

RELIGION AS STATELESS HEGEMONY: DEMOCRACY AND THE CONTINUED DOMINANCE OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM IN EXILE

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ABSTRACT Before the exodus of many people and the political leadership from the territory of Tibet, both the macro-governmental and micro everyday sociocultural existence were dominated by Buddhist religion and religious personalities. The wealth of the nation was decided and measured by the ever-increasing number of grand monasteries and religious personalities. This article argues that after more than six decades of democratic internal governance in exile, the earlier dominance of religion and religious personalities has now taken a hegemonic turn in this democracy without territory. Despite the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's unprecedented decision to relinquish his formal governmental authority in exile, the continued dominance of religion in the polity and everyday life of Tibetans is notable and is critically examined in this article.

KEYWORDS: *Buddhism, Dalai Lama, democracy, hegemony, religious dominance, Tibetan exile*

Introduction

In the discourses on the comparative political mechanisms of the pre-exile and post-exile Tibetan nation, the institution of the Dalai Lama has been pre-eminent. However, in the post-exile refugee condition, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama relinquished his political and governmental roles and began dedicating his life primarily to the cause of Buddhist spirituality. Yet, this act of the Dalai Lama, to distinguish between the religious and spiritual dimension

and the domain of political administration, this article argues, has not led to diminishing hegemonic influence of the Tibetan Buddhist religion and religious personalities on all aspects of exile Tibetan life, including the political sphere. This raises the question how Tibetans, those living in present-day Tibet under Chinese rule as well as those in exile, have come to terms with this type of disjunction. Given the monumental shift that the Dalai Lama's decision has had on the life-worlds of ordinary Tibetans everywhere in the world, this article examines the sociopolitical consequences of the Dalai Lama's decision to separate his political–governmental and spiritual leadership.

Examining the functioning of Tibetan administrative institutions before 1959 brings to our notice the dominance of religion and religious institutions in everyday life (Goldstein, 1989; Shakabpa & Wangchuk, 2010). Traditional Tibet, in essence, measured its success, its pre-modern gross domestic product if one can conceive of it that way, spiritually in terms of the number of monks, monasteries and prayer rituals it produced, not materially in terms of the amount of wool, skins and other products that Tibetans produced and exported (Goldstein, 2010). In exile, after the formation of the exile government and the inflow of international aid, the nature of this religious dominance has undergone significant transformations. Now, in exile, the dominance resembles the process of hegemonic control of the masses by religion. Given that there is a link between religion and politics in both pre-exile and post-exile Tibet, albeit with some differences, the primary focus of our present discussion is thus to understand the extent of continuity and novelty in the influence of religious institutions and personalities on the political and everyday life of Tibetans in exile.

We have attempted to underscore and delineate the continuing ecclesiastical dominance in exile, being aware that writing on class and status relations in Tibet, let alone on democracy, has been challenging in various ways. Although it is acknowledged among Tibetans themselves that Tibet had been a feudal class-based society, scholarly studies on class distinctions and status exploitation have been lacking in the Tibetan exile community. As the Chinese often justify their occupation of Tibet by claiming that they liberated Tibetans from the exploitation of feudal aristocracy and the clergy, the Tibetan exile community perhaps does not encourage any study which could give credence to such Chinese claims.

Most studies on class and status issues in Tibet thus touch either one of two extremes. Pro-Chinese studies seek to justify the Chinese occupation of Tibet (Jing, 1989; Wylie, 2003). Studies fuelled by nostalgia by Tibetans as well as orientalist studies of Europeans (Bishop, 1989; Mote, 2003) portray pre-modern Tibetan society as generally a feudal, yet peaceful Buddhist society barring occasional issues of class conflict. Our acceptance of the domination of the ecclesiastical elite in the Tibetan feudal society should not be construed as validation for the Chinese occupation of Tibet. The domination and, at times, exploitation of Tibetans by the entrenched classes in pre-modern Tibet does not justify China's brutal annexation of Tibet and the suppression of Tibetans.

This article seeks to understand the continued dominance of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibetan society and culture in exile. Field visits and ethnographic fieldwork were conducted in such Tibetan settlements in India as Bylakuppe and Mundgod in Karnataka, Herbertpur in Uttarakhand, Kalimpong in Sikkim and with Tibetan nomads in the border regions of Ladakh, episodically from 2016 to 2019. Further, our interactions with Dharamshala-based Tibetan activists, government officials, monks and lay people have provided us with rich primary data.

Tibetan Nation in Tibet: Theocratic Aristocratic Dominance

The notion of Tibet being a religious land legitimated by Buddhism has been a continuous thread in Tibetan history. In fact, the distinction between Tibetan and non-Tibetan was a Buddhist differentiation between believers and non-believers (Norbu, 1992). However, Buddhism was not the earliest religion of Tibet. While tracing the etymology of the word *Bo*, the Tibetan word for Tibet, Shakabpa and Wangchuk (2010: 5) suggested that since the *Bönpos* spread the *Bön* religion in the Land of Tibet, it could be said that the name of the religion was applied to the country, that is, through a corruption of the word *Bön* (*bon*), it came to be called *Bö* (*bod*). However, after gaining acceptance in Tibet in the seventh century, Buddhism got intrinsically entwined with the political, sociocultural and economic destiny of Tibet. It also held together the disparate and semi-autonomous political units that constituted pre-modern Tibet. Even the nomads, who lived isolated lives in the Tibetan plains, became subservient to the religious authority of the Tibetan Buddhist lamas, especially the Dalai Lama. Although disparate over centuries, Tibetans never doubted that they constitute one cultural entity and the roots of this cultural commonality were shared across the three Tibetan regions of U-Tsang, Kham and Amdo (Kolas, 1996). While Tibetan Buddhism unified these diverse political units of Tibet, it was, however, by no means a homogeneous religion. Although Tibetan Buddhism today has acquired a pacifist status, for much of its history, ethnographic Tibet has been dominated by authoritarianism and, at times, Buddhist sectarian violence (Shakabpa & Wangchuk, 2010).

The tradition of monks forming part of the government began with the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Losang Gyatso (1617–82) who founded the Gelupa Government. This form of governance, called *chosinyidrel* (religion and politics combined) is based on the idea that superiority on the path towards enlightenment legitimates political power (Frchette, 2007: 106). Since then, politically Tibetans were ruled by an unusual form of feudal theocracy that was both centralised and decentralised (Kharat, 2003: 16). While the central government, headed by the Dalai Lama, was the ultimate authority on matters of defence and foreign affairs, members of the monastery and the aristocracy acted as local administrators. The Tibetan government until 1959 had the Dalai Lama at the top, followed by the *kashag* [cabinet], headed by the *kalon tripa* [prime minister]. The governmental structure was dualistic in

nature with two prime ministers, one a layman and the other a monk, and the administration was divided into civil and religious branches (Gyatso, 1998 [1990]). Given the primacy of monastic institutions in governance, there was an ecclesiastical court which dealt with legal matters concerning monks. The National Assembly (Parliament) dealt with the political governance of lay Tibetans. It was composed of all secular and ecclesiastical officials below the *Kashag*, among which the latter made up half the numbers of the National Assembly.

The quasi-theocratic state in Tibet existed not simply to administer its territories for the material welfare of its people or to develop Tibet's wealth and power vis-à-vis its neighbours. Rather, it primarily encouraged and facilitated large numbers of males to renounce marriage, family and secular life and accept monastic vows for the salvation of the individual and the glory of Tibetan religiosity (Goldstein, 2010). A critical factor underlying such a governmental ideology and practice was the belief that the state should foster the spiritual (religious) development of the country by making monkhood available to the largest number of persons (Goldstein, 2010). The scope of monasticism, and the cycle of religious rituals and ceremonies the monks performed, was seen in turn as the measure of the Tibetan state's success. As the clergy constituted a large proportion of the general population, their influence on Tibetan society was tremendous. Especially the big monasteries exerted much authority in matters of governance and also local affairs. The networks of Geluk monasteries were seen as safeguarding the ultimate authority of the state, whereas the larger monasteries of certain other schools were less likely to eagerly accept the influence of the state (Jansen, 2018: 12). According to 1959 Chinese statistics, 36.8% of the total amount of cultivated land in Tibet was held by monasteries and lamas, 24% by aristocratic families and 38.9% by the government itself (Jansen, 2018). The sheer demographic size, political influence and extent of landholdings made the clergy a formidable source of authority in pre-exile Tibet.

Tibetan society was organised upon the medieval feudalistic pattern, but the lines were blurred by the intricate interweaving of ecclesiastical and secular society along this hierarchy (Saklani, 1978a: 27). Society was divided into aristocrats and clergy at the top and commoners below. The feudalism practised in Tibet was different from Western forms of feudalism. Although over 38% of the land was owned by the state with local people working as tenants, the peasants had *de facto* control over the land. A peasant's land was heritable, and he could lease it to others, mortgage it, or even sell his rights over it (Gyatso, 1998 [1990]: 65). The taxes paid to the state were in kind. In this set-up, where hierarchy was related to landholding, the clergy as significant landowners had authority over the lives of ordinary Tibetans, while the serfs of the monasteries were subjected to heavy taxation and labour obligation. Tashi Tsering, in his autobiography (Goldstein et al., 1997), recalls the exploitations that he suffered in the 1940s as a member of the *gadgrugba*, the Dalai Lama's personal dance troupe, as a payment of a specific tax levied on

families in rural areas. Cases of such coercion and exploitation, either within the monastery or by the monastery over lay Tibetans, even if reported, have not always been pursued (Goldstein et al., 1997).

Ever since the Dalai Lama assumed the powers of the state, Tibetan politics had been a balance between the old aristocrats as the hereditary chiefs of their powerful clans, and aristocrats from the ecclesiastical order, who, because of their ordination, were expected to be loyal to the Dalai Lama and the theocratic order (Saklani, 1978a: 32). While the *de jure* power was with the Dalai Lama, the clergy and aristocracy wielded *de facto* control of Tibet and resented any attempt to change the status quo. They opposed all efforts made by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama to modernise Tibet through modern education, English language and modern army as well as the efforts of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama to introduce democratic reforms and welfare measures in Tibet (French, 2004).

Thus, until the mid-twentieth century, Tibet remained a theocratic and feudal aristocracy until China annexed Tibet in 1949. After 10 years of fruitless attempts at negotiations with China, in March 1959, fearing kidnapping and assassination, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, fled Tibet to take refuge in India (Gyatso, 1998 [1990]). Following the Dalai Lama, and later on to escape the atrocities of the Chinese Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, many thousands of Tibetans fled to India. As religion was the primary target of Chinese aggression, a large section of refugees were monastics, while many aristocrats had already moved to India during the 1950s. The demographic make-up of Tibetans in exile was not a proportionate representation of Tibet's demography. Although the refugees may not be demographically representative of the traditional society in the truly statistical sense, they nonetheless represent the traditional structure of power and authority as well as the cultural leaders (Saklani, 1978b: 42). So, the system of dominance continued in exile, albeit with a difference, as this article seeks to identify.

Tibetan Nation in Exile: Identity, Democracy and Hegemony

Since the Chinese takeover in 1959, there has been growing consciousness, particularly among 'urban' Tibetans, about a pan-Tibetan identity that sharply differentiates itself from the Chinese Han (Norbu, 1992). While sectarian and regional identities were pre-eminent in pre-modern Tibet, over the centuries a pan-Tibetan identity was woven around Tibetan Buddhism, as indicated in the previous section. Other cultural commonalities, such as language, that bound ethnographic Tibet stemmed from Tibetan Buddhism. In the aftermath of Chinese annexation, Tibetan Buddhism was consciously adopted as a marker of Tibetan identity. It helped unite the ecclesiastical and lay refugees, who otherwise identified themselves along regional and sectarian lines. It also helped differentiate Tibetans in Tibet from the dominant Chinese.

The Tibetan Buddhist dominance on Tibetan society continues even in exile, with some changes. The entrenched classes in exile of course lost the power associated with land ownership. An exception to this norm in exile is northern Ladakh, where Tibetan nomads informed us that they had to toil *pro bono* for Buddhist monasteries, whether Ladakhi or Tibetan. Overburdened by the obligations to the monasteries, some nomadic groups gave up their traditional occupation and migrated to cities.

While we did not research to what extent such expectations of service continue to affect all exiled Tibetan Buddhists, Tibetans in exile certainly realised that objections to modernisation by the monastics were one of the primary reasons for Tibet's geopolitical isolation and Chinese annexation. Disenchantment with the traditional religious order, which failed to deliver at the time of the deepest crisis, started a process of rational thinking among a small section of discerning Tibetans. In the second decade of exile itself, Tibetans were familiarising themselves with such alien concepts as nationalism, democracy, fundamental human rights and civil law (Saklani, 1978b: 43). The Thirteenth Dalai Lama, as well as his incarnation, the present Fourteenth Dalai Lama, encouraged Tibetan refugees to imbibe modern values. In fact, even while the Fourteenth Dalai Lama was in Tibet, he had sought to introduce reforms but was discouraged from doing so by Tibet's religious and aristocratic elite as well as the Chinese Government (French, 2004).

However, in exile, the Dalai Lama saw an opportunity to actualise some of the transformations he had envisioned earlier. The democratisation of Tibetan politics and society has been the most important achievement of Tibetans in exile (Tsomo, 2003: 151). While it had early antecedents in the Dalai Lama's Reform Committee, established while he was in Tibet, Tibetan democracy is an example of a democracy which took its birth in exile, outside the territorial nation.

Democratisation in exile began in 1960 when the Dalai Lama gave the blueprint for democracy at Bodh Gaya in Bihar in North India. Even though they were in exile and not officially recognised by any state, democratic governance was useful in two ways: It facilitated the restructuring of the Tibetan community in exile and also strengthened international support to the Tibetan cause. The exile government's emerging practice of democracy instilled hope for Tibetans, both in exile as well as in Tibet, of a form of alternative governance that would be more sensitive to the needs of common people. The support this received from fellow Tibetans was noteworthy, more so as Tibet had always been a deeply stratified society. A number of young Tibetans were specifically excited and hopeful about the process of democratisation introduced by the Dalai Lama (Norbu, 2004: 14).

The initial set-up of the Tibetan Government in Exile (TGiE) or the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), as it is now known, was reflective of those in the homeland, with the old elites of the Lhasa government becoming the new exile officials and politicians. Gradually non-elites began to enter the administration as the exile government got further democratised. On 2 September 1960, the Assembly of

Tibetan People's Deputies (ATPD) was instituted, becoming the first experience of practising democracy. The apex body of this Assembly was the council of ministers (*Kashag*), answerable to the Dalai Lama. The first ATDP had representatives from each of Tibet's three provinces, U-Tsang, Kham and Amdo, and each of the four Buddhist sects, namely Kagyu, Gelup, Sakya and Nyingma (Tsomo, 2003). In subsequent decades, the Bon religion and Tibetans settled abroad all over the world also had representation in the Assembly. The representation was not based on exile reality, but on the idea of a unified ethnographic Tibet. Since the three earlier Tibetan regions are today subsumed under various Chinese provinces, this was a conscious geopolitical decision to reiterate the exile government's claim to the entire ethnographic Tibet, and not the limited territory that China recognises as Tibet. As the Tibetan Buddhist religious sects also had representation, the clergy had a double vote, with regional as well as sectarian representation. A member of the Tibetan parliament spoke to justify this double vote of the clergy, saying that this dependence on the religious sphere is what was unique to Tibetan democracy. He added that the wisdom of the clergy would help in Tibetan governance. Further democratisation was promoted with the adoption of the Tibetan Constitution in 1963 and the Tibetan Charter in 1991.

The centuries-old Buddhist theocratic Tibet now started adapting to the principles of democratic governance in exile. But this process has not been without limits, as this Tibetan democracy has of course been restrained by its statelessness. Additionally, the exalted status of the Dalai Lama as the Buddha of Compassion, in our opinion, challenges democratic principles of egalitarianism. Even when the Dalai Lama insists that he is 'just a simple Buddhist monk', the dominance of religion and the religious specialists on Tibetan society still persists. The cultural hegemony of Tibetan Buddhism is the primary force behind efforts at constructing and sustaining refugees' homogenous Tibetan identity dictated by the religious sphere.

We also argue, however, that this domination of Tibetan Buddhism has undergone significant transitions in exile. While pre-modern Tibet was characterised by authoritarian and coercive control of the masses by monastic Tibetan Buddhism, the democratisation efforts of the Tibetan institutions in exile have shifted the domination of religious institutions from coercion to consent. This was probably helped by the fact that, given the centrality of Tibetan Buddhism in defining Tibetan identity, exile Tibetans clung even more strongly to their religious identity, while Tibetan Buddhism also legitimised the governmental shift from theocracy towards democracy.

The exile Tibetans found the democratic focus on individuals and their welfare similar to the Buddhist focus on the welfare of all. While total devotion to the Dalai Lama made them accept democracy as a divine gift of His Holiness, it also made them reject any proposition that undermined the superior status of the Dalai Lama. Hence, the Dalai Lama's repeated attempts to relinquish his special powers were rejected by the Tibetans. For instance, in the draft of the Constitution, he had

inserted a clause whereby the Dalai Lama could be impeached by the Tibetan Parliament. Finding even the idea preposterous, the Tibetans rejected this outright (Brox, 2016).

The bourgeois class, via the dominant institutions of civil society, reproduces its hegemony through the projection of its special interests as general interests (Maglaras, 2013: 4). Some Tibetans suggested to us that the refugee Tibetan political elite capitalised on this hegemonic acceptance of Tibetan Buddhism by the Tibetans to further their own interest. Tibetan nationalism itself is certainly not a unified discourse, but a site of contention, where conflicting visions compete for the allegiance of Tibetans (Dreyfus, 2002: 13). There are many Tibetan nationalists, both inside and outside of Tibet, who are markedly uncomfortable with religious nationalism and who feel ill at ease to self-identify with the moral community defined by the 'Prayer of Truthful Words' and the National Anthem (Dreyfus, 2002).

The challenges to the Tibetans' experiment with democracy in exile began to appear in the first decade of exile itself. Tibetan society had always been inherently divided along sectarian, regional, aristocratic and ecclesiastical lines. Fostering democratic principles in such a stratified society has been challenging. Questions on regional affiliations as well as hegemonic influence of the aristocracy and clergy have challenged and at times overshadowed the Tibetan exile government's move towards democratisation. Although over the years these challenges have been ironed out to a certain extent, the hegemony of Tibetan Buddhism on Tibetan exile polity and society still continues.

Particularly, the exalted position of the Dalai Lama has been used as a shield to retain the hegemony of the entrenched classes of pre-modern Tibet. Since the 1960s, minority exile voices raising questions on the implementation of the democratic process have been labelled as 'anti Dalai Lama'. They have not been viewed constructively as people who offer alternative viewpoints in order to enrich debate and reflection or deepen democracy (Brox, 2016: 276). Instead, they have been seen as dissidents, trying to split the exile community and to topple the government and freedom movement headed by the Dalai Lama (Brox, 2016). The voices of those challenging the homogenised Buddhist-centric Tibetan exile identity are muffled. Their writings are censored, and, at times, they are even abused by the exile community. We were told that a Tibetan who had critiqued the hegemony of the religious elite, in the early decades of exile was even chased out of Parliament by women throwing eggs and pelting stones.

This tendency to label people who challenged the normative line got even more virulent after the Dalai Lama decided to change the goal posts of the Tibetan freedom movement from independence to genuine autonomy in the 1980s. Tibetan intellectuals such as Dawa Norbu (1992) and Jamyang Norbu (2004) were victimised for critiquing the entrenched elite. Norbu (2004) details the violent sanctions against Tibetan intellectuals and the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC) during the 1980s (Brox, 2016: 276).

Middle Way Dichotomy and Hegemonic Influence of the Dalai Lama

In his address to the European Parliament at Strasbourg in 1984, the Dalai Lama proposed the Middle Way Approach, which sought a resolution of the Tibetan issue within the framework of the Chinese Constitution. This Middle Way policy of genuine autonomy was in accordance with Tibetan Buddhist values. Many international leaders supported this political transition. Given the Dalai Lama's endorsement, it is unsurprising that the TGIE and most Tibetans in exile now support the Middle Way. But with the emergence of democratic practice in exile, a number of individuals did raise objections to the 'Middle Way Approach'. Referred to as the *ranzen* [freedom] group, they insisted on total independence as the goal of the Tibetan movement. A number of Tibetan NGOs, including the influential TYC, as well as Tibetan publications such as the *Tibetan Political Review* were vociferous supporters of *ranzen*. However, Tibetans at large still saw such mainly NGO-driven critiques of the Middle Way as questioning the wisdom of the Dalai Lama.

This confirms that the majority of the Tibetan exile population remains largely unaware of alternative values, as the hegemonic process does not create a value consensus but confusion and fragmentation (Sallach, 1974: 42). The proponents of *ranzen*, as mentioned earlier, were even branded as traitors, routinely abused and ostracised. The hostility between the two ideological camps came out in the open during the 2016 Parliamentary elections of the TGIE. One of the five candidates for the post of *sikyong* [prime minister] was Lukar Jam, a former political prisoner and staunch supporter of *ranzen*. There was a vitriolic campaign against him by both the elite and lay Tibetans. This anti-Lukar stance was further legitimated when his various utterances concerning the Dalai Lama were shown to be derogatory. In conversation with us, Lukar Jam even alleged that a *sikyong* candidate on the campaign trail even refused to debate with him, because Lukar had referred to the Dalai Lama as 'an old man'.

Many Tibetans we spoke to shared with us the hurt they felt about what they saw as Lukar's insult to the Dalai Lama, reflecting also that Tibetans equate the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism with Tibet and the cause of Tibet. Although the Dalai Lama made it explicitly clear that he was not perturbed by his critics, the Tibetan people have decided to carry the mantle of righteousness and, in turn, decide what will be allowed to be said about the Dalai Lama and what will not be acceptable (Wangchuk, 2017). The two candidates in the final round of *sikyong* elections sought to display their loyalty to the Dalai Lama as legitimation of their candidature. Norbu (2004) argues that Tibetans are not a cowed people because of their extreme devotion to the Dalai Lama. Rather, Tibetans easily lose heart when they feel they may cause him offense, even through no fault of their own. It is this weakness that the Tibetan Government has used effectively till now to suppress dissent (Norbu, 2004).

The hegemony of Tibetan Buddhism is felt at all levels of Tibetan exile society. One young *ranzen* activist we spoke to shared that, in this exile society, there is

freedom of expression, even freedom to choose *ranzen*, as long as you do not question the religious institutions. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, Tibetan intellectuals like Jamyang Norbu who challenged the hegemony of the religious elite were compelled to migrate to the West, to escape the abuse of fellow Tibetans in India. After the 2016 elections, Lukar Jam and his family were literally hounded out of India. A Tibetan doctoral candidate working on Tibetan nationalism explained to us that the elite discourse in the refugee community has the capability to organise the social alignment, so that those who do not agree can be driven away. He reasoned that this was because even after 60 years in exile, the Tibetan refugees in India are not politically enlightened. Rather, they are still very much a faith-based community, still strongly influenced by supplication to the Dalai Lama.

The Appeal of Tibetan Buddhism Beyond India

Since coming into exile, the Dalai Lama as well as Tibetan Buddhist influence have moved far beyond the borders of Tibet. Exile has enabled Tibetan Buddhism to reach out to various Western countries. The West's oriental fascination with Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism could be actualised in the 1960s, with Tibetan Buddhism now becoming more accessible in exile. The constant stream of Western tourists who frequented Dharamshala and other Tibetan settlements in South Asia often glamorised and patronised Tibetan Buddhism and traditional Tibetan society (Bishop, 1989), inadvertently reaffirming the hegemony of Buddhism. A number of Tibetan Buddhist lamas are either based in Western countries or regularly tour them. There are collaborations between Western institutes and Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in exile. The West's engagement with Tibetan Buddhism has facilitated the disproportionate attention given to religion and its hegemony even over secular institutions. Institutions such as the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamshala, primarily set up to research Tibetan history and culture, became something resembling Dharma centres (Norbu, 2004). Hundreds of Tibetan Buddhist texts were translated into Western languages while nothing much from the West was translated into Tibetan (Norbu, 2004). Interestingly, Western fascination with Tibetan Buddhism may not translate into support for the Tibetan cause. Some non-Tibetan Dharma seekers we interacted with were neither really aware of nor interested in the Tibetan movement. The focus of religious specialists has undergone changes in exile. While the monasteries and religious specialists in Tibet are a symbol of protest against Chinese occupation, in exile they are focused towards elucidating dharma and expanding its ambit of influence.

The appeal of Tibetan Buddhism among Westerners has encouraged many Tibetan youth to take a keener interest in dharma. An increasing number of educated Tibetan youth now register for various dharma courses on completion of their formal degree. Although a seemingly positive development, a Tibetan research scholar with whom we interacted felt that too much focus on studying Tibetan Buddhism today may be

detrimental to the Tibetan cause. Some young Tibetan scholars also feel that while nationalism in Tibet is territorial, nationalism in exile tends to become religious. In exile, Tibetan Buddhism has been consciously cultivated as the essence of a unitary Tibetan nationalism, which lacks a territorial state. For Gramsci (1971), the ‘traditional intellectual’ has pre-existent structural ties to the dominant group; they are essentially the social glue, which holds together the ideological worldview of the dominant class with the ‘common sense’ of the subordinate class. By consciously making Tibetan Buddhism the glue holding together the disparate Tibetan exile community, the clergy could ensure the continuation of Tibetan Buddhist hegemony in exile.

Political and Administrative Changes in Exile

The Dalai Lama’s desire to extricate his office from political and administrative matters was finally realised in 2011. He broke away from a tradition which began with the Fifth Dalai Lama and declared that he was no longer the political leader of Tibet. Simultaneously, the nomenclature of TGiE was now changed to CTA, and the *kalon tripa* is now the *sikyong* [political leader]. This move of changing the official names to more secular labels may have been made keeping home-host realities as well as international relations in mind. After all, India’s condition when the Dalai Lama sought refuge for Tibetans in 1959 was that Tibetan refugees should not use Indian soil to engage in political activities. The Dalai Lama’s abdication of his political responsibilities was a fruition of his desire, ever since coming into exile, of having a fully democratic Tibetan polity.

Nevertheless, the Dalai Lama’s momentous decisions in 2011 shocked the Tibetan society. The TYC argued that by changing its title and symbol, its continuation to the past Government of Tibet, the *Ganden Phodrang*, has been broken (Brox, 2016: 8). Some Tibetans felt that the removal of the name *Ganden Phodrang* and *kalon tripa* implied removal of legitimacy of the continuation of the TGiE. While many Tibetans were shattered by this decision of the Dalai Lama, given his exalted status, they concluded that he must have taken this decision for the betterment of Tibetan society. The outgoing prime minister in 2011, Samdhong Rimpoche, also assured Tibetans that the name change was a preventive measure to counter possible future, ambiguous legal positions of the Tibetan exiles’ administration and, above all, to ensure the continuity of the Tibetan freedom struggle (Brox, 2016: 9).

While Samdhong Rimpoche’s reasoning may have some merit, the Dalai Lama’s abdication of his political responsibilities needs to be further examined. One understands that in keeping with his desire to ensure democracy, he would like to hand over charge to a democratically elected secular leader. But does a leader elected by just the Tibetan refugees who have a Residence Certificate (RC), and not Tibetans who have Indian citizenship or more importantly, those who are still in Tibet, represent the scattered Tibetan population? For centuries, the Dalai Lama has been the spiritual

and temporal head of Tibet. His decision to surrender his temporal powers may make Tibetans, especially those in Tibet, insecure. Already dominated by a hostile Chinese Government, they may feel abandoned that their God King has now placed political responsibilities in the hands of a leader in whose election they have had no role.

In his public interactions during the last few years, the Dalai Lama has tended to focus more on wider ethical issues, including principles of Tibetan Buddhism, secular ethics, environmental protection, mind–life connection, and so on. While in a democracy it is supposed to be the institution and not the individual who is pre-eminent, when many in the nation have not had the opportunity to choose the leader, can that leader still claim to democratically represent the nation? And if the Dalai Lama is now only the Supreme Tibetan Buddhist religious head, how do non-Buddhist Tibetans such as Bonpos or Tibetan Muslims view him? For the religious minorities of Tibet, the Dalai Lama was always their ruler. If he is now no longer the political head, what role does, and can, he play in their lives? That the Tibetans, regardless of their apprehensions, reluctance or even feeling of abandonment, accepted the Dalai Lama's decision on such a fundamental change in policy without challenging it indicates the continuing extent of hegemonic control also in Tibetan exile society. While the Dalai Lama's decision undoubtedly facilitated the democratisation of Tibetan exile politics, it did not lead to the diminution of the hegemony of the religious elite in influencing not only exile politics but also the life-worlds of ordinary Tibetans in exile.

Conclusions

Traditional Tibet, like any other complex society, had inequalities, with power monopolised by an elite composed of a small aristocracy, the hierarchy of various sects (including incarnate *lamas* known as *Rimpoches*), and the great Geluk monasteries (Norbu, 2004). Just as in theocratic pre-modern Tibet religion legitimised political governance, it has also been instrumental in legitimising democracy in exile. While acknowledging the egalitarian principles of democracy, Tibetans in exile still cling to the faith-based dominance of pre-modern Tibet, with the only difference that now that dominance has taken the form of Gramscian glue-like hegemony. Consequently, the democratisation of the Tibetan exile polity is fettered and countered by the hegemony of Tibetan Buddhism in the exile community. The erstwhile Buddhist Tibet may today be dominated by the hegemony of Communist China, but, in exile, Tibetan Buddhist hegemony is thriving. As China's grip over Tibet gets increasingly tightened and international support for the Tibetan movement gets weaker, given China's rapidly increasing economic prowess, the actualisation of the Tibetan cause seems more remote. In the face of such brutal power, maybe an imagined but impossible nation state, premised on untenable territorial boundaries and a shaky ethnic distinction between Tibetans and all others, is no longer a viable utopia (Samdub, 2020).

But it seems that this changed geopolitical reality has not dented the hegemonic scope of Tibetan Buddhism. The domain of the influence of Tibetan Buddhism in exile today is much larger than it ever was in pre-modern Tibet. There is a perception among the Tibetan religious and political elite in exile that the exile set-up could exist not in order to win back the Himalayan homeland but to serve those who have historical cultural ties to Tibetan Buddhism as a node within a globalised Buddhism (Samdub, 2020). Buddhists in general, also in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, and Tibetan Buddhists in particular from various parts of Asia and Europe are included under Tibetan Buddhism's sphere of influence. Mindful of the growing popularity of Tibetan Buddhism across the world, the CTA is investing heavily in propagating the idea of Tibetan Buddhism as a metaphor for Tibetan identity. This shift from territory to religion as a primary site of identity may make Tibetan Muslims, Christians and Bonpos, already left out by the dominant discourses of Tibetan nationalism, feel even more excluded (Samdub, 2020). At the same time, hegemonic Tibetan Buddhism as a form of stateless democracy has been strengthened in exile, providing added influence on religion as an identifying element.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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