

# Repression, Resistance, and Resilience in Tibet

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Michael C. Davis

The tragic March 2008 riots in Tibet surprised the Chinese government and the world both by their occurrence and intensity. Decades of harsh Chinese suppression of even the mildest forms of dissent left many citizens falsely assuming that the situation in Tibet was under control and that Tibetans were satisfied with Chinese rule. The timing of the riots was inspired both by the March anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan uprising against Chinese rule when the Dalai Lama fled into exile and by the Beijing Olympics, which gave them the opportunity to attract attention to their cause. The ferocity of the demonstrations appeared to catch even the exiled Tibetan leadership off guard. Long committed to non-violence and mindful of putting Tibetans at risk of a harsh Chinese response, these leaders would not have encouraged such public confrontation. The Chinese have long claimed to have liberated Tibetans from feudal and repressive indigenous rule and to have brought about popular democratic reform—a claim now refuted by these protests, which demonstrated both the inadequacy of current Chinese policies and the resilience of the Tibetan identity.

The Tibetan cause has shown a surprising resilience through a prolonged series of crises over several decades.

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The Sino-Tibetan narrative is a familiar story of the occupation and resistance of an indigenous people. The 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples that calls for guarantees of autonomy and self-rule, likewise acknowledges the difficulties and rights-deprivation that indigenous peoples experience around the world.<sup>1</sup> The PRC voted for the UN Declaration and yet seems to have missed this point in its own back yard. The current resilience of the Tibetan cause is a product of this failed understanding and the harsh repression associated with it. The three R's in the title—repression, resistance and resilience—reflect a causal chain, as indigenous communities subject to sustained periods of repression feel encouraged to resist, and that resistance in turn shapes their identity and resilience as a people.<sup>2</sup>

The sections that follow address the explicit Chinese and Tibetan reactions to the 2008 crisis, the historical Sino-Tibetan relationship, and recent Chinese official policies on national ethnic autonomy. The article then concludes with a policy prescription that draws on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

### **The 2008 Crisis and the Current Impasse.**

After the March 2008 demonstrations in Tibet and various supportive demonstrations that followed the Olympic torch around the world, the Chinese government aggressively condemned the Tibetan rioters and pressed foreign governments to contain overseas demonstrations. With Olympic success at stake, however, the PRC government was under consider-

able pressure to meet with Tibetan exile leaders. A quick meeting in Shenzhen was followed by two formally scheduled conferences with the Dalai Lama's representatives in July and October 2008. The latter two dates were considered the seventh and eighth rounds in a series of largely unproductive Sino-Tibetan meetings that began in 2002.<sup>3</sup> While Beijing was interested solely in damage control, the Tibetans came to the table with a serious proposal for negotiation.

In response to a Chinese request at the July meeting that they outline their position on autonomy under the Chinese constitution, the Tibetans prepared and submitted at the October meeting a "Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for the Tibetan People."<sup>4</sup> In this memorandum the Tibetans proposed a hybrid of China's two constitutional models for regional autonomy: the PRC Constitution Article 4 model on minority nationality autonomy and the PRC Constitution Article 31 model on special administrative regions, as is applied to Hong Kong.<sup>5</sup>

The Tibetan Memorandum offered this "middle way" approach as a negotiating position.<sup>6</sup> This approach favors "genuine autonomy" under Chinese rule and has long been advocated by the Dalai Lama as an intermediate position between full independence and the current lack of autonomy. Even before the meetings, the Chinese reiterated their long-standing position that the "contacts and dialogues were about the Dalai Lama's personal future, and not so-called 'China-Tibet negotiation'" or "dialogue between Han and Tibetan people."<sup>7</sup> They went so far as to challenge the Dalai Lama's credentials to represent the Tibetan people, insisting

that he must speak to the central government as a “common person.”<sup>8</sup>

The Chinese position hardened in response to the Tibetan Memorandum, accusing the Tibetans in a State Council Press Conference of seeking “half-independence,” and “covert independence.”<sup>9</sup> They argued that Tibet has always been an inseparable part of China and accused Tibetan exiles of various misdeeds, including proposals of “ethnic cleansing” in the Memorandum and activities such as colluding with “Eastern Turkistan terrorists.” The State Council Address declared, “[w]e never discussed the so-called ‘Tibet issue’ and will never make a concession.”<sup>10</sup> In the face of Chinese rejection of the Tibet-

with their own culture and traditions.

**The Historical Sino-Tibetan Relationship.** While Chinese policies have acknowledged that Tibetans have a distinct nationality, they have pressed Tibetan leaders to accept the Chinese interpretation of the Sino-Tibetan past that the Dalai Lama has explicitly rejected. The Sino-Tibetan dispute over interpreting their shared history continues to drive the current policy debate over the legitimacy of Chinese rule and Tibetan claims for greater autonomy. The Chinese claim to have ruled Tibet indirectly during the dynastic period through a relationship in which the Tibetan gov-

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an Memorandum, a large November meeting of Tibetan exiles continued to support this “middle way” approach, even while suspending discussions.<sup>11</sup>

This uncompromising approach has made it clear that Chinese leaders have no interest in responding to Tibetan concerns about greater autonomy. The historical and continued repressive policies and denial of a separate Tibetan identity has no doubt moved Tibetans to defend their distinctive character vigorously, more so than they would have without such subjugation, as was evident in the anger expressed during the 2008 demonstrations and riots. The continued desire to defend their identity as Tibetans contributes to their resilience as a distinctive community

and its religious leaders were subordinate to the Chinese emperor. The Tibetans have seen themselves as independent—though at times as a vassal state—with the Dalai Lama in a patron-priest relationship with the Chinese Emperor. Under either view, there was no direct Chinese rule until after the 1950s occupation. Even the Seventeen-Point Agreement, which the Chinese thrust upon the Dalai Lama after the 1950 invasion, still called only for indirect Chinese rule over an autonomous Tibet.<sup>12</sup>

Chinese accounts usually date China’s claimed incorporation of Tibet to the Mongol-ruled Yuan Dynasty (1270–1368). Tibet scholar Warren Smith describes a carefully crafted diplomatic

relationship between ruling Tibetan lamas and Chinese emperors from the Yuan Dynasty forward, in which Chinese imperial attempts at subordination were matched with Tibetan resistance.<sup>13</sup> Tibet appeared to be at most a vassal state much like Korea on China's northeast border.<sup>14</sup> While the Yuan Emperors valued a patron-priest relationship with Tibetan lamas, the subsequent Chinese Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) appeared to value Tibetan lamas more for their intermediary role with the threatening Mongols. It was only in the middle of the Manchu-dominated Qing Dynasty (1636-1910) that imperial China occasionally occupied and ruled Tibet, and even then the method appeared to be indirect rule as part of the Qing's "exterior empire," though the Eastern Tibetan provinces of Kham and Amdo were sometimes under direct Qing control.<sup>15</sup>

After the Qing's decline Tibet enjoyed *de facto* independence from 1911 until its occupation by the PRC in 1950. While the Chinese are fond of characterizing Tibet during this period as hopelessly feudal in order to justify its "liberation," there is little evidence to show that it was any more feudal than China itself.<sup>16</sup> The indigenous Tibetan government seems to have by then begun the process of modernization, which has since gained further traction with the establishment of democracy for the current government-in-exile.<sup>17</sup>

**China's Current Ethnic Autonomy Policies.** After its 1950 invasion, China promised Tibet full autonomy with indigenous self-rule under the Seventeen-Point Agreement. However, in its post-revolutionary zeal, China

freely interfered in Tibetan affairs. Tibetan anger at such encroachment eventually led to the 1959 uprising, the flight of the Dalai Lama, and the establishment of a government in exile. This government-in-exile has offered an independent Tibetan voice of resistance through the long years of authoritarian policies and strict Chinese control. This has no doubt contributed to the resilience of the Tibetan identity, which was further developed and encouraged by the many writings and efforts of the exile government. Repression reached its height during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Though there was some remorse and liberalization after the Cultural Revolution, Tibetan demonstrations in the late 1980s led to further crackdowns.

The same harsh Chinese policies of suspicion and distrust have persisted ever since, though in recent years Chinese leaders have sought to temper their political control with economic development assistance. This is seemingly done in the belief that Tibetan anger and resistance is driven by economic factors and not the strong sense of ethnic and religious identity expressed by Tibetan exiles. Tibetans resent these policies, based on their perception that much of this economic activity does not assist Tibetans, but instead aims to achieve Chinese security objectives and to benefit ethnic Chinese who are encouraged to move to the region.<sup>18</sup> Tibetans have meanwhile expressed quiet resistance in numerous ways, including sending their children to Tibetan schools run by the exile government in India. With the lack of free expression and association in Tibet, the leadership in exile, especially the Dalai

Lama, has long provided the coherent expression of Tibetan identity that sustains the community today.

China's formal policies on Tibet are promulgated in articles on national regional autonomy in the 1982 PRC Constitution<sup>19</sup> and in the Law on Regional National Autonomy (LRNA) passed in 1984, as revised in 2001.<sup>20</sup> The LRNA expressly provides protection for national minorities in the areas

this brand of governance is accompanied by the harsh security measures of China's omnipresent Public Security Bureau and the People's Liberation Army, Tibetans may feel the urge to resist Chinese rule in any way they can.

The May 2004 Chinese White Paper on Regional Ethnic Autonomy in Tibet offers a Chinese rebuttal of such criticisms, highlighting favorable statistics on Tibetan participation in auton-

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of language, education, political representation, administrative appointments, local economic and financial policies, and the use of local natural resources. Still, Article 15 of the LRNA provides that autonomous areas carry out their role "under the unified leadership of the State Council and shall be subordinate to it." A basic regulation on the exercise of autonomy has never been enacted for the Tibet Autonomous Region, though other separate regulations that largely track national laws have. In practice, these national minority laws enhance central authority and address Chinese security concerns in respect to their two most restive minority regions, Tibet and Xinjiang. Central officials are generally appointed to important Chinese Communist Party (CCP) positions, and a complex process of CCP review and approval of all local legislative initiatives assures very little local minority autonomy.<sup>21</sup> When

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ous governance, including a 93 percent voter turnout rate for county level elections and over 80 percent Tibetan occupation of the top positions of various autonomous governments and standing committees.<sup>22</sup> Critical reports, however, argue that Tibetans lack real power and are generally subordinate to more powerful Chinese officials.<sup>23</sup>

The weakness of minority autonomy is evident in the exercise of administrative power on both national and local levels. Pragmatically, the top official in the TAR will nearly always represent the interest of the Central Government. This leads Tibetans to see themselves as a subordinate class, further encouraging the repressive siege mentality that may sustain their cause. Furthermore, there is no sign of the indigenous form of self-rule promised in the Seventeen-Point Agreement—promises of autonomy under indigenous systems of governance were clearly envisioned as

temporary. A 1997 report of the International Commission of Jurists supports this argument, noting that while “Tibetans are in positions of nominal authority, they are often shadowed by more powerful Chinese officials” and “every local organ is shadowed by a CCP committee or ‘leading group.’”<sup>24</sup>

Added to these structural and ideological impediments has been a long history of repressive acts. Chinese repression has included military occupation and crack-downs, the sacking and razing of Buddhist monasteries during the Cultural Revolution, coerced “reeducation” of monks and nuns in monasteries, large-scale imprisonment of dissidents, compulsory renunciation of the Dalai Lama, and the forced relocation of rural dwellers and herders to more populated areas. Tibetan resentment is expressed in public, but more often muted, ways such as sending their children to India for education, or declining to wear Tibetan ceremonial clothes when asked by Chinese officials. Resistance is difficult when nearly all avenues to defiance have been closed by strict control of expression and aggressive policies of reeducation. Such heavy-handed tactics and the consequent urge to resist appear to encourage Tibetan loyalty to the Dalai Lama and China’s demands for his renunciation. Tibetan resentment has bubbled over into mass demonstrations in 1959, 1989, and 2008. An argument grounded in Tibet’s rich sense of history, and sustained in the Dalai Lama’s guardianship of Tibet’s religious and cultural traditions, demonstrates that repression breeds determined resistance, which in turn breeds a deeper sense of identity and resilience.

### **Beyond Repression and Resistance.**

The unrelenting Chinese political control over Tibet has encouraged Tibetan resistance. The few changes the Chinese government has made have too often fallen short of what had been promised, and have failed to meet international standards. Soon after the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was passed, China declared that there are no indigenous peoples in China,<sup>25</sup> claiming that “for 5,000 years the Chinese were always united with minorities living on their own lands.”<sup>26</sup> The 2008 demonstrations in Tibet call into question this image of ethnic satisfaction and harmony. The immediate harsh Chinese crackdown followed by expressions of Chinese indifference in the late-2008 discussions did little to repair Tibetan alienation and despair.

If China and the world would like to see this situation improve there are clear avenues to consider. First, the political leadership in China should acknowledge that their current policies of excessive control have only bred the kinds of sustained resistance and doubts about Chinese rule they have sought to dispel. The Chinese government has long feared that Tibetans simply want to split the country. They claim to prefer what they characterize as a harmonious society, effectively denying the Tibetan identity. To achieve this society, the Chinese need to return autonomous control to the Tibetan community.

Second, they need to admit that the genuine autonomy proposed by the Tibetan Memorandum is consistent with both China’s domestic constitutional framework and its international obligations. The agreement between

the constitution's and Seventeen-Point Agreement's recognition of a special obligation to indigenous groups has been widely acknowledged as the impetus behind the "one country, two systems" model applied to Hong Kong under PRC Constitution Article 31. By voting for the UN Declaration, which offers similar commitments to indigenous peoples worldwide, China demonstrated a capacity to appreciate this point. The Memorandum was offered as a negotiating platform and should be taken as such. It reflects a Tibetan willingness to compromise from the independence they might otherwise be entitled to seek.<sup>27</sup>

Third, the Chinese Government should take advantage of the Dalai Lama as a negotiating partner. Speculation often has it that the Chinese government is playing for time, hoping that

the tensions in Xinjiang by allowing the Uyghurs control over their own situation within a currently prosperous China. Moreover, large numbers of Tibetans have consistently supported the Dalai Lama's "middle way" approach and would likely support any agreement he proffered. The recent Tibetan election of the youthful 42-year-old Lobsang Sangay as the new prime minister of the exile government, along with the Dalai Lama's indications of a desire to withdraw from his historical political role, promises not only sustained leadership in the exile government, but also signals that the window of opportunity to deal directly with the Dalai Lama will someday close.<sup>28</sup>

Fourth, international partners should use their offices to encourage Chinese officials to embrace the Tibetan Memorandum as a negotiating doc-

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the Tibetan cause will die with the Dalai Lama. With his death, however, this superb and reasonable negotiating partner will be lost. Beyond the equanimity of his autonomy proposals, Chinese officials should be mindful of his superior capacity to deliver on his promises. There is no reason to fear the slippery slopes often raised by Chinese officials—that Uyghurs in Xinjiang may seek a similar deal or that Tibetans may use this as the first step to independence. Such an arrangement may offer a very positive model for resolving

ument. China has talked with Tibetan representatives about this issue, but to little purpose, proving that it is not enough to encourage discussions. The Memorandum, in conjunction with the various documents discussed under the second point above, offers a more concrete framework for productive discussion and should specifically be promoted in foreign policy.

Finally, China's relationship with Tibet should be built on cooperation and respect instead of repression and control. Chinese leaders, who have

long promoted Tibetan culture to tourists, should respect Tibetan traditions instead of demeaning them as backward and feudal. At the same time, China's growing economic capacities should be shared. Such generosity in spirit and substance will ultimately prove the measure of China's Tibet policies, both for Tibetans and for the world.

These policy prescriptions are ultimately interconnected. It should be remembered that China's policies on the indigenous Tibetan people do not exist in isolation from China's other foreign policy concerns. The Nobel Laureate Dalai Lama has long been ranked as one of the most popular political figures in the world. As the fourth item above suggests, even while formally recognizing the PRC, leading foreign nations have long been

uncomfortable with China's repressive Tibet policies. With its recent rise, China's approach to ruling a peripheral community has become an even more personal concern for foreign leaders. If China achieves a dominant position in global affairs, as is widely predicted, how can we expect it to treat other peoples around the world? In this sense Tibet has become a barometer of what might be expected from PRC dominance. A policy built on cooperation and respect in Tibet would not only benefit the Tibetan people, but would surely send the right signal to the world at large.

## NOTES

1 United Nations, "UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples," Internet, [http://www.tebteba.org/tebteba\\_files/ipr/undrip/OfficialResolution/A61L.67%20eng.pdf](http://www.tebteba.org/tebteba_files/ipr/undrip/OfficialResolution/A61L.67%20eng.pdf) (date accessed: 4 April 2011).

2 James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

3 Over the decades there have been other Sino-Tibetan meetings, but the round of meetings beginning in 2002 have been the most sustained. While the Tibetans, as advocated again in their 2008 memorandum, aimed to reach a settlement that guaranteed genuine autonomy under what they characterize as the "middle way" approach, the Chinese have generally declared that they are only interested in discussing the status of the Dalai Lama, as again articulated in response to the Memorandum.

4 Tibet Autonomous Region, "Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for the Tibetan People," *Seventh Sino-Tibetan Meeting*, 4 November 2008.

5 The critical language in PRC Constitution, Article 4 provides: "Regional autonomy is practiced in areas where people of minority nationalities live in compact communities; in these areas organs of self-government are established for the exercise of the right of autonomy." PRC Constitution, Article 31 provides: "The state may establish special administrative regions when necessary. The systems to be instituted in special administrative regions shall be prescribed by law enacted by the National People's Congress in light of the specific conditions."

6 Tracking the areas of autonomy typical of indigenous people's rights listed in the UN Indigenous Peoples' Declaration, the Tibetan Memorandum sought autonomy in eleven policy areas, including language, culture, religion, education, environmental protection, utilization of natural resources, economic development and trade, public health, public security, population migration, and cultural, educational, and religious exchanges with other countries. All of these except for the requested guarantees relating to local control over public security, migration, and external exchanges reflect unfulfilled commitments to ethnic minority autonomy already promised by the Chinese under Article 4. As with Hong Kong, the Tibetan side further asked that local autonomous laws not be subject to Central Government approval and that the Central Government not be allowed to amend the arrangement unilaterally. They added a controversial request that the current thirteen contiguous Tibetan autonomous areas be unified into one as a geographical matter. Beyond the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), there are presently twelve contiguous Tibetan autonomous areas in adjoining provinces. China has long objected, since such a unified Tibetan area would constitute one quarter of contemporary China. While China's existing national autonomy laws seem to promise that identified minorities living in a contiguous area will enjoy a single autonomous region for local self-rule, they have refused this for Tibetans. Tibetans argue that since they are only seek-

request that the current thirteen contiguous Tibetan autonomous areas be unified into one as a geographical matter. Beyond the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), there are presently twelve contiguous Tibetan autonomous areas in adjoining provinces. China has long objected, since such a unified Tibetan area would constitute one quarter of contemporary China. While China's existing national autonomy laws seem to promise that identified minorities living in a contiguous area will enjoy a single autonomous region for local self-rule, they have refused this for Tibetans. Tibetans argue that since they are only seeking autonomy there is no reason their areas cannot be united, while China seems to fear such unity will pose temptations toward greater national disunity.

7 "Chinese official urges Dalai Lama to respond with sincerity after recent contact," *Xinhua*, 6 July 2008.

8 "Expert calls for dialogue on Tibet within China's constitutional framework," *Xinhua*, 18 July 2006. This view was further supported by Dong Yunhu, the Director General of the State Council Information Office, who stated, "The Central Government will never discuss the future of Tibet with the Dalai Lama," as "he has lost all right to negotiate on the future of Tibet." - "China unwilling to broach Tibet with Dalai," *Indo-Asian News Service*, 15 July 2008.

9 Zhu Weiqun, "Address at the Press Conference" (State Council Office, Beijing, 10 November 2008).

10 *Xinhua*, "Tibet Sets 'Serfs Emancipation Day,'" Internet, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-01/19/content\\_7410293.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-01/19/content_7410293.htm) (date accessed: 19 January 2009).

11 "China's Communist Regime Losing Ground," *Agencies*, 16 January 2008.

12 "Agreement of the Central People's Government and the Local Government of Tibet on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet," Internet, <http://www.ti-bet.net/en/diir/pubs/phri/17point/data/app1.html> (date accessed: 4 April 2011). The Seventeen-Point Agreement was essentially an agreement presented to the Dalai Lama on a "take it or leave it" basis after the Chinese invasion of Tibet. It promised Tibet autonomy under Chinese rule with the right to maintain the traditional form of government.

13 Warren W. Smith, Jr., *Tibetan Nation: A History of Tibetan Nationalism and Sino-Tibetan Relations* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1996), 83-100.

14 Pamela Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (University of California, 1999), 327-336.

15 Warren W. Smith, Jr., *Tibetan Nation: A History of Tibetan Nationalism and Sino-Tibetan Relations* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1996), 134-138, 145, 151.

16 Robert Barnett, *Authenticating Tibet, Answers to China's 100 Questions*, Anne-Marie Blondeau and Katia Buffetrille, eds., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) 81-84.

17 Lobsang Sangay, "Tibet: Exiles Journey," *Journal of Democracy* 14, No. 3, (2003):119-130.

18 Warren W. Smith, "China's Policy on Tibetan Autonomy," *East-West Center Washington Working Papers*, No. 2 (October 2004); Andrew M. Fisher, *Authenticating Tibet*, Anne-Marie Blondeau and Ka-tia Buffetrille, eds., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 269.

19 PRC Constitution (1982), Articles 4, 59, 65, 89 and 112-122.

20 Law of the People's Republic of China on Regional National Autonomy, 1984, revised 2001.

21 See Chunli Xia, "Autonomous Legislative Power in Regional Ethnic Autonomy of the People's Republic of China: The Law and the Reality," presented in Conference on "One Country, Two Systems, Three Legal Orders—Perspectives on Evolution," Macau, February 2007 (citing Organic Law of the People's Republic of China, Article 7 and the Legislative Law, Article 63).

22 Office of the State Council of the PRC, *White Paper on "Regional Ethnic Autonomy in Tibet"*, (Beijing, May 2004).

23 Minority Rights Group International, "Human Rights in China and Minority Rights Group International, China: Exclusion, Marginalization and Rising Tension" Internet, <http://hrchina.org/public/PDFs/MRG-HRIC.China.Report.pdf> (date accessed: 4 April 2011).

24 *Tibet: Human Rights and the Rule of Law*, (Geneva: International Commission of Jurists, 1997), 14-21.

25 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Switzerland, "China Concerned with Protection of Indigenous Peoples' Rights," Internet, <http://ch.China-embassy.org/eng/ztnr/rqwt/t138829.htm> (date accessed: 4 April 2011).

26 Tong Zhihua, (speeches, Human Rights Council, 1st Meeting, 11th Drafting Session)..

27 *Advisory Opinion, Accordance With International Law of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in Respect of Kosovo*, International Court of Justice, 22 July 2010; *Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples*, 1960 UNGA Resolution 1514 (XV), 15 UN Gaor, Supp. (No. 16), UN Doc. A/4684 (1960), 66.

The exile government, its Kolan Tripa or prime minister and cabinet have long served in a subordinate role under the Dalai Lama, with whom China generally deals directly, but the Dalai Lama's expressed desire to relinquish his political role will no doubt produce changes in this formula when eventually accepted by the exile community. While the Chinese government will likely maintain the fiction that they are dealing only with the Dalai Lama, his stated intentions and the emergence of new exile leadership surely signal a coming diminution of the Dalai Lama's role. "Lobsang Sangay elected Tibetan exile leader," *BBC*, 27 April 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-13205481>.