

Urgent interpellations as of 23 May, 2011

(Initiatives towards the Chinese Government for the protection of Tibetan monks and civilians, with particular reference to the monastery of Kirti - no. [2-01085](#))

PRESIDENT. Honourable Mecacci is entitled to illustrate his question no. [2-01085](#), concerning initiatives towards the Chinese Government for the protection of Tibetan monks and civilians, with particular reference to the monastery of Kirti (See Annex A – [Urgent interpellations](#)).

MATTEO MECACCI. Mr. President, I wish to thank one by one the thirty-eight colleagues from the various political groups with which I submitted this urgent question to the Government, for witnessing the attention of the Parliament towards what is happening Tibet, particularly in the county in which a severe humanitarian crisis has been taking place for some weeks or months.

We tried to arouse our Parliament's attention on a situation like that of Tibet that is under the spotlight of the Italian and European public opinion, but vis-à-vis which – and we cannot hide it – there is some reluctance by Western Governments, including our Government, in dealing with the destiny of tens of thousands of people that are the object of a strong and lasting repression, which unfortunately has been increasing in the last few years.

Unfortunately, we know well what the rules of the so-called *realpolitik* are. In these months and days, a lot of attention is paid to what is happening in Northern Africa, where many rebellions occurred and continue to take place with the aim of overturning authoritarian regimes that do not differ – in terms of how they treat their citizens – from what the Chinese Government has been doing for a long time; we know, however, that the political, economic and strategic weight of China is still – evidently – very strong vis-à-vis our Governments.

Therefore, I have no illusions about the answer I will receive from the Government, in particular by Undersecretary Saglia, (Undersecretary for Economic Development) who was delegated to that end. The Minister of Foreign Affairs did not have the opportunity and the time to intervene on this matter, but, unfortunately, this is not something new either.

A brief mention about facts, and then I will reply to the answer that will be given by the Government. This situation dates back to some weeks ago, and began with the final sacrifice of a young Tibetan monk at the monastery of Kirti, in a region of Tibet in which tensions have been taking place for nearly three years. In Tibet, in fact, there have been important demonstrations to ask for the respect of some fundamental rights of the Tibetan population, starting from the right to religious freedom, which is constantly denied by the Chinese authorities through forms of control on the activity carried out in monasteries, including the prohibition of having images and referring to the figure of the Dalai Lama.

The Dalai Lama is the spiritual and political leader, although not under the constitution any longer, since a few days ago the Tibetan Parliament decided to change the institutional role of the Dalai Lama inside of the Tibetan society, hence modernising a system that was criticised by the Chinese Government saying that the Tibetan society was run according to a medieval approach, with the identification between the religious and the political authority. This is not the case anymore.

Moving on to the concrete case, the young Tibetan monk decided to make the final sacrifice, and died; afterwards, thousands of monks in this monastery and thousands of citizens from the surrounding areas, tried to organise demonstrations to ask to put an end to these repressions that also lead to desperation and to these sacrifices.

Unfortunately, the Chinese Government reacted hardly, laying siege to this monastery – the siege is still ongoing – causing the impossibility for the monks to go out, as well as preventing the access to the monastery by the citizens from the neighbouring areas who were there to express their solidarity, support and to bring food and beverages to the monks. In addition to all that, nearly three hundred people including monks and Tibetan citizens were imprisoned and forced to attend patriotic religious re-education courses held by the Chinese authorities. Saying these things in 2011 appears somehow anachronistic; it seems to remember some of the items contained in the black book of Communism that Italian citizens knew well since it was distributed in our Country as well, and which shows a way of controlling the society based on these types of repression and ideological approach.

China is part of the international community and plays an increasing role in the management of international crises, also in consideration of its increased weight and influence, particularly after its economic growth; at the same time, however, it is a Country that continues to enforce repressive systems that do not allow us to hope for the best. A Government that becomes economically and military stronger and gains a higher weight at international level, but continues to be ruled according to these methods that involve not only Tibetans but also minorities as Uyghur people and and Mongols that live inside of China, does not allow us to hope for the best.

I hope - although I have to confess that I am not very confident - that the Italian Government adopts an initiative taking into consideration the following: having good economic and political relations with China does not mean remaining silent before episodes of such severity, which witness a government system with a complete lack of the rule of law and of the respect of rules. This behaviour shall not be encouraged, because it jeopardises the interests that our Country and other European Countries intend to start with China: when these methods are enforced internally, it is not possible to exclude that they might also have consequences in the foreign policies of such an important Government as the Chinese one.

With this initiative we intended to give a signal; it is however important to note that in the Parliament – and the number of those who signed this urgent interpellation witnesses it –

there is a particular sensibility to this subject, which was also shown in 2009 when we hosted at the Italian Parliament the Dalai Lama and the 5th World Congress on Members of Parliament supporting the Tibetan cause. I hope that the Government might mirror the attention showed by the Parliament, and have a feedback that is not just formal but that leads to concrete results.

PRESIDENT. The Undersecretary for Economic Development Stefano Saglia has the right to reply.

STEFANO SAGLIA, *Undersecretary for Economic Development*. Mr. President, on the occasion of the third anniversary of the violent events in Lhasa of March 2008, the Tibetan issue is undergoing a new delicate phase. Last 16th March a young bonze of the Lamaist monastery of Kirti, in the province Sichuan, set himself on fire, and died the day after as a result of his burns.

According to the sources linked to the Tibetan movement in exile, also two elderly persons of Tibetan origins, coming from the village near the monastery, reportedly died as a consequence of the blows from the local police while, together with two hundred persons, were making a *sit-in* to protect the monks of Kirti from their deportation to the labour camps.

The tensions around the monastery do not seem to disappear. The security authorities of Sichuan continue to enforce a strict surveillance and do not allow the access to external observers and journalists. The Chinese authorities observe strict silence on this issue, exception made for the condemnation expressed by the «People's Daily», which denounced the behaviour of the monks of Kirti, incited – this is what an editorial stated – by the «mobs of the Dalai Lama», in turn supported by the Western world.

The agitation of the Chinese authorities is also linked to the extreme instability characterising the relations between Beijing and the so-called Tibetan government-in-exile. The Dalai Lama abandoning his political tasks, and the election of a new Prime Minister, *Lobsang Sanuay* - a non-clerical and non confessional figure, former professor at *Harvard* - might entail changes in the balance of negotiations with Beijing, until now guaranteed by the Dalai Lama.

The Italian Government, in the full respect of the territorial sovereignty and integrity of China, supports the common position expressed at European level to foster a constant and constructive dialogue between Beijing and the Tibetan representatives. The latter obviously represent fundamental interlocutors to find a shared solution to the Tibetan issue, a solution that – in the framework of the Chinese Constitution – ensures the level of protection and autonomy needed to preserve the culture, the century-old tradition and the religion of Tibet.

The specific crisis of the Monastery of Kirti was the object of concertation inside of the European Union. In fact, when it comes to such important and delicate matters, it is even

more necessary that Europe acts with a coordinated approach. It was therefore decided to promote a joint action to express with a single voice the unease of the EU in relation to the news coming from Sichuan. The EU Foreign Service summoned the Ambassador of China at the EU to express the deep concern of the Union for the news of violence perpetrated by the Sichuan authorities against the Tibetan monks. The EU also complained for the refusal by the Chinese Authorities to allow the access to the area of Kirti, a circumstance that did not allow an accurate and independent evaluation of what happened.

It must be stressed that, on the occasion of his visit to China last May, the President of the European Council indicated the respect for human rights, including religious rights, as a parameter to evaluate the role and the contribution of China as a «global responsible actor». The President reminded the Chinese interlocutors that human rights represent one of the founding values of the European construction.

The situation of the monastery of Kirti will be tackled once again by the European Union on the occasion of the next six-monthly session of the EU-China dialogue on human rights, scheduled for next 16th June.

Italy will continue to follow this delicate matter with the highest level of attention. We obviously intend to keep our constant commitment in monitoring – in general – the situation of human rights in China. We actively support those instances that, inside of the European Union and in other international frameworks, might be addressed to the Chinese authorities, asking them for more openness towards the protection of religious freedom and freedom of thought.

The multilateral actions carried out by our Country to protect religious freedom are well-known. As from 2009 – and I would like to recall it on this occasion – Italy promoted the adoption by the Council of *ad hoc* conclusions on religious freedom. At the EU level, thanks to the activity of the *task force* on religious freedom that meets on a periodical basis, an «Action Plan» was launched last July 2010 with the objective of promoting measures aimed to the protection of religious freedom through four main areas: bilateral actions, multilateral initiatives, financial support, training.

Through the contribution of Italy, it was possible to stress the fundamental items characterising the European position on this matter, also in the dialogue with China.

[PRESIDENT](#). Hon. Mecacci has the right to reply.

[MATTEO MECACCI](#). Mr. President, as previously said I had no illusions about the reply of the Government, and my idea has been confirmed. In fact, the reply of the Undersecretary allows to think that here we have a news: that is to say that the Government abdicated our foreign policy towards China in favour of the European Union. Consequently, the news is that we finally have or will have a common foreign policy of the European Union vis-à-vis China. Unfortunately, this concerns only troublesome issues, that is to say that when the issues to be raised with China are about violations of human rights, then the European

Union is invoked and entrusted with the task of dealing with them, whereas when it comes to other matters, that are politically more important also from an economic perspective, bilateral relations are very much cultivated also with rather questionable initiatives.

This is mainly due to the political support expressed towards a Government of China with which – and here I stress it again – we need to have good relationships in different areas including economy, military cooperation, and international relations. However, the fact that this relationship does not include any reference whatsoever to the need for such a Country to adopt democratic reforms, starting from the respect of some fundamental human rights as the ones we are referring to, represents a capital error. This is an error that we also made with other Countries in the recent history of the Italian foreign policy, like Libya, Tunisia and Egypt: there was an excessive political exposure of our Country to support these authoritarian Governments, exceeding what was needed to be done to have good economic relations with them.

Therefore, I cannot but say that I am not satisfied; this is not depending on the fact – and I think that this opinion is shared by many colleagues here at the Parliament – that I am a representative of the opposition party, but rather because the approach adopted of not dealing with issues that are politically uncomfortable and that relate to the *governance* of a Country as China, encompasses an evaluation error. The fact of deciding to have privileged political relations, as it was witnessed by the recent visit of the President of the Chinese Parliament in Italy, will not entail any advantages for our Country, because China is a large Country with a clear idea of the importance of relations of power, and it knows well that the issue of its democratic legitimization at international level is an important element for its perspectives of growth.

When a Country as Italy, which is member of the G8 and one of the founding Countries of the European Union, stops raising these questions, then it becomes weaker, and when this happens with these kind of Governments, they grasp the opportunity of adopting more aggressive initiatives, also in other areas that are considered more strategic for our Country.

Having considered your reply, I intend to evaluate with other colleagues the opportunity of submitting other initiatives, i.e. motions, that might somehow change the approach expressed today by the Government, an approach that we consider as deeply wrong.