

Beijing fears a breakup. If it makes concessions in Tibet, other ethnic groups such as the Uyghurs and the Mongols may use the situation as a precedent for basing their claims. Thus, China is stalling for time in the hope that a new Dalai Lama who easier to handle will soon appear. But with the Olympics close at hand, the Chinese position is becoming very hard to support.

Tibet: greater freedom at the top of the world

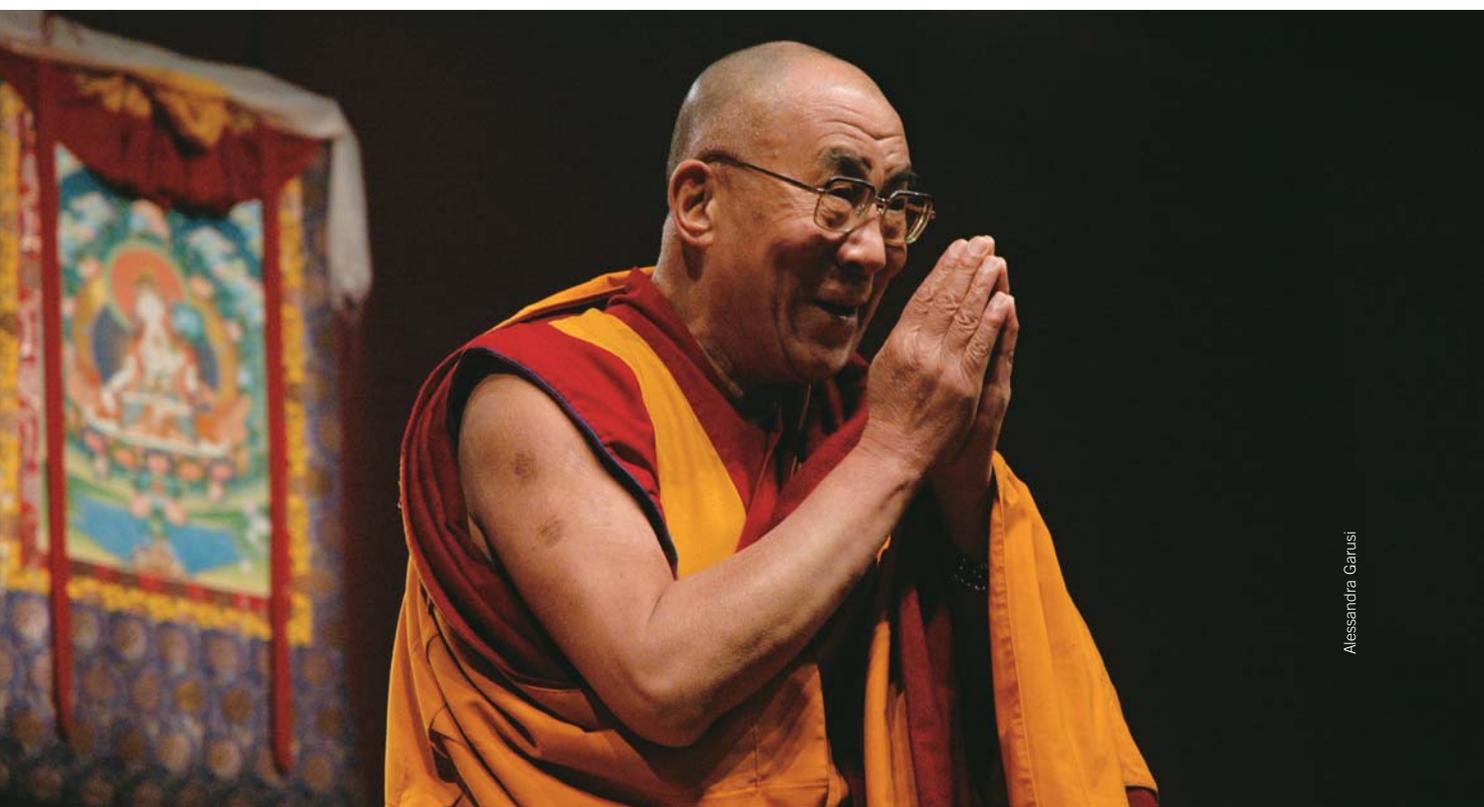
CHURCH AND STATE 2

by Alessandra Garusi

“In Tibet, it’s illegal to keep a statue of Buddha in your house. It’s illegal to go on pilgrimages to temples. Chinese authorities have eliminated all references to religion in schools, while political indoctrination sessions have begun in the monasteries; the first point they teach is to criticize the Dalai Lama. They’ve even made it illegal to mention my name. They’ve removed all my photos. But

the worst thing is that any demonstration of protest against Beijing in our country is crushed and ultimately ends in bloodshed. Arrests and torture are the order of the day. In their own homeland, Tibetans are treated like animals to be beaten and denied their dignity”. Tenzin Gyatso, the XIV Dalai Lama, is extremely severe when asked about the current situation in Tibet. On March 17, 1959, he was forced to escape on the back of a yak in the middle of the night. “From Potala Palace, I could see the artillery advancing. I didn’t choose exile, it was forced on me. And now, I’ve been homeless for almost half a

The Dalai Lama, the highest Buddhist authority, was forced into exile in 1959. Despite his being awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1989, there still appears to be no solution to the Tibetan problem



century". His trip across the Himalayas ended at Dharamsala, in India, where then-Premier Nehru allowed him to establish a Tibetan government-in-exile.

After three UN General Assembly resolutions condemning China (1959, 1961 and 1965), and after the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, the Tibetan question still seems to be far from being resolved. "Since 2001, there have been six meetings between our delegation and our Chinese counterparts", says the Dalai Lama. "We were making progress up until 2006. In the spring of that year, though, the accusations against me resumed. In their eyes, I'm still a separatist, a person who is undermining the unity of the Peoples' Republic. Beijing broke off talks before the summer. They only told us, 'there's nothing to discuss about Tibet'".

Actually, the Dalai Lama does not demand that his country regain the independence it had lost in 1950, the year of the Chinese invasion. He merely calls for greater autonomy, which above all would ensure the survival of the only culture of its kind in the world. But even this request seems extreme to the Chinese authorities. Whether it is because of a lack of knowledge or for geopolitical reasons, they have always considered Tibet to be a menace. As a result, whenever a country receives the Dalai Lama, Beijing frowns and expresses its displeasure, which sometimes takes the form of closing its strongly expanding markets to the transgressing country.

At the end of 2006, there were 10,000 major companies in China with direct investments in 160 countries, according to the Ministry of Commerce. One of the criteria for foreign acquisitions is securing energy, minerals, forests, etc. And Tibet is extremely rich in copper, iron, zinc, lead, and perhaps even oil and natural gas. "Due to its exploitation of the natural resources, China cannot do without Tibet", explained Professor Donatella Dolcini of the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Milan. "But there are also geostrategic questions such as relations with India, which are good for the moment... but tomorrow is another day. And there's the matter of equilibrium among the countries that arose after the Soviet Union dissolved".



Grazia Neri/AFP (2)

In other words, Beijing fears a breakup. If it makes concessions in Tibet, other ethnic groups such as the Uyghurs and the Mongols may use the situation as a precedent for basing their claims.

The increasingly inflexible position of the Beijing government persuaded the Dalai Lama to seek solidarity and support abroad. He has been received by top government officials from a host of countries – from Canada to Australia, from Europe to the United States. On October 17 of last year, the US Congress awarded him a gold medal, an accolade previously bestowed on personalities of the stature of Winston Churchill and Nelson Mandela.

"The award has political meaning in that it represents a strong position taken by the United States in favor of human rights, peace, and dialogue", said Vicky Sevegnani of the Italy-Tibet Association. "At the same time, it's a warning to Beijing on the eve of the Olympics, because it keeps promises that were made when the Olympic Committee awarded the Games to China in 2001". But actually, the American Congress – and Nancy Pelosi in particular – has always been sensitive to this question. In fact, the US pays a million dollars a year to the Dharamsala government, as mandated by the "Tibet Act" of 2002.

Europe, on the other hand, cannot bring itself to react in a unified way. It reaches out to



_Facing photo: President Bush giving the Dalai Lama an award previously given to Winston Churchill and Nelson Mandela. Above: The Dalai Lama with Angela Merkel, who received him with full honours in Berlin

China haphazardly and often with its head hung low. Last September, for example, Chancellor Angela Merkel decided to welcome the Dalai Lama to Berlin with all the honors generally accorded to the symbol of a religion and of a land that is thousands of years old. At the same time, the French government organized a visit to Beijing by Sarkozy and a delegation interested in business matters, but there was no room for the French Minister of Human Rights. Italy was divided on the issue. Only Sergio Chiamparino and Walter Veltroni, the mayors of Turin and Rome respectively, decided to receive the Nobel Prize winner at City Hall because of the solemn nature of his visit. Romano Prodi, however, did not receive the Dalai Lama and admitted that his refusal was “in the national interest”. Incidentally, the import-export business between Italy and China has reached 20 billion euros; perhaps this may explain Prodi’s coldness, at least in part. The only welcome that was less friendly occurred in Japan, where a visit by the Dalai Lama was not given any official attention whatsoever, and the government even refused to provide him with an escort.

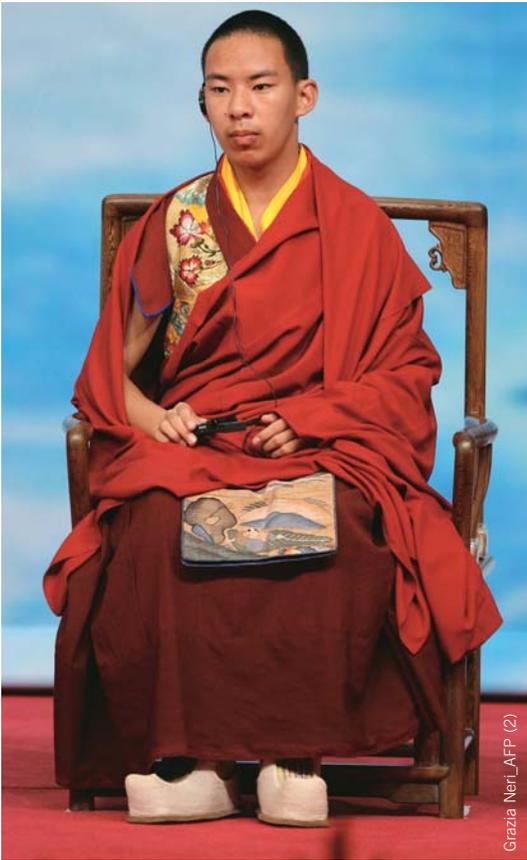
Not wishing to compromise relations with Beijing, even Benedict XVI canceled an audience with the Dalai Lama at the Vatican, which was to take place last December 13. President Hu Jintao appreciated the move and allowed new bishops to be ordained; on December 21, word came that Beijing authorities had authorized that the new bishop of Ningxia (favored by the Vatican) would be named exclusively by Chinese bishops who had been approved by the Pope. Actually, the relationship began thawing last June, when Benedict XVI wrote an open letter to Chinese followers. The purpose was to restore diplomatic relations, which were broken two years after the communists seized power in 1949.

Meanwhile, the countdown to the Olympics has started, and the Dalai Lama immediately came out against a boycott, “China is a great nation. It deserves to host the games. But I think that if it is to be a good host, Beijing should pay closer attention to the concerns of governments and NGOs regarding human rights violations, freedom of religion and speech, and respect for the environment”. When asked what can be done in concrete terms, Tenzin Gyatso shows the pragmatism of a politician, “China must not be isolated from the international community. Economically speaking, China is already an integral part of the world. But by itself, that’s not enough. The free world has the moral

responsibility to bring China into the democratic sphere. An economic relationship must be a friendship between equals in which the values of open and democratic societies are essential principles. If you show up only to do business and only repeat 'yes, Minister', then you risk losing face and the respect of the Chinese as well".

That Chinese authorities are especially skittish was evident last October 17. The news that the US Congress had awarded the Dalai Lama a gold medal was all that was needed for violent clashes to begin. The police were called in when a thousand monks in the Drepung monastery began a symbolic whitewashing of buildings reserved for His Holiness, as a sign of good luck on his return. A security force of four thousand soldiers sealed off Drepung and another monastery nearby. The revolt continued for days, and several monks were beaten and arrested. Because of the heavy-handed repression perpetrated on both religious followers and the civilian populace, many people flee. Every year, an average of three thousand Tibetans try to cross the Nepalese border. Those who succeed in reaching Katmandu are given shelter by the High Commission for Refugees in a center for temporary wayfarers. The right to leave a country and seek political asylum elsewhere is a fundamental human right. However, China considers it a crime to cross the border without permission, and that crime is punishable with up to a year in prison. The last serious case involved Kelsang Namtso, a 17 year-old girl from Nagchu who was killed by Chinese police on September 30, 2006. She belonged to a group of 73 Tibetans who were trying to cross the Nepalese border through the Nangpa pass, at an altitude of 20,000 feet. Human Rights Watch asked the Chinese government to allow an independent investigation.

This NGO is also criticizing Beijing for a campaign launched in 2005 that is known in Tibetan as the "Namdrang Rangdrik" ("Do-it-Yourself-Program"). In this program, village inhabitants abandon their houses and move to new buildings (which are all identical) along the main roads. The Chinese authorities say they want to "fight poverty" with the program, but actually the opposite is true. The cost of a house is around 5,000-6,000 dollars, and the government contributes



_Right: Indians protesting against the violation of human rights in Tibet. Above: Gyaincain Norbu, the second-most important spiritual figure for Tibetan Buddhists. A new law claims he was chosen by the Beijing government

1,200 as a loan. The rest are supposed to be paid by the Tibetans, but often they do not qualify for a mortgage. In any case, they have no choice. They get into debt and then risk seeing their house razed by a bulldozer. "Gradual, total cultural assimilation, that's what Beijing wants", says Thupten Tenzin, President of the Italian Tibetan Community. "Otherwise, it wouldn't have targeted nomads in its attempt at forced urbanization. They're the ones who have most effectively conserved their Tibetan identity (in their dress and lifestyle)". The same is true for the new, 700-mile high speed railroad which has run from Lhasa to the western Chinese province of Qinghai since July 2006. Mining companies and tourism should eventually profit enormously. But in the meantime, the line is being used to transport Chinese troops to the Tibetan



Fifty years of domination

At present, Tibet is an autonomous region of China. In 1950, it was invaded by Chinese troops. On March 17, 1959, after a failed revolt against Beijing, the XIV Dalai Lama fled from Lhasa and set up a government-in-exile in Dharamsala, India. Most of the monasteries were destroyed in the 1960s and 70s, and it is believed that thousands of Tibetans have been killed during periods of repression and martial law. Contacts with the Chinese government resumed in 1979. In the early 1980s, there was renewed optimism under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping and General Secretary Hu Yaobang. In 1989, the Chinese student movement was brutally repressed in Tiananmen Square. Dialogue between Tibetan and Chinese delegations resumed in 2001. There have been six meetings, the latest of which floundered before the summer of 2006. Meanwhile, in Dharamsala, a movement that has revolved around the personal charisma of the Dalai Lama for decades is becoming more democratic. Samdhong Rinpoche, who was elected Premier in 2001, was reelected for a second term in 2006.

capital, critics say. And even if it does generate economic benefits in the future, they will end up in the pockets of Han immigrants (Han is the largest ethnic group in China), whose number here is skyrocketing. According to the Japan Times, 7.5 million Han already live in Tibet, as compared with 3.6 million residents of Tibetan ethnicity.

From forced urbanization to economic retaliation, Beijing has used a number of schemes to strengthen its authority in Tibet. The latest is to control the succession of the Dalai Lama. The authorities of the Peoples' Republic are convinced that time is on their side, so they have planned the ultimate solution: when Tenzin Gyatso dies, they will try to impose a leader of their choice so that the last traces of religious independence will be stamped out. And, they have already tried it. In 1995, the Dalai Lama chose a six-year old boy named Gendun Choekyi Nyima to become the eleventh Panchen Lama, the second most respected spiritual figure among Tibetan Buddhists. The boy and his family disappeared three days later and have never been seen since. The Beijing government maintains that they are being held in a secret location "for their protection". Meanwhile, communist authorities have named Gyaltsen Norbu to be the Panchen Lama, and they expect him to be totally loyal to China. On September 1, 2007, in compliance with a new law (the so-called Order number 5) passed by the State Administration for Religious Affairs, Beijing appropriated the right to choose the lesser Lamas in the various temples across Tibet; that is, all living, reincarnated Buddhas must first be approved by the government.

"No matter what the Chinese do, I can assure you that Tibetans will never accept a Dalai Lama chosen by Peking". Tenzin Gyatso shakes his head and says, "There are only three possibilities. The first is that my successor could be elected through a procedure like the one used for the Pope, who is chosen by a conclave of clerics. The second is that I myself could choose him before I die. I've already tried that. Finally, I could be reincarnated after my death". And, in a recent interview in "Vanity Fair", he added, "If it's more useful, I could reincarnate myself in a higher form. In the form of a woman".