

The benefits of a Dalai Lama visit

Written by Khedroob Thondup
Monday, 03 August 2020 05:24

In 1997, then-president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) took the bold initiative to invite the Dalai Lama to Taiwan as a state guest for the first time in history.

His foresight allowed Taiwanese to be exposed to the Tibetan leader, who has earned respect as a great Buddhist teacher.

Lee's passing is a true loss for Tibetans, as he was a strong supporter.

Prior to the 1997 visit, much dialogue had taken place.

Our delegation would not have anything to do with the then-Mongolian Tibetan Affairs Commission (MTAC), which was a sticking point in Tibet-Taiwan relations, and we had discussed the closure of this office, as it had become irrelevant.

In due course, the commission's role was diminished and later merged with the Ministry of Culture.

Scores of Tibetans who had entered Taiwan on different passports were offered residency.

His Holiness was allowed entry not only as a religious but also as a political leader.

One direct result of the visit was the setting up of the official Tibet Religious Foundation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Taipei.

A few days before His Holiness' visit to Taiwan, I was asked what I thought of the visit. I said that it was a historic visit, as His Holiness would be visiting a Taiwanese territory. If the visit

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was to be successful, it would be the springboard to visiting China.

The visit was extremely well received by both the government and the people of Taiwan. It left a changed view with us that Taiwan was not part of China, but instead a separate entity.

In our dialogue with Beijing, they insisted that His Holiness recognize Taiwan as part of China. This was a precondition that Beijing said would lead to future talks.

After visiting Taiwan, seeing the vibrant democracy and making many friends, His Holiness found it difficult to declare that Taiwan was part of China.

In 2001, then-president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) invited His Holiness for a second visit and started the Taiwan Tibet Exchange Foundation to deal directly with the Tibetan government-in-exile.

In 2009, then-president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) allowed His Holiness to visit as a religious leader.

Recently, His Holiness has expressed the desire to again visit Taiwan as a religious leader, as he has a large following in Taiwan and thousands of Taiwanese visit Dharamsala, India, every year.

Even though Taiwan has in the past 10 years made statements that it would welcome a visit, His Holiness has not been able to visit, as recent Taiwan governments have been sensitive to China's hardline position and not been able to hold as independent a view as earlier presidents.

Taiwan has more to gain by allowing His Holiness to visit as a religious leader.

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