



## INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

### **Conference on Tibetan and Vietnamese Buddhism highlights need for cooperation to defend religious freedom**

<http://www.savetibet.org/conference-on-tibetan-and-vietnamese-buddhism-highlights-need-for-cooperation-to-defend-religious-freedom>

July 12, 2018

At a conference on July 11, 2018 about freedom of religion and foreign policy, Tenzin Dorjee, chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, ran through a list of hardships imposed on the people of Tibet—from extensive surveillance by the Chinese government to restrictions on travel and the stationing of police officers in monasteries—then said that words alone were inadequate to address their plight.

“Simply noting injustice is not enough,” Dorjee said. “We must encourage the US government and others to do more.”

Dorjee’s statement provided an overall message for the conference, which was titled “Freedom of Religion or Belief & Human Rights: Vietnamese and Tibetan Buddhism under threat” and hosted by the International Campaign for Tibet and the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights.

The event, which took place in Washington, DC, gave members of Congress, policy experts and faith leaders an opportunity to participate in panel discussions on how to protect religious freedom around the world, particularly in Tibet and Vietnam.

### **Police state conditions**

In Tibet, where Chinese officials increasingly try to control the practice of the local Buddhist religion, conditions have come to resemble a police state, Dorjee said.

Dorjee, whose parents smuggled him out of Tibet when he was an infant, pointed to the examples of the [11th Panchen Lama, a high-ranking religious leader who was kidnapped by the Chinese 23 years ago and has not been seen in public since](#), and [Tashi Wangchuk, who was recently sentenced to five years in jail after he was seen on video advocating for Tibetan language instruction](#).

Wangchuk’s imprisonment was also raised by Arjia Rinpoche, a fellow panelist at the conference who is the former abbot of Kumbum Monastery in Tibet and current head of the Tibetan Mongolian Buddhist Cultural Center in Indiana.

Several speakers said Vietnamese Buddhists face similar oppression in their country. Suggestions were made on how the issues of Vietnamese and Tibetan religious freedom could be raised at different levels with governments and the international community.

In a video message, Thich Quang Do, patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, who is under house arrest in Ho Chi Minh City, said Buddhists in Vietnam and Tibet “share the same punishment, torture and detention from governments that are determined to stifle our voice.”

## Threats to US and global security

The hostility faced by Buddhists in Vietnam and Tibet is not just a challenge to them, but also to the peace and security of the United States and the global order, said Matteo Mecacci, president of the International Campaign for Tibet.

Mecacci warned that a dangerous “alternative model” is on the rise in places like China that says it’s possible to build a strong country and economy while denying religious freedom and human rights.

Todd Stein, senior policy advisor to Rep. Chellie Pingree (D-Maine), said Tibet “provides a real-time example of the intersection of religious freedom and security.”

Stein said China’s attempts to control Tibetan Buddhism—including selecting the eventual reincarnation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama—will likely cause instability in the area, which could have a spillover effect throughout the region and threaten American interests.

## Taking action

Many of the panelists said actions could be taken to prevent that outcome, including lobbying elected leaders to make religious freedom a priority in foreign policy and to raise concerns about prisoners of conscience like Tashi Wangchuk and Thich Quang Do.

Another suggestion was to form alliances among groups that care about this issue, such as advocacy organizations, private businesses and faith-based institutions.

In the case of Tibet, several actions can be taken, including [asking members of Congress to approve the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act](#) and the [Trump administration to appoint a Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, as required by law](#).

In addition, Mecacci said the upcoming Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, during which US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will convene leaders from around the world, will be “an important opportunity to work at a multilateral level with likeminded governments to promote and protect religious freedom, and we hope that it will lead to concrete actions.”

## Learn more about the conference

The panelists at “Freedom of Religion or Belief & Human Rights: Vietnamese and Tibetan Buddhism under threat” included Tenzin Dorjee; Kristina Arriaga, vice chair of the US Commission on

International Religious Freedom; Arjia Rinpoche; Robert Herman, vice president of Freedom House; Todd Stein; Vo Van Ai, president of the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights, Penelope Faulkner, also of VCHR; and Matteo Mecacci of ICT.

Rep. Alan Lowenthal (D-Calif.) addressed the conference and spoke about his experience in Tibet and more indepth about his concern for the people of Vietnam, and a letter was read from Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-Calif.)

[Watch the first panel discussion, “Religious Freedom and American Foreign Policy.”](#)

[Watch the second, “Strategies to Promote Freedom of Religion or Belief in Closed Societies: The Cases of Vietnam and Tibet.”](#)