What is Happening in Tibet

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About the Author

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Introduction

On November 26, 2017 a 63-year-old Tibetan popular monk and volunteer teacher of village children named Tenga from Kardze self-immolated in Sichuan province’s Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. He called out for freedom in Tibet before he set himself aflame. These self-immolation protests have explicitly called for greater freedom for the Tibetan people. They represent the deep frustrations and yearnings of the Tibetan people.

Since 2008-2009, the unrest of resorting to self immolation by the Tibetans to protest against the Chinese has gained huge momentum and till now more than 150 Tibetans have resorted to this extreme step of protest. Even sending a picture like this abroad can, and has, cost Tibetan men and women their freedom and resulted in lengthy prison sentences.

Repression

Hundreds of Tibetans are imprisoned for expressing their opinions or beliefs; Buddhist monasteries across Tibet are under strict police surveillance, with police stations built inside or beside them. The Chinese Communist Party – not Tibetan Buddhists – has the authority to identify and appoint reincarnated Tibetan Lamas, including the Dalai Lama. Tibetan nomads are being removed from their land and relocated in ‘socialist
villages’; a number of urban centers in Tibet now have a majority ethnic Chinese population; and the use of the Tibetan language is discouraged. This threatens the Tibetan language being reduced to colloquial just use. These are the policies that threaten the very survival of Tibetan identity.

On any given day, people in Tibet may wake up without access to the Internet and unable to make a phone call because authorities have shut down all communications. Tibetans can find themselves stopped and searched randomly at roadside security checkpoints, their phones and electronic devices confiscated to be probed for sensitive images, like those of the Dalai Lama. Nuns and monks from nearby monasteries may be rounded up by police to be detained or warned about the use of social media. And entire families may be taken into custody under suspicion that one individual, or a close relative, has communicated with foreign media or NGOs.

**Larung Gar Incident**

Erosion of religious rights and freedoms in Tibet may be best illustrated by the accelerated demolition and crackdown on Larung Gar. Larung Gar is one of the most prominent and vibrant Tibetan Buddhist learning centers with monks and nuns from all over the country. It is one of the few and earliest religious institutes in Tibet where nuns are provided equal opportunities to study as monks. The institute houses the first nunnery in Tibet that offered curricula leading to women getting the degree of Khenmo, the feminine equivalent of the Khenpo degree, similar to a doctorate degree, that is usually given after 13 years of rigorous study in five areas of Buddhist scriptures, particularly in the Nyingma and Kagyu traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. In 1990, the institute awarded the first Khenmo degrees and since then, no less than a hundred nuns have successfully acquired the degree. For many other nuns who are either disabled, widowed or divorced, the institute has provided a lifeline in terms of spiritual and secular sustenance. The total number of monks and nuns, apart from lay and foreign practitioners, at the institute hovered around 10,000 before the demolition.
Larung Gar, the world's largest Tibetan Buddhist institute

Larung Gar, the world’s largest Tibetan Buddhist institute, resembles a sliced melon a year after Chinese authorities dismantled thousands of monastic residences and evicted Buddhist practitioners in Larung Valley in Tibet’s Serthar (Ch: Seda) County in Kardze (Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. The famed institute which used to house thousands of Buddhist practitioners has been divided into several segments with new roads and staircases taking up the spaces where once stood the homes of monks and nuns. With hundreds of ethnic Chinese as well as Tibetan devotees, Larung Gar is known for its democratic and egalitarian practices, with a robust means of collective decision-making by its members, an express commitment to gender and ethnic equality, and a rejection of traditional forms of hierarchy. Even the highest lamas must perform menial chores such as cleaning toilets, unusual among monastic communities that are typically highly stratified.

In March 2017, a statement by an abbot of the institute was found posted on Weibo that confirmed that the Chinese authorities had announced the demolition of 3,225 monastic quarters by 30 April. By the end of February 2017, more than half of the targeted 4,725 houses had been destroyed during the same period. The remaining houses which number about 2,000 were set to be destroyed by the end of April. In early April, about 250 monks and nuns, who were originally from Tsongon (Qinghai), were
evicted. By the end of May, the Chinese authorities had evicted 4,828 monks and nuns and destroyed 4,725 houses.

Larung Gar—Before and After the Demolitions

In 2001, Chinese authorities implemented similar crackdown on Larung Gar by destroying thousands of monastic dwellings and expelling many monastic and lay practitioners, some of whom died of shock or resorted to suicide, while some were rendered mentally unsound.

Suppression of Access to Information

Virtually all expressions of Tibetan identity—including the practice of religion and the teaching of the Tibetan language—online, and on social media are filtered, monitored or outright censored. Those who are considered to have violated what’s deemed necessary by authorities to preserve stability often suffer severe consequences such as jailing and torture. Each time a protest takes place, authorities intensify efforts to clamp down on the sharing of information. Entire prefectures and regions can be plunged into a communications blackout in the wake of such protests. Messaging apps like WeChat are shut down, along with the Internet and phone lines. Face Book and YouTube are blocked, and Chinese telecoms that control Chinese Internet access have been ordered by the
state to ban the use of VPNs, removing nearly any possibility for Tibetans to access sensitive content on outside social media and websites. China’s vast system of Internet filters and blocks, known collectively as ‘The Great Firewall’, is tightly enforced in the Tibetan regions, where all online access and the Internet can be shut down at any given moment. Chinese state-sponsored hackers target the Tibetan diaspora and organizations outside China, using malware attacks to shut down overseas servers and IT infrastructure.

Weibo and WeChat, the dominant social media platforms in China, are heavily monitored and restricted. Tibetans who use WeChat to keep in touch with family and friends, but also to discuss sensitive topics in created groups, risk harassment and jail. Chinese authorities have begun to infiltrate these groups to monitor and crack down on individuals. Authorities ramped up efforts to police WeChat and warn Tibetan monastery heads about the severe consequences their entire establishments would face if monks and nuns shared or discussed content deemed sensitive. Chinese authorities also bring the heavy hand of law enforcement down on any Tibetan caught sharing information of events inside the Tibetan regions with foreign outlets. They even target Tibetans using WeChat and WhatsApp in the United States.

Beijing has recently directed increased resources to build up its state-sponsored Tibetan language media operations on radio, online, and TV, which offers audiences almost solely entertainment programming punctuated with propaganda-driven news updates serving the Chinese Communist Party’s narrative.

2008 Uprising to the Present State

Beijing has always kept a tight lid on Tibet, mostly to conceal the extent of its abuses stemming from its policies in the region. In 2008, an uprising in Lhasa spread throughout all Tibetan regions within China, culminating in the last protests leading up to the Beijing Olympics. There was a series of riots, protests, and demonstrations that started in the Tibetan regional capital of Lhasa and spread to other Tibetan areas and a number of monasteries including outside the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), which led to 18 civilians killed and 382 injured. What originally began as an annual observance of ‘Tibetan Uprising Day’ resulted in street protests by
monks, that later descended into rioting, burning, looting, and ethnic killing. The violence was mostly directed at Han and Hui civilians by Tibetans participating in the unrest. Police intervened to prevent the conflict from further escalation.

The United States and many other countries have tended to take a benign view of China’s policies because Xi Jinping tries to present himself to the world as a global citizen. In addition, illusion still persists that integration of China into the global economy and political order will moderate its behaviour and encourage its internal liberalisation. In fact, the threat posed by China to the world order has increased with its growing economic power, and repression is worse today than at any time since the death of Mao Zedong four decades ago. Nowhere is this repression more cruel than in Tibet, where the Chinese Government is pursuing a policy that the Dalai Lama has called ‘cultural genocide’. In addition to the systematic effort to destroy the Tibetan religion, language, culture, and distinct national identity, China has flooded Tibet with Han Chinese settlers, placed monasteries under direct government control, arrested and tortured writers, and forcibly resettled more than two million nomads in urban areas, destroying their traditional way of life and disrupting the fragile
ecosystem of the Tibet Plateau. The death and likely murder in prison in July 2015 of Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, a beloved community leader and spiritual teacher, is emblematic of this condition.

Continued Tibetan resistance to Chinese oppression exposes the falseness of China’s claim to the legitimacy of its rule in Tibet, which rests on the assertion, stated in a White Paper issued by the Chinese Government in 2015, that “Tibet has been an integral part of China since antiquity.” China insists that it won’t resume the negotiations over Tibet’s status that it broke off in 2010 until the Dalai Lama agrees to that assertion, something he cannot do since it is contradicted by the historical literature and overlooks the fact that Communist China invaded Tibet and illegally annexed it in 1951. Tibet was not a part of China before the invasion occurred and it continues to violate international law by denying the Tibetan people their right to self-determination.

During President Xi Jinping’s tenure, China has grown even more strident in enforcing a comprehensive censorship and propaganda operation in Tibet. These tactics are designed to keep the Tibetans in the dark as Beijing has stepped up its suppression of Tibetan identity and religious freedom, continued to seize land and mineral wealth from Tibetan-populated areas, increased its attacks on Tibetan cultural heritage and demonised the Tibetan people’s spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama.

**China’s Strategy**

**Urbanisation**

The Chinese state, as part of its arsenal of responses against the Tibetan unrest, has intensified urbanisation, hoping that economic development and cultural contact will lead to assimilation and stability. Urbanisation is Beijing’s new model for modernising and civilising the country’s ethnic borderlands. It is now the centerpiece of policies for poverty alleviation and economic growth, as outlined in the state’s ambitious National New-Type Urbanisation Plan 2014-2020, launched in March 2014. This aims to create more than 100 million new urbanites by 2020, and the ‘Rural Poverty Alleviation and Development Program’ 2011-2020, launched in November 2011. Employment, education, and business opportunities draw many Tibetans to cities; in the 2010 Census, Beijing classified only 33.5 per cent of the country’s 6.2 million Tibetans as urban residents. For rural
youth in particular, cities offer a vibrant and exciting alternative to country life, even though some find it difficult to adjust to the pace of life, Han cultural norms, and widespread ethnic discrimination that define city life.

The scale of urbanisation in China’s Tibetan areas can be seen in Qinghai Province, home to 1.3 million Tibetans. Xining, Qinghai’s capital, is the largest city on the Tibetan Plateau with 2.3 million residents, including roughly 120,000 Tibetans. Qinghai will be home to seven new cities by 2020, as the Province seeks to urbanise nearly half a million people and create a new network of transportation and communications infrastructure.

Other policies encourage urbanisation by undermining the traditional subsistence economy and divesting Tibetans of their rural homelands. Key among them are the ‘Grain for Green policy' (Tuìgēng Hái Cǎo), which appropriates farmland for conservation; and resettlement programs, which have mobile pastoralists settling in townships while either collectivising or selling their livestock. Meanwhile, schools and health clinics in rural areas have been closed, and new facilities opened in urban centers, which also pushes Tibetans towards cities. For China’s policy makers, however, urbanisation is more than just an economic strategy for developing Tibetan areas. Cities promote cultural transformation and political integration through increased inter-ethnic ‘mingling’ (jiāoróng) with the Han majority. And while this process is intended to reduce separatist tendencies by minimising ethnic differences, cities also conveniently lend themselves to monitoring and high-tech surveillance by China’s state security apparatus.

Beijing incentivises county and prefecture-level governments to upgrade to municipality status. Cities entail higher ranks for government leaders, additional departments, and more resources. Five of the seven prefectures in the TAR have already been designated as municipalities. Other cities have also been created in regions outside of the TAR with large Tibetan populations: Gyalting (Shangrila) in Yunnan Province; Dartsemdo (Kangding) in Sichuan, Yushu in Qinghai, and Tso (Hezuo) in Gansu have each been “upgraded” in the past decade. Tibetans who move to large, Han-dominated cities with populations in the millions like Xining, become minorities subject to societal discrimination and state-led assimilation efforts. But urbanisation also facilitates new forms of Tibetan interaction and mobilisation. In cities, Tibetans find themselves connected to resources
that enable them to mobilise around topics of common concern and to build coalitions for cultural preservation and development.

Cities, therefore, have the potential for new forms of Tibetan politics that resist as well as co-opt the state’s push for assimilation. Universities, tea-houses, and bars are all urban venues where Tibetan intellectuals exchange ideas and organise to pursue collective goals. The Internet and new social media platforms provide other opportunities for resistance—despite China’s heavy online censorship—resulting in a fluid, ever-evolving public sphere where Tibetans interact with each other, other ethnic groups, and the state. Some of these projects are specifically designed to resist assimilation and assert Tibetan identity, such as the Lhakar campaign, which encourages Tibetans to speak ‘pure’ Tibetan (without Chinese loan words) and to dress in Tibetan robes every Wednesday. But the emerging urban Tibetan public sphere also grapples with other issues, including indigenous development, religious reform, environmentalism, entrepreneurialism and education.

Despite a significant Han presence, Tibetans remain the largest population groups in these towns. Here, life continues to be unmistakably Tibetan; but what and who defines that “Tibetanness” is being hotly contested as Tibetans from different localities and walks of life live closer together. For Tibetans, cities are therefore sites of cultural erosion, resistance to assimilation and intra-ethnic competition. As a result, the possible futures of urban Tibetans are far more dynamic than any one-dimensional notions of assimilation, meaning that the fault lines of future unrest are not only more numerous, but perhaps also less predictable than previously imagined.

**Control of Religion**

**Tibetan Buddhism**

For centuries, Tibetan Buddhism and its vast network of monasteries and nunneries have been a central component of economic, social, political, and religious life in Tibet. Many of the region’s religious sites date back to the seventh century. Political and religious authority have been closely intertwined, particularly since a Dalai Lama began ruling the Tibetan Plateau in the late-16th Century.
The unique religious traditions of Tibetan Buddhism—its religious texts, dances, tantric practices and the philosophical debates that are central to monastic education—differ significantly from the form of Mahayana Buddhism practiced widely in other parts of China. Lay practice typically involves making offerings at temples, reciting prayers, maintaining a home shrine, celebrating annual festivals, and completing pilgrimages to sacred sites in Lhasa or elsewhere on the Plateau. These activities are quite common and visible in Tibetan areas of China. Also visible, however, are the heavy para-military and police presence surrounding key monasteries and video surveillance cameras installed within or near religious sites.

According to official statistics, as of 2014, there were 3,600 active Tibetan Buddhist monasteries or temples and 148,000 Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns throughout China, far exceeding the number of Chinese Buddhist monastics and illustrating the important position that religious institutions hold among Tibetan communities. Of these, 1,787 religious sites and over 46,000 monks and nuns are reportedly located within the TAR. Of the number of lay believers, almost all of the vast majority of the 6.8 million Tibetans, of which 97 percent living in Greater Tibet, are thought to engage in some kind of Tibetan Buddhist practice, unless they are members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or government officials.

While the number of practicing Tibetan Buddhists among ethnic Tibetans has remained more or less constant, one significant change in the religion over the past decade has been the growing number of Han Chinese followers, particularly urban elites. Several million are believed to have adopted the religion. Some observers attribute the rising popularity of Tibetan rather than Chinese Buddhism, among Han population to the extensive spiritual guidance that Tibetan Buddhist monastics provide directly to lay believers, and to an interest in obtaining supernatural abilities.

**Schools of Tibetan Buddhism.** The Dalai Lama heads the largest school of Tibetan Buddhism, the Gelugpa School, although Tibetans from other schools also revere him. Meanwhile, worshippers of Shugden, a Tibetan Buddhist deity, have their own historical animosity toward the Dalai Lama. In recent years, the Chinese authorities have sought to exploit this internal division, providing funding and other support to Shugden monasteries and
religious leaders, and even encouraging monks at Gelugpa institutes to adopt worship of the deity.

**Revival and Expansion.** Tibetan Buddhism has revived significantly since the rampant destruction of the Cultural Revolution. Over the past decade, it has gained millions of new believers from the urban Han elite across China, joining the widespread piety among roughly six million Tibetans.

**Extensive Controls:** The Chinese authorities impose severe restrictions on the religious practice of Tibetan Buddhists, particularly devotion to the exiled Dalai Lama, a core tenet for many believers. Intrusive official presence in monasteries, pervasive surveillance, routine re-education campaigns, limits on travel and communications, and regulations discouraging religiosity among government employees and university students affect most monastics and many lay believers. Nevertheless, some of the controls are implemented unevenly across different geographic areas or schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

**Violent Repression.** Chinese security forces in Tibetan areas are quick to employ coercive measures to suppress perceived religious dissent, including the use of live ammunition against unarmed civilians. Several individuals die in police custody each year.

**Economic Carrots and Sticks.** Various rewards and punishments encourage local officials to use coercive rather than cooperative methods to handle disputes with Tibetan religious communities. Economic measures are also increasingly being used as a form of collective punishment to deter acts of protest or resistance to religious repression, often affecting the livelihood of entire families or villages.

**Resilience and Resistance.** Tibetans’ private devotion to the Dalai Lama has proved incredibly resilient despite over two decades of suppression efforts. Constant denunciation and vilification of the Dalai Lama by Chinese officials and state media remains one of the most offensive aspects of the government’s religious policy.

**Communist Party Policy.** Organised Tibetan Buddhism is widely perceived as the greatest potential threat to Communist Party rule in Tibetan areas. Large-scale protests by Tibetans across the plateau before the Beijing Olympics caught the officials by surprise, as many had assumed that the absence of mass demonstrations in the previous nine years was the result of Tibetans accepting Chinese rule and a reduced devotion to the
Dalai Lama. In the aftermath, party leaders re-examined policies in the region, but rather than easing restrictions that were fueling grievances, they reinforced them. The year 2008 has been a turning point in the government’s management of Tibetan Buddhism. The years, since, have featured greater restrictions on travel, intensified political education campaigns, and enhanced deployments of security personnel at religious ceremonies and institutions.

**Tibetan Buddhism under Xi Jinping**

When Xi Jinping took the helm of the CCP in November 2012, he inherited a particularly tense situation across the Tibetan Plateau. A series of self-immolation protests that began in 2009 were reaching their peak. The desperate acts were reportedly fueled by a sense of resentment and helplessness among both monastics and lay Tibetans as they faced longterm encroachment on Tibetan cultural space and growing restrictions on religious belief, travel, children’s education, and day-to-day life in the wake of the 2008 protests.

President Xi Jinping has largely continued Hu Jintaoera policies and campaigns while deepening and expanding certain controls. Some new measures have escalated tensions with monastics and lay believers. At the Sixth Forum on Tibet held in August 2015, for example, Xi declared that “efforts should be made to promote patriotism among the Tibetan Buddhist circle...encouraging interpretations of religious doctrines that are compatible with a socialist society.” Other measures appear to be the initiatives of various lower-level authorities. Some of the measures directly driven by central authorities to alter Tibetan Buddhist doctrine are:-

- Collective punishment to stem self-immolations;
- Frequent festival bans;
- Intensified reprisals for lay religious practice;
- Doctrinal manipulation. Xi aims to alter Tibetan Buddhist doctrine so that it better conforms to “socialism with Chinese characteristics” and acceptance of CCP rule.

**Key Methods of Political Control.** The Chinese Government imposes a wide array of controls on Tibetan monastics and lay believers. It has become increasingly intrusive, encroaching on areas of life that had
previously been left unmolested. Ubiquitous propaganda posters and slogans in public places and monasteries remind clerics and lay people of official regulations on religious management; demands to prioritise loyalty to the state, and penalties for violating rules like carrying prayer beads or other religious symbols into government buildings or schools.

Some of the measures taken by CCP to manage Tibetan Buddhism are:-

- Weakening the bond between monasteries and the surrounding community;
- Severing residents’ bond with the Dalai Lama and other exiled religious leaders;
- Promoting the influence of politically loyal religious leaders and doctrinal interpretations, most notably the government appointed Panchen Lama;
- Cultivating a Tibetan socio-economic elite with a weaker religious identity;
- Limiting the size of the monastic community and the quality of monastic education;
- Discouraging protests motivated by spiritual beliefs or loyalty to the Dalai Lama.

**Response and Resistance by Tibetan Community**

The Chinese government’s multilayered apparatus of control over Tibetan Buddhism has generated significant resentment among both monastics and lay people across the Tibetan Plateau. Notably, official actions that generate offense or trigger unrest are not just the ruthless acts of force, but also mundane and pervasive controls like travel restrictions, bans on private worship of the Dalai Lama, and propaganda inside monasteries. The interference, combined with the typically patronising tone of official rhetoric, evokes a strong sense among Tibetans that the state disrespects and willingly desecrates key elements of their religious faith. The more extreme uses of violence further convey a lack of respect for Tibetan lives on the part of Chinese officials and security forces.
Future Outlook

Political and religious authority in Tibet have long been intricately intertwined in a manner that is unique among the major religions in China today. This has presented distinct challenges to CCP’s policy as officials attempt to permit some degree of religious practice while strongly suppressing the actions perceived to be politically subversive.

The Dalai Lama handed over all his remaining political authority to the prime minister of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile in 2011, but the Chinese Government continues to regard him as a political threat rather than a purely religious figure. In fact, the CCP is looking ahead to the current Dalai Lama’s death and intensifying its efforts to control his reincarnation. It has made statements insisting that the next Dalai Lama will be born inside Tibet. Given the evident resilience of Tibetans’ devotion to the Dalai Lama and their reluctance to genuinely embrace the government-backed Panchen Lama, such rhetoric seems guaranteed to create more friction. By contrast, if CCP leaders were to decide on a more conciliatory approach and accept the Dalai Lama’s role as a religious figure, they might be able to reap political and economic benefits while significantly reducing social tensions. Robert Barnett, a leading scholar on Tibet, argued in a recent interview that “if Xi had time to sort out Tibet policy, stopping the attacks on the Dalai Lama would solve 50 to 60 percent of the problem.”

Despite the severity of the current situation and the expressions of concern made by many governments, China continues to intensify its grip on Tibet. It has also failed to engage in meaningful dialogue in response to proposals put forward by the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile aimed at alleviating tensions and allowing the Tibetan people to protect their cultural traditions. Far from genuinely addressing the grievances of the Tibetan people, China’s leaders have chosen instead to follow a policy of violence and intimidation in Tibet.
END NOTES


*Image Source: https://www.engadget.com/2017/06/27/the-high-tech-war-on-tibetan-communication/*
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