

THE DALAI LAMA: AN INSTITUTION OF GLOBAL SIGNIFICANCE

by
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The current Dalai Lama's exile from Tibet after China annexed it decades ago has made his succession a highly contentious issue. The 14th Dalai Lama—Tenzin Gyatso—has now confirmed that he will have a successor after his death, ending years of uncertainty. In the long-awaited [announcement](#), he said a trust created by him will be the sole authority to recognize his reincarnation, effectively shutting out any role for China in choosing his successor.

This latest announcement has certainly upped the ante as China [responded](#) by saying it alone would choose the Dalai Lama's successor, which must be "approved by the central government." As Tibetans commemorate the Dalai Lama's life with a "Year of Compassion," the Chinese government is accelerating a long-running campaign aimed at erasing his legacy, influence, and re-engineering Tibetan Buddhism into a state-controlled religion.

The Dalai Lama firmly said that only the [Gaden Phodrang Trust](#), the Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, could recognize a future Dalai Lama—"no one else has any such authority to interfere." The office should carry out the procedures of search and recognition of the future Dalai Lama "in accordance with past tradition," he said, without revealing further details on the process.

The Dalai Lama revealed his succession plan ahead of his 90th birthday on July 6. "Today's message is that the Dalai Lama institution will continue," Lobsang Tenzin, the trust's second-most senior leader and known by his religious title Samdhong Rinpoche, [told a news conference](#) in Dharamshala. "There will be a 15th Dalai Lama. There will be a 16th."

A Moral Force

The stakes could not be higher. The Dalai Lama has been the beating heart of Tibetan identity for generations. Born in 1935 in the village of [Taktser](#)

[in northeastern Tibet](#), he was recognized as the reincarnation of his predecessor at the age of two, enthroned in 1940, and assumed political leadership during one of the darkest chapters in Tibetan history. By 1959, after a failed uprising against Chinese occupation, he fled to India, where he's lived in exile ever since, leading a non-violent movement that has galvanized global awareness of Tibet's struggle for autonomy.

"The issue of Tibet remains unresolved, while my homeland is still in the grip of repressive communist Chinese rule," the Dalai Lama [wrote](#) in his latest book *Voice for the Voiceless*. Documenting his decades-long struggle with China, he wrote: "Given that ours is a struggle of people with a long history of distinct civilisation, it will, if necessary, continue beyond my lifetime."

For 66 years, the Dalai Lama has defended the Tibetan people's cultural and spiritual heritage from afar, transforming the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism into a secular moral force. He relinquished political authority in favor of a democratic administration-in-exile, turning the Central Tibetan Administration into a rare model of stateless democracy. He has become a world-renowned figure and a religious leader on the global stage. In 1989, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in recognition of his nonviolent campaign to end Chinese domination of Tibet. His message, rooted in compassion, nonviolence, and the universality of human dignity, has resonated far beyond Tibet's borders.

Yet, Beijing's efforts to sever this link between the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people are intensifying. With an eye toward his eventual passing, Chinese authorities are positioning themselves to control his succession. This is not merely a religious dispute. It's a geopolitical play cloaked in spiritual robes.

Reincarnation and Politics

Tibetan Buddhists believe the Dalai Lama can choose the body into which he is reincarnated, as has happened on previous occasions since the creation of the institution in 1587. In 2007, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) issued "[Order No. 5](#),"

mandating that all reincarnations of Tibetan lamas or “living Buddhas” must be approved by the state. The absurdity of an atheist regime dictating the metaphysical is not lost on observers, but it is part of a much broader strategy. China wants a Dalai Lama of its own: compliant, controllable, and anointed by the Party.

The CCP seeks to strengthen its historical claim—citing Qing dynasty precedents and the "[Golden Urn](#)" system—to control the reincarnation of [Tibetan leaders](#), including the Dalai Lama. The 2007 law intended to ensure that successors align with the Party rather than Tibetan spiritual traditions. To solidify its authority, Beijing has created a nominating committee composed of Party-aligned Tibetan monks and officials, along with “patriotic” museum exhibits that reinforce CCP legitimacy over reincarnation rites. The Dalai Lama himself emphasizes that his successor must be born outside of China, underscoring that his reincarnation will follow spiritual guidance rather than political considerations.

State media has been strongly [advocating](#) this line in recent months and such [manipulation](#) undermines the centuries-old Tibetan ritual and aims to delegitimize any future Dalai Lama not approved by Beijing.

Tibetan Buddhism, its monastic institutions, and its reincarnation traditions are not just religious customs—they are the lifeblood of a culture that has survived conquest, displacement, and diaspora. Attempts to re-engineer these systems are, as the Dalai Lama has [described](#), “outrageous and disgraceful.” More importantly, they represent an existential threat to the continuity of Tibetan identity itself.

The 14th Dalai Lama has stated clearly that any future reincarnation should be born in a free land and chosen according to centuries-old traditions, not by a communist bureaucracy. In his writings and public statements, he has left instructions for how his successor should be found, signalling that the next Dalai Lama may not be born in Tibet at all.

The Chinese Control Campaign

China’s response is not just about controlling religion.

It’s about consolidating power in a geopolitically strategic region and extinguishing a beacon of moral resistance. Under Xi Jinping’s leadership, the CCP has increased efforts to [sinicize](#) religion, a policy officially introduced in 2015 and strengthened through institutional reforms. Through the United Front Work Department, the CCP enforces the “[four standards](#)” in monasteries, forcing monks to prioritize loyalty to the Party over religious beliefs publicly. Patriotic education is mandatory, and possessing images of the Dalai Lama is criminalized; many monasteries are militarized with surveillance, expulsions, and re-education [campaigns](#). The sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism—mandating Mandarin in monasteries, surveilling monks, rewriting scriptures, and now, controlling reincarnation—is cultural erasure by design. Controlling any future Dalai Lama is central to the sinicization policy that enforces a Chinese cultural nationalism in direct confrontation with Buddhist belief and practices.

Smear campaigns are integral to the CCP’s strategy to discredit the Dalai Lama. Beijing conducts extensive [external](#) and internal propaganda efforts, labeling the Dalai Lama as a “wolf in sheep’s clothing” or a [demon](#), designed to undermine both local and global trust. In April 2023, Chinese propagandists spread a false story about sexual misconduct, twisting innocent interactions into claims of pedophilia to discredit him domestically. This [smear campaign](#) seeks to disconnect the Tibetan people from the moral authority of their spiritual leader.

Another aspect involves political [restructuring](#): Tibetan officials in the TAR are subordinate to the CCP, with allegiance taking precedence over cultural representation. Tibetan heads of local government exist but remain under the control of unelected Party secretaries. Religious figures are co-opted into state-sanctioned roles, weakening genuine Tibetan voices. This tactic undermines independent authority structures, ensuring that any Tibetan leadership reflects CCP ideology rather than Tibetan spirituality.

The CCP’s campaign to [weaken](#) the Dalai Lama is complex, and includes indoctrination of young children. State-run boarding schools remove Tibetan

children from family and monastic influence, imposing Mandarin-centered curricula to produce generations disconnected from Tibetan identity. These policies aim not only to limit dissent but also to assimilate Tibetan Buddhism into Party ideology, rendering the Dalai Lama spiritually and culturally insignificant. Beijing's long-term goal is to replace the exiled Dalai Lama with a government-approved figure who aligns with its worldview, thereby strengthening both domestic control and international legitimacy. The CCP actively cultivates Buddhist networks abroad to support its [claim of control](#) over reincarnation rites, framing them as reforms and modernization.

What will India do?

The reincarnation of the 15th Dalai Lama will take place under intense media scrutiny and immense public interest, in addition to causing anxieties amongst not only Tibetans and the Chinese government, but various states including India, Mongolia, and even Russia, which has a few Buddhist republics within its territories, and Tibetans living elsewhere. The uncertainty relating to it will have significance beyond the Tibetans in Tibet because of the veneration for the Dalai Lama amongst Tibetan Buddhist populations outside Tibet.

India, on its part, is likely to continue to host the exiled Tibetan population and calculate this factor into its strategic ambit. India has maintained that the Dalai Lama is an "[honoured guest](#)" and a spiritual leader, and even the Prime Minister sends greetings to him on his birthdays. But make no assumptions about the lack of reaction so far to the Dalai Lama's announcement: India cares about the situation and monitors everything closely without responding to every occasion.

Protecting the Legacy

The search for the Dalai Lama's reincarnation begins only upon the incumbent's death. In the past, the successor has been identified by senior Tibetan religious leaders, based on spiritual signs and visions, and it can take several years after the next Dalai Lama is identified as a baby and groomed to take the reins.

The likely outcome? Two Dalai Lamas. One born of the Tibetan people's faith. The other, a puppet of Beijing. The precedent is already there: after abducting the Panchen Lama recognized by the Dalai Lama in 1995, the Chinese government installed their own—a clear example of government interference. The original has not been seen since. If this approach is replicated, it will tear at the spiritual fabric of Tibetan society and deepen the crisis of legitimacy already plaguing Beijing's rule in Tibet.

The Dalai Lama's insistence that his successor be chosen through spiritual—not political—processes, along with international attention, has made Beijing's plans uncertain. Still, the CCP's campaign is a calculated, long-term effort to erase the spiritual authority of one of the world's most important religious figures.

The international community must not turn a blind eye. The question of the Dalai Lama's succession is no longer a purely Tibetan issue. It is a test of the world's willingness to defend religious freedom, cultural autonomy, and the right of a people to determine their own spiritual future. The West, especially the U.S. and Europe, and democratic allies in Asia must take a clear stand. This means articulating a Tibet policy that addresses Beijing's interference in Tibetan affairs. And it means rejecting any Chinese-appointed Dalai Lama as illegitimate.

For Tibetans, the Dalai Lama is not just a leader—he is the embodiment of their hope, continuity, and moral compass. Undermining this institution is not just an assault on tradition; it's a political act with spiritual consequences. As the world celebrates the Dalai Lama's 90th birthday, his spiritual legacy needs to be protected, not rewritten by those who seek to replace faith with control.

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