

Critics question Obama's commitment to international religious freedom

October 5, 2009

WASHINGTON (RNS)—When the Dalai Lama came to Washington two years ago, he was feted with the nation's highest civilian honor, the Congressional Gold Medal, as President George W. Bush and a bipartisan delegation looked on.

But as the exiled Tibetan leader returns for another visit to the nation's capital this week, there is a White House-sized hole in his itinerary.

President Obama will not meet with the Dalai Lama, breaking a precedent that dates to President George H.W. Bush in 1991. Obama will not convene with the famed Buddhist monk until after the president returns from a summit in Beijing in November, the administration has said.

The perceived snub has angered human rights advocates, who say it reflects an early pattern in Obama's foreign policy to sideline religious freedom in favor of other issues like trade and climate change.

“Not only does (Obama) risk saying that, he comes very close to saying it outright,” said Thomas Farr, who was director of the State Department's [Office of International Religious Freedom](#) from 1999-2003.

“They do seem to be saying that religious freedom is important—but not as important as these other issues, and I think that is a serious error.”

government in India. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. (Photo/ Luca Galuzzi – www.galuzzi.it)

The Chinese government is severely critical of the Dalai Lama, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, calling him a “splittist” who aims to undermine Beijing’s control of Tibet. They also discourage heads of state from meeting with the Dalai Lama, who says he is seeking more autonomy for Tibetans—not a split from China.

Rep. Frank Wolf, R-Va., co-chair of Congress’ [Human Rights Commission](#), which held a hearing on China on Sept. 29, called Obama’s decision not to meet with the Dalai Lama “an embarrassment.”

“Whenever you sell a global religious leader out for an export deal, that’s very bad. Economics should not trump human rights. You can do them both together and do them respectfully,” Wolf said in an interview.

Farr, too, said not meeting with the Dalai Lama sends a “very, very bad message” that the U.S. is willing to back down on religious freedom.

Though Obama has drawn praise for talking about the importance of religious rights—most notably in a speech in Cairo last June—critics say his policies do not match his rhetoric.

“It got some lines in the Cairo speech, but we haven’t seen any pressing on the issue so far,” said Michael Cromartie, a member of the [U.S. Commission on Religious Freedom](#), an independent, bipartisan panel created by Congress in 1998. “Snubbing the Dalai Lama is another indication of that.”

In May, the USCIRF issued a stinging rebuke of the Chinese government, saying it “engages in systematic and egregious violations of the freedom of religion or belief.” The report also said that “in Tibetan Buddhist areas, religious freedom conditions may be worse now than at any time since the Commission’s inception.”

The U.S. State Department has also criticized China, labeling it a “country of particular concern” not only for its treatment of Tibetan Buddhists, but also of Muslim Uighurs, Christian house churches, and Falun Gong practitioners.

But Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has seemed to downplay disagreements with China over religious freedom, saying last February such issues “can’t interfere” with efforts to broker deals on climate change, security and trade.

Moreover, the White House has begun to engage regimes in Sudan, Myanmar and Cuba that have spotty human rights records; failed to criticize abuses in Iran and Egypt; and left vacant the post of ambassador-at-large for religious freedom.

“If this administration has a considered approach to these issues, we’re all waiting to hear it,” said Sophie Richardson, Asia advocacy director for Human Rights Watch. “Until they make their intentions, tactics, and priorities clear, it’s very hard not to conclude that these guys are not going to do a great deal on the issue of human rights in China.”

The Obama administration refused repeated request for comment about its policies on religious freedom or the Dalai Lama’s visit to Washington.

Senior White House Advisor Valerie Jarrett and a State Department official met last month with the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India, the seat of the Tibetan government-in-exile. In a statement after the meeting, the Dalai Lama’s office said Jarrett “reiterated President Obama’s commitment to support the Tibetan people in protecting their distinct religious, linguistic, and cultural heritage and securing respect for their human rights and civil liberties.”

Mary Beth Markey, vice president for advocacy at the [International](#)

[Campaign for Tibet](#) , said the Dalai Lama had a role in the decision not to meet with Obama in Washington. For years, she said, presidents have been meeting with the exiled Buddhist leader, but China hasn't budged.

In fact, the situation in Tibet has worsened.

"My true sense is that the decision was based on switching things up," Markey said. "And if the Chinese appreciate the gesture of postponing or not engaging the Dalai Lama before the president goes to China, maybe that's a better first step."