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Freedom in the World 2012 - Tibet

2012 Scores

Status: Not Free

Freedom Rating: 7.0

Civil Liberties: 7

Political Rights: 7

Overview

The security clampdown established after an uprising in 2008 was generally maintained during 2011. Between March and the end of the year, 12 Tibetans set themselves on fire to protest Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule, mostly in the Tibetan regions of Sichuan Province. The authorities responded with mass detentions, "patriotic education" campaigns, and communications blackouts, continuing a trend in recent years of growing repression in Tibetan areas outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) where government policies had previously been less severe. Also in 2011, the top CCP official in the TAR was replaced, though the change appeared unlikely to significantly reduce state repression in the region.

The Tibetan plateau, or a substantial portion of it, was ruled by a Dalai Lama or his government from the mid-17th century onward. Chinese Communist forces entered Tibet in 1950 and defeated the Tibetan army. The region was formally incorporated into the People's Republic of China the following year. In 1959, Chinese troops suppressed a major uprising in Lhasa, reportedly killing tens of thousands of people. Tibet's spiritual and political leader – the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso – was forced to flee to India with some 80,000 supporters.

During the next six years, China closed 97 percent of the region's Buddhist monasteries and defrocked about 100,000 monks and nuns. Most Tibetan territory was reorganized as the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) in 1965, but some eastern portions of the Tibetan plateau were included in separate Chinese provinces. During the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-76), nearly all of Tibet's estimated 6,200 monasteries were destroyed.

Under reforms introduced in 1980, limited religious practice was allowed again. Between 1987 and 1989, some 200 mostly peaceful demonstrations were mounted in Lhasa and surrounding areas. After the antigovernment protests escalated in March 1989, martial law was imposed until May 1990.

In the 1990s, Beijing reinvigorated its efforts to control religious affairs and undermine the exiled Dalai Lama's authority. Six-year-old Gendun Choekyi Nyima was detained by the authorities in 1995, and his selection by the Dalai Lama as the 11th Panchen Lama was rejected. He subsequently disappeared from public view, and Beijing orchestrated the selection of another six-year-old boy as the Panchen Lama. Since one of the roles of the Panchen Lama is to identify the reincarnated Dalai Lama, the move was widely seen as a bid to control the eventual selection of the 15th Dalai Lama.

China hosted envoys of the Dalai Lama in 2002, marking the first formal contact since 1993. The Tibetan government in exile sought genuine autonomy for Tibet, particularly to ensure the survival of its Buddhist culture, but the Chinese side said repeatedly that it would only discuss the return of the Dalai Lama and not broader conditions in Tibet. Meanwhile, other Tibetan exile groups increasingly demanded independence.

Under Zhang Qingli, who was appointed as secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the TAR in 2005, the authorities amplified their repressive policies. In March 2008, after security agents suppressed a march by monks to mark the anniversary of the 1959 uprising, a riot erupted. Some Tibetans attacked ethnic Chinese residents and burned Chinese- or Hui-owned businesses and government offices. Over 150 other protests, most of them reportedly peaceful, soon broke out in Tibetan-populated areas of the TAR and other provinces. The government responded with a massive deployment of armed forces, who opened fire on protesters on at least four occasions, according to Human Rights Watch. The authorities reported that 19 people were killed in Lhasa, primarily in fires, and admitted to the death of three Tibetan protesters in the city. Overseas Tibetan groups claimed that between 100 and 218 Tibetans were killed as security forces suppressed the demonstrations.

Although the region was accessible to tourists and journalists under special conditions for parts of the next three years, the high level of repression established in 2008 was generally maintained. Security measures were especially tight surrounding politically sensitive dates. In 2011, these included the March anniversary of the 1959 and 2008 uprisings, and the 60th anniversary of Chinese rule in July. On both occasions, the authorities imposed a month-long ban on travel to the area by foreign tourists.

In the Tibetan areas of Sichuan Province, repression intensified beginning in March 2011, after a young monk set himself on fire to protest CCP rule. By year's end, 10 more Tibetans in Sichuan and one in the TAR had self-immolated, and at least six of them died from their injuries. The crackdown after the first self-immolations spurred clashes between security forces and Tibetan residents, and according to some observers, was a motivating factor for the subsequent acts of protest.

The intermittent talks between the government and representatives of the Dalai Lama ceased again in 2011, as the atmosphere for dialogue deteriorated. At a July rally in Lhasa to mark the 60th anniversary of Chinese rule in the region, Chinese vice president Xi Jinping, expected to become China's top leader in 2012, touted the CCP's deeply unpopular policies in Tibet and praised the work of security units that have played a leading role in violent crackdowns. Both state-run media and "patriotic education" campaigns continued to vilify the Dalai Lama, and Beijing continued its aggressive policy of pressuring foreign leaders to refrain from meeting with him and endorse the official Chinese position on Tibet.

The government's extensive economic development programs in Tibet have disproportionately benefited ethnic Chinese and increased Chinese migration to the region, stoking Tibetan fears of cultural assimilation.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

The Chinese government rules Tibet through administration of the TAR and 12 Tibetan autonomous prefectures or counties in the nearby provinces of Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu, and Yunnan. Under the Chinese constitution, autonomous areas have the right to formulate their own regulations and implement national legislation in accordance with local conditions. In practice, decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of senior, ethnic Chinese CCP officials. In August 2011, Zhang Qingli was replaced as TAR party secretary by Chen Quanguo, a CCP veteran with no previous experience dealing with ethnic minorities. Some observers speculated that Chen might not pursue repressive measures with as much zeal as Zhang, but such a shift appeared unlikely without a policy change in Beijing. The few ethnic Tibetans who occupy senior positions serve mostly as figureheads and echo official doctrine on Tibet. Padma Thrinley (known as Pema Choling in the Chinese press), a Tibetan, has served as chairman of the TAR government since January 2010.

Since 1960, the Dalai Lama has overseen the partial democratization of the government in exile in Dharamsala, India. Current institutions include an elected parliament serving five-year terms, a Supreme Justice Commission that adjudicates civil disputes, and – since 2001 – a directly elected prime minister, also serving five-year terms. The unelected Dalai Lama, who served as head of state, renounced his political role in March 2011, and the parliament made the necessary changes to the exile government's charter in May. Separately, Lobsang Sangay was elected prime minister in April, replacing a two-term incumbent.

Corruption is believed to be extensive in Tibet, as in the rest of China. Nevertheless, little information was available during the year on the scale of the problem or official measures to combat it.

Chinese authorities control the flow of information in Tibet, tightly restricting all media. International broadcasts are jammed. The internet has provided educated residents with more access to information, but the online restrictions and surveillance in place across China are enforced even more stringently in the TAR. Security forces periodically confiscate communications devices and raid internet cafés, and routinely monitor calls in and out of the region. Tibetans who transmit information abroad often suffer repercussions including long prison sentences, while some internet users have been arrested solely for accessing banned information. Near the sites of self-immolations in 2011, the authorities at times cut off the internet entirely. Several Tibetan websites and a social-networking site were shut down within days of the first self-immolation. Also during 2011, security forces continued a recent campaign of arrests aimed at cultural figures whose work – often circulated by hand within Tibet and shared with the outside world – emphasizes Tibetan identity. According to overseas Tibetan

groups, more than 60 writers, intellectuals, and musicians have been arrested since 2008, with some sentenced to lengthy prison terms, including a number of convictions in 2011.

Authorities continued to restrict foreign journalists' access to the TAR in 2011. Like other foreigners, they were denied entry around politically sensitive dates in March and July. During other periods, they were required to travel in groups and obtain official permission to visit the TAR. Foreign journalists periodically report being expelled from Tibetan areas of Sichuan and other provinces, though no permission is technically required for travel there. Residents who assist foreign journalists are reportedly harassed.

The authorities regularly suppress religious activities, particularly those seen as forms of dissent or advocacy of Tibetan independence. Possession of Dalai Lama-related materials can lead to official harassment and punishment, though many Tibetans secretly possess such items. CCP members, government employees, and their family members are not allowed to practice Buddhism, at least within the TAR. The Religious Affairs Bureaus (RABs) control who can study in monasteries and convents. Officials allow only men and women over age 18 to become monks and nuns, and they are required to sign a declaration rejecting Tibetan independence, expressing loyalty to the Chinese government, and denouncing the Dalai Lama. Regulations announced in 2007 require government approval for the religious recognition and education of reincarnated Buddhist clergy. The government manages the daily operations of monasteries through Democratic Management Committees (DMCs) and the RABs. Only monks and nuns deemed loyal to the CCP may lead DMCs, and laypeople have also been appointed to these committees. New regulations in effect as of August 2011 in approximately half of the Tibetan areas outside the TAR will further increase government control over the personnel decisions and daily affairs of monasteries in those regions.

Ideological education campaigns that had been conducted sporadically since 1996 began to escalate under Zhang Qingli in 2005 and intensified after 2008. They have occasionally been extended beyond monasteries to Tibet's general population, forcing students, civil servants, farmers, and merchants to recognize the CCP claim that China "liberated" Tibet and to denounce the Dalai Lama. Monks and nuns who refuse face expulsion from their religious institutions, while others risk loss of employment or arrest.

University professors cannot lecture on certain topics, and many must attend political indoctrination sessions. The government restricts course materials to prevent the circulation of unofficial versions of Tibetan history.

Freedoms of assembly and association are severely restricted in practice. Independent trade unions and human rights groups are illegal, and even nonviolent protests are often harshly punished. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) focused on development and public health operate under highly restrictive agreements. Despite the risks, Tibetans continue to seek avenues for expressing dissatisfaction with government policies. In 2011, a new form of protest took gained prominence as 12 Tibetans, mostly monks and nuns, set themselves on fire and shouted slogans calling for freedom in Tibet and the return of the Dalai Lama. In March and April, police detained numerous people tangentially linked to the first self-immolator, Phuntsog, a monk from Kirti monastery in Sichuan's Aba (Ngaba) prefecture. A tighter lockdown was imposed on the monastery in April, sparking protests by local residents who tried to stop police from taking monks away for "patriotic education." After a standoff of several days, security forces suppressed the protests and detained 300 monks; two lay Tibetans reportedly died in the clashes. At least 100 of the detained monks were later released, but were required to return to their homes in Qinghai rather than continue their monastic studies. In September, six people linked to Phuntsog were sentenced: three monks accused of aiding and sheltering him received 10 to 13 years in prison, while three others received two to three years in "reeducation through labor" camps.

In addition to the self-immolations and related protests in Aba, clerics and lay Tibetans in Ganzi (Kardze), also in Sichuan, staged a series of small protests throughout the month of June. On an almost daily basis, a pair or small group would go to a public space, distribute leaflets, and call for the return of the Dalai Lama. By the end of the month, between 40 and 60 people had reportedly been arrested. Seventeen were apparently released in August, while the whereabouts of the others were unknown at year's end. Meanwhile, rural Tibetans in the TAR continued to stage periodic protests against Chinese mining operations on the plateau.

The judicial system in Tibet remains abysmal, and torture is reportedly widespread. Several cases of detainees dying in custody or shortly after release were reported in 2011. Defendants lack access to meaningful legal representation. Trials are closed if state security is invoked, and sometimes even when no political crime is listed. Chinese lawyers who offer to defend Tibetan suspects have been harassed or disbarred. Security forces routinely engage in arbitrary detention, and the families of detainees are often left with little information as to their whereabouts or well-being. A partial list of political prisoners published by the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China included over 500 Tibetans as of September 2011.

Heightened restrictions on freedom of movement – including troop deployments, roadblocks, and passport restrictions – were employed sporadically during 2011, particularly surrounding politically sensitive anniversaries and in areas of Sichuan where self-immolations took place. Increased security efforts kept the number of Tibetans who successfully crossed the border into Nepal at around 700 during the year, compared with some 800 in 2010 and over 2,000 in 2007.

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As members of an officially recognized minority group, Tibetans receive preferential treatment in university admission examinations, but this is often not enough to secure entrance. The dominant role of the Chinese language in education and employment limits opportunities for many Tibetans. Private-sector employers favor ethnic Chinese for many jobs, especially in urban areas. Tibetans reportedly find it more difficult than Chinese residents to obtain permits and loans to open businesses.

Since 2003, the authorities have intensified efforts to resettle rural Tibetans – either by force or with inducements – in permanent-housing areas with little economic infrastructure. According to state-run media reports, by July 2011 a total of 1.4 million farmers and herders had been resettled within the TAR. Many have reportedly tried to return to their previous lands, risking conflict with officials if they are discovered.

China's restrictive family-planning policies are more leniently enforced for Tibetans and other ethnic minorities than for ethnic Chinese. Officials limit urban Tibetans to having two children and encourage – but do not usually require – rural Tibetans to stop at three children. As a result, the TAR is one of the few areas of China where the prevailing preference for male children along with the restrictive regulations has not led to a skewed sex ratio in the population.

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