

ARJIA RINPOCHE TESTIMONY FOR THE TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS
COMMISSION

First of all, I would like to thank the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for giving me the opportunity to share my thoughts with you today.

My name is Arjia Lobsang Thubten. I am the former Abbot of Kumbum Monastery in Eastern Tibet. I was born in 1950 and lived most of my life on the Tibetan Plateau under Chinese control. In 1998, due to issues surrounding the reincarnation of the late Panchen Lama, I had to leave. It is a painful story to tell. Today, however, I will share only briefly about the past and will focus more on the religious policies of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

In the 1950s and 60s, the Chinese government prohibited the practice of all religions, saying that religion is opium that poisons people's minds, and is the product of feudal superstition. During the "Religious Reform" campaign, religion was criticized and denounced in meetings and gatherings at all levels. In my autobiography "Surviving the Dragon," I described some of these events in detail. At the time, the government sent Chinese officials into Kumbum Monastery, which was home to 3000 monks. Property belonging to the monastery and monks were either confiscated or forcibly transferred to collective ownership. About 500 monks and all the administrators, such as the abbot, the disciplinarian, the chanting master, and the scholars were arrested. Other monks were forced to disrobe and either sent to factories or farms to be reformed through labor.

When I was 8 years old, they wanted us to be "reborn, free from feudalism," so I was sent to a Chinese school to study Chinese. In those days, anyone showing the slightest sign of resistance or dissatisfaction would be regarded a "rebel." At that time, the government's "quelling of rebellion" practice in the Amdo region of Tibet was known for its cruelty. My birth place of Haiyan County was designated as a "County of Counterrevolutionaries," and many were arrested for "conspiring to rebel." Those not arrested were forcibly relocated to remote and isolated places depending on what social class they belonged to. My father, a brother-in-law, and a religious figure were all arrested at this time. My father died in prison.

During the Cultural Revolution, religion became even more a target for persecution. The campaign of "Breaking Four Olds," for instance, was one to eradicate religion altogether. Almost

all of Tibet's monasteries were destroyed during this campaign. A very few ruined monasteries were kept only as a negative example to educate the masses on denouncing religion and feudalism.

When the Cultural Revolution ended the dictatorship went away too. At that time the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership split into two factions: the liberal reformers and the conservatives. Meanwhile, Chinese economy developed further toward a market based system. Many people started placing high hopes for change in China, but not the conservatives. Calls for democracy and freedom were frequent; protests and demonstrations of different sizes were taking place all over the country.

In Tibet, demands for religious freedom and the return of His Holiness the Dalai Lama became stronger day by day. Between September 1987 and March 1989, for example, there was a series of protests in Tibet. As a result, the conservatives in the Chinese government declared martial law in Tibet, carried out a violent crackdown and characterized the events as "a serious riot in Lhasa."

In 1989, the student uprising in Tiananmen Square, a.k.a. "June 4 Massacre" led to the end of the internal struggle between the two factions of the CCP, with the conservatives winning. The leaders of the reformists either stepped down or were put under house arrest. In the 1990's, at the 14th National Congress of CCP, Deng Xiaoping introduced a new policy to replace dictatorship called "Reform and Opening." In this new system, leaders are appointed by the previous leadership and had limited terms.

In contrast to the improved economic situation, China's religious policies became increasingly tighter and tighter. For example, on the issue of the 10th Panchen Lama's reincarnation, the Chinese government insisted on using the so called "Gold Urn" method which had been long criticized as "feudal" and "backward." In my memoir, I recorded some of the previously unknown details of the procedure, and showed that it was but an excuse by the Chinese authorities to instill their own version of the Panchen Lama. Meanwhile, the authorities made hints to appoint me as the tutor to their selection of the "11th Panchen Lama," perhaps because my uncle, Gyayak Rinpoche, was a tutor to the previous Panchen Lama. However, I chose not to betray my faith. I refused to cooperate with the Chinese Communist regime, and escaped from China. Eventually, I was granted political asylum in the United States.

Since 2000, the calls for religious freedom and protection of cultural heritage in Tibet are continuing. During the Olympics in 2008, Tibetans' voices demanding change were the loudest. The Chinese authorities, as always, dealt with heavy hands which in turn led Tibetans in all three regions to resist the crackdown. More than one hundred people even set themselves ablaze to demand Tibetan freedom and to "let the Dalai Lama return." The Chinese government, however, labeled everything as a plot on the part of the so called "separatist clique," and blamed His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

During this period, Chinese government policies became more and more restrictive. For example, in 2007, China's State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) issued its Order No. 5, called "Measures on Management of Reincarnation," which limited the selection of reincarnated lamas, otherwise known as tulkus. This order aimed to prohibit the "treasonous" and "separatist" tulkus from being selected, and introduced a "Certificate of Reincarnation." The certificate imposed control over spiritual leaders, throughout the whole Tibetan nation, and even planned to interfere in the selection of the next reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. Although the Chinese authorities have always insisted on the separation of policy and religion (church and state), in reality Chinese religious policy is far from separation of the two. Policies force religion to have no choice but to give in to political power and to fully give up its own freedom.

In 2010, SARA issued its Order No. 8 known as the "Measures for the Administration of Buddhist Monasteries" to push for further control over monasteries' religious affairs and finances. For example, the Chinese government requires all monasteries to be registered. Starting new monasteries will not be allowed or approved. Old monasteries that were destroyed during political campaigns such as the "Great Leap Forward" and the Cultural Revolution, might be restored and reopened, but a strict approval process will be imposed. Even if approval is granted, there will be a limit on the number of monks and nuns and rigid control over all religious activities. Monks in monasteries will also be required to study policies on current affairs and patriotic materials. This, in essence, broke down the Tibetan tradition of administering monasteries through ethical discipline, and changed the fundamental nature of Tibetan religious institutions.

In recent years, practitioners in remote areas opened new Centers for Buddhist study. They avoided using the name "monastery," and instead called themselves "camp institutes."

Because of this new name and style, they didn't draw attention from the government. Some of these institutes became increasingly influential and attracted more and more people from inside and outside China, who came there to study. Larung Gar Buddhist Academy was one such institution that avoided government scrutiny for a long time. Recently, the Chinese government noticed the growth of these centers in remote Tibetan areas and took control. They drastically limited the number of monks and followers, demolished the housing complexes and forced the monks to leave.

On the other hand, the government wants to present a different image to the outside world. They organize religious figures from these institutes and send them abroad on lecture tours to help create a false image of "religious freedom." At home, the khenpos and masters are afraid to speak against the government. All they can do is beg the monks to practice patience and endure the oppression and humiliation. In short, the Chinese government, while it propagates "religious freedom" abroad, at home it practices strict control over all religious affairs, and is a typical example of "strict inside and loose outside" policy.

In fact, despite appearances, government control is still very strict. For visitors and tourists, especially foreigners, these details are not easily noticed. Instead, it appears that monasteries are opening normally, and religious activities are still going on. However, police stations are located within the monastery; Chinese officials and party cadres are sent to embed in monasteries; the phones are bugged and cameras are installed to monitor all activities of the monks and nuns. Of course, restrictions vary from place to place, but the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) is the most severely restricted. In the TAR, large numbers of monks are forced out of monasteries, religious events cannot be conducted normally, and pictures of the Dalai Lama cannot be displayed. Instead, the images of Chinese leaders are placed high up and the Communist Chinese flag is raised higher than the prayer flags. All in all, the situation is only worsening day by day.

Looking back at the decades, it is easy to see that policies on ethnic and religious affairs, the environmental issue on the plateau and the pollution of water resources are only worsening. Facts prove that past policies are not functioning properly.

When Xi Jinping was appointed leader of China, he instilled hope in the people. His pledge of honesty fostered trust. His reorganization plans and anti-corruption policies held great

promise. Tibetans became hopeful for genuine “religious freedom.” Their dream for His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s return to Tibet was renewed.

Presently there is a widespread quote in the Chinese Internet sphere, attributed to Xi Jinping, saying “Communist Party members can also study Buddhism, and should learn from the Buddha’s great love and compassion.” Although the quote is even translated into Tibetan and is quite popular, it is hard to know whether or not Xi actually said it. At least it is a sign that the common folk still have some hope for Xi Jinping.

China prides itself in having five thousand years of civilized history. So why can they not learn to respect religion and practice harmony from their own wise historical Chinese emperors and kings? Why must they impose strict control over, even trample and ravage, religion? China’s population has grown to be number one in the world; they bravely want to be world leaders. While China can contain over a billion people, why is it unable to tolerate a Dalai Lama who long ago had already recognized the sovereignty of the People’s Republic of China?

In conclusion, I have hope that China’s liberal reformers will once again gain power and the situation will improve. In the meantime, I hope that human rights and religious commissions of the United State government will conduct research and continue the dialogue with the Chinese government. These efforts will not only improve the current situation, but could also achieve a genuine “ethnic equality” and “religious freedom” in China.

Thank you.