

## **Tibet and Kosovo: a World Apart**

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Violent clashes in Tibet and Kosovo dominate the headlines. Though both struggles for self-determination bear striking similarities the response of the international community could not have been more different. In Kosovo, NATO intervened to stop Milosovic' oppression of the Kosovars, the territory was placed under UN-protection and it achieved independence with the backing of western powers. Tibet received no such attention. After hundreds of thousands of Tibetans died at the hands of the Chinese in the early sixties and the International Commission of Jurists found that "acts of genocide had been committed in Tibet in an attempt to destroy the Tibetans as a religious group", those same western powers remained silent and Tibet was sealed off from the outside world.

Kosovo achieved independence without resolution of the Security Council, without peace agreement, without legal basis. Why? Apparently, because Serbia no longer deserved to govern Kosovo given the way it had treated the Kosovars. But then, what about Tibet? If there is a moral justification for Kosovo's independence shouldn't the Tibetans have their freedom too?

Tibet has been under Chinese occupation since 1949. Prior to the Chinese invasion, Tibet functioned as an independent state. It had a functioning government and maintained relations with neighbouring states. It used Tibetan currency and issued its own passports. Tibet had a sophisticated spiritual cultural and a highly developed medical system. The Chinese stated rationale for incorporating Tibet was to reunite Tibet –"which has always been part of China"- with the motherland and to liberate it from imperialist influences.

However, Tibet is also important for strategic, economic and demographic reasons. The high plateau of Tibet is situated between Russia, China and India. Given its strategic location, the British colonial government in India maintained Tibet as a buffer state. Moreover, five major rivers that supply water to neighbouring South-Asian countries have their source in Tibet. Whoever controls Tibet controls this scarce resource. Tibet's vast empty land also offers China a demographic outlet for its fast growing population.

While in the case of Kosovo the international community was quick to act decisively, even using military force, to end serious human rights abuses, in the case of Tibet the response has been deafening silence. For more than 50 years now. The United Nations adopted three resolutions in 1959, 1961 and 1965 affirming the right of Tibetans to self-determination. Yet, nothing concrete was done. Western powers

prefer to treat the Tibetan issue as a human rights problem, to be resolved through very quiet diplomacy.

The Tibetans have finally had enough. Their anger and frustration is real. These protestors on horseback are young men who don't know the Dalai Lama and don't long for the old ways. These are people who are desperate to survive and maintain their Tibetanness in their own country.

The Tibet-issue is a forgotten conflict that requires a political resolve. Systematic human rights violations, discrimination and marginalisation are but logical consequences of the unresolved status of Tibet. The Dalai Lama has renounced independence and is seeking negotiations with the Chinese leadership about genuine autonomy for Tibet. Those same western powers that recognized Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence have been half-hearted in their support for this modest demand. If Kosovo is not a precedent, concretely supporting and facilitating a serious process of negotiations this is the least they can do.