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# Verses of Praise and Denigration: Finding Poetic Creativity in the Tibetan Election in Exile

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Tsering Wangchuk

Between October 2015 and March 2016, over ninety-thousand Tibetans in exile prepared to elect either Lobsang Sangay or Penpa Tsering as the new political leader of the Tibetan government in exile. In a negative campaign style, which was unprecedented in the history of the Tibetan democracy in exile, the two candidates were pitted against each other. Many Tibetans now reminisce with some remorse about how this election campaign stirred up tensions and animosity in the exile community. The campaign offered a germane platform to many Tibetan poets all over the world to express their opinions about their potential future leaders in the Tibetan language. One forum where they disseminated their poems about the two candidates was an exile-based Tibetan-language website

devoted to poetry, news, essays, and songs. In this piece, I offer an English translation of four of these poems and discuss the issues and themes that concerned the poets as well as the Tibetan electorate.

**Keywords:** Tibetan diaspora, poetry, Sikyong election, politics of exile.

## Introduction

Between October 2015 and March 2016, over ninety-thousand Tibetans in exile prepared to elect the next *sikyong* (*srid skyong*)<sup>1</sup> or political leader of the Tibetan government in exile, which is officially known as the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA). The election was considered particularly significant due to these factors: 1) an estimated 140 Tibetans had already self-immolated in protest against the Chinese authoritarian rule in Tibet,<sup>2</sup> 2) the voters' palpable, yet mostly unspoken, concern about the health of the aging His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 3) and their concern about how to maintain the vitality of the Tibetan administration in exile after the death of His Holiness. Hence, many Tibetans in exile felt the utmost urgency to elect a leader "who could fulfill the wishes" (*mngon 'dod sgrub thub mkhan*)<sup>3</sup> of Tibetans inside and outside Tibet and a leader who could lay out a viable foundation for CTA in the post-Dalai Lama era.

Another crucial factor that contributed to the enthusiasm for the election was how the supporters and critics of the two *sikyong* candidates, Lobsang Sangay (*blo bzang sangs rgyas*) and Penpa Tsering (*spen pa tshe ring*), fiercely pitted both candidates against each other. Lobsang Sangay's supporters pointed out that he was a Harvard University graduate, he had an international appeal, he had accomplished much since he became the *sikyong* in 2011 (such as raising funds for CTA and improving the quality of education), and he was loyal to the Dalai Lama. On the other hand, the supporters of Penpa Tsering claimed that he was humble and friendly, that he had worked for CTA for a long time, first serving as a member of the Tibetan Parliament in exile and later as the Speaker of the Parliament (*tshogs gtso*), and that he was also loyal to the Dalai Lama.

On the contrary, each candidate's opponents generally had only negative remarks to make. To give a couple of examples, Lobsang Sangay's opponents claimed that he postponed the famed Kālacakra religious initiation that the Dalai Lama had announced he would confer in Bodhgaya in January 2016 by a year for his own political ends. According to his opponents, he did so because he feared the initiation would interfere with his political campaign since he would have been required to be present at the religious gathering. On the other hand, Penpa Tsering's opponents went so far as to allege that he killed a Tibetan lama.<sup>4</sup> Both allegations were unsubstantiated, but they succeeded in stirring up problems for both candidates and raised doubts in the minds of the electorate. Therefore, the Tibetan voters' determination to elect the best candidate to the highest official post within CTA was understandably strong during the campaign period.

The campaign season offered a germane platform to many Tibetan poets and writers in exile to show their long-distance nationalism by expressing their opinions about their future leader in the Tibetan language. One forum where these Tibetans wrote about the two candidates was <[www.khabdha.org](http://www.khabdha.org)>, an exile-based Tibetan-language website devoted to subjects such as poetry, news, essays, and songs. The poetry section features poems on various themes, such as His Holiness' birthday, Tibetan self-immolators, and even Valentine's Day and President Trump. For this article, I selected four poems from the website that were written by the Tibetan poets living in countries such as France and England. Each poem was written after the preliminary election results were announced in October 2015 and before the final election that proclaimed Lobsang Sangay as the new leader was held in March 2016. Since these poems were written in Tibetan, I will provide an English translation of the selected poems and offer some context and observations about the themes addressed in the poems.

Because the system of robust political campaigning and democratic participation in electing one's political leader are recent phenomena in the history of the Tibetan politics, I will first provide a brief account of the history of the Tibetan democracy in exile and the historical trajectory leading up to the *sikyong* election before I discuss these four poems.

## Tibetan Democracy in Exile

The Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959 led to the exile of His Holiness along with roughly 80,000 Tibetans into India, Nepal, and Bhutan. The current Fourteenth Dalai Lama, and his previous incarnations since the Fifth Dalai Lama in the mid-seventeenth century, served as the rulers of Tibet. The Dalai Lamas are believed to be the emanations of the compassionate deity, Avalokiteśvara (*spyan ras gzigs*), which ensured these governments were theocratic.

In 1960, His Holiness began to implement the process of democratizing his government in India to create a future, democratic Tibet. The Tibetans living in exile informally elected their first thirteen delegates which "constituted the first democratically elected Tibetan parliament-in-exile" (Brox 2016: 2).<sup>5</sup> It thereby marked the initial "rehearsal," to use McConnell's term, for a free, democratic state of Tibet (McConnell 2016: 7). These delegates were elected without much desire on their own part to run for their post and without any political campaigns. In the early years of their exile, the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan dignitaries imagined the fruition of the democratic process in Tibet because they believed that their exile

would be temporary and they would soon return to Tibet. Their exile, unfortunately, continued, turning it into a “diasporic permanence.”<sup>6</sup>

Over the past five decades the democratic process has gone through several major changes<sup>7</sup> under the leadership of the Dalai Lama, such as the introduction of the ‘Democratic Constitution of Tibet’ in 1963, the crafting of the ‘Charter of the Tibetans-in-exile’ in 1991, and finally, the devolution of the political power of the Dalai Lama in 2011. Due to the crucial role that His Holiness played in instituting a democratic governance in exile, Tibetans view their democracy as a ‘gift’ (*gsol ras*) from the Dalai Lama.

The Dalai Lama made the public announcement of the disempowerment of his political authority on March 10, 2011,<sup>8</sup> but the majority of Tibetans in exile received the news with great reluctance. According to Tibetans in exile, the Dalai Lama’s disempowerment ultimately ended the century-old tradition of Tibet being ruled by a series of incarnations of the Dalai Lama. His announcement engendered a sense of utmost urgency among the Tibetan voters in the final election for the position of *kalön tripa* (*bka’ blon khri pa*) or Chief of the Cabinet Ministry that was set for March 20, 2011. The role of the democratically-elected *kalön tripa* since 2001 had been to administer their cabinet under the political leadership of the Dalai Lama. Samdhong Rinpoche (*zam gdong rin po che*), an elderly Buddhist monk and scholar, had served in this capacity for two terms (2001-2006 and 2006-2011).

With the end of both Samdhong Rinpoche’s second term and the Dalai Lama’s official political career, the new democratically-elected *kalön tripa* would have to lead CTA as its new political leader. There were two leading non-monastic candidates for the *kalön tripa* post in the 2011 final election: Tenzin Namgyal Tethong (*bstan ’dzin rnam rgyal bkres mthong*) and Lobsang Sangay.<sup>9</sup> They both ran campaigns, much like the political campaign in India and the U.S., that were unprecedented in the history of Tibetan politics where the candidates visited Tibetan settlements to solicit votes, held public debates about their political views and positions, and appeared on various media outlets to ask for votes from the Tibetan voters. Despite the ‘exuberance’ or ‘excitement’ (*’khrug cha dod po*) that the election generated, negative campaigning where the candidates and their supporters offered harsh criticism of the other candidate was minimal.<sup>10</sup> In the final result, Lobsang Sangay, a Harvard-educated legal scholar who was born and raised in India, was elected as the new *kalön tripa*. His official title was soon changed to *sikyong*.<sup>11</sup>

Sangay’s first term ended in 2016 and he ran for a second term against Penpa Tsering, then Speaker of the Tibetan

Parliament in exile, in the next election for *sikyong*. Unlike the previous election where there was very little negative campaigning involving overt accusations and regionalism, many Tibetan refugees said that the final *sikyong* election in 2016 “created problems” (*rnyog khra bslangs song*) in the Tibetan community or “lacked any moral compass” (*bzang spyod med pa*) because of the excessively negative campaigning. His Holiness expressed his dissatisfaction with the campaigning after the election was over.<sup>12</sup>

Even though significant political changes were made to the Tibetan democracy in exile, the Tibetan electoral constituency for the *sikyong* election was not based on political party lines because there is no political party in the Tibetan polity yet.<sup>13</sup> In lieu of political parties, regional affiliation becomes an important incentive and social capital for support and votes. The exile electorate consists of a higher percentage of Tibetans from the province of Ü-Tsang (*dbus gtsang*) than Tibetans from the provinces of Kham (*khams*) and Amdo (*a mdo*).<sup>14</sup> Penpa Tsering, who is an Amdo descent, needed votes from the Ü-Tsang voters to win the election because only about ten percent of Tibetans in exile affiliate themselves with the Amdo region. The Ü-Tsang and Ngari (*mga’ ris*) regional associations in exile lent their endorsement to him for the final *sikyong* election in order to garner support from the Ü-Tsang electorate.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, Lobsang Sangay is of Khampa descent, which gave him an advantage over the Khampa voters, especially over the monks from Kham at the three big Geluk (*dge lugs*) monasteries in South India. Interestingly, Chushi Gangdruk (*chu bzhi sgang drug*), the largest Khampa regional organization in exile, abstained from endorsing any candidate for the final *sikyong* election.<sup>16</sup> However, in order for Lobsang Sangay to win the election he needed votes from the Ü-Tsang electorate as well, but not as many as Penpa Tsering did.

The supporters of each candidate tried to incite regional tension among voters in order to secure votes for their candidate. Many Tibetans now reminisce with some ‘disgust’ (*skyug mer lang*s) about how the final election campaigning stirred up regionalism in the exile community. In a recent Voice of America interview, the newly-reelected *sikyong*, Lobsang Sangay, says, “Regionalism definitely happened [in the 2016 election]” (*chol kha’i ’then ’khyer byung yod red*).<sup>17</sup> It appears that Tibetans in exile are beginning to show a “disenchantment with democracy” that is similar to newly democratic European nations who complain about their democracy (Rupnik 2007: 18). I will now turn to the poems that tried “to make something happen” (Thurston 2001:8).

## Poems about the Two Candidates

Fulsome praises and criticism is common in Tibetan poetry. Praises in verses (*bstod tshogs* or *zhabs brtan gsol 'debs*) to buddhas and gurus are prevalent in devotional literature where the poet-devotees adulate their objects of devotion with much praise of piety. Similarly, poetic verses criticizing or ridiculing opponents are found in the Gesar epics and Tibetan Buddhist polemical literature. The four poems examined here have their precedence in these classical poems and epics in terms of their broad themes of praise and denigration.

Furthermore, since the translated poems apply classical Tibetan poetic frames to address contemporary socio-political issues in a relatively easy-to-understand Tibetan language without much technical Buddhist parlance and poetic ornamentations, they resonate with Tibetan political 'street songs' in Lhasa (Goldstein 1982, 1991), the poems written by Gendün Chöpel (*dge 'dun chos 'phel*, 1903-1951) (Lopez 2009), and the poetic verses crafted by many contemporary Tibetan poets in Tibet (Jabb 2015). However, what is unique about the poems is that they are the outcome of a modern political campaign and they reveal the issues that were important to the different electorate constituencies.

In the first poem, Basé (*'ba' sras*),<sup>18</sup> an Amdo poet residing in France, praises Penpa Tsering while also denigrating Lobsang Sangay. The poem titled 'I find My Sikyong in the Honorable Penpa Tsering through Truth' (*drang bden gyis rnyed pa'i nga'i srid skyong sku ngo spen pa tshe ring mchog*) is written in the nine-syllabic meters which is a predominant style in classical Tibetan poetry (Sujata 2005: 134).

The verses below demonstrate that while Penpa Tsering is imbued with inner good qualities, such as humility that Tibetans consider as a virtue, Lobsang Sangay is boastful and untrustworthy in ways that go against Tibetan virtues.

The stripes of a human's interior landscape

Do not manifest as the tiger's stripes.

A *sikyong* candidate whose words and intention never match

Is compared with you [Penpa Tsering]!

A loud roar about being able to build a tent out of a rainbow;

Big talk about being able to move a mountain with fingers;

Big lies deceiving the public,

You, the great *kungo*<sup>19</sup> do not tell.

In the verses below from the same poem, the poet Basé goes on further to show that Lobsang Sangay will say anything such as that he follows the 'Middle Way Approach'<sup>20</sup> to obtain votes in the same way that a beggar who has nothing to lose will conjure up any tricks to receive some food. On the other hand, Penpa Tsering, as the poet notes, speaks the truth and is the true supporter of the 'Middle Way Approach.' Penpa Tsering, for instance, is (in)famously known for stating that he would not debate with Lukar Jam (*klu mkhar byams*), a *sikyong* candidate in the preliminary election, because of Lukar Jam's firm stance in support of a complete independence for Tibet. Penpa Tsering, according to the poet, acts on his belief and assertion that he follows the 'Middle Way Approach' whereas Lobsang Sangay does not.

Basé also voices that Penpa Tsering is not biased toward regional affiliation, and thus implies that Lobsang Sangay is biased toward his own regional background. The implication is that Penpa Tsering will be a unifying figure for the community whereas Lobsang Sangay will be a dividing force within the community.

For votes, the other one [Lobsang Sangay] proclaims his achievements!

You enumerate the factual truth.<sup>21</sup>

You, a Middle Way supporter, who see the factual truth,

Who understand the intention of the Victorious One [the Dalai Lama], are certainly the honest one.<sup>22</sup>

"Through regionalism

If one votes for me, [that is a] mistake.

Understanding the factual truth is essential."

Who else would say such other than you, the *kungo*?

How could a beggar draped in one's shadow behind,

Moving one's empty fists up and down,

Looking for the food of votes,

Be the sword of the unwavering truth?

The Victorious One's mutually beneficial Middle Way

Remains the only aspiration of the majority of Tibetans.

The one who faithfully strives for it with determination

Is none other than you, the lord [Penpa Tsering].

Basé furthermore points out Penpa Tsering's positive qualities in the following verses by saying that he is multilingual, rich in work experience within CTA, and not corrupt. On the other hand, Lobsang Sangay, as the poet wants readers to believe, (1) is not multilingual since he is fluent only in Tibetan and English, not in Hindi which is an official language of India, the host country of the Dalai Lama and the majority of Tibetans in exile, (2) is not rich with experience because he had not worked for CTA before he became *sikyong* in 2011, and (3) he is a corrupt politician because of the mortgage issue in America. (I will say more about these points later in my discussion.)

You are fluent in Hindi, Tibetan, and English;

You are rich with work experience in Tibetan administration;

You are well connected with Tibet support groups;

Your knowledge, capability, and pure intention are even superior.

No faults in the past actions;

No mistakes in the present actions;

No doubt about any shortcomings in the future actions;

No one, similar to you, exists among the candidates this year.

Clean hands with no traits of embezzlement;

A clean mouth with no traits of deprecating the Victorious One;

A clean heart for his pure intention for Tibet;

Clean you are among the candidates this year.

The metal fence for protecting the Victorious One;

The water bridge for continuing the Sino-Tibet dialogue;

The skilled person in overseeing the exile administration;

With these qualifications, you alone are

superior to others.

Not through unexamined assumptions,

Not through regionalism,

Not through losing one's self-control by listening to someone,<sup>23</sup>

My sincere vote is offered to you.

With the platform of the grand political authority

Comes a heavy burden to solve the Tibet issue.

In lifting the weight with strength

You alone are superior; may you be victorious!

In the second poem, Pel Gyépa Dorjé (*dpal dgyes pa rdo rje*),<sup>24</sup> a poet from England, praises Lobsang Sangay for his education at Harvard, his international appeal, generating funds for CTA, improving the education of Tibetan students at Tibetan schools in exile, and renaming the road (previously known as Jogiwarra Road) that connects McLeod Ganj to Dharamsala with 'Potala Road'.<sup>25</sup> The poem also praises Lobsang Sangay for his emphasis on the unification of the Tibetan community despite his Khampa regional background, and for his loyalty as a disciple of the Dalai Lama. His poem titled 'An Auspicious Blue Turquoise Crown for Nurturing the Fortune of Truth of the Snow Lion' (*seng ge bden pa'i g.yang kha gso ba'i rten 'brel gyi gyu ral sngon po*)<sup>26</sup> is also written in nine-syllabic metrical form.

The writer seems to pit Lobsang Sangay's charisma and education at Harvard against Penpa Tsering and implies that Tibetans need a charismatic, educated leader with an international legitimacy that will help bring funds to CTA for the future of Tibet. Moreover, the poet seems to suggest that his educational background at Harvard will help ensure that the education of Tibetan students in exile can be improved to help shape the future of Tibet. Finally, the poet does not shy away from disclosing that Lobsang Sangay is a Khampa, and does this most likely to encourage the Khampa constituency to cast their vote for Lobsang Sangay in the 2016 final election during which regional influence tampered and afflicted the minds of many Tibetan voters.

The construction of the new Potala Road,

A symbol that never existed in sixty years,

Stands in Dharamsala, the second seat of the Snow Land;

This is the first auspicious sign of Lobsang Senge [Lobsang Sangay].<sup>27</sup>

The inexhaustible rain of the financial support to the administration,  
For the fulfillment of the Middle Way policy for peace between China and Tibet,  
Is the scholar's pure intention.  
This is the second auspicious sign of the supreme leader.<sup>28</sup>

With his strict unity, even demons encircle as servants;  
His self-reliance that built the palace of the Office of Tibet in D.C.;;  
The restful time that the Supreme Victorious One enjoys;  
These are the third auspicious signs of Senge, the Ph.D.

Wooing the leaders of the world with his speech;  
Raising the blood pressure of the liar involved in embezzlement;<sup>29</sup>  
Opening the door of the wisdom at Tibetan schools;  
These are the fourth auspicious signs of the first president.

The supreme disciple who fulfills the wishes of his guru;  
The supreme leader who fulfills the desires of his citizens;  
The supreme pillar of the good deeds of the Snow Land;  
These are the fifth auspicious signs of the brave Senge.

He is a pure Khampa who loves people from all provinces;  
He is a religious person endowed with the defining quality of pure perspective and devotion;  
He sees the value of His Holiness' life as the glory of the Snow Land  
These are the sixth auspicious signs of the benevolent leader.

In the final part of my essay, I will discuss a couple of poems that criticize Lobsang Sangay. In the poem titled, 'The Sikyong, Pleasing to a Heart' (*srid skyong snying la rje bo*)<sup>30</sup> Madukché (*rma dug lce*),<sup>31</sup> another Amdo poet living

in France, criticizes Lobsang Sangay through sarcasm for his lack of knowledge about Tibetan culture, history, and the Tibetan literary tradition. The poem is written in three disyllabic meters, a popular literary form in central Tibet that is used in many Tibetan songs, such as the Lhasa 'street songs' about Tibetan politics and the songs of the Sixth Dalai Lama (Sujata 2005: 122).

In the verses below, the writer alludes to Lobsang Sangay's ignorance about Tibetan culture by sarcastically saying that the incumbent *sikyong* could not even differentiate the difference between the term for the statue of the Buddha in the Jokhang (*jo khang*) temple in Lhasa and the term for the Dalai Lama.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the poet ridicules *sikyong* for his Tibetan language reading skills, for his position on the future of Tibet, and for the knowledge of Tibetan history he displayed at important domestic and international stages. The rhetoric concerned with the lack of knowledge about Tibetan culture, language, and history is particularly poignant given the recent protests and self-immolations in Tibet that demand a more Tibetan-centric education in Tibet and an ever-growing importance placed on preserving Tibetan identity through learning one's language, culture, and history in Tibetan communities throughout the world.

"The Wish-Fulfilling Jowo Shākṛyamuni  
Is the name of His Holiness."

Such words display his [Lobsang Sangay]  
scholarly knowledge!

The *sikyong* pleasing to a heart  
Resides in the sphere of doubts.

On March 10,  
At the Thekchen Chöling Temple,  
[The *sikyong*] reads Tibetan falteringly.  
The *sikyong* pleasing to a heart  
Resides in shame.

"Democracy in Tibet,  
We do not demand."<sup>33</sup>  
Such a proclamation is made from above.  
The *sikyong* pleasing to a heart  
Resides in America.

“We, the Tibetans from the Snow Land,  
Never had a country.”<sup>34</sup>  
Such was announced to the world.  
The *sikyong* pleasing to a heart  
Resides in Germany.

In the following verses, Madukché brings up several allegations against Lobsang Sangay, such as that as an incumbent *sikyong* he did not take any action to stop the Shukden (*shugs ldan*) deity protesters or that he or his family has connection with the Shukden deity,<sup>35</sup> that he removed a picture of the Dalai Lama from the Office of Tibet in Washington D.C. and replaced it with his own picture, and that the Kālacakra initiation was postponed for his own political gain.<sup>36</sup> Because of the important role that His Holiness and religion play in Tibetan politics, this poet and the critics of Lobsang Sangay try to portray him as someone with no faith or deference for the Dalai Lama, or even worse, as an anti-Dalai Lama by associating him with the controversial Shukden deity.

Furthermore, the poet also questions how Lobsang Sangay was able to pay off the mortgage payment for his house in Boston in about four years<sup>37</sup> and why CTA staff members, including Dickyi Chhoyang, a cabinet minister who resigned from her high-level post and gave her endorsement to Penpa Tsering only a couple of weeks before the Tibetan voters went to the voting booth, had no aspiration to work for CTA under him. By so doing, the poet tries to demonstrate that Lobsang Sangay is corrupt and people who work under him know that he will not be a good leader. On the other hand, the poet implicates that Penpa Tsering is not corrupt and he is well-liked by staff members at CTA.

The *Shukden* issue is left aside.  
Envoys are abandoned for no reason.<sup>38</sup>  
The picture disappears without any purpose.  
The *sikyong* pleasing to a heart  
Resides in the Cabinet.  
  
The Kālacakra initiation requested in due time  
Had to be postponed.  
The timing was not fortuitous.  
The *sikyong* pleasing to a heart  
Resides in regrets.

When the issue of [his] house mortgage was raised  
In the *Washington Times*,  
He could not offer a clear answer.  
The *sikyong* pleasing to a heart,  
Resides in the sphere of gossips.

Under the new Cabinet,  
Innumerable staff ran off.  
Even someone with the title of a cabinet  
minister ran off.  
The *sikyong* pleasing to a heart  
Resides in confusion.

In the fourth, and the last, poem titled ‘Fed up’ (*yid thang chad*),<sup>39</sup> the poet Drakpa (*grags pa*)<sup>40</sup> brings up similar themes discussed in the poems thus far. He supports Penpa Tsering and criticizes Lobsang Sangay for his untrustworthiness and arrogance.

Partisanship encircles like waves.  
Manipulation hits quick like a *teurang*-spirit.<sup>41</sup>  
Flattering behavior is like a cat.  
I am fed up with the current society.  
  
Egoistic pride is higher than a mountain.  
Factual truth is like stars during the day.  
Gains and status are protected like the  
apple of one’s eye.  
I am fed up with the current *sikyong*.

The conferment of the female *géshe* degree<sup>42</sup>  
And the construction of the Potala Road;  
The two are enumerated as his accom-  
plishment by force.  
I am fed up with the current *sikyong*.

The piling up of the power of the faith of *Amdowa*  
inside and outside,  
Resulted in the celebration of the 80th birthday  
[of His Holiness].

Even that is counted as an accomplishment of the new cabinet.<sup>43</sup>

I am fed up with the current *sikyong*.

Furthermore, Drakpa also brings up the mortgage issue, the removal of the picture of the Dalai Lama from the Office of Tibet in D.C., the Shukden case, the Kālacakra issue, and the resignation of Dickyi Chhoyang in these verses.

A news article by an American woman

Mentions the source of the *sikyong*'s mortgage payment as unclear.

Regardless, he enters into the meditative practice of non-speaking.

I am fed up with the current *sikyong*.

Even when the Victorious Leader is still alive,

We notice the act of removing

The picture of the precious liberation-upon-seeing.

I am fed up with the current *sikyong*.

The *Shukden* group marched towards the Victorious One.

Their protest blocked the path of the Victorious One.

But they were left alone.

I am fed up with the current *sikyong*.

The Kālacakra initiation, which is like the clarified butter [of Buddhism],

Generates goose bumps of faith among Tibetans inside and outside Tibet.

Even that is cancelled due to the honorable *sikyong*'s politics.

I am fed up with the current *sikyong*.

He claims that there is unity within the administration.

Upon returning from his trips abroad,

Honorable Dicki Chhoyang resigned.

I laugh at the current *sikyong*.

If his faults are pointed out just slightly,

Disliking it, he becomes wrathful,

And threatens to report them to the cops.

I am fed up with his threats.

In the following two verses, Drakpa sadly reminisces about the loss of the experienced veterans and 'insiders,' Tenzin Namgyal Tethong and Tashi Wangdu (*bkra shis dbang 'dus*), to the 'outsider' Lobsang Sangay in the 2011 election. The poet then, as a supporter of Penpa Tsering, encourages the Tibetan voters in the 2016 final election to elect the more experienced 'insider' Penpa Tsering over Lobsang Sangay.

Tethong, Tashi Wangdu, and others,<sup>44</sup>

Who had experience over many years,

Were set aside and Loseng<sup>45</sup> was elected instead.

Now the time has come for regrets.

To conclude, those with keen eyes for the truth,

Open their minds to the benefits of democracy

And with their vote

Elect the qualified person having made an examination!

## Conclusion

Tibetophone writers in South Asia did not write much for the first three decades of their exile; what little they wrote were mostly about religion and memoirs reminiscing the past. As the self-proclaimed custodians of the traditional Tibetan culture, these writers in exile penned their writings using the traditional literary style without addressing social issues. The literary landscape since then has changed with the 'new-arrivals' (*qsar 'byor ba*) to India from Tibet beginning in the 1980s. These young Tibetans, who were familiar with the so-called 'modern Tibetan literature' (*deng rabs bod kyi rtsom rig*) that was pioneered by Dondrup Gyal (*don grub rgyal*, 1953-1985) through the use of free-verse poetry addressing current social issues, introduced modern Tibetan literature to exile readers with the publication of 'Jangzhön' (*ljang gzhon*) in 1990 (Jigme 2008: 288). Its publication sowed seed for the production of several Tibetan literary publications over the next few decades in exile.

As the launch of the <[www.khabdha.org](http://www.khabdha.org)> website in 2007 and the political poems about the two *sikyong* candidates demonstrate, Tibetophone writers in exile no longer write

mostly about religion or memoirs. They now write about various domestic as well as international topics or events using classical Tibetan poetic meters or free-verse style in relatively plain language without heavy use of poetic ornamentation or religious parlance that dominates the traditional Tibetan literature. As the famed contemporary writer and poet Jangbu comments in a recent interview over the quality of the Tibetan literature in exile, “Judging from [the poems] online, [I] think that the poetry [in exile] has improved well over [the past] few years” (*drwa lam khag nas bltas pa yin na lo shas nang snyan ngag de yar rgyas yag po phyin song snyam gyi ’dug*).<sup>46</sup>

While one may appreciate the political poems about the two candidates for various reasons such as for their literary quality or the historical significance, Tibetans in exile express these challenges concerning the *sikyong* election: 1) how to exercise the freedom of speech that the Tibetan democratic system allows without inciting any regionalism within the exile community (especially if the *sikyong* candidates come from different traditional Tibetan provincial background), 2) how to show deference to diverse sound perspectives on Tibet issue without labeling them as anti-CTA or anti-Dalai Lama, and 3) how to engage in a robust political campaign to garner support from the electorate without compromising ‘moral characters’ (*bzang spyod*) such as humility and kindness that are valued in Tibetan culture. For example, in an interview with Samdhong Rinpoche,<sup>47</sup> the first elected *kalön tripa* tells a reporter that he did not vote in the last *sikyong* election because the campaigning style was based on “competition” which he says comes from “Western, modern culture” and that it lacked the value of “cooperation” which he says is rooted in “Tibetan culture.” As Tibetan voters in exile are getting scattered across the globe, difference in voices regarding the nature of political campaign and characters of the political leader of CTA seems to become greater.

Lastly, did the political poems make any difference in the election outcome? It is difficult to exactly speculate the impact of these poems or (mis)information spread about the two candidates over WeChat and Facebook on the outcome of the final election result.<sup>48</sup> But the margin of difference in the voting results<sup>49</sup> for the preliminary *sikyong* election in October 2015, and for the final election in March 2016, shows a significant hike for Penpa Tsering. Whereas Lobsang Sangay had a lead over Penpa Tsering by over 40% of the votes in the preliminary election, the lead was narrowed down to only over a 15% of the votes in the final election. The Tibetan exile community observed an 18.42 percent hike for Penpa Tsering and a 9.63 percent drop for Lobsang Sangay in the final election result.

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## Endnotes

1. I have given Wylie transliterations for Tibetan names and words in parenthesis.
2. See McGranahan and Litzinger (2012) on Tibetan self-immolations.
3. Many Tibetans including the current *sikyong* use this phrase.
4. See Wangyal (2015).
5. For some information on who the voters were and how the voting worked, see Brox (2016: 1-2).
6. Trine Brox (2016: 258-265) makes a distinction between ‘exile temporality’ and ‘diasporic permanence’ and states that whereas Tibetan exile condition has become a diasporic permanence, they generally view it as temporary.
7. See Brox (2016) Chapter 1 for the three major changes in Tibetan democracy.
8. The Dalai Lama’s disempowerment of political authority became official in May 2011 when an amendment to the Charter of Tibetan-in-exile was made regarding His Holiness’ political power.
9. For the candidates’ differences, see Brox (2016: 246-253).
10. Some rumors, for example that Tenzin Tethong was corrupt when he was a cabinet minister and Losang Sangay was not a loyal member of the exile community, circulated. Regionalism was also barely represented as these two candidates emerged as the leading contenders.
11. See Phayul (2012).
12. See Dharpo (2016).
13. See Brox (2016) Chapter 3.
14. It is estimated that 65 percent of Tibetans in exile are from Ü-Tsang, 25 percent from Kham, and 10 percent from Amdo (McConnell 2009: 141).

15. See the Editorial Board of the Tibetan Political Review (2016).
16. A part of the reason why they did not endorse Lobsang Sangay may have something to do with his stance against the Old Chushi Gangdruk. See McGranahan (2010) on the organization's relation with CTA.
17. Kunleng Show (2017).
18. His name is Samten Gyatso (*bsam gtan rgya mtsho*) and he is a frequent contributor to <www.khabdha.org>.
19. *Kungo* (*sku ngo*) refers to a high-ranking government official.
20. The Middle Way Approach basically refers to CTA's position that they are not seeking a complete independence of Tibet from the People's Republic of China, and rather voices that they want a genuine autonomy for Tibet within China. CTA claims that this approach will benefit both countries in the long run. For a detailed description of the approach, visit <http://mwa.tibet.net>. However, there is a large number of Tibetans in exile who ask for a complete independence. Leading proponents of the independence approach, such as Jamyang Norbu (*'jam dbyangs nor bu*) and Lukar Jam (*klu mkhar byams*) are caricatured as 'anti-Dalai Lama' and 'anti-CTA.'
21. I take the 'kyi' after 'khyod' as a typo for 'kyis,' an agentive marker.
22. I take 'grang' as a typo for 'drang (honest).'
23. I take 'gyis' as a typo for 'gyi,' a genitive marker.
24. He also goes by Emaho (*e ma ho*) or Khenchen Lama (*mkhan chen bla ma*). He is a frequent contributor to <www.khabdha.org>.
25. According to the official statement, Lobsang Sangay came up with the idea of renaming the road. For the statement, see Staff Writer (2015).
26. The poem is dated February 20th, 2016.
27. Many in exile also use 'Senge' (*seng ge*) (snow lion) for his last name.
28. The verse is difficult to follow grammatically. Based on the other verses, I take the 'gis' on the fourth line as a typo for 'gi,' a genitive marker.
29. The 'liar' is Dawa Tsering (*zla ba tshe ring*), a Member of Parliament in exile. For the issue, see Wangyal (2013).
30. The poem is dated March 20th, 2016.
31. His name is Ragyawa Tenzin (*rwa rgya ba bstan 'dzin*), a poet from Ragya, Amdo.
32. Lobsang Sangay was criticized for singing a Tibetan song during his campaign because of a recent death of a young Tibetan self-immolator. In response to the criticism, on March 5th in Bylakuppe he said that he did not sing it for entertainment, rather he explained that the song's lyrics praise His Holiness. While the song is about the Dalai Lama, the poet ironically points out Lobsang Sangay's seeming ignorance for conflating the statue of the Buddha in Jokhang in Lhasa with His Holiness.
33. This remark comes from an interview with Jerome Cohen. See Cohen (2013). According to Lobsang Sangay, his remarks stand within the 'three adherances'—the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, the socialism with Chinese characteristics, and the Regional National Autonomy system—of the Middle Way Approach as put forth by the Chinese authorities. See Central Tibetan Administration (2010). The document was submitted to the Chinese dignitaries at the ninth round of China-Tibet dialogue in Beijing in January 2010.
34. For a piece on this, see Norbu (2011).
35. The Dalai Lama and his supporters claim that Shukden is a harmful spirit that creates schism within Tibetan religious traditions, while the Shukden followers say that he is an enlightened deity who protects the Geluk tradition. For a history of the deity, see Georges Dreyfus (1998). The poet refers to the incident in San Francisco, CA in 2012 where a Caucasian Buddhist nun, a supporter of the Shukden practice, approached the Dalai Lama and said, "Stop lying, Dalai Lama." For a reflection on the incident, see Norbu (2014).
36. The initiation was officially cancelled on August 31st, 2015 due to His Holiness' demanding schedule for the upcoming year. For a report on the canceled event, see Monlam (2016).
37. See Moynihan (2015). For a rejoinder to the article, see Aukatsang (2015).
38. The poet is probably suggesting that Lobsang Sangay never had a dialogue with China during his tenure since the resignations of Lodi Gyari and Kelsang Gyaltzen, the envoys for the Dalai Lama on Tibet-China dialogues.
39. The poem is dated March 15th, 2016. Although there is no title to the poem, the readers who commented on it called it 'Fed up'.
40. I am unable to find any information about the author.
41. *Teurang* (*the'u rang*) is a harmful spirit that can display miracles.
42. For this, see Sangay (2016). Note that the poem was written on March 15th, 2016.

43. Perhaps referring to the March 10th statement by Lobsang Sangay where he states, “We were greatly overjoyed to witness the deep respect, reverence and enthusiasm with which the Tibetan people inside and outside Tibet, friends and supporters world-wide celebrated the 80th birthday of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.”

44. Both Tenzin Tethong and Tashi Wangdu were the candidates for the 2011 final *sikyong* election.

45. Loseng is a shorthand for Lobsang Senge, another name that he goes by.

46. See Dölönyön (2017).

47. See Wangyal (2016).

48. See Dalha (2016).

49. 30,508 votes (66.71 percent of the votes) for Lobsang Sangay, 10,732 votes (23.47 percent) for Penpa Tsering, and the remaining votes for the four other candidates in the preliminary election in October 2015. 33,876 votes (57.08 percent) for Lobsang Sangay and 24,864 votes (41.89 percent) for Penpa Tsering in the final election.

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