

Democracy, a strategic weapon for Tibet

Plenary speech by Troy Davis given on Saturday 26 October 2002 for the 17th Annual Tibet Day 2002, Fort Mason Conference Center, San Francisco

Thank you for inviting me to speak at your Annual Tibet Day. It is an honor and a pleasure to share some ideas on how Tibetans can free themselves by adopting novel concepts of citizenship and democracy.

Today, I wish to speak about a danger facing the Tibetan cause and a suggestion how to address it, as well as a strategic opportunity which you could use.

The danger is that the Tibetan cause is facing a paradox: it has been very successful compared to other causes, but it is showing signs of falling prey to "cause fatigue", overexposure and at same time, jealousy from others. And unfortunately, in spite of Tibet continuing to be at the top of the list of humanitarian causes, there is little to show concretely towards reaching the goal of a free Tibet. It seems therefore reasonable to ask the following question: why after decades of struggle are Tibetans as far from as they have ever been to the goal of a free Tibet, in spite of the fact that they are one of the most successful causes in terms of humanitarian "branding"?

As the magazine Foreign Policy pointed out in a cover article last summer, Free Tibet is one of the most fashionable, if not the most fashionable cause now that Apartheid is over, of all humanitarian causes. This is due to a set of circumstances, notably the existence of a charismatic leader, the Dalai Lama, as well as celebrity support and the undeniable appeal to Westerners of a spiritual philosophy.

Newsweek in this week's issue, reminds us of this fact, stating "His Holiness is the draw for much of the international publicity showered on the Tibetan cause, but this attention does little to advance Tibetan national interests". ("After the Dalai Lama", Newsweek, October 28, 2002)

And as the Foreign Policy article implies, Tibetans by not linking their cause to the broader world are making a big mistake. Others ask the question: Why is their cause more worthy than ours? The Rwandans, or the Chechens, or the Yanomanos, or any given indigenous people from Central America, to the oppressed American Indians to the Sarawak people in Indonesia? If the main reason and strength in global public opinion is due to a view that Tibet and the Dalai Lama have an overwhelmingly moral case, then by that same token, on what moral grounds is the suffering of other people less deserving ?

The danger is that other people may come to see Tibetans as hogging too much of the limelight and as being a sort of unfair competition in the nonprofit world. This would be unfortunate but Tibetans – as a people blessed with a loved charismatic leader - can fight that perception by generalizing their own cause.

But cynics may ask: why should we care about others before we have our own problem solved?

Apart from the obvious moral coherence that your claims are based on the universality of human rights and the equal dignity of all humans, it is in the self-interest of Tibetans to think more broadly and out-of-the-box.

For many reasons: one is simple: His Holiness will not always be here. Secondly, people who support humanitarian causes want to believe that they are doing the right thing and helping the underdog. If the Tibetans are perceived as being privileged among all the peoples striving to be free, and unwilling to support broader struggles, those supporters may turn away. Thirdly, if you help and join with others, your strengths and weaknesses could complement the weaknesses and strengths of others.

Since we are in California, you have probably heard of new concepts of philanthropic efficiency, of social entrepreneurship, of philanthropic “investments” and similar concepts, all these concept imply a much more rigorous analysis of the merits of different

causes. If large donors interested in human rights made a due diligence analysis on the efficiency of different groups like the Tibetans, the Kurds, the Chechens etc., they might focus their donations and efforts on groups that had a broader vision, and strategies that are scalable, or linked to greater visions.

How can Tibetans counter a perception of being a lonesome cowboy? I believe the answer lies in linking the Tibetan cause to a greater cause, and in fact not just linking it but making it part of a greater cause. What greater cause can that be and how should your cause be conceptually integrated into it? In a nutshell, the greater cause is that of citizenship and democracy for all peoples of the world, and to be more specific, not just national citizenship and national democracy, but also world citizenship and world democracy. Why?

Because ultimately, you can only win your freedom if you deliberately take the battle away from the battlefield and the conceptual weapons your opponent has chosen. One of the lessons of the Art of War is that to win, you must choose the battlefield and time and manner of battle, not make the mistake of letting your enemy choose. Right now, you are letting your enemy dictate everything. But you can never win in a world exclusively based on national sovereignties, a world based on amorality and power, because this is a world where China will always win. You must find a way to shift the battleground. You may of course bank on a breakup of the Chinese empire in the future, but this cannot replace a strategy.

So what battlefield and concepts should you draw your opponent on? The battlefield is the battlefield of public opinion and the new weapons or strategic concepts are ones which China cannot easily deny or match: citizenship and democracy at both national and global levels.

More specifically, you should base your strategy on a constitutionally democratic Tibet being part of a future supranational order based on citizenship and democracy; an international order based on the equal dignity of all human beings,

a global constitutional order based on the premise that all humans have natural and inalienable rights, regardless of who they are. This means a new global order based on democratic rules, on a democratic world constitution. It implies Tibetans transcending old national definitions of sovereignty, while of course remaining strongly rooted in their culture, language and traditions.

If you do that, you have a fighting chance of winning, because you will not be alone in your fight and people everywhere will join you. And the leaders of any country who are mired in the old world order cannot win in this new world. But the people themselves will win, the Chinese people as well as others but even Americans and Europeans who run the world today.

This is because in such a world democracy, Chinese will have a greater say in deciding global rules, but also American taxpayers will not have the huge burden of maintaining an expensive Pax Americana, and Europeans will finally be able to have the moral foreign policy which their citizens want, but which they cannot have today. And a world democracy will also vindicate the belief of Europeans that conflicts are best solved via political rather than military means, as they are doing by writing today a constitution for Europe.

But there is another practical immediate reason why you should embrace world citizenship and world democracy, as your greatest strength today is based on a moral stance and your support in global public opinion is based on a positive image. If people start to realize that all you want is based on the same old power politics of the past, in a sense that you want to be seated like an equal at the table of an immoral system, you may lose your credibility. Why? Because people have high expectations of you, which are partly also spiritual. This strength is also a weakness if your goal can be summarized to the wish to participate in a global system of nation-states based on power rather than on human rights. This is what happened to East Timor which had a precious ally and supporter for years in Taiwan. But as soon as East Timor became an independent state, its good and wise and moral rulers were forced by the international system to behave like immoral

scoundrels: they immediately recognized China and rejected their old friend Taiwan.

This is unfortunately probably what a free Tibetan government would do as well, however saintly its leaders might be. This is the fault of the structure of the international system itself which is immoral, and proves that problems in international relations are systemic and come from the global power architecture. So the emphasis on the personal qualities of leaders is counter-productive if it prevents us from fixing the root of the problem. However moral national leaders are, in today's system, they are obliged to act in a morally corrupt manner to protect their people.

Thus if one looks at this soberly, Tibetans may easily be accused of fooling the world, presenting an image of morality and saintliness today when it comes to seducing the global public to help its cause, when in fact their dearest wish is to participate in an evil system and become just one more immoral state. This inherent contradiction could prove deadly to your cause if more people become aware of it.

And once the public, the media and celebrities realise that you are not more moral than others, they might call Tibetans hypocrites and support others instead. This is because many support Tibetans as a sort of spiritual penance for their own material prosperity, as a way to find meaning in their lives, as a opportunity for transcendence. If they realize that Tibetans are no better nor worse than dozens of other peoples struggling to be free and to have their own national state, that they are as altruistic or selfish as others, the imagined source of transcendence will die and your support with it. This may have started already. So you must act now to minimize a potential backlash in the future by disappointed Western supporters. The extent of that backlash would be much worse for you than for other causes since you have benefited from a "spiritual premium" which no one else benefited from.

How did it get to this dangerous situation? It got here because a conceptual error was made and paradigms and mental frameworks

were mixed. On the one hand, you base your struggle on the fundamental principles of freedom and the rights of peoples to self-determination, and on the other, you seem to use a strategy and goal based on the historically obsolete model of absolute national sovereignty. While absolute national sovereignty was a progress for human liberty compared to feudalism, it is now an hindrance and in fact, one of the biggest obstacles to it. This is because society is globally interdependent and absolute sovereignty, which was invented as a "shield" by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 to protect one's citizens, has lost most of its power. September 11 proved beyond a doubt that national sovereignty cannot protect the citizens of even the most powerful country. It should spur you to design a new strategy based on modernity, citizenship and democracy. Updating citizenship and democracy through modernity means world citizenship and democracy.

Today human freedom is best served by an extension of the concepts of citizenship and democracy to the global level. And Tibetans can only be truly free if they embrace world citizenship and world democracy in addition to the national kind. This is also the way that Tibetans can link themselves to other oppressed people everywhere.

If you decide to start with one strategy, that of morality and principles, you must stick with it to the end and not switch in mid-stream. This is the price of public respect, credibility and ultimately freedom. If the Tibetan community seriously wants to develop those innovative strategies, the World Citizen Foundation is ready to help and work with you, as we will do with anyone, including China, seeking to develop citizenship and democracy.

I have not referred to external authorities so far, so that you could hear my case on its own intellectual merit and without being influenced by known public figures. But to finish, I wish to quote His Holiness the Dalai Lama himself on the same topic: "Each of us must take his or her own share of universal responsibility. Though no system of government is perfect, democracy is that which is closest to humanity's essential nature" (p.145).

“Democracy is the only stable foundation upon which a global political structure can be built. To work as one, we must respect the right of all peoples and nations to maintain their own distinctive character and values” (p.146). (The Dalai Lama, Imagine all the people, HH The Dalai Lama with Fabien Ouaki, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 1999).

Thank you

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