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CECC Roundtable on “The Dalai Lama: What He Means For Tibetans Today

July 13, 2011

I would like to address this issue by looking at the impact of the recent devolution of the authority of the Dalai Lama to an elected Tibetan leadership on the future of Tibet.

To begin with, why did His Holiness divest himself of his authority? I see there are three main reasons.

First, this is part of his long held aspiration to democratize the Tibetan community and to develop a system of democratic governance in the Tibetan polity. His Holiness has said that since his childhood, he had developed an admiration for democratic values.

Secondly, through the system of rule by elected leadership, His Holiness is enabling the Tibetan struggle to sustain itself even if there is no resolution to the Tibetan issue in the foreseeable future. He believes that the issue to be addressed concerns the six million Tibetan people and not the person of the Dalai Lama.

Thirdly, His Holiness has said that it looked hypocritical for him to be combining spiritual and political authority in himself when he was calling others to separate religion and politics.

What are the implications of the Dalai Lama's decision to devolve authority? On the broader issue of the Dalai Lama's historical bond with the Tibetan people, particularly the majority of them who are in Tibet, I do not foresee any changes in the future. He will continue to be revered by the Tibetan people and also regarded by them as their “source of refuge for this life and the next.”

The change is and will have an impact on the Tibetan political movement in exile. First of all, this will be a challenge to Dr. Lobsang Sangay, the newly elected Kalon Tripa, the Chairman of the Tibetan Cabinet, who will be assuming office in August. On the positive, this Kalon Tripa will be more powerful than anyone so far. But the changes also mean that the new Kalon Tripa will have to assume more responsibility, be more decisive and not to be seen pushing issues back into the Dalai Lama's hands. He will also have to mold himself to be the Tibetan political leader, separate from the Dalai Lama. Also the Tibetan administrative system in exile, including the various offices connected with the Dalai Lama, will have to undergo the necessary repositioning under such a development.

At the people level, the Tibetan people in exile will also have to undergo a paradigm shift in their thinking and adapt to this new reality. They will have to learn to see the elected leadership as their political leaders.

Some of the implications of the Dalai Lama's decision on the Chinese leadership's policy are:

It challenges the Chinese authorities' position on the dialogue process. To date, even though the nine rounds of talks between envoys of the Dalai Lama and the Chinese leadership have touched on issues connected with the rights of the Tibetan people, the official Chinese position is that the talks are not only with the private envoys of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and are about his return.

There is a situation where the directly elected leader of the Tibetan people take the helm of the direction of the movement, there will be more voices that are there which may not be there currently which will be having an impact on the future policies of the Tibetan administration if there is no solution during that time.

It thwarts China's plans for the future Dalai Lamas. Despite their position that the Dalai Lama should stay away from politics, the Chinese authorities have been putting a long-term plan into action with the intention of controlling the process of the reincarnation of the next Dalai Lama to serve their political ends. Accordingly they have formulated regulations saying that only the Communist Party can anoint the highest Tibetan religious leader (not understanding the obvious contradiction), or in recent days even commanding that the Dalai Lama should be reincarnated irrespective of what the present incarnation is saying. Therefore, this decision of the Dalai Lama to break away from the historical role of the institution has effectively thwarted any such Chinese plans.

It bursts the myth about the return of the "Old Society": One of the scare tactics that the Chinese authorities continue to use among Tibetans in Tibet to maintain control is to project the period during independent Tibet (referred to as the "old society" as opposed to life under China, which is the "new society") as horrendous, and to say that the Dalai Lama's aim is to restore the "old society." The Dalai Lama's decision including the removal of the name of the government of Ganden Phodrang (that ruled Tibet) from the present Administration in exile takes away the opportunity for the Chinese to continue resorting to this myth.

There is one interesting impact that the Dalai Lama's devolution of his authority would have on his relationship with the governments throughout the world. Internationally, governments should now find it easier to have a simple, transparent and clear position towards the Dalai Lama than in the past. To date, quite a few governments have tried to overcome the perception of being seen as dealing with Dalai Lama the political leader by formally regarding him as a spiritual leader only. Now that the Dalai Lama has divested himself of his political position, unless politics kick in governments should find it easier to have a formal relationship with him as an eminent religious leader.