

Tibetans' aspirations find expression in rumour

A strong rumour has spread across Tibet in recent weeks that Gyaltzen Norbu has escaped from China or at least attempted to do so. The Chinese authorities appointed the Tibetan boy as the Panchen Lama in 1995, after they effectively abducted Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the Dalai Lama's choice for the second highest position in the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchy. More than for its veracity, for which there is no tangible corroboration, the rumour reveals ongoing Tibetan aspirations that their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, prevails. It also makes apparent the current nervous social atmosphere in Tibet where Chinese authorities, who have sponsored anti-Dalai Lama campaigns and Shugden-cult activities (which the Dalai Lama disapproves of), clash with popular fervour for the Tibetan leader, manifested in fur burnings and long life prayers.

In the first week of April 2007, a strong rumour began circulating in Lhasa that Gyaltzen Norbu had escaped. In the following weeks, the rumour spread all over the Tibetan regions of the PRC, gathering in the process a great number of putative details. There are two archetypal versions of the rumour. According to the first, Gyaltzen Norbu escaped to India and was then relocated to an unknown western country. The second version states that the escape attempt ended in Nyalam, close to the Tibet-Nepal border, where the boy was finally intercepted by the state authorities and taken to an unknown location.

There are no indications that the rumour has any serious basis whatsoever, rather, the fact that Gyaltzen Norbu was not been seen in public or on state-run media for quite some time appears to have provided grist to the rumour mill. His perceived absence from the media glare is not in itself surprising, as the state media mainly feature the boy in distinctive phases, for instance around special occasions like important party meetings, religious ceremonies etc, or when he travels in Tibet. Although these phases can be intensive and last for some weeks during which he is portrayed without fail as a "*true patriot*" and "*model leader*" (contrasting him with the Dalai Lama), there is no regular reporting about him as such.

In the absence of free media, rumours are still an important medium of information that Tibetans rely upon and they also provide an important outlet to air popular aspirations, fears or discontent. While their content does not always reflect tangible facts, they mostly relate to real events or developments, or at least give indications about the current social atmosphere within Tibet. In the past few years, tenacious rumours have emerged at regular intervals from Tibet.

In 2000-02, for example, a rumour stated that war with India was imminent and that troops were being sent to forward areas in the TAR. This rumour coincided with TV images of successful Western military operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan aimed at evicting unpopular regimes, following similar moves in previous years in Kuwait and Bosnia. These apparently fired fantasies of similar developments in Tibet. Some troop movements along the border with India added apparent credibility to the rumour.

Another rumour in 2002 stated that the Dharamsala-based Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC) was channelling volunteers into Tibet to wage an all-out struggle against the Chinese authorities. It came at a time when the TYC and some other Tibetan organisations in exile debated abandoning the 'Middle-Way' approach advocated by the Dalai Lama and made statements about surrendering their refugee documents and organising a peace march to Tibet⁽¹⁾.

In 2004-05 and 2006, persistent rumours emerged that the Dalai Lama would be making an unannounced visit to Tibet and that cities were being spruced up for the event. In mid-July 2006, Tibetans even travelled in their thousands to Kumbum Monastery in Qinghai province (Amdo) in the earnest belief that the Dalai Lama would visit the monastery. The surge of people forced the authorities, alarmed about potentially serious disturbances, to set up a checkpoint near the monastery and step up security. By 15-16 July 2006, most of these Tibetans had been required to leave. In his annual 10 March statement, the Dalai Lama had publicly expressed the wish to visit sacred pilgrimage sites in China and mentioned that he had instructed his envoys to convey this wish to the Chinese authorities in the last round of dialogue.

The latest rumour about Gyaltzen Norbu's alleged attempt to escape China fits well into this. To average Tibetans the boy, who has been projected by the Chinese authorities as the model of "*patriotic spiritual leadership*", represents Chinese hegemony over Tibetan religion, culture and identity and the drive to re-write Tibetan national history and culture in tune with Chinese perceptions of them. Consistently, all attempts by party and state apparatus in Beijing and Lhasa to coerce the Tibetan masses into accepting Gyaltzen Norbu as the Panchen Lama have failed, and the boy has failed to make any inroads into the hearts and minds of Tibetans. Even the majority of ethnic Tibetan officials and cadres who are normally obliged to display his framed picture, and thus face a dilemma between their civil and religious duties, often do so with subtle signs of disrespect, for example by hanging it in odd positions or behind profane objects. At the same time, still respectful of all things religious and genuinely believing in supernatural interventions, many Tibetans express their wish that the disruption of their system of belief created by the PRC state and the stubborn defiance of the authorities towards the Dalai Lama may come to an end. Obviously, an escape by Gyaltzen Norbu from the role imposed on him by the state, and his seeking refuge with the Dalai Lama would present the best thinkable solution to their predicament, and one that would re-establish the harmony of Tibetan Buddhist life once and for all.

Notes:

1: In this case, some intelligence analysts saw indications that the rumour had been partly fuelled by the TAR authorities in order to further intensify their 're-education campaign' in monasteries, their 'struggle against the Dalai Clique' and gauge the political mood of the people. Although this theory cannot be totally discounted, other analysts remark that the uncontrollable nature and potentially destabilising effects of the rumours appear strongly at odds with the desire for 'stability' and 'harmony' - currently the overwhelming principles of the PRC authorities - making it doubtful that they would actually resort to such means.

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