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*Young Tibetans have grappled for years with the radical idea of a Tibet without the Dalai Lama. Now, as His Holiness steps down, Tenzin Tsundue traces their difficult moment of change*

My Gandhian guru, Rajiv Voraji, once told me a tale of a small kingdom ruled by a brute who'd break his subjects' backs with heavy taxes while he made merry. The poor farmers, unable to revolt, left for a jungle. When the king's rations finished, he realised his mistake and journeyed to the jungle, knelt down and begged them to return, saying, "I am not your king but your servant."

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has done the opposite: he's decided to abdicate his political powers to an elected leadership, committing the 400-year old institution of the Dalai Lama to history. At a time when street revolutions are afoot and despots are fighting to retain their last bastions, the Dalai Lama and his people are engaged in a polite pingpong exchange. He wants his people to choose their own leadership while they — unable to rise above their emotions — are pleading with him to continue.

As a child, my first image of the Dalai Lama was on a postage stamp. He was holding a child, so we were envious and our parents said we were the unfortunate ones. For Tibetans, he is the reincarnation of Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva who vowed to be with us until we all achieve nirvana. So when he's making fundamental changes — terminating the Ganden Phodrang government that's existed since 1642 — it's a deeply emotional moment and the change is unlikely to be easy.

This revolutionary change is a continuation of the previous Dalai Lama's reforms of the early 20th century, which were also resisted by the aristocrats and clergy. The Dalai Lama recently told the media that as a teen, he witnessed how his officials scolded people away instead of hearing them — he already felt the need for change. And in exile, aged 28 and guided by Indian leaders like Nehru and Sardar Patel, he introduced democracy in 1963. After carefully nurturing this democratic culture, today as he is retiring, a system of elected leadership is already in place.

But our 43-member Parliament's rejection of his retirement is not just an emotional gesture; it reveals a complex relationship at play. I sat through the two-day deliberations. Every member knew it was the Dalai Lama's final decision and was bound to be returned to them — perhaps with a good scolding. And yet Parliament voted he should remain. It made me ask: Why do politicians lack confidence in carrying out the Dalai Lama's wishes, and fear their easy acceptance will be misconstrued as over-enthusiasm?

Some politicians, including the prime minister-in-exile, Prof Samdhong Rinpoche, alerted everyone to be wary of Tibetan writers who pen “criticism of the Dalai Lama”. Besides his nuanced interpretation, others suggested the retirement has been triggered by such writers. This isn’t new. In the 1980s, when the first batch of India-educated intellectuals started to speak out against blind faith and superstition, their English was nothing like the usual reverential Tibetan prose. In 2002, when Tibetan intellectual Jamyang Norbu wrote in Newsweek that “The Dalai Lama is like a banyan tree under which nothing grows,” there was uproar and goading to be “faithful, obedient and loyal”.

The late historian Dawa Norbu hid on a Delhi-bound bus among vegetables and shoeboxes to escape Dharamsala when a mob went berserk about his statement, in a magazine he edited, that “Tibetan leadership is not dynamic enough”. Norbu taught history for 19 years at JNU and continued writing. Fellow writer-activists Pema Bhumi and Jamyang Norbu left for the US, while activist Lhasang Tsering stayed in Dharamsala calling himself the ‘resident devil’. That makes two devils in Dharamsala. The other is the Dalai Lama, dubbed by Beijing “the devil in monk’s robes”. He laughs this off by posing with his index fingers as horns above his big sunny smile.

My friend Lukar Jam is the latest devil on the prowl. He is famous for his cutting comments that infuriate critics. This former political prisoner had to resign as a researcher from the exile government’s security department for his vocal support for independence (as opposed to autonomy).

Writers become heroes if they criticise China but become ‘unfaithful’ if they criticise domestic policies. Our community is largely conformist and traditionalist, so free minds and non-believers are often misunderstood and labelled ‘anti- Dalai Lama’. Some politicians do this to look loyal. But I haven’t met a single intellectual who doesn’t respect His Holiness. The situation is better today but people still cower in fear of getting the ‘anti-Dalai Lama’ tag.

The biggest protest since the 2008 uprising happened last year by students and intellectuals protesting China’s policy of replacing Tibetan school books with Chinese ones. Beijing is now cracking down savagely on Tibetan writers, poets, singers and artists since they provide leadership by their creative expressions. Recently, both the Dalai Lama and prime minister-in-exile praised these heroes’ courage and demanded their release. One such jailed hero-writer, Shokdung, was once hated by some in our community for being too vocally a non-believer and speaking against Buddhist practices ridden with ritualism.

Thank god it is the Dalai Lama himself who’s calling for change. He understands that 400 years of faith in him has become a culture of dependency. Thus only he can liberate their minds. Our politicians defend Tibetan democracy by claiming that since the majority has faith in His Holiness’ leadership, it is democratic to insist that he continues as our leader. But conversely, the Dalai Lama wants elected leaders to completely democratise the system.

I believe a thinking Buddhist reasons and finds no place for blind faith. For him, democracy is the missing wing, else ‘faithfulness’ is mistaken as the wish of the majority.

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*The views expressed in this piece are that of the author and the publication of the piece on this website does not necessarily reflect their endorsement by the website.*