

# Penpa Tsering, the New President of the Central Tibetan Administration, Calls on China to Grant 'Genuine Autonomy' to Tibet

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# Penpa Tsering, the New President of the Central Tibetan Administration, Calls on China to Grant ‘Genuine Autonomy’ to Tibet

## Abstract

*Penpa Tsering has been elected as the new Sikyong or President of 17th Tibetan government-in-exile (TGiE), formally known as the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA). This write-up explores the life and policy stance of the newly elected Sikyong, his future course of actions/concerns regarding the resolution of the Sino-Tibetan conflict and his aspirations for the diaspora of the Tibetan community. The article also looks briefly into the structure of CTA, Tibetan Parliament in Exile (TPiE) and the general elections conducted by TGiE. A brief account of the Tibetan community's tussle with China over the 14th Dalai Lama's succession has also been included.*

With the election of pragmatic and popular Tibetan leader Penpa Tsering as the new Sikyong or President of the Tibetan government-in-exile (TGiE), the Tibetan movement for political autonomy and protection of their cultural identity in China, has entered a significant new phase of global activism. Formally known as the Central Tibetan Administration

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(CTA) based in Dharamshala, the government represents the Tibetan community spread across some 26 countries. Voters from across these countries participated in the recently held elections for both the new Sikyong and the 45-member Tibetan Parliament in Exile (TPiE).

The 14th Dalai Lama, the ‘highest spiritual leader’ of Tibet, had set up the CTA on 29<sup>th</sup> of April 1959, a few weeks after escaping to India. Tibet was occupied by China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) during 1950-51 claiming it as its territory<sup>1</sup>. The CTA operates “as a veritable government and has all the attributes of a free democratic government”<sup>2</sup>. More critically, the TGIE/CTA recognises itself as the “continuation of the government of independent Tibet”<sup>3</sup>.

The Sikyong (earlier known as Kalon Tripa) is the head of Cabinet/Kashag, the executive branch of the CTA<sup>4</sup>. Penpa Tsering became the second Sikyong (first being Dr. Lobsang Sangay) to wield political power after the 14th Dalai Lama officially announced during the 2011 general elections the decision to delegate his political powers to a democratically elected government of the Tibetan community in exile. The election to the office of Sikyong and Chitue (members) of the Tibetan Parliament in Exile (TPiE) are organised and overseen by an independent agency of CTA known as the Tibetan Election Commission<sup>5</sup>. The new TPiE is to be constituted on the 30th of May, 2021<sup>6</sup>.

### **A Brief Biography and Future Course of Actions of the New Sikyong**

Penpa Tsering was born to a Tibetan family at the Bylakuppe Refugee Camp in Mysore, India. He completed his education at the Central School for Tibetans, Bylakuppe and the prestigious Madras Christian College (MCC), India<sup>7</sup>. Some of the important work profiles of the new Sikyong are as follows<sup>8</sup>:

- Tsering was elected to the 12th and 13th TPiE (from 1996 and 2006);
- He was the Speaker of the House of the 14th TPiE (2008) and was re-elected in the next term;
- He was appointed as the North America Representative of H.H. Dalai Lama in 2016;
- While Mr. Tsering had earlier lost in the 2016 Sikyong elections to Dr. Lobsang Sangay, this time he had a clear edge over his competitor, Kelsang Dorjee Aukatsang;
- In 2017, Penpa Tsering was crucial in organising ‘the high-level bipartisan US Congressional Delegation’ led by Nancy Pelosi, the Democrat leader, to Dharamshala and also successfully coordinated the security arrangements for H.H. Dalai Lama’s US visit with the Diplomatic Security Service (DSS)<sup>9</sup>;

Credited with vast work experience both at the administrative and the grassroots level issues that are of concern to the Tibetan community, Tsering prefers to seek ‘logical means’ in achieving the autonomy for Tibet premised on the Dalai Lama’s ‘Middle-Way Approach’<sup>10</sup>. The Dalai Lama’s Middle-Way Approach is a policy proposed “to peacefully resolve the issue of Tibet and to bring about stability and co-existence between the Tibetan and Chinese peoples based on equality and mutual co-operation”<sup>11</sup>. According to the Middle-Way Approach, “the Tibetan people do not accept the present status of Tibet under the People’s Republic of China. At the same time, they do not seek independence for Tibet, which is a historical fact. Treading a middle path in between these two lies the policy and means to achieve a genuine autonomy for all Tibetans living in the three traditional provinces of Tibet within the framework of the People’s Republic of China”<sup>12</sup>. The policy has been democratically embraced by the Tibetan people and the CTA<sup>13</sup>.

The political pragmatism of Penpa Tsering became evident in a 2015 interview when Tsering was quizzed as to why he supported the Middle-

Way Approach and not '*Rangzen*' (meaning 'complete independence for Tibet')<sup>14</sup>. To this, Tsering responded by saying - "I would fight for independence, if it was possible. But the problem is, if you go with *Rangzen* to the Chinese, all the doors and windows are closed. Even now with the middle way, it was open for some time and then it closed; and we'll see if it opens again. If you can't put your toe on the threshold of the door, then you can't move in. If you can't move in, then how will you eat, or drink or talk"<sup>15</sup>.

In the (same) 2015 interview, wherein Penpa Tsering was gearing up for the 2016 Sikyong elections, he had laid out an ambitious policy proposal for the Tibetan communities, inspired by the 'National Teacher of India' - Acharya Vinoba Bhave<sup>16</sup>. Tsering expressed his desire for "a radical settlement redesign, inspired by Bhave's *Bhoodan* movement. Establishing semi-urban settlements where Tibetan-run health, education and social services could be supported by a consolidated Tibetan residential population and would provide employment opportunities for Tibetan youth, keeping them in the community"<sup>17</sup>. The 'Bhoodan-Gramdan Movement' (Land Gift Movement), also known as the 'Bloodless Revolution' was initiated by Acharya Bhave at Pochampally village, Telangana, in 1951<sup>18</sup>. Acharya Bhave was inspired by Gandhiji's Gram-Swarajya and Sarvodaya movement, and the idea behind the Bhoodan movement was to convince rich landowners to voluntarily donate a part of their "land to landless people"<sup>19</sup>. If elected to the post of Sikyong (in 2016), Tsering hoped to implement this proposal via CTA and, with the adequate support of Tibetan parliament, investors and entrepreneurs within their community, to bring all generations of Tibetan populace "mentally close even though they are physically apart"<sup>20</sup>. Though having lost in the 2016 elections meant Penpa Tsering could not start the work on his project proposal, it will be keenly watched as to how and where he proposes to implement (if he intends to) the same as the newly elected Sikyong of CTA.

In an exclusive interview to *The Week*, after the victory in the 2021 Sikyong elections, Penpa Tsering said that youth of Tibet across the globe “will soon get a chance to directly get involved in raising issues concerning mass migration of Chinese in the Tibetan plateau and alleged destruction of Tibetan identity, language and religious freedom”<sup>21</sup>. Quoting verbatim from the interview, the newly elected Sikyong stated:

“I have decided to establish a global Tibetan advocacy group to rope in young Tibetans, college going students and professionals, who are based in at least 25 countries, to work towards resolution of conflict in Tibet and remind the Chinese government that the issues cannot be ignored”<sup>22</sup>.

Penpa Tsering also said that they shall work with the US and Indian governments to pressurise Beijing to settle the Sino-Tibet conflict<sup>23</sup>. The 2021 CTA general election manifesto of Penpa Tsering stated his plans for restarting the dialogue with the government of China if elected as the new Sikyong of TPiE<sup>24</sup>. Tsering said in his election manifesto - “Under the provisions of the Middle Way Policy, no efforts will be spared to achieve a Sino-Tibetan dialogue, and when deemed necessary, devise new ways and means for this purpose, such decisions will be undertaken through the democratic process”<sup>25</sup>.

Post the 2021 CTA election, Penpa Tsering spoke at length to *CNN-News 18* about the CTA’s areas of primary concerns and future course of action regarding the Sino-Tibetan issue. When enquired about the ‘priority areas’ of him as a Sikyong, Tsering said there would be “two main responsibilities” for the CTA. The first is resolving the Sino-Tibet conflict. Sikyong said:

“Our effort would be to reach out to the Chinese government because the reality is that the Tibet issue can be resolved only by talking with the Chinese. So I will try to put forward our consistent position that His Holiness has followed over several decades to find a mutually beneficial solution to the Tibet conflict which can benefit not just China but also the

Tibetan people and this will also have a lot of positive repercussions in the whole geopolitical region”<sup>26</sup>.

Tsering said the second responsibility of CTA would be to look after the welfare of Tibetan community.<sup>27</sup> Sikyong also added that it is his responsibility “to bring back all the Tibetans together for the common interest of the Tibetan people” -- hinting at the division within the Tibetan community during the election times, which he said was common in a democratic system whenever elections are held<sup>28</sup>. Sikyong also categorically stated that his community is not in opposition to multiculturalism, but he said that it is genocide when a single majority community tries to completely overwhelm a community that is in a minority<sup>29</sup>. Sikyong continued by saying that the programmes and policies followed by the Chinese government leading to “the eradication of Tibetan national identity” including their culture, religion, language, or Tibetan environment are becoming “a huge concern” for the Tibetan community<sup>30</sup>. When asked about how Sikyong hopes to engage with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) who is unwilling to have any dialogue with the CTA or the Tibetan community in exile, Sikyong reiterated that “there has to be common sense within the Chinese leadership that they just cannot wish these issues away” -- Tibetan aspirations, i.e., the protection of Tibetan national identity cannot be neglected by the Beijing authorities and these concerns of the minority population cannot be satisfied by the repeated “development” narratives of China<sup>31</sup>. Insisting that his efforts to bring a ‘lasting solution’ to the Sino-Tibet conflict via Middle-Way path will be a ‘multi-level’ approach, Sikyong remarked that if ‘third-party intervention’ or ‘Internationalisation of Tibetan Issue’ is a concern for Beijing, CTA is willing to reach out to them directly<sup>32</sup>. On the other hand, if the CCP is unwilling to respond to their direct reaching out and does not want Tibetan community to seek support from the international community, Penpa Tsering commented - “then that doesn’t make sense for us”<sup>33</sup>. Also, when quizzed about the expectation from the Government of India (GoI), the newly elected Sikyong said while there were Indian

leaders in the past who were more vocal about wanting to “take a more stronger position on Tibet”, now since it has been almost 70 years into exile he thinks “the realisation is setting into the minds of Indian leaders” that “India needs to be more proactive” with the Tibetan cause<sup>34</sup>.

The new Sikyong acknowledged that while India (both government and people) has been extremely generous in terms of the “humanitarian support for the Tibetans”, that has not been the case in “the political sense”<sup>35</sup>. In comments to *The Print*, Tsering remarked, “Now, I sense this renewed urgency within the Indian leadership and also in the intelligentsia or the academicians that the policy they have adopted towards Tibet or towards China has not been adequate; there needs to be a proper review... Also because of what happened in Doklam, in Galwan”<sup>36</sup>. The new Sikyong also said that although the border incursions have been occurring for many years now, the recent developments between India and China are “more like a war-like situation” that Beijing is imposing on the Indian military<sup>37</sup>. According to the new Sikyong, this “kind of puts a reset button on how India should approach the Tibetan issue”<sup>38</sup>. Tsering also felt that Tibetan issue had been seen by New Delhi so far as a means “for leveraging diplomatic ties or political ties with the Chinese government” but there is an awareness now that the issue of Tibet “cannot just be used as leverage but needs to be resolved”<sup>39</sup>.

Tsering warned that there is an “urgent threat of cultural genocide in Tibet”, and called upon the international community to stand up to the Chinese authorities ahead of ‘the 2022 Winter Olympics’ that will take place in Beijing<sup>40</sup>. Tsering said, “Time is running out. Once it is eliminated, it doesn’t make sense to fight for anything”<sup>41</sup>. According to the Tibetans and the Rights groups based in Tibet, the CCP has placed ‘strict controls’ on language, education, religion and labour whilst encouraging China’s majority ethnic group, Han Chinese to migrate to Tibet<sup>42</sup>. Contrarily, the CCP denies any human rights violations being committed on the Tibetan populace and instead reiterates that Beijing’s policies for development

have “eradicated absolute poverty” in Tibet and that their development policies are “backed by all residents” in the region<sup>43</sup>.

The United States and Taiwan have “officially congratulated” the newly elected Sikyong<sup>44</sup>. Ned Price, spokesperson, the United States Department of State, tweeted that they look forward to working with Penpa Tsering and CTA to render support to the Tibetan diaspora across the globe<sup>45</sup>. Jaushieh Joseph Wu, the Foreign Minister of Taiwan wrote to Penpa Tsering that the result of the CTA elections once again shows the world, “the Tibetans’ unwavering commitment to building a free and democratic Tibet”<sup>46</sup>.

According to a *Tibetan Review* report, as a presidential candidate, Penpa Tsering had refused to undertake any ‘campaign tours’, fearing that his public gatherings could contribute to the spread of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic<sup>47</sup>. Instead, he chose to restrict himself to answering questions from the Tibetan community via online meetings<sup>48</sup>.

## **CTA, TPiE and General Elections**

The Central Tibetan Administration operates on basis of ‘the Constitution of the Tibetan government’ known as ‘The Charter of the Tibetans in Exile’<sup>49</sup>. The ‘Constitution Redrafting Committee’ initiated by the 14th Dalai Lama composed ‘the Charter of the Tibetans in Exile’, and H.H. Dalai Lama subsequently approved it on 28th of June, 1991<sup>50</sup>. The TGIE has executive, legislative and judiciary branches<sup>51</sup>.

Around 1.3 lakh Tibetans live in exile and are settled across the globe, most of them in India<sup>52</sup>. The election process empowers them with democratic rights to choose their ‘next Parliament-in-exile’. The polling for the general elections was spread across 26 countries, including India, the US, Australia, Germany, Italy, France, Netherlands, Japan, Norway, Poland, Russia, Ireland, Brazil, New Zealand, Costa Rica, Canada and Taiwan<sup>53</sup>. A large voter turnout was witnessed in the final polling phase to elect the

next Sikyong of CTA and the 45 members of TPiE<sup>54</sup>. According to Wangdu Tsering, the Tibetan Chief Election Commissioner, around 83,079 voters participated in the 2021 electoral process<sup>55</sup> and he also confirmed that there were 95 candidates contesting for the 45 seats in TPiE<sup>56</sup>. After a due registration process, the Tibetan population who “has reached the age of 18”<sup>57</sup>, as per their “identity document called the Tibetan Green Book” are eligible to cast vote in the election<sup>58</sup>.

With the elections to the post of Sikyong of CTA and members of TPiE taking place every 5 years, the process of selection of Sikyong is known to be a “two-stage election system” - the first phase for the determination of the candidates followed subsequently by “the main election”<sup>59</sup>. In the initial round of the 2021 general elections, there were 8 candidates for the post of Sikyong in which Penpa Tsering got the highest number of votes, and Kelsang Dorjee Aukatsang secured second place<sup>60</sup>. The final phase of polling, which took place on the 11th of April, had two contenders for the position of Sikyong - Penpa Tsering and Kelsang Dorjee Aukatsang. Tsering bagged more votes than Aukatsang in the final phase and emerged as the winner<sup>61</sup>. The Election Commissioner has also made the announcement of “the appointment of the 45 members of the Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile”<sup>62</sup>. The outgoing Sikyong, Dr. Lobsang Sangay, was elected as the first Sikyong of CTA, and has held the post for two terms (since 2011). Hence, according to their constitution Sangay becomes ineligible to contest for a third term as Sikyong/Kalon<sup>63</sup>. The constitution clearly states that one of the qualifications to be elected as a Kalon includes that the candidate should not be “a Kalon who is serving a second consecutive term in office”<sup>64</sup>.

As mentioned earlier, the Sikyong is the head of the Kashag (Cabinet), which is the topmost executive branch of the CTA<sup>65</sup>. According to ‘the Charter of Central Tibetan Administration’, the seven-member (Kalons) of the Kashag shall be headed by the Sikyong<sup>66</sup>. The Sikyong is elected directly by the exile Tibetan community, in turn, the Sikyong shall nominate

the 7 Kalons and also seek approval from the Parliament<sup>67</sup>. The post of Sikyong, who is the political leader of the Tibetans, was created by the Tibetan Parliament in Exile (TPiE) in the year 2011 to ensure “democratic governance to the exiled Tibetan community”<sup>68</sup>. The amendments were undertaken “to delegate the political powers and facilitate the elections” of Sikyong of CTA<sup>69</sup>.

Before 2011, H.H. Dalai Lama “used to exercise the powers as temporal head of the Tibetan community in all affairs”<sup>70</sup>. Interestingly, “until the 17th century the Dalai Lamas were prominent religious teachers of the Dge-lugs-pa sect (commonly called Yellow Hats), one of the four major sects of Tibetan Buddhism. In 1642 the fifth Dalai Lama was given temporal control of Tibet, and the Dalai Lamas remained head of state until the flight of the 14th Dalai Lama into exile in 1959”<sup>71</sup>. The bold move by the 14th Dalai Lama to delegate the political power to a democratically elected representative was “aimed at avoiding a leadership vacuum and keeping the struggle against China’s rule in Tibet running even beyond the lifetime of the octogenarian monk”<sup>72</sup>. The radical democratisation by the highest spiritual leader of Tibet was also “intended to pre-empt any attempt by the government of the communist country to trigger chaos within the community after the death of Dalai Lama – by projecting a rival claimant to challenge the credibility of his next incarnation and take advantage of the situation to fizzle out the movement for ‘genuine autonomy’ for Tibet”<sup>73</sup>.

The Tibetan Parliament-in-exile (TPiE) is headed by the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker. The headquarters of TPiE is situated in Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh, and has a strength of 45 democratically elected members. Until 2006, the TPiE was called ‘Assembly of Tibetan People’s Deputies (ATPDs)’; the nomenclature was later changed to the Tibetan Parliament-in-exile<sup>74</sup>. According to the information provided by *International Campaign for Tibet*, the newly elected 45 members of TPiE represent the following constituencies - “10 members each from the

Indian subcontinent representing the three traditional Tibetan provinces of U-Tsang, Kham and Amdo; two members each from the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism and the Bon religion; two members each representing Tibetans in Europe and the Americas respectively; and one member representing Australasia and other regions of Asia (excluding India, Nepal and Bhutan)<sup>75</sup>.

Taking pride in the democratic electoral process of CTA, the outgoing Sikyong, Lobsang Sangay, remarked - “We are sending a clear message to Beijing that there is no democracy in China and Tibetans don’t enjoy freedom but under the great leadership of his holiness the Dalai Lama we in-exile have been given this gift of democracy<sup>76</sup>. Mr. Sangay further said that “today is a proud day, where Tibetans all over the world come together to celebrate and participate and embrace democracy. To show that we are refugees for political reasons but as a human being, we are as capable, as any other citizens of a democratic country<sup>77</sup>. A similar message was echoed by a popular Tibetan activist Tenzin Tsundue. According to Tsundue - “The fact that we can vote and elect our government and run a democratic society is something people of China have been deprived of. The resilience of our 70-year freedom movement and test of democracy are enduring legacies led by His Holiness the Dalai Lama supported by the Government of India and peoples around the world<sup>78</sup>.

The 2021 general elections were significant as they were held in the wake of an American endorsement of the democratic aspirations of the Tibetan community in exile<sup>79</sup>. After having passed in the United States Congress, President Donald Trump has recently signed into law ‘the Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020 (TPSA)<sup>80</sup>. The act which was introduced in the US House of Representatives as ‘The Tibetan Policy and Support Act (HR 4331)’ is considered to be the “the most comprehensive policy bill on Tibet since the Tibet Policy Act- 2002<sup>81</sup>. Upholding the successor rights of the 14th Dalai Lama, the Tibetan community and the Buddhist leaders of Tibet, the bill emphasises that it is America’s policy that<sup>82</sup>:

- “decisions regarding the selection, education, and veneration of Tibetan Buddhist religious leaders are exclusively spiritual matters that should be made by the appropriate religious authorities within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and in the context of the will of practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism”;
- The aspirations of the 14th Dalai Lama “should play a determinative role in the selection, education, and veneration of a future 15th Dalai Lama”; and
- any interference from China or any government for that matter “in the process of recognizing a successor or reincarnation of the 14th Dalai Lama and any future Dalai Lamas would represent a clear violation of the fundamental religious freedoms of Tibetan Buddhists and the Tibetan people”.

The bill also states that the United States would consider senior Chinese officials who are complicit or responsible in the induction or identification of Beijing’s choice of a successor to the 14th Dalai Lama to have committed<sup>83</sup>:

- “a gross violation of internationally recognized human rights for purposes of imposing sanctions with respect to such officials under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act ([22 U.S.C. 2656](#) note)”;
- “a particularly severe violation of religious freedom for purposes of applying section 212(a)(2)(G) of the Immigration and Nationality Act ([8 U.S.C. 1182\(a\)\(2\)\(G\)](#)) with respect to such officials”.

Beijing has reacted strongly against the passing of TPSA 2020, accusing the United States of meddling in China’s internal affairs and also warning that this law could potentially harm the bilateral relationship and co-operation with Washington<sup>84</sup>.

## **The Tussle with China Over Dalai Lama's Succession**

China has not held any dialogue with the Dalai Lama or his representatives since the year 2010<sup>85</sup>. While Beijing claims that Tibet has been a part of China's territory since historic days and hence their continued occupation of Tibetan territory, this claim has been repeatedly refuted by the Tibetans<sup>86</sup>. According to the people of Tibet, "they were ... independent for most of their history, and that the Chinese government wants to exploit their resource-rich region while crushing their cultural identity"<sup>87</sup>. In keeping with their official position on Tibet, China does not recognise neither the elections to CTA nor TPiE and have persistently asked India "to shut it down"<sup>88</sup>.

The recently concluded general elections have taken place amidst a brewing tussle with China over the successor to the 14th Dalai Lama, who would be turning 85 this year. According to the traditional and foundational beliefs of Tibetan Buddhism, the successors of the Lamas happen through reincarnation (tulkus/living Buddhas) or rebirth. Tibetans believe that their highest spiritual leader is a living Buddha who would be "reincarnated after his death"<sup>89</sup>. The Tibetan Buddhism also emphasize that "the reincarnating lamas hold sway over adherents' spiritual and temporal needs"<sup>90</sup>.

The atheist CCP does not accept this unique tradition for finding the highest spiritual leader of the Tibetan community. According to Lu Kang, a Chinese diplomat and spokesperson of Foreign Ministry, "reincarnation of living Buddhas, including the Dalai Lama, must comply with Chinese laws and regulations and follow religious rituals and historical conventions"<sup>91</sup>, referring to the legal order known as 'Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism'<sup>92</sup>. The order was issued on 13th of July 2007 by China's State Administration for Religious affairs<sup>93</sup>.

China claims that the approval of the Dalai Lama's successor is its right - which many experts view as a "a coercive attempt to control Tibet, where ethnic Tibetans make up about 90% of the population"<sup>94</sup>. The authorities of Beijing also claim, with little evidence, that this right has been inherited by them from the erstwhile emperors of China<sup>95</sup>. China has recently released an official White Paper titled 'Tibet Since 1951: Liberation, Development and Prosperity' - which reiterates the official position that any successor to the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama must be approved by China, thus "ruling out recognition to any heir nominated" by the Dalai Lama or his followers<sup>96</sup>. The White Paper also asserts the Chinese position that Tibet is an "inseparable part of China" and maintains that "the demand for Tibetan independence" is "a product of imperialist aggression against China"<sup>97</sup>.

As of now, there is ambiguity regarding the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama's reincarnation, particularly since the Dalai Lama himself had hinted that "he might be the last person to hold the title"<sup>98</sup>. But, recently, the Dalai Lama had also said that after his death, "his incarnation could be found in India", where the Dalai Lama has been living since 1959<sup>99</sup>. H.H. Dalai Lama has stated categorically that the Tibetan populace will not accept the successor proposed or selected by the authorities of Beijing<sup>100</sup>. There are reports which suggest that the Dalai Lama has entrusted 'Gaden Phodrang Foundation' with the task of finding his successor. The 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama could be a woman, man or child<sup>101</sup>.

What would happen if there occurred a scenario wherein Tibetans and China each choose their own Dalai Lama, thus asserting their authority over the right of choosing the next successor of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama? Anticipating an attempt by China "to foist a successor on Tibetan Buddhists", the current Dalai Lama has observed laughingly - "In future, in case you see two Dalai Lamas come, one from here, in free country, one chosen by Chinese, then nobody will trust, nobody will respect (the one chosen by China). So that's an additional problem for the Chinese! It's possible, it can happen"<sup>102</sup>.

## The Government of India and CTA

Officially, the Government of India has not yet acknowledged the TGiE, though the CTA has been permitted to set up its seat in Dharamshala. The Indian Government has also encouraged the 14th Dalai Lama to guide the Tibetan populace in exile to accept the concept of democracy – starting with election of the TPiE and then proceeding to directly elect the leader of the TGiE<sup>103</sup>.

The initial phase of the 2021 general elections happened during a heightened India-China stand-off on the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Regardless of the fact that ‘officially’ India does not get involved in the internal affairs of Tibet there are media reports which suggest that the CTA had consulted New Delhi before announcing the commencement of the electoral process<sup>104</sup>. According to a Tibetan report, senior officials in India, have been involved in discussions about the succession process for the next Dalai Lama<sup>105</sup>. The same report also highlights the fact that for the first time, India (“in more than 2000 years”) convened “five separate assemblies of senior monks from various sects and schools” along her Himalayan borders recently<sup>106</sup>. Some perceive this as an attempt by the government to provide global legitimacy “to the current Dalai Lama’s successor and help fill a power vacuum” as it may take many years for the coming of age of the successor to the 14th Dalai Lama<sup>107</sup>.

The 14th Dalai Lama has always expressed the greatest regard for India. Referring to India as the ‘*Aryabhoomi* (precious land)’ for Tibetans, the Dalai Lama has remarked that “historically, our relation is very deep.... When we come to India, we feel we have returned to our spiritual home”<sup>108</sup>. The Dalai Lama stressed the importance of both “the ancient Indian concept of *karuna* (compassion) and *ahimsa* (non-violence),” as well as the relevance of “1,000-year-old tradition of secularism” in today’s state of the world while also adding that he considers himself “a messenger of ancient Indian thought”<sup>109</sup>. The Dalai Lama has announced that he has

asked ‘the Dalai Lama Trust’ to contribute to the ‘PM-CARES Fund’ to showcase Tibetan solidarity “with fellow Indian brothers and sisters” as the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic surges in the country<sup>110</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

The Tibetan movement faces challenging and testing times ahead. Despite the Dalai Lama adopting a conciliatory ‘Middle-Way Approach’, Beijing has not been amenable in its stoic Tibetan stance nor are willing to engage in participatory (or any form of communication for that matter) dialogues with the TGIE. It has to be seen how under the leadership of the newly elected Sikyong, the CTA will push for resuming the stalled Sino-Tibetan dialogue through their long-established ‘non-violent’ and ‘democratic’ approach. Much to the annoyance of the CCP, the United States is now explicitly supporting the inheritance/successor rights of Tibetans with the passing of TPSA 2020. India, the home of the Tibetan community in exile, is known to be providing (indirectly) all possible support to them since 1959, and the earlier mentioned developments can be viewed as a signal that India respects the Tibetan choice when it comes to the selection of their successor. It is high time the international community rally in support for the peaceful resolution of the Sino-Tibetan conflict. As stressed by Penpa Tsering, time is running out, and there is a sense of urgency to protect the ‘Tibetan identity’ from the ‘cultural genocide’ at the hands of Chinese authorities. Once a sovereign and free state, it can only be hoped and wished that under the leadership of Penpa Tsering the Tibetan people would find the strength and support to pursue their long-cherished dream of returning to their homeland and achieve the ‘genuine autonomy’ status desired by them.

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