

# What now for the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan cause?

The Dalai Lama has decided to relinquish his political duties - we ask why and what this means for the future

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Thursday 10 March 2011 23.21 AEDT

## **Does today's announcement mean Tenzin Gyatso is no longer the Dalai Lama?**

No. It means that his role now is spiritual leadership only. Any political functions - effectively being the ultimate decision-maker in any non-religious matters - will be devolved on an elected prime minister.

## **So what happens to the spiritual role?**

Nothing in the short term. The Dalai Lama is regarded as the 14th reincarnation of a famous Buddha who achieved enlightenment and as such can't resign. Nor does anyone appear to want him to.

## **But he's 76, so ... ?**

The question of who succeeds the Dalai Lama as spiritual leader will come to a head when he dies. The actual process of choosing the most senior leader in the diverse and complex world of Tibetan Buddhism theoretically depends on a variety of omens and signs that lead senior monk-scholars to the chosen child candidate. The process can take years and is contentious. Chinese authorities will try to impose a candidate who will follow their interests. The Tibetan community in exile will try to make sure their own becomes leader. A compromise may be the young monk known as the Karmapa, who fled into exile in India a decade ago as a teenager but is seen as potentially acceptable to Beijing.

## **Who will take over the political role?**

Whoever is elected by the Tibetan community in exile next week. The front-running candidate is currently Harvard law professor Lobsang Sangay, 42. He will be known as the Kalon Tripa.

## **Will the announcement weaken the Tibetan exiles?**

Not necessarily. The Dalai Lama would not have made his decision if he did not think there was sufficient unity among the exiles and, crucially, sufficient common ground between Tibetans inside and outside Tibet itself, and inside and outside China, for the new system to work. However, many are now very worried by the prospect of a future in which he plays a lesser role.

## **Who will speak for the Tibetan cause now?**

Still the Dalai Lama, though there will be someone else also speaking: the elected prime minister. This may make it easier for western governments in some ways. It means they could meet the Dalai Lama, as he would be a purely religious figure, while snubbing the political leadership and keeping Beijing happy.

## **Are there political reasons for standing down?**

The Dalai Lama sees it as the culmination of many decades of edging the exiled Tibetan community into democracy, while keeping an authentic Tibetan identity. He has also said how he would like to return to being "a simple monk".

. This article was amended on 14 March 2011. The original referred to the election of the Kalon Tripa by the Tibetan parliament. This has been corrected.

More q&as

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