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Freedom in the World 2013 - Tibet

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2013 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 sustained during 2012 and increasingly extended to Tibetan areas outside the Tibet Autonomous Region. Over the course of the year, a total of 84 Tibetans set themselves on fire to protest Chinese Communist rule. The authorities responded with communications blackouts, "patriotic education" campaigns, travel restrictions, and intrusive new controls on monasteries. Despite the repressive atmosphere, many Tibetans expressed solidarity with self-immolators, protested language policies, and quietly maintained contact with the exile community.

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 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 Chinese Communist Party (CCP) secretary in the TAR in 2005, the authorities amplified their repressive policies. In addition, the party began extending harsher restrictions on Tibetan religion and language to the previously more open neighboring provinces, spurring growing resentment. In March 2008, after security agents suppressed a march by monks on the anniversary of the 1959 uprising, a riot erupted in Lhasa. Over 150 other protests, most of them reportedly peaceful, soon broke out in Tibetan-populated areas. The government responded with a massive deployment of armed forces. The authorities reported that 19 people were killed in Lhasa, primarily in fires, while overseas Tibetan groups claimed that between 100 and 218 Tibetans were killed as security forces suppressed the demonstrations.

The tight security conditions established in 2008 were generally maintained over the subsequent years, with especially restrictive measures imposed around politically sensitive dates. A young monk in Sichuan Province set himself on fire to protest CCP rule in 2009, and a series similar self-immolations gained momentum in 2011. In 2012, the incidents spread geographically and increasingly involved lay Tibetans rather than monks and nuns alone. A total of 84 Tibetans reportedly self-immolated during 2012. The vast majority of the incidents were in Sichuan, Qinghai, and Gansu Provinces, with only eight of the 112 that had occurred since 2009 taking place in the TAR. Most of the self-immolators shouted slogans referring to political and religious freedom, and almost all died from their injuries.

The Chinese authorities responded with communications blackouts, invigorated political indoctrination campaigns, collective punishment, and arrests of those suspected of helping the immolators, sending information abroad, or strengthening Tibetan identity via cultural expression. State-run media and mass "patriotic education" campaigns sought to discredit the immolators and vilify the Dalai Lama as their instigator, fueling tensions between Tibetans and both the government and ethnic Chinese residents. The Dalai Lama declined to either condone or condemn the protests.

While the region had been periodically accessible to tourists and journalists under special conditions since 2008, travel restrictions on Tibetans and foreigners attempting to enter the TAR intensified in 2012, and access was extremely limited in the second half of the year. In November, the government rejected a request by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to allow a visit by independent monitors.

The intermittent talks between the government and representatives of the Dalai Lama, last held in 2010, did not resume during 2012, marking the longest period without negotiations since 2002. Meanwhile, Beijing continued to press foreign leaders to refrain from meeting with the Dalai Lama and to endorse the official Chinese position on Tibet.

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. The authorities' actions during 2012 dispelled speculation that Chen might not pursue repressive measures with as much zeal as Zhang. 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.

The Tibetan government in exile in Dharamsala, India, includes 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. Lobsang Sangay was elected prime minister the following month, replacing a two-term incumbent and becoming the exile government's top political official.

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 tightly restrict all media in Tibet. Such measures intensified in 2012 as the authorities sought to suppress information about self-immolations and related security crackdowns. International broadcasts are jammed and communications devices periodically confiscated. The online restrictions and monitoring in place across China are enforced even more stringently in the TAR. In July 2012, Human Rights Watch reported new media controls and invigorated state propaganda efforts, particularly in the TAR. These included distribution of satellite receivers fixed to government channels and a pilot project for broadcasting official messages via loudspeakers in 40 villages. A number of Tibetans who transmitted information abroad suffered repercussions including long prison sentences. Some internet and mobile-telephone users have been arrested solely for accessing banned information. On several occasions in 2012, the authorities cut off the internet and mobile-phone text-messaging near the sites of self-immolations in Sichuan and Gansu Provinces. Also during the year, officials detained or imprisoned at least 10 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 such writers, intellectuals, and musicians have been arrested since 2008, with some sentenced to lengthy prison terms.

Authorities continued to restrict access to the TAR for foreign journalists, human rights researchers, and even tourists in 2012. They were denied entry surrounding politically sensitive dates, such as the anniversary of the 2008 protests. During other periods, they were required to travel in groups and obtain official permission to visit the TAR, but even then, last minute travel bans were sometimes imposed. Foreign journalists were consistently prevented from entering 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 nunneries. 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

government, and denouncing the Dalai Lama. In January 2012, the CCP announced that new committees of government officials were being set up within monasteries to manage their daily operations and enforce party indoctrination campaigns. Under the previous arrangement, managing committees comprised monks and nuns who had been deemed politically reliable. That system was reportedly retained in Tibetan regions outside the TAR, but with a government official appointed as deputy director. In addition, police posts are increasingly common even in smaller monasteries.

Ideological education campaigns that had been conducted sporadically since 1996 began to escalate in 2005, intensified again after 2008, and expanded further in 2012, reaching most monasteries and nunneries in the region. Such campaigns typically force participants to recognize the CCP claim that China "liberated" Tibet and to denounce the Dalai Lama. Some monks and nuns reportedly left their institutions to avoid the sessions, causing the closure of at least one monastery in the TAR. The effort was also extended to the lay population during the year, with students, civil servants, and farmers required to participate in discussions, singing sessions, and propaganda film screenings. In a new program initiated in 2011, 21,000 CCP cadres were sent to over 5,000 villages across the TAR to spread the government's message.

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. Most self-immolation protesters in 2012 were lay Tibetans, whereas in 2011 the majority were monks and nuns. Authorities responded with information blackouts, a heightened security presence, and increased surveillance. Late in the year, officials in some areas employed collective punishment tactics, canceling public benefits for the households of self-immolators, and ending state-funded projects in their villages. Notices offered rewards of up to 200,000 yuan (\$31,500) for information on organizers.

In addition to the self-immolations, Tibetans staged periodic demonstrations or vigils to protest CCP rule or express solidarity with the immolators. Security forces sometimes responded violently. In January, police allegedly opened fire on unarmed protesters in Sichuan on three different occasions. At least 10 people were reportedly killed and scores injured; state media acknowledged at least one death. Later in the year, reports emerged of several Tibetans being sentenced to long prison terms for their alleged involvement in the protests. In other cases, such as two demonstrations with nearly 2,000 participants in Qinghai in February, security forces showed restraint and the protests proceeded without incident. Meanwhile, rural TAR residents continued to stage periodic protests against mining operations, while students in Qinghai protested efforts to replace Tibetan-language textbooks with Chinese editions.

The judicial system in Tibet remains abysmal, and torture is reportedly widespread. In March 2012, press watchdogs reported that public notices posted in eight counties in Gansu Province explicitly threatened "violent beating/torture" for those found distributing banned information. In June, a Tibetan monk in Sichuan died due to torture in custody after being detained the previous month for putting up pro-independence posters. 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 detainees' families are often left uninformed as to their whereabouts or well-being. In December 2012 the central authorities unveiled guidelines indicating that engaging in self-immolations and organizing, assisting, or gathering crowds related to such acts should be considered criminal offenses, including intentional

homicide in some cases. A partial list of political prisoners published by the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China included over 600 Tibetans as of September 2012; the commission's Political Prisoner Database included 267 cases of Tibetans detained in 2012.

Heightened restrictions on freedom of movement – including the use of troop deployments, roadblocks, and passport restrictions – were employed during 2012, particularly in areas where self-immolations took place. New travel restrictions introduced in March inhibited many Tibetans from entering the TAR. It was reported in May that Tibetans without permanent residency permits were being forced to leave Lhasa. Increased security efforts kept the number of Tibetans who successfully crossed the border into Nepal at between 300 and 600 in 2012, continuing a trend of annual declines from over 2,000 in 2007. In February, hundreds of Tibetans were interrogated and subjected to "reeducation" sessions upon returning from India, where they attended religious teachings by the Dalai Lama. According to Radio Free Asia, new regulations introduced in April led to almost no passports being issued to TAR Tibetans for the rest of 2012.

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 employers favor ethnic Chinese for many jobs, and Tibetans reportedly find it more difficult to obtain permits and loans to open businesses.

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

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, by the end of 2011 a total of 1.85 million farmers and herders had been resettled within the TAR. Many have reportedly tried to return to their previous lands, risking conflict with officials.

China's restrictive family-planning policies are more leniently enforced for Tibetans and other ethnic minorities. As a result, the TAR is one of the few areas of China without a skewed sex ratio. Officials limit urban Tibetans to two children and encourage rural Tibetans to stop at three.

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