

The 11th Panchen Lama of Tibet: The world's youngest political prisoner

A CTC Backgrounder

Gendun Chokyi Nyima was born on April 25, 1989 to a nomad family from the Lhari District of Nagchu, Tibet. On May 14, 1995, the Dalai Lama recognized this 6 year old child as the 11th Panchen Lama of Tibet. Shortly after the Dalai Lama's announcement, Gendun Choekyi Nyima and his family disappeared from their home. Their whereabouts remain unknown to this day. If still alive, Gendun Chokyi Nyima has lived his life as a prisoner, deprived of his childhood, freedom, and his human rights.

Although the Chinese government initially denied knowing anything about the disappearance of Gendun Choekyi Nyima, in May 1996 Chinese delegates at the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child admitted that the boy and his family were being held in custody "for their own protection". Since then, Chinese authorities have repeated variations on that theme to numerous government and United Nations representatives.

In September 1996, delegates of the Chinese "Ethnic Affairs Commission" confirmed in a meeting held at the Canadian Human Rights Foundation in Montreal, that Chinese authorities were holding Gendun Choekyi Nyima and his family saying that he was "healthy and that he is studying to become a monk".

In 2000, during a bilateral dialogue meeting on human rights, European Union and British officials were shown 2 photographs of a young boy allegedly proving that he was alive and well. Forensic analysis later indicated that the photographs were not Gendun Choekyi Nyima. In August 2001, Chinese authorities promised photographs to a Polish delegation to Tibet but the delegation was later told that the boy was "far away" from Lhasa and so the pictures could not be obtained immediately.

In October 2001, an Australian delegation was told that the parents of Gendun Choekyi Nima were insisting that no foreign delegations be allowed to meet with him. According to Chinese authorities, the parents have said that "they want their privacy respected, that they don't particularly want people to have access to the child and they want him to live a normal life and they don't want to be bothered by people".

The Significance of the Panchen Lama in Tibet

The Panchen Lama, meaning "great scholar", is the second highest spiritual leader in Tibet and his release has become synonymous with survival of Tibetan Buddhism. The Panchen Lama and the Dalai Lama have an extraordinary relationship, which dates back to the 16th century. The Panchen Lama has been described as the moon to the Dalai Lama's sun and together they form

the spiritual center of Tibetan Buddhism. Throughout history, the Panchen Lama has been primarily a religious leader, while the Dalai Lama is both a religious and a secular leader. For centuries, they have been students and teachers of each other and most importantly, they play a key role in the selection of each other's reincarnation. By choosing the reincarnation of the 11th Panchen Lama, the People's Republic of China (PRC) hopes to control the reincarnation of the next Dalai Lama and consequently the spiritual lineage of Tibet. The move is a direct violation of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights which protects religious freedom.

Violations of Religious Freedom in Tibet

The interference in the selection of the 11th Panchen Lama is but one of the many forms of religious repression in Tibet. The "Patriotic Re-education" campaign began in April 1996 and enforces certain beliefs on the monks and nuns in Tibet, such as the recognition of the unity of Tibet and China, the denial that Tibet should be independent, the denunciation of the Dalai Lama, and the recognition of the Chinese-appointed Panchen Lama. If monks and nuns refuse to agree to these points they may suffer harassment, expulsion, and arrest. The effect of this campaign has been to depopulate many religious institutions.

The International Campaign to Free the Panchen Lama

The detention of the Panchen Lama has sparked widespread international activity, including requests by the United Nations that an official delegation be allowed to visit the boy and his family. In September 1998, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, visited China and submitted a request for information on the case. Chinese officials declined to answer her questions (Agence France Press, September 14, 1998). Appeals by Amnesty International concerning his safety, the safety of his family and the monks of Tashilungpo Monastery have been supported by protests and demonstrations in several world capitals.

Get involved and sign the international petition: www.freepanchenlama.org

This backgrounder was originally written by Deborah Simpson for the Canada Tibet Committee in 2000. It was updated in 2013.