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Freedom in the World 2010 - Tibet [China]

Capital: N/A

Population: 5,300,000

Political Rights Score: 7 *

Civil Liberties Score: 7 *

Status: Not Free

Explanatory Note

This population figure from China's 2000 census includes 2.4 million Tibetans living in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and 2.9 million Tibetans living in areas of eastern Tibet that were incorporated into various Chinese provinces.

Overview

Although Tibet was more accessible to tourists and journalists for parts of the year, the high level of repression established in 2008 was generally maintained in 2009, particularly ahead of politically sensitive anniversaries. There were few large-scale demonstrations, though many Tibetans resorted to passive protest tactics, such as a farming boycott and abstention from Tibetan New Year celebrations. At least 715 political and religious prisoners reportedly remained in custody as of September. In October, three Tibetans were executed, marking the first use of the death penalty in the territory since 2003. Talks between the government and representatives of the Dalai Lama did not resume in 2009. Instead the authorities continued ideological indoctrination campaigns and the vilification of the Dalai Lama through official rhetoric.

The eastern portions of Tibetan-populated areas were gradually incorporated into various Chinese provinces over several centuries. The Tibetan plateau was ruled by a Dalai Lama in the early 20th century until the People's Liberation Army invaded Tibet in 1950, defeating the local army. In 1951, the Chinese Communist Party formally extended control over the Tibetan plateau. This territory was designated as the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) in 1965.

In 1959, Chinese troops suppressed a major uprising in Lhasa in which tens of thousands of people were reportedly killed. 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 more than 100,000 monks and nuns. During the Chinese Cultural Revolution

(1966-76), nearly all of Tibet's estimated 6,200 monasteries were destroyed.

Under reforms introduced in 1980, religious practice was allowed again – with restrictions – and tourism was permitted in certain areas. Beginning in 1987, some 200 mostly peaceful demonstrations were mounted in Lhasa and surrounding areas. After antigovernment protests escalated in March 1989, martial law was imposed; it was not lifted until May 1990.

In the 1990s, Beijing reinvigorated 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 has not been seen since. Beijing then 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 seen as a bid by Beijing to control the eventual selection of the 15th Dalai Lama. China hosted envoys of the Dalai Lama in 2002, the first formal contacts since 1993. The Tibetan government-in-exile sought to negotiate genuine autonomy for Tibet, particularly to ensure the survival of its Buddhist culture, but no progress was made during subsequent rounds of dialogue. Meanwhile, other Tibetan exile groups have 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. To protest religious restrictions and the previous arrest of several monks, 300 monks conducted a peaceful march in Lhasa on March 10, 2008, the 49th anniversary of the 1959 uprising; security agents suppressed the march. A riot erupted four days later, with Tibetans attacking Chinese – civilians as well as those suspected of being plainclothes police – and burning Han- or Hui-owned businesses and government offices. The authorities reported that 19 people, mostly Chinese civilians, were killed, primarily in fires. Most observers believed the protests and riots to have been spontaneous outbursts of ethnic tension. Some, including prominent Chinese human rights activists, raised concerns of official malfeasance in terms of police not taking necessary steps to prevent violence or deliberately allowing it to escalate. Over 150 other protests, most of them reportedly peaceful, soon broke out in all Tibetan-populated areas of the plateau, as well as in other provinces. The government responded with a massive deployment of armed forces and barred entry to foreign media and tourists. According to overseas Tibetan groups, 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 part of 2009, the high level of repression established in 2008 was generally maintained. Security measures were especially tight surrounding a series of politically sensitive dates. These included the Tibetan New Year (Losar) in February and both the 50th anniversary of the 1959 uprising and the one-year mark of the 2008 protests in March. During this period, security forces increased their presence in Lhasa, raided homes and businesses, detained hundreds of Tibetans accused of not having permits to be in Lhasa, established roadblocks throughout the region, and restricted access for foreign tourists and journalists. Tight restrictions were imposed again ahead of the 60th anniversary of CCP rule in October.

These security efforts largely prevented major demonstrations during the year, though several Tibetans carried out one-person protests; most were immediately detained. Many Tibetans instead resorted to passive methods of protest, such as participating in a farming boycott or refusing to partake in Losar celebrations.

Talks between the government and representatives of the Dalai Lama, which had last taken place in November 2008, did not resume in 2009. Meanwhile, official statements, state-run media, and "patriotic education" campaigns continued to vilify the exiled leader. Beijing also pursued an increasingly aggressive, and often effective, policy of pressuring foreign governments to refrain from meeting with the Dalai Lama and to publicly express support for the official Chinese position on Tibet.

The government's economic development programs have disproportionately benefited ethnic Han and a select category of Tibetans, such as businessmen or government employees. Most other Tibetans cannot take advantage of economic development and related opportunities for higher education and employment. The development activity has also increased Han migration and stoked Tibetan fears of cultural assimilation.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

The Chinese government rules Tibet through administration of the TAR and 10 Tibetan autonomous prefectures in nearby Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu, and Yunnan provinces. 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 CCP officials; in the case of the TAR, Zhang Qingli, an ethnic Han, has served as the region's CCP secretary since 2005. The few ethnic Tibetans who occupy senior positions serve mostly as figureheads, often echoing official statements that condemn the Dalai Lama and emphasize Beijing's role in developing Tibet's economy. Jampa Phuntsog, an ethnic Tibetan, served as chairman of the TAR government from 2003 through the end of 2009.

Since 1960, the Dalai Lama has overseen the introduction of a partly democratic system to the government-in-exile in Dharamsala, India. Current institutions include a popularly elected 46-member Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies, a Supreme Judicial Commission overseeing civil disputes, and more recently, the direct election of a prime minister. In 2001, Buddhist scholar and lama Samdhong Rinpoche was chosen as prime minister and re-elected in 2006. Participating in the polls were Tibetans in exile in India, Nepal, the United States, and Europe; an estimated 120,000 are eligible to vote, though in practice, voter turnout was reportedly 30 percent. Observers have noted that such arrangements fall short of a fully democratic system due to an absence of political parties and the ongoing role of the unelected Dalai Lama in decision-making; a significant number in the exile community have resisted proposals by the Dalai Lama to completely step down from his political responsibilities, however.

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. Tibet is not ranked separately on Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Chinese authorities control the flow of information in Tibet, tightly restricting all media. International broadcasts are jammed. Increased internet penetration in urban areas has provided more access to information, but online restrictions and internet cafe surveillance in place across China are enforced even more stringently in the TAR. Officials repeatedly shut down mobile-telephone networks surrounding politically sensitive dates in March 2009. Security forces have also been known to periodically confiscate mobile phones, computers, and other communication devices from monasteries and private homes, and to routinely monitor calls in and out of the region. Tibetans who transmitted information abroad often suffered repercussions, while some internet users were arrested solely for accessing banned information. In August, 19-year-old Pasang Norbu was reportedly detained after viewing online images of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan flag at a Lhasa internet cafe. In November, Kunchok Tsephel was sentenced to 15 years in prison, on charges of "leaking state secrets," for writings posted on a literary website he had founded. In December, a Qinghai court sentenced Tibetan filmmaker Dhondup Wangchen to six years in prison; he had been detained in March after filming interviews with Tibetans for a documentary he was making titled *Leaving Fear Behind*.

Authorities continued to restrict access to Tibet for foreign journalists in 2009, though not as consistently as in 2008. Journalists were denied entry throughout the year, especially around politically sensitive dates. During other periods, journalists were required to travel in groups, and access was contingent on prior official permission, with Tibet being the only area of China to require such special authorization. Residents who assisted foreign journalists were reportedly harassed.

The authorities regularly suppress religious activities, particularly those seen as forms of political dissent or advocacy of Tibetan independence. Possession of Dalai Lama-related materials can lead to official harassment and punishment. CCP members and government employees must adhere to atheism and cannot practice a religion. The Religious Affairs Bureaus (RABs) control who can and cannot study religion in the monasteries and nunneries in the TAR; officials allow only men or women over the age of 18 to become monks or 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 recognition and education of reincarnated teachers. 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. Since 2008, monasteries in Kardze (Ganzi in Chinese) have been required to have a police station within their confines.

Since March 2008, the authorities have intensified ideological education campaigns that had been conducted sporadically since 1996 and began to escalate after Zhang Qingli's appointment in 2005. According to official statements, over 2,300 officials had been sent out to 505 monasteries across the TAR by March 2009 to carry out "patriotic education" programs among monks and nuns. The campaign had been extended beyond monasteries to reach Tibet's general population in 2008, 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 monasteries or nunneries, while others risk loss of employment, or arrest. In a move that further reinforced the CCP's version of Tibetan history, the government designated March 28 as a new holiday called Serf Emancipation Day.

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, civic groups, and human rights groups are illegal, and even nonviolent protests are harshly punished. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) focusing on development and health care operate under highly restrictive agreements. Domestic groups that challenge government policy on Tibet risk punishment. In July 2009, the authorities shut down the Beijing-based Open Constitution Initiative, a prominent legal-aid NGO, shortly after it published a report attributing the March 2008 protests to legitimate Tibetan grievances, thereby challenging the official line that the unrest was masterminded by external actors.

Despite the risks, Tibetans continued to seek avenues for peacefully expressing dissent in 2009. In the first large gathering since the 2008 protests, at least 100 people marched peacefully in Lhasa to assert religious freedom; six Tibetans were reportedly detained for several days for participating. Smaller or even one-person demonstrations were more common, though in most cases participants were immediately arrested. Tibetans also staged passive protests, such as a widespread boycott of Losar celebrations in February. In Kardze (Ganzi in Chinese) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, farmers expressed disapproval of the post-March 2008 crackdown by refusing to till their land. Authorities responded with eviction threats, and at least one individual reportedly died after being beaten by police for putting up posters supporting the farming boycott.

The judicial system in Tibet remains abysmal. Defendants lack access to meaningful legal representation, and trials are closed if state security is invoked. Chinese lawyers who offer to defend Tibetan suspects have been harassed or disbarred. Security forces routinely engage in detention without due process and torture. Tibetan human rights groups and Amnesty International documented at least five Tibetans who reportedly died in custody, or immediately after release, as a result of torture in 2009. In the first executions in Tibet since 2003, three people were put to death in October for their role in the 2008 protests. Widespread and arbitrary arrests continued in 2009, though not on the same scale as in 2008. Due to government restrictions on prison access for independent monitors, precise figures of Tibetan detainees were unavailable. However,

a partial list of political prisoners published by the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China included 715 Tibetans as of September 2009, the vast majority of whom were arrested on or after March 10, 2008.

The deployment of an estimated 70,000 soldiers and the erection of roadblocks following the March 2008 protests exacerbated already severe restrictions on freedom of movement. Similar measures were employed sporadically during 2009, particularly surrounding the politically sensitive anniversaries. Increased security efforts kept the number of Tibetans who successfully crossed the border into Nepal at around 500 in 2009, compared with over 2,000 in 2007.

As members of an officially recognized "minority" group, Tibetans receive preferential treatment in university admissions. However, the dominant role of the Chinese language in education and employment limits opportunities for many Tibetans. The illiteracy rate among Tibetans, at over 47 percent, remains five times greater than that among ethnic Han. Private-sector employers favor ethnic Han for many jobs, especially in urban areas. Tibetans find it more difficult than Han residents to obtain permits and loans to open businesses. General discrimination increased after the 2008 riots, as television broadcasts showed footage of Tibetans attacking Han residents and burning down Han and Hui businesses.

The authorities have intensified efforts to forcibly resettle traditionally nomadic Tibetan herders in permanent-housing areas with no provisions for income generation. According to official reports, in 2008 the government relocated some 312,000 Tibetan farmers and herders to housing projects. A program to resettle a further 57,000 herders would reportedly be completed in 2010.

China's restrictive family-planning policies are more leniently enforced for Tibetans and other ethnic minorities than for ethnic Han. Officials limit urban Tibetans to having two children and encourage – but do not usually require – rural Tibetans to stop at three children.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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