people. In reality, however, Tibet has not been able to exercise those promised freedoms. It has gotten worse since President Xi Jinping.

I would like to start with some facts on the economic, social, and cultural realities of Tibetans under the Xi Jinping government. Despite China's and Xi Jinping's claims of rising prosperity and high levels of economic growth in the Tibetan area, poverty continues to plague Tibetans living under Chinese authority. While the government often highlights the impressive GDP and subsidies, in reality, Tibetans in Tibet have faced discrimination policies along with political repression, which have created a two-class economic and social system based primarily on race.

There are various international studies, including UN development program statistics under the human development index, that show that Tibet is still the poorest region in China. It has the lowest score in the whole of China on various indexes, such as the human development index and living index. But from a Tibetan perspective, it's still their country.

In terms of culture, China argues that it defends and promotes Tibetan culture in part by efforts to encourage cultural tourism in Tibetan areas, but Tibetans highlight what they view as the Disney-ification of Tibetan tradition and institutions.

A recent example can be seen in Karze, located in Eastern Tibet. There, a large part of the Larung Gar Buddhist Academy, which was the largest Buddhist study centre in the whole Tibet, was demolished, and the residents were expelled and forced into re-education, all in the name and edict of the development of tourism.

In addition to the demolition of physical structures, China has started claiming the rights of appointing the reincarnation of the Tibetan Buddhist Lama, a move that we believe is clearly aimed at interfering in the future reincarnation of Dalai Lama. Again, there's the case of Tibet's Panchen Lama being kidnapped by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) when he was only six years old; another testament to China's violation of religious rights of the Tibetan people.

MLI: I know the Chinese government has claimed that he is now living a normal life. He's gone through education, and he just wants to be left alone. Do you believe any of those claims?

Sherap Tharchin:

Absolutely not. As Dr. Sangay said during his testimony at the Canada-China Committee, if the international community (and Tibetans) are to believe in the claims of China, then China should allow the access to Tibet for us to see the Panchen Lama's family, whether it's in person or in video, at least there should be some sort of a record. So far, the only thing we have is a photo of Panchen when he was six years old. All the claims of him being well, and doing well, and good education are unbelievable. The Chinese government passed legislation called Ethnic Unity, which is aimed at the complete assimilation of Tibet into the already dominant Han Chinese with the idea of undermining Tibetan language, culture, religion, and its unique identity.

Under this law, anyone discussing the preservation of Tibetan culture, language, and Tibetan unity can be punished or disciplined

for disrupting this so-called national unity.

I think a good example of this law is the arrest of Tibetan language education advocate, Tashi Wangchuk, who was arrested and sentenced for five years on the charges of inciting separatism and his only act was appearing in a *New York Times* documentary where he spoke about the importance of preserving Tibetan language and culture.

MLI: There is a lot of similarities to what we're seeing with Hong Kong, which has now taken the stage in terms of Canada-China relations.

Sherap Tharchin:

Absolutely. They are different names but similar in purpose.

MLI: Dr. Lobsang Sangay, president of the Tibetan government-in-exile, recently testified to the Government of Canada, and urged the federal government to support the resumption of dialogue between Tibetan representatives and the Chinese government. In his testimony, he called this a win-win situation for all. Could you explain further the importance of resuming talks between Beijing and the Tibetan people?

Sherap Tharchin:

I think for many Tibetans, the idea of a win-win situation is that we're not seeking complete independence of Tibet from China but rather genuine autonomy, which is already promised within the framework of the Chinese Constitution. I think a good example is that China as a global superpower spends billions of dollars every year to improve its soft power, but it completely ignores the person who in many ways symbolizes soft power to millions of people around the world, the person who is willing to work with the Chinese government for the long-term interests of Tibetans and Chinese, without seeking independence of any sort. Of course, this person is His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. Uniquely, and very sadly, the Chinese government fails to see this, and they are just waiting for the Dalai Lama to pass away.

When Dr. Sangay says there's a win-win situation, I think it conveys the sense of urgency that there's an opportunity to have a dialogue while the Dalai Lama is still alive, while he still has the influence over the 20 percent of the Chinese population who are Buddhists, and of course the six million Tibetans in Tibet who hold him dearly as not only the religious leader, but also a moral authority.

Yes, I think it really is in the interest not only of Tibetans but also of China, but unfortunately the Government of China fails to see this.

MLI: I think one thing that I feel Canadians have a bit of trouble grasping is the exact situation in Tibet. I'm just curious if you could explain a little further with what is exactly in the Chinese Constitution, and what has the Chinese government violated when it comes to Tibet.

Sherap Tharchin:

The Constitution does promise regional autonomy to ethnic minorities in China, and that would include Tibetans and Uyghurs, and autonomy to practice their own language, culture, and religion, and also autonomy to elect members from their own community to represent them in their region. In the last 60 years since the invasion of Tibet, there has never been a Tibetan leading the so-called Tibet Autonomous Region. The roles that Tibetans play are usually at the very junior level in the CCP. I think the promises exist only in theory.

MLI: I know Dr. Sangay mentioned the same that what's happening in Tibet is happening all over the world.

Sherap Tharchin:

What has happened in Tibet and what is happening in Hong Kong is not something that is just happening thousands of miles away. It could happen right here in Canada. We have seen an example of that with the intimidation and harassment of Hong Kong and Tibetan students. We saw a story about thousands of emails that originated from China threatening the life of the Tibetan student advocate Chemi Lhamo. That, I think, indicates that the reach of Chinese government is not limited to the boundary of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

I think it's a threat not only to Hong Kong and Tibet, but also anyone who believes in the idea of democracy and human rights. As Dr. Sangay said, they are trying to change the whole definition of human rights with their influence in the United Nations.

MLI: When this motion was put forth by MP Garnett Genuis, the committee was initially adjourned, citing the need for more study. That suggests a lack of understanding of Tibet, despite the mountain of evidence we have. What do you think that Canada still fails to understand about Tibet and China?

Sherap Tharchin:

There's several fronts where Canadians, or the Canadian government, fails to understand about Tibet and China. One is that – and this is not just limited to Canada but is similar in many other countries – the international community over the past few years has come to accept that issue of Tibet is an internal issue of China. However, if we go back to the record of the early 1950s to 1960s, there's evidence that Tibet was an independent state, and it was not an internal matter of China.

For example, I would like to quote the statement made by Canada's Minister of External Affairs, Lester Pearson, in 1950. He said, "In fact it appears that during the past 40 years Tibet has controlled its own internal and external affairs. Viewing the situation thus, I am of an opinion that Tibet is, from the viewpoint of international law, qualified for recognition as an independent state."

This is just an example of a statement that came in the 1950s and right after the invasion, and there were several other statements from different countries that in some ways recognize Tibet as an independent country. Tibet was not an internal issue of China, but an issue of one country invading another.

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country invading another.*

However, over the past decades, with China spending billions of dollars and mounting this information campaign, the Chinese government has successfully put what Michael Van Walt, who is a famous Tibet author, calls a Soviet-tested strategy of reflexive control, where the government uses a manufactured narrative of Tibet for so long and so consistently that the international community starts believing in that narrative. This unfortunately has happened with Tibet, and now when there's talk about Tibet, the Canadian government hesitates to get involved, believing that they're actually interfering in Chinese internal matters, which is really unfortunate.

Another area where Canada not only fails but hesitates is when it comes to non-China related issues, there's not much cost to pay, but when we're dealing with China, there's a cost to pay.

Australian basketball player, Andrew Bogut, said in response to NBA superstar LeBron James's lack of support to Hong Kong, "It's all about cause until it is about cost." LeBron James, as many people would know, is a fierce supporter of human rights in the US, but when it came to Hong Kong, he was against the students who were fighting for democracy in Hong Kong. For him, time was not for the cause, but for the cost. This is, I think, applicable to not just individuals, but to countries as well. It's easy to stand when there's not much price to pay, but when you stand for Hong Kong, for Tibet, for India, there's definitely a price to pay.

MLI: With other countries, how are they approaching Tibet?

Sherap Tharchin:

The first country that really comes in the mind of many Tibetans is definitely the United States. The United States earlier this year passed a bill of reciprocal access to Tibet, and it has now been implemented by the US State Department. The bill calls for access for the American journalists, diplomats, and human rights experts to Tibet in return for Chinese government official access to the US, which they already have.

Then, there's also another bill that is being tabled in the US Senate, which was passed in the US House of Representatives this year. The bill is the *Tibet Policy and Security Act*, which is aimed at stopping China from interfering in the identification of the re-incarnation of the future Dalai Lama.

Then, there is India, which shares a border with Tibet and has had several conflicts with China, including military conflicts in the last few months. The Indian government's support to Tibet is well documented. Perhaps the biggest contribution is giving a home to the Dalai Lama and to the Tibetan government exile.

I do not recall any other specific parliamentary tools of support, but France, Germany, Australia, and even a small country like Czech Republic, have had a large number of members of parliament support Tibet. In fact, the Czech Republic has the largest number of members of parliament support Tibet in the whole Europe, and Japan has been a key ally too. There's a Parliamentary Friends of Tibet, an association that exists in most countries that support Tibet, including in Canada. In comparison, of all of this Parliamentary Friends of Tibet, Japan has the largest number of members of parliament supporting Tibet issues through their membership in this group.

MLI: We are starting to see a shift in public opinion on China, and governments are increasingly saying that they're going to push back against China. We're hearing a lot about Hong Kong and the Uyghur Muslims. I'm curious on your thoughts about how Tibet is critical to Canada-China relations?

Sherap Tharchin:

There are several connecting points about how Tibet issues are critical to Canada's policy on China. Canada's confirmed honorary citizenship to the Dalai Lama. There are only – if I'm not mistaken – six honorary citizens that Canada has awarded in its entire history, and when you award something like honorary citizen, I think it comes with a lot of belief in the values of that person. I think it would be meaningless if you don't believe in the ideas that the Dalai Lama has put forward. An honorary citizen should mean something for the Canadian government. The Tibet issue, along with Hong Kong and Uyghur, is one of the few non-violent movements in the world, and Canada has this image of a country that supports peace around the world. It's really, I think, a test for Canada to put its principles and values into action by supporting and speaking up for Tibet, Hong Kong, and Uyghurs.

Tibet and Hong Kong are not the only issues in the international world right now. We have so many other issues, but what makes Tibet and Hong Kong unique is that we have not adopted violence against the Chinese government. I think that's a test for Canada and the international community.

MLI: What is your hope for the future of Tibet?

Sherap Tharchin:

My hope for Tibet is very similar to the hope of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, and the whole central Tibetan administration. I hope that one day Tibetans in Tibet can practice their language, culture, religion without any fear. I hope that Tibetans and Chinese can live in harmony side by side. I hope the Chinese government will not stop destroying the fragile environment of Tibet, which many environmental scientists call the "third pole," in accordance to its impact on the global environment. I hope the Chinese government would respect the lifestyle of Indigenous Tibetans, most of whom live a nomadic lifestyle, who have been the guardians of the land for thousands of years. That's a brief hope for Tibet.

MLI: Finally, what would be your advice to the prime minister or the minister of foreign affairs on the issue of Tibet?

Sherap Tharchin:

I was watching a documentary yesterday called *A Song for Tibet*, which was made in 1991. That documentary shows Tibetan advocates in the early 1990s struggling to get the support of the Canadian government. It also has this moment where the Dalai Lama visits Canada, and the Canadian prime minister doesn't meet him. There's also a video that shows some member of parliament attending the talk by the Dalai Lama and the House of Commons sending an indication that these MPs should come and attend a House of Commons meeting, in an attempt to reduce the number of MPs attending the talk by the Dalai Lama.

Sadly, this was 30 years ago, and not much seems to have changed. There's still that sense of fear and hesitation when dealing with China. Thirty years ago, Tibet supporters, both Tibetans and non-Tibetans, were calling for the then prime minister to speak to the Dalai Lama, to do the right thing by meeting a person who was just awarded the Noble Peace Prize, and yet there was hesitation to meet the Dalai Lama, who is globally known as the Man of Peace.

Sadly, even 30 years later, we are asking for the same thing. Nothing much seems to have changed. If I had the chance, I would ask the prime minister to reflect the importance of human rights as a core Canadian value in this country's foreign policy, and also consider the significance of the Dalai Lama as an honorary Canadian citizen.

If human rights are a core Canadian value, then should we not support them, even when there's a price to pay? Are Canadian values bought and sold as commodities in the international market? Why is the Dalai Lama an honorary Canadian citizen, and what obligation does that impose on this country? It should impose some respect for his approach to resolving the conflict in Tibet. I would urge the PM to listen to the perception of the majority of Canadians on China.

The public perception is shifting away from China now. It's all in the interest of the current Canadian government to really adopt a policy that is based on the human rights development in China for Hong Kong and for Tibetans.

MLI:

Thank you so much for joining us to offer your insightful comments on the situation facing Tibet and the importance of this issue to Canada-China relations.



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323 Chapel Street, Suite 300,
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7Z2
613-482-8327 • info@macdonaldlaurier.ca

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