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MONGOLIA: Authorities thwart the return of Buddhist King

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org/>)

Before 1921, Mongolians recognised a living Buddha as ruler, so the discovery of a legitimate successor to the last ruler has not been viewed with enthusiasm by the present-day government, Forum 18 News Service has found. An anonymous Buddhist source told Forum 18 that the government does not permit Jetsun Dhampa IX to visit Mongolia as "They are scared that he will lay claim to power here." Jetsun Dhampa has, however, maintained that he has "no interest in politics." Widely different views were expressed in Mongolia to Forum 18 of what position he should hold. In 1999 Jetsun Dhampa visited Mongolia unofficially as a tourist, meeting with an enthusiastic popular reception and recognition by some as the religious leader of Mongolia, which embarrassed the government. An official visit seems unlikely in the near future.

By executing Tsar Nicholas II and his family in 1918, the Bolsheviks put a decisive end to Russian rule by a "divinely anointed" monarch. Their revolutionary counterparts in Mongolia faced a trickier task. In the same way that Tibetans regard the Dalai Lama, pre-revolutionary Mongolians revered Bogdo Gegen as both their sovereign ruler and a living Buddha. The leaders of the new Mongolian socialist state may have stripped the eighth Bogdo Gegen of all political authority in 1921, but his natural death in 1924 did not mean that they had got rid of him for good.

In 1936 senior Buddhist monks in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa recognised his reincarnation in a local four-year-old boy. By that time Mongolia was in the grip of a fierce anti-religious campaign in which the authorities used tanks and aircraft to destroy hundreds of Buddhist monasteries and thousands of monks. The discovery of Jetsun Dhampa IX (the title "Bogdo Gegen" or "Most Holy" is conferred only upon installation in Mongolia) was therefore kept secret until the fall of the Soviet-backed regime. As a visitors' guide to Bogdo Gegen's fabulously opulent royal palace complex – now a state museum – in the Mongolian capital Ulaanbaatar notes, the ninth reincarnation remained "unknown by the people until 1990, because religion was rather unwanted by the socialist government."

In that year, Deputy Abbot Yo Amgalan of Mongolia's main Gandantegchenlin Buddhist monastery told Forum 18 News Service on 17 October, "we heard that there was a reincarnated lama in India who was Jetsun Dhampa IX." Mongolia's Buddhists have accepted the current Dalai Lama's 1991 official confirmation of the ninth reincarnation, continued Amgalan. [Without surnames, Mongolians normally use only their first name, which is written after a patronymic that may be shortened to an initial]. Yet, while their organisation, the Centre of Mongolian Buddhists, has asked the government to issue Jetsun Dhampa an entry visa several times since 1990, "we have received no response," he said.

Speaking to Forum 18 in Ulaanbaatar on 18 October, an anonymous Buddhist source explained that the Mongolian government does not permit Jetsun Dhampa IX to visit the country. "They are scared that he will lay claim to power here," he remarked. In July 2000 Jetsun Dhampa was also denied a visa to Russia, but was again able to visit in August 2003. In an interview with religious supplement NG-Religii while in Moscow, the exiled Buddhist leader similarly suggested that the Mongolian state authorities were afraid that he would attempt to wrest political power from them if he returned due to his historical role as both spiritual and temporal ruler. "But I have no interest in politics," he maintained.

In the same interview, Jetsun Dhampa claimed that most Mongolians were his followers, and that all of Mongolia's Buddhist abbots had asked him to become their official spiritual leader. In Ulaanbaatar, Forum 18 found widely differing views as to what position he could hold in present-day Mongolia, however. In what he stressed was his personal view, the head of the foreign affairs department at the Centre of Mongolian Buddhists pointed out that, while the faithful acknowledged the ninth reincarnation, this was only due to the spiritual authority of the Dalai Lama. J. Lhagvademchig did not believe that Jetsun Dhampa's influence over the people was overwhelming. "He doesn't know the Mongolian language – or psychology and culture either. Some will say he is a spiritual master, but others will ask: 'What's the use of this old Tibetan?'" In his opinion, the majority of the population would take the latter view, since "Mongolia is a democratic society now – it is impossible for a reincarnation to return as ruler."

Member of Mongolia's State Khural (parliament) for the southern aimag (region) of Bayankhongor (Bayanhongor), Sendenjav Dulam told Forum 18 on 18 October that, while some Buddhists wanted the return of Bogdo Gegen, such a figure could no longer be head of state. "He could be a spiritual mentor, but not even the head of Mongolian Buddhists," he remarked. While acknowledging himself to be entirely non-religious, a colonel in the Mongolian armed forces was more accommodating towards the idea of Bogdo

Gegen as a national figurehead. "He could come back as president, but not with political power," E. Batmunkh remarked to Forum 18 on 17 October. "Like the British queen."

On 19 October Samdan Tsedendamba confirmed to Forum 18 that the Mongolian authorities had never granted permission for Jetsun Dhampa to visit the country, even though it had received requests ever since 1990. 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.

While Deputy Abbot Amgalan remarked to Forum 18 that "the Mongolian government decides whether he [Jetsun Dhampa] can be Bogdo Gegen," Tsedendamba maintained that it was up to Mongolian Buddhists either formally to confirm as Bogdo Gegen the reincarnation recognised by the Dalai Lama or to have their own leader, since a 1928 state ruling preventing the Mongolian government from acknowledging anyone as Bogdo Gegen has never been annulled. Asked what role a ninth Bogdo Gegen could play in present-day Mongolia, Tsedendamba admitted to Forum 18 that the 1921 agreement which stripped the eighth reincarnation of his political authority could not be considered valid today. However, "its principles have been incorporated into every constitution since then," he remarked. "According to the separation of church and state, a simultaneously political and religious leader is unacceptable."

In July 1999 Jetsun Dhampa did visit Mongolia - "on his own initiative with a tourist visa," according to Tsedendamba. Sendenjav Dulam confirmed to Forum 18 that many people of all ages turned out to see him: "They even came in from the villages when they heard that he was here." Tsedendamba recounted how this unexpected arrival of a prominent member of the Tibetan community in exile created a difficult situation for the Mongolian government, since it came on the eve of an official visit by then Chinese leader Jiang Zemin. "The Chinese thought it had been organised specially and demanded that he be sent back within 24 hours." Since Jetsun Dhampa had come informally as a tourist, however, the Mongolian authorities insisted that he could stay – "just like any tourist" - for 30 days. But his public reception was more than they had bargained for. On visiting a Buddhist monastery in the city of Erdenet, Jetsun Dhampa was given the seat of honour and a seal which stated that he was the ninth Bogdo Gegen, said Tsedendamba, "and recognition of him as the religious leader of Mongolia was expressed."

"The situation got more and more aggravated," he told Forum 18. "Monks began writing to the authorities asking for permission for him to live in Mongolia as religious leader." These events have taught the Mongolian government that it has to be "very careful" about a second visit by Jetsun Dhampa, Tsedendamba concluded. "We learnt that Mongolians are much closer to the issue of Bogdo Gegen than we thought."

A printer-friendly map of Mongolia is available at

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

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY