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MONGOLIA: Authorities don't follow neighbours' exclusion of religious leaders

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Even though Mongolia's influential neighbours China and Russia have not recently hosted Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso XIV or Pope John Paul II, Forum 18 News Service has found that in Mongolia they are welcome guests. This appears to be because Mongolia regards the Dalai Lama as a solely religious figure, and the Pope as primarily a head of state. Discussing the exiled Tibetan religious leader's latest visit with Forum 18, Mongolian military colonel E. Batmunkh pointed out that "we are a state with equal rights now. We don't look to the Chinese - if the Dalai Lama is invited to Mongolia, he comes." Fr Anatoli Fesechko of Ulaanbaatar's Russian Orthodox church, talking to Forum 18 about a possible papal visit, said that the Moscow Patriarchate did not consider Mongolia to be a part of its canonical territory, "so there can't be interconfessional conflict between us."

In Mongolia, Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso XIV and Pope John Paul II are welcome guests, even though government policy in the surrounding states of China and Russia defines both as personae non gratae. In 1959 the Tibetan Buddhist leader fled Chinese occupation; he has been refused visas to Russia since 1994. Due to the Vatican's ties with Taiwan and Russian Orthodox pressure respectively, the present pope is also unable to travel to either China or Russia.

Queried how, with such influential neighbours, it was possible to receive the present Dalai Lama, the member of Mongolia's State Khural (parliament) for the southern aimag (region) of Bayankhongor (Bayanhongor) remarked "I'm surprised myself." The visits were "very risky politically," Sendenjav Dulam told Forum 18 News Service on 18 October, "but we have very shrewd diplomacy and strong political and economic relations with China." Dulam [without surnames, Mongolians normally use only their first name, which is written after a patronymic that may be shortened to an initial] also stressed that the visits were "a religious affair – we politicians don't participate." On 17 October Deputy Abbot Yo Amgalan of Gandantegchenlin Buddhist monastery confirmed to Forum 18 that the Dalai Lama comes to Mongolia solely at the invitation of the country's Buddhist community.

This is a relatively new departure, however, since the Mongolian state has long maintained a special relationship with Tibet. In 1913 the last Buddhist ruler of pre-socialist Mongolia and the thirteenth Dalai Lama ratified a treaty recognising "the formation of an independent [Tibetan] state and the proclamation of the Dalai Lama as ruler of Tibet." Crucially, the two sides also pledged that Mongolia and Tibet would both "afford each other assistance against external and internal dangers from now and for all time."

Today however, Mongolia's position is quite different, Dulam insisted to Forum 18: "We consider Tibet to be a part of China." In an interview in Ulaanbaatar on 19 October, Samdan Tsedendamba maintained that the 1913 Tibet-Mongolian Treaty was no longer in force. (The adviser to Mongolian president Natsag Bagabandi on religious affairs, Tsedendamba spoke to Forum 18 on this issue in his capacity as a religious studies lecturer at the Mongolian State University.) Nevertheless, while the Mongolian government now views the Dalai Lama and Tibet as separate issues, he said, China regards them as inseparable, and so the Dalai Lama's visits remain "a very sensitive subject" in Mongolian-Chinese relations. The Buddhist leader's last visit in November 2002 was particularly difficult to arrange, according to Tsedendamba: "The Chinese have been complaining, of course... but the final decision had to rest with Mongolia."

Forum 18 found this view echoed by military colonel E. Batmunkh. While socialist Mongolia was subject to control by neighbouring countries, "we are a state with equal rights now," he remarked on 17 October. "We don't look to the Chinese - if the Dalai Lama is invited to Mongolia, he comes." On 18 October a Buddhist source in Ulaanbaatar told Forum 18 that the two political factors making the Dalai Lama's visits possible were the exiled leader's positive reception among the majority Tibetan Buddhist population and Mongolia's position as a small nation enjoying generally good relations with China. "This means the issue can't become a bargaining tool," he explained.

While initially telling Forum 18 that the Mongolian state "never invites" religious leaders, Dulam acknowledged that Pope John Paul II holds an open invitation issued by President Nagabandi in 2000. In August 2003 the pope was meant to consecrate both Ulaanbaatar's new yurt-shaped Catholic cathedral and Bishop Wenceslao Padilla, the Filipino bishop told Forum 18 on 20 October, but was unable to make the long journey from the Vatican due to his poor health. While Bishop Wenceslao acknowledged that the "sensitive issue" of a possible stop-over in the Russian republic of Tatarstan had also been a factor contributing to the trip's

postponement, he maintained that there were no similar considerations in Mongolia. Showing Forum 18 photographs of the consecration service, he pointed out local Russian Orthodox parish priest Fr Anatoli Fesechko among the guests and described him as "a good friend of mine."

Asked about local Catholic-Orthodox relations by Forum 18 on 20 October, Fr Anatoli Fesechko of Ulaanbaatar's Russian Orthodox church of the Holy Trinity remarked that the Moscow Patriarchate did not consider Mongolia to be a part of its canonical territory, "so there can't be interconfessional conflict between us." Tsedendamba told Forum 18 that he was not aware of any criticism from the local Russian Orthodox community when the papal visit to Mongolia was announced. He also pointed out that, since prominent Russian Orthodox churchman Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad visited the country in July 2001, "they would have no grounds to complain about any other religious leader visiting anyway, especially as a head of state."

A printer-friendly map of Mongolia is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=mongoli>

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