

# TURMOIL IN TIBET

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The question looming large in everybody's head seems to be—what caused the protests inside Tibet? Wen Jiabao, the Chinese Premier, on 18 March unequivocally alleged the 'Dalai clique' —a phrase used to refer to the Dalai Lama and his followers by the Chinese leadership—of instigating the protests in Tibet. He went a step further to say that China had evidence to prove it. This is not the first time that China has blamed the Dalai Lama and his supporters for the protests. Earlier, Qiangba Puncog, Governor of Tibet Autonomous Region alleged that the protests were "engineered by the Dalai clique, which incited it using an organized, premeditated, meticulous plan".

The Dalai Lama, in a media conference later in the day, used very strong words and gestures to refute the allegations made against him by the Premier. His rare demeanor at the press conference reflects the Tibetan leadership's growing impatience with China's Tibet policy and their callous attitude towards the Dalai Lama and the exile establishment's peace initiative. The Dalai Lama in a fit of reaction over the allegations made against him declared that if independence is what the Tibetan people want, then he is open to it—a development that would definitely have far reaching implications. Again, in a media conference on 20 March, he went as far to openly declare that he has no control over the protesters fighting for independence and that it is not possible for him to ask them to 'shut up'. The Dalai Lama's reaction would have been noted by the Tibetan populace closely following his speeches and interviews.

While it is imperative in human nature to seek the cause of an event, however, to derive a simplistic and linear causation of events is problematic. The Chinese leadership seems to have fallen into that trap when accusing the Dalai Lama and his followers for events inside Tibet. Rather, the protests inside Tibet, a minority region of present China, and other Tibetan areas outside the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) demands careful optimum searching; searching for a 'scapegoat' is hardly going to complete the search nor is it going to end the effects.

It must first be pointed out that this is not the first time that protests have occurred inside Tibet. There have been numerous accounts of minor outbursts here and there that are however suppressed easily by the authorities. The protests inside Tibet this time however, gained momentum and turned violent on the fifth day of the Tibetan commemoration of March 10 uprising against Chinese rule with the Tibetans estimating the death toll above 80 and the Chinese sources at 16. In an important development, the protests were not limited to the TAR alone; it spread to other parts of Tibetan areas of China while the Chinese premier announced that situation in Tibet is calm and under control. A candle light vigil was also carried out in the National Minority University located in the capital of China, Beijing. Officials are reported to have allowed the vigil in order to avoid any violent outbursts leading to the repetition of a 1989 Tiananmen like incident. So, there seems to be an uneasy calm and artificial peace as far as the situation inside Tibet and other Tibetan areas are concerned. With the imposition of

restrictions on foreigners and journalists desiring to enter these troubled areas, there is very less information flowing out. Yet, it is not lost on the world that there is turmoil in the roof of the world as a result of the video footage that has been smuggled out by tourists who witnessed the events.

Numerous attempts at securing the Chinese government's legitimacy in its rule in Tibet seem to have resulted in equal amount of fallouts. While the world was closely watching and almost persuaded to marvel at the magnitude of economic developments inside Tibet symbolized in the Qinghai-Tibet railway, its unabated policies of excluding the Tibetan minorities from the benefits of economic development, restrictions on religious practice and the weakening of Tibetan culture and ethnic identity, fizzled out as international and national televisions across the world beamed images of Tibetans burning Chinese flags, clashing with Han and other nationalities, carrying Tibetan flags and crying out slogans for free Tibet. Tibetan nationalism, if historically examined, is a modern phenomenon that was facilitated as a result of its direct clash with Chinese Han identity with so called 'liberation of Tibet' by Chinese PLA forces in 1950. Drastic demographic changes inside Tibet with the settlement of Han and other nationalities inside Tibet sponsored by the government have exacerbated Tibetan nationalism and minority/majority conflict, thereby enhancing Tibetan in-group cohesion. The Chinese government's coercive measures to deal with dissension and instead, attempts to interpret it as something 'orchestrated' by outside forces, only reveals its intent to derecognize the gravity and urgency of the situation in Tibet and Tibetan areas.

Therefore, a serious rethinking of China's Tibet policy is warranted. Would proper governance and implementation of its regional ethnic autonomy law in letter and spirit cause to avoid future resentment and protests? Such a policy might have achieved some success 20/30 years ago. Even then, what about the Tibetan areas those are not within the TAR's jurisdiction, as they too are actively participating in the protests. These Tibetan areas constitute more or almost half of erstwhile Tibet's territory; the Dalai Lama himself was born in Amdo, now a part of Chinese province. The CIA sponsored Tibetan guerrillas who managed to fight the Chinese in the 1960's and 70's belong to the Khampa region of Tibet, which is now outside the TAR. And reportedly, many Tibetan refugees fleeing China into the Indian subcontinent originate from these regions.

The Chinese government must factor in the transnational character of Tibetan nationalism. Conflict is a dynamic process. While it enhances in-group cohesiveness, it must pay attention to the integrative effects of conflict. Tibetan nationalism inside Tibet and outside has seen this direct sense of integration like never before. The images of dead bodies and rioting have caused a sense of uproar and euphoria in exile on account of which Tibetans across the world have displayed a heightened sense of unity and brotherhood with the Tibetans inside Tibet. Chinese consulates in major capitals around the world have been targeted and there has been no ceasing of protests and demonstrations. Shops are shut down in various parts of India, daily life is paralyzed as they gather to protest, demonstrate and mourn the deaths in Tibet and pray for the safety of their brothers and sisters in Tibet. Swarms of monks, nuns and lay Tibetans and Tibet supporters have gathered on streets to organize peaceful protests against China's

coercive policies and to call upon boycott of China's Olympics five months from now.

While it is important to seek the cause, the relevant question for the Chinese leadership to ask would be – what is the solution? This reminds one of the famous rendition by Bob Dylan : *The answer my friend is blowing in the wind... The answer is blowing in the wind.*

It would be opportune for the Chinese leadership to heed the Dalai Lama's call for dialogue. Because, as mentioned earlier, the Tibetan exile leadership seems to be getting impatient. A few years ago, the exile government almost changed gears. It voted for a review of the middle way policy if China does not begin meaningful dialogue with the TGIE before March 2005. This was passed as a resolution by 19 votes to 16 votes in the parliament (*Tibetan Bulletin*, 8 (2), March-April, 2004). Such a review of the middle path policy, however, faced immense opposition and was finally, stalled.

Currently, in the face of the latest developments inside Tibet and Chinese name calling, the Dalai Lama still appears to be holding steadfast to his commitment for peace and dialogue. In his press interview on 18 March, he main-tained some reservations by giving the Premier some benefit of doubt, perhaps an opportunity to retrace allegations. According to the Dalai Lama, Wen might probably have been misinformed by the local officials in Tibet of outside involvement. In the light of Chinese threats to crackdown on protesters with serious consequences, the Dalai Lama warned that he would resign from political duty if violence in Tibet did not abate. The latter declaration might also be interpreted as an attempt on his part to conform to Chinese demands to prove his sincerity. Such efforts, on the Dalai Lama's front indicate, as he mentioned during the press conference, that he continues to be committed to the middle path policy.

Also, the latest the exile government and leadership's too seems to be committed to the middle way policy. Earlier at various occasions, Prof Samdong Rinpoche, the Prime Minister of the exile government, called upon Tibet support organizations and Tibetan people to resist from anti-China protests and demonstrations in order to facilitate smooth Sino-Tibetan dialogue process. On 31 July 2008, to the chagrin of its pro-independence populace, it went ahead and passed a set of what it described as "important guidelines for its officials and offices in dealing with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)". It clarified that, among others, "In cases of arrests or detentions by the local police (of Tibetans) as a result of their having taken part in any campaign action ... no official or office of the Tibetan government (in exile) shall provide surety for bailing them out. (trans. <http://www.tibetanreview.net>, 7 February, 2008)

In response to allegations made against him, the Dalai Lama, in an effort to lodge his sincerity, invited the Chinese embassy delegates in New Delhi as well as international observers to visit him and investigate his files, speeches, telephone calls, etc. if they so like (*Times Now*, 18 March). When quizzed about the independence/autonomy issue, the Dalai Lama unequivocally responded that given the present reality, it was logical to follow a middle path policy rather than allow 'emotions' to take sway (Interview with the CNN, 18 March). Even while,

this article is being written, the Dalai Lama continues to voice concern over the protests in Tibet which he says are going to further worsen.

Therefore, given that the Dalai Lama is committed to his words, what is/are the policy criteria impinging on China's ability to discern his commitment? If Chinese preconditions—give up pursuit for independence, stop separatist activities, and declare in public that the Dalai Lama recognizes Tibet is an inalienable part of China and so is Taiwan—to dialogue are taken as the yardstick then the Tibetan leader seems to have adhered to at least two of these preconditions. What then are the policy considerations behind the linking of the Taiwan issue with the Tibet issue? Similarly, what are the policy considerations for holding the so called 'Dalai clique' responsible for the protests in Tibet?

Are the Chinese sincerely 'open to dialogue' as the Premier reiterated in his speech a few days ago? Is suspicion over Dalai Lama's intentions the only cause? Why is the Chinese leadership unwilling to publicly acknowledge the ongoing contacts between Beijing and the Dalai Lama's envoys? Intrinsic to this phenomenon is the Chinese leadership's Dalai Lama fixation, which serves to act as a cause for solution as well as deadlock. Deadlock because, the working knowledge within a section of the Chinese leadership seems to be that the popularity of the problem of Tibet is a result of the Dalai Lama's effective marketing of the Tibet issue abroad. That is why the Chinese leadership is so concerned over the British Prime Minister's decision to meet the Dalai Lama. A part of the Chinese leadership believes that partaking in engagement until the Dalai Lama is alive would assuage international criticism and in his absence, the Tibet issue would die a natural death.

It is observed that the inability of the Dalai Lama to deliver, might aggravate nationalist sentiments within the active Tibetan Diaspora community which has not failed in engaging in constant 'struggle', protests and demonstrations against Chinese 'oppression' as is revealed by the latest protests; and may, in turn, entrench their demand for 'complete independence' within the community as well as with the sympathizers for "Free Tibet". This is where the person of the Dalai Lama figures prominently as he stands to legitimize the process of dialogue and its outcome, while, concurrently dampening alternative voices and even assuaging nationalist sentiments. He is considered to be the political as well as the spiritual leader by the Tibetans, a position accorded since the 16th century, when the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism became the dominant school.

An appraisal of the issues involved in Sino-Tibetan engagement, points to the fact that the ball is in the Chinese court. For any dialogue to be successful, it is important that respective parties recognize differences and move forward in search of potential areas of cooperation and mutual interest. On these lines, the Dalai Lama's initiative to agree to Chinese terms, agreeably, within the limits of his authority, and to demand for "autonomy", within China, and not independence, is a policy area worth exploration by both the parties. Deng's vision for a modernized and unified China could only be achieved with the peaceful integration of its ethnic minority population—the Tibetans. A win-win solution is achievable and the more it is postponed the more nationalistic the Tibetan population is becoming, as is reflected by the latest violent uprising in Tibet. The Dalai Lama is now 72 years old, and he is not getting any younger.

Thus, if Tibetans were to look at the problem from this prism, they might be able to deem him as not a cause for the problem, instead a cause for solution to the vexed issue of Tibet. □□□