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TIBET, TO DEATH, TO LIFE

“The situation today in Tibet is a case of life or death. The policy of the Chinese government is to finish off Tibetan identity and Tibetan culture.” Words that echo the call launched last year by Chinese officials to “a fight to the death against separatism and its religious henchmen”. Words that ring out like a warning, that resonate in the head and wring the heart: The Dalai Lama pronounced them on 4 May 2009 during a public meeting in New York. He also encouraged the audience to go and see what is happening in situ, to see at first hand what is really happening behind the picturesque shop window and to testify - to see at first hand if Tibetans are happy, as the Beijing government assert unceasingly, having sent out envoys all over the world in the framework of a propaganda offensive. Their efforts go as far as authorizing the re-opening of tourism with a huge publicity thrust. The first groups of tourists are well surrounded during their visit to the Potala; but researchers, experts, pilgrims and Tibetan nationals with foreign passports, without forgetting journalists, are systematically refused visas and permits to enter Tibetan territory.

During this time, the official Press Agency obligingly enumerates the government-organized exhibitions relating the Chinese version of Tibet being presented in Hong Kong, Montreal, Mexico and elsewhere. On their side, the Chinese diplomats busy themselves by warning against any inclination on the part of political officials to talk to the Dalai Lama, should he be in their country. Danish and Dutch parliamentarians have already made it known in no uncertain terms that they do not intend to be dictated to by Beijing, which continues to multiply its reprimands, warnings, and threats of reprisals to the world. As if the Forbidden City ruled the world. Without the least embarrassment, the official Chinese services did not hesitate to ask the American President not to meet the Spiritual and Temporal Leader of Tibet during a voyage envisaged for next Autumn. In the meantime, the Town Hall of Paris, suspected of planning to offer Honorary Citizenship of the City of Paris to the Dalai Lama (conforming to a Resolution of 2008) during his forthcoming visit to France in June, is the target of official Chinese wrath. If that is not interference in the affairs of other countries, then the words have certainly lost their sense.

One year after the protest movement that set fire to the whole of the historic Tibetan territory tightly encircled by Chinese frontiers, the first condemnations to death have been officially pronounced and trials continued, most often in huis clos and without anyone knowing anything about what is going on or under what conditions. Verdicts are announced furtively, and the small amount of information that circulates is thanks to the families directly concerned. Certainly, in rare cases like that of Lama Jigmé (of Labrang) or the liberation of Golok Jigmé, responsible with Dhondup Wangchen for the film *Leaving Fear Behind*, some information can be gathered, even if what happened to the latter is not known. Without in any way deluding ourselves with illusions, perhaps one can read behind the lines in these apparent acts of “clemency”, an unconfessed consequence of campaigns carried out in support of these “accused people”, as was the case not long ago when public opinion was mobilized in support of Soviet or Chinese dissidents. This does not alter the fact that those who were released take the trouble to recount the tortures, the interrogations and the bad treatment inflicted upon them by way of routine in detention.

Sporadic detentions nevertheless continue – like the pupils and students who demonstrated in April in Labrang to protest against the demonization of the Dalai Lama, claiming the right to express themselves and to denounce bullying and the mortifications they had been subject to. This give rise to concerns about their future... The Tibetan land is also suffering in its own way; Chinese specialists are beginning to worry about a worrying rise in temperature on the Tibetan High Plateau, which does not bode well for huge Chinese projects, in particular the much-vaunted railway. According to the on-line “People’s Daily”, “Tibet is seriously affected by climate warming”. Oh really? Who has been saying for years, experts demonstrating, supported by proof, that “uncontrolled human activities” are menacing the fragile environmental balance of Tibet? And it is certainly not the forced and accelerated settling of Tibetan nomads, with a host of disastrous socio-economic consequences induced by these coercive measures, that will put things right.

Not far from there, the parents of Chinese children killed under the ruins of the schools that collapsed in the Szechuan earthquake last year are being harassed and threatened by the authorities to keep them silent. However, the more that repression grows, the more discontentment grows; a logic seemingly lost on the authorities. The approach of the 4 June – twenty years after the tank assault on students in the large square in the middle of Beijing – is visibly making the Chinese leaders if not worried, at least nervous. To protect themselves from a surprise, faced with this latent unrest, they want at all costs to ensure peace, or rather, according to the formula of the Chinese President, “stability and harmony.” As if it were sufficient to deploy army, police, paramilitary or other forces as soon as there is the slightest attempt at criticism or hint of a demonstration, so as to guarantee this very singular order, dear to dictators.

Visibly, such is not the view of Spanish justice which, under the terms of the principle of the universal jurisdiction that it proclaims, has just heard various testimonies supporting the open dossier opposing several high placed Chinese officials held responsible for the massive repression of Tibetan protests during the Spring of 2008. Rogatory Committees have even been sent to collect the replies of the principal personalities implicated, which was apparently not appreciated by the Chinese authorities: the official press made it known that if the Spanish judge ventured into China, he would immediately be imprisoned for calumny and defamation. Which is, undoubtedly, an excellent proof of the independence of Chinese justice...

The Chinese government very much wants to present itself to the rest of the world as a government conscious of its responsibilities and the role it tries to play on the international scene; its economic and military power are not sufficient to bring the respect it requires from others. At the very most, some people back off and hide away because of prudence, as misplaced as it is dishonourable. The use of force – against its own people to start with, followed by its neighbours - does not suffice either. On the subject of fundamental liberty and human rights as in Tibet, it is not in ignoring or destroying the past that one can shape the future. And by one of these unexpected about-turns of which history has the secret, perhaps today more than ever, the destiny of China depends on the wisdom its leaders might be able to demonstrate concerning Tibet.

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