



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act becomes law, marking new era of American support for Tibetans

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The Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act is now law, signifying a more vigorous interest by the United States in Tibet and the Tibetan people.

This law marks a new era of US support for Tibetans and a challenge to China's discriminatory policies in Tibet. Following unanimous passage by both the [House](#) and the [Senate](#), President Donald Trump signed it on December 19, 2018.

The legislation calls for American diplomats, journalists and ordinary citizens to have equal access to the Tibet Autonomous Region and other Tibetan areas as their Chinese counterparts enjoy in the US.

“This is truly a turning point for Americans, Tibetans and all who care about equality, justice and human rights,” said Matteo Mecacci, president of the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT). “By passing this impactful and innovative law, the US has blazed a path for other countries to follow and let the Chinese government know that it will face real consequences for its discrimination against the Tibetan people.”

Why it's needed

The Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act is based on the diplomatic principle of reciprocity, which calls on countries to give equal rights to one another's citizens.

When it comes to Tibet, China does not reciprocate. Although Chinese citizens travel freely throughout the US, Chinese authorities severely restrict Americans' ability to access Tibet. US citizens—including government officials, reporters and tourists—who seek to enter Tibetan areas are routinely rejected, and the few who do get in are forced to stay on strictly controlled official tours, where the true situation of the Tibetan people is hidden from them.

The situation is worst of all for Tibetan-Americans, who are almost always denied the right to make a pilgrimage to their ancestral land and to meet their family members there.

“The Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act specifically highlights the discriminatory attitude of Chinese officials toward Tibetan-Americans who seek to visit Tibet,” ICT Vice President Bhuchung K. Tsering said. “The Chinese embassy and consulates routinely place such Tibetan-Americans under a more stringent and non-consular application process merely because they are of Tibetan origin. This includes subjecting them to vigorous interviews by United Front officials, collecting personal and family information and eventually denying them access.”

What it does

Until now, China has been able to use its economic and military power to isolate Tibet without much resistance from the international community. With reciprocal access to Tibet becoming law, China will begin to feel the weight of its unfair policies.

The law requires the Secretary of State to assess Americans' level of access to Tibet within 90 days of its enactment and to send a report to Congress every year afterward identifying the Chinese officials responsible for keeping Americans out of Tibet.

The Secretary will then ban those officials from receiving visas to enter the US.

During a Senate hearing on Dec. 4, a senior State Department official responded to questions from Senators by saying that the department shares the goals of the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act and will work to implement it once it becomes law.

Mecacci said the law is significant because China takes advantage of open societies like the US to spread its propaganda. Over the past 10 years, nearly three times as many Chinese delegations have visited Western countries compared to the number of Western delegations allowed into Tibet. Earlier this month, Sen. Cory Gardner (R-Colo.), a cosponsor of the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act, noted that "Chinese officials who purport to represent Tibet have been freely coming to the United States."

"Now that reciprocal access has become law," Mecacci said, "those officials will no longer be able to do that, unless China changes its policies to allow Americans to enter Tibet just as Chinese are able to enter the United States."

How it happened

For Tibetan-Americans and supporters of Tibet, the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act has been a long time coming. Earlier versions of the legislation were introduced in 2014 and 2015 but never went up for a vote.

In 2017, the legislation was reintroduced in the House of Representatives by Reps. Jim McGovern (D-Mass.) and Randy Hultgren (R-Ill.) and in the Senate by Sens. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) and Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisc.). On July 25, 2018, the bill was approved unanimously by the [House Judiciary Committee](#). Exactly two months later, it was passed by the entire [House](#) and referred to the Senate.

The [Senate Foreign Relations Committee](#) approved the bill unanimously on Nov. 28, followed by the [full Senate](#) passing it on Dec. 11. The bill became law when Trump signed it today.

Throughout that process, Tibetan-Americans and Tibet supporters worked hard to apprise their members of Congress about the lack of access to Tibet and called on them to support the bill. They wrote thousands of letters to their members of Congress and personally participated in Tibet Lobby Days in Washington, DC in 2017 and 2018 as well as in a [special Lobby Day](#) around the country on Oct. 17.

"Tibet supporters have played a vital role in this legislation," Tsering said. "We would like to thank them for their tireless efforts, and we want to express our immense gratitude to Congressmen McGovern and Hultgren and Sens. Rubio and Baldwin for their indispensable leadership."

As the bill was in the process of getting approved, the Chinese government began pushing out misleading propaganda, claiming the bill interferes in China's domestic affairs. Mecacci rebutted those claims in a [statement](#) on Dec. 15. He highlighted how the bill was about American interests and how China was the one interfering in the American legislative process.

The Washington Post also exposed China's hypocrisy when it reported on Oct. 11 that the Chinese consulate wrote to some Senators urging them not to support the bill.

What happens next

Now that reciprocal access to Tibet has become law, ICT will work with the State Department to make sure it is fully implemented, Mecacci said.

The law arrives at a precarious moment inside Tibet. Just this year, [three Tibetans](#) have self-immolated, lighting their own bodies on fire in a tragic attempt to draw the world's attention to China's oppression. A total of [155 Tibetans](#) have self-immolated inside Tibet and China since 2009.

Despite many attempts, American diplomats have only had limited access to Tibet and almost no Beijing-based foreign journalists have been able to travel to Tibet to cover the conditions there, including the self-immolations.

It is hoped that the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act will help curtail human rights abuses in Tibet by pressuring China to open the region to outside observers.

The law reflects growing frustration from politicians across the political spectrum and in the White House at Beijing's lack of reciprocity on several levels of its relationship with the US.

The law builds on the Global Magnitsky Act, which allows for a travel ban and the freezing of assets of human rights violators around the world. Bill Browder, the leading voice behind the Global Magnitsky Act, recently tweeted in support of reciprocal access to Tibet.

"The enactment of the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act is truly a watershed moment," Mecacci said. "For decades, China has ruled over Tibet like it was a private prison. With this new law, the tide is beginning to turn against Beijing. It is imperative now that we make sure the law is fully implemented and that the movement for reciprocal access to Tibet continues to grow around the world."

Mecacci added: "We are already in discussion with political leaders in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and countries in [Europe](#) who are calling for a similar reciprocal access to Tibet law for the citizens of their respective countries."