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Freedom in the World 2009 - Tibet [China]

Capital: N/A

Population: 5,300,000

Political Rights Score: 7

Civil Liberties Score: 7

Status: Not Free

Trend Arrow ↓

Tibet received a downward trend arrow due to deterioration in freedom of movement caused by the increased military presence, roadblocks, and greater bureaucratic restrictions that followed antigovernment protests.

Overview

Beginning in March 2008, Tibetans mounted hundreds of protests across the Tibet Autonomous Region and surrounding provinces. Some turned violent, reportedly leading to the deaths of 19 people. The authorities responded with the most severe crackdown in the region since 1989, detaining thousands of people and sentencing dozens to long prison terms. Soldiers allegedly opened fire on protesters, and the estimated death toll ranged from 100 to 218, though journalists were denied access to Tibetan regions, making details difficult to confirm. Adding to the tensions, the authorities stepped up their "patriotic education" campaign to suppress Tibetan dissent.

China formally annexed Tibetan territory in 1951. In an effort to undermine Tibetan claims to statehood, Beijing split up the lands that had traditionally comprised Tibet, incorporating the eastern portion into four different Chinese provinces. The remaining area was designated the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) in 1965.

In 1959, Chinese troops suppressed a major uprising in Lhasa in which 87,000 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 monasteries and defrocked more than 100,000 monks and nuns. During the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-76), nearly all of Tibet's 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. After antigovernment protests 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 Gedhun 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 has sought to negotiate genuine autonomy for Tibet, particularly to ensure the survival of its Buddhist culture, but no progress has been made during subsequent rounds of dialogue, including the most recent in November 2008. Meanwhile, other Tibetan groups continue to demand independence.

Actions by hard-liner Zhang Qingli following his 2006 appointment as secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the TAR exacerbated Tibetan resentment of the Chinese presence and infringements on religious and cultural freedom. In 2007, the authorities amplified their repressive policies, including an anti-Dalai Lama "patriotic education" campaign and measures to increase control over Tibetan Buddhism. They also encouraged a larger influx of Han Chinese migrants. Partly to protest such policies, 300 monks conducted a peaceful march in Lhasa on March 10, 2008, the 49th anniversary of the 1959 uprising. The march was violently suppressed by security agents. Riots erupted four days later, with Tibetans attacking Han 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 were killed, mostly in fires, and that the protests were coordinated from outside China. Most observers, however, believed the riots to be spontaneous outbursts of ethnic tension. Some, including prominent Chinese human rights activists, questioned the government's account of events, raising concerns of official malfeasance in connection with the riots, whether in terms of police not taking necessary steps to prevent violence or even instigating it. More than 150 other protests, the majority of them reportedly peaceful, soon broke out in Tibetan-populated areas of other provinces.

The authorities responded with a massive deployment of armed forces, establishing a lockdown at each protest site, confiscating communications equipment, and barring entry to foreign media. According to overseas Tibetan groups, between 100 and 218 Tibetans were killed as the security forces suppressed the demonstrations. Security agents subsequently raided monasteries and private homes, detaining thousands of Tibetans, including some who had not been involved in protests. At year's end, at least 190 people had reportedly been tried and sentenced to between nine months and life in prison, according to the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy. While most of the 4,400 people initially arrested were released by year's end, 1,000 or more remained missing or in incommunicado detention. Many heightened restrictions on speech, assembly, and religious practice were still in place at year's end.

While many Tibetans have benefited from the government's economic development programs, particularly infrastructural improvements, the changes have disproportionately benefited Han Chinese or a privileged class of Tibetan officials, often at the expense of younger Tibetans, who lack opportunities for higher education and employment. The development activity has also brought increased Han migration and rising Tibetan fears of cultural assimilation. In 2008, tourism revenue fell by over 50 percent, due largely to the uprising and subsequent government-imposed travel restrictions.

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 regions 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 party members, particularly Zhang Qingli, a Han Chinese who has served as the TAR's CCP secretary since 2006. No Tibetan has ever held the post, and the few 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. Unlike China's provinces, which are run by governors, autonomous regional governments have the post of chairman, usually held by a member of the largest ethnic group. Jampa Phuntsog, an ethnic Tibetan, has served as chairman of the TAR government since 2003. Local government structures are similar to those in the rest of China. According to Tibetan exile groups, 13 Tibetan CCP members were expelled from the party in July 2008 for suspected involvement in the March protests and inadequate performance in the subsequent "patriotic education" campaign.

Corruption remains a problem in Tibet and is believed to be extensive given its level in other parts 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 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Chinese authorities control the flow of information in Tibet, tightly restricting all media and regulating internet use. International broadcasts are jammed. Increased internet penetration in urban areas has provided more access to information, but online restrictions in place across China are enforced even more stringently in the TAR. In 2008, officials reportedly shut down mobile-telephone networks and internet servers to prevent the circulation of images of the protests. Security forces also physically confiscated mobile phones, computers, and other communication devices during raids on monasteries and private homes, and monitored calls in and out of the region. Nevertheless, digital media played a crucial role in allowing demonstrators to share mobile-phone photos and video clips of protests with other Tibetans and foreigners, spreading news of the uprising.

In the aftermath of the March 14 riots, the government barred foreign journalists from entering Tibet and expelled those already inside; heavy restrictions remained in place at year's end. Tibetans who spoke to foreign reporters or transmitted information abroad often suffered repercussions. Between October and November, a court in Lhasa sentenced seven Tibetans to between eight years and life in prison for participating in protests and sending information overseas, primarily to Tibetan exile groups. The crackdown extended to those who avoided overtly political topics, including a prominent television producer and advocate for the preservation of Tibetan culture who was arrested in Qinghai in April and later placed under house arrest. During the year, the Chinese government mounted a fierce propaganda campaign that fueled nationalistic outrage among Han Chinese against Tibetans and Western media coverage.

The authorities regularly suppress religious activities, particularly those seen as forms of political dissent or advocacy of Tibetan independence, and these restrictions increased in 2008. Possession of Dalai Lama-related materials can lead to imprisonment. CCP members and senior officials must adhere to atheism and cannot practice a religion. The Religious Affairs Bureaus (RABs) control who can and cannot study religion in the TAR; officials allow only boys over the age of 18 to become monks, and they are required to sign a declaration rejecting Tibetan independence, expressing loyalty to the Chinese government, and denouncing the Dalai Lama. TAR regulations announced in 2007 gave the authorities unprecedented control over Tibetan Buddhism, notably requiring government approval for the recognition and education of reincarnated teachers and restricting travel for the purpose of practicing religion.

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. Since 1995, laypeople have also been appointed to these committees. After the March 2008 demonstrations, the Drepung and Nechung monasteries were sealed off by troops, and restrictions on burning incense were imposed at Repkong monastery. In May, security forces arrested a senior abbot who headed two convents in Ganzi, where over 80 nuns had protested Chinese rule, charging him with

weapons possession and embezzlement; he had yet to be sentenced at year's end. Ganzi officials placed additional restrictions on speech and association for monks and nuns in the region, prescribing unprecedented punishments for violations, such as stripping teachers of religious authority and destroying parts of offending monasteries. Buddhist clergy also faced large-scale arrests. In the run-up to the Olympics in August, the authorities deported several hundred monks from the Drepung, Sera, and Ganden monasteries in the TAR and held them in detention centers around Golmud, Qinghai province. Many temples remained under 24-hour surveillance by soldiers or plainclothes policemen at year's end.

The government's "patriotic education" propaganda campaign, conducted sporadically since 1996, intensified after Zhang Qingli's appointment in 2006. In 2008, the campaign was extended beyond monasteries to reach Tibet's general population. Students, civil servants, farmers, and merchants were forced to recognize the CCP claim that China "liberated" Tibet and to denounce the Dalai Lama. Those who refused faced expulsion from monasteries, loss of employment, or arrest. In April, police killed eight people in a village in Sichuan after they protested the earlier arrest of two monks who opposed official desecration of photos of the Dalai Lama.

University professors cannot lecture on certain topics, and many must attend political indoctrination sessions. The government restricts course materials to prevent campus-based political and religious activity. In July 2008, authorities ordered students who had studied abroad in schools run by the Tibetan government-in-exile to return and confess any involvement in political activities, threatening them with disciplinary action and their parents with expulsion from the party if they refused.

Freedoms of assembly and association are severely restricted in practice. Independent trade unions, civic groups, and human rights groups are illegal, and as seen in 2008, even nonviolent protests are harshly punished. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) focusing on development and health care operate under highly restrictive agreements. Some NGO employees were imprisoned during the 2008 crackdown. In October, a project officer for an HIV/AIDS program run by an Australian NGO was sentenced to life imprisonment for allegedly passing information to Tibetan exiles. On the same day, an employee of a Tibetan NGO focused on community development was sentenced to 14 years in prison for espionage.

The judicial system in Tibet remains abysmal. Defendants lack access to legal representation, and trials are closed if the issue of "state security" is invoked. Security forces routinely engage in arbitrary arrest, detention, torture, and execution without due process. Thousands of people were arrested during the 2008 crackdown, and at least 1,000 remained in custody at year's end. A group of 18 Chinese civil rights lawyers who offered to defend accused protesters were harassed and threatened with disbarment. At least one prominent lawyer, Teng Biao, was denied renewal of his law license in June. There were continued reports of detainees being subject to beatings and torture; Tibetan human rights groups and Amnesty International documented at least four Tibetans who reportedly died in custody as a result of torture in 2008.

After the March 2008 protests, already severe restrictions on freedom of movement were exacerbated by the deployment of an estimated 70,000 soldiers and the erection of roadblocks across the region. Tibetans without residence permits were ordered to leave Lhasa, and residents were reportedly barred from leaving the city until May; Han Chinese were apparently able to move around more freely. As a consequence of travel restrictions, the number of Tibetans who successfully crossed the border into Nepal in 2008 dropped to 550, from 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 (over 47 percent) remains five times greater than that of Han Chinese (around 9 percent). In the private sector, employers favor Chinese for many jobs, especially in urban areas. Tibetans find it more difficult than Chinese to obtain permits

and loans to open businesses. General discrimination increased after the 2008 riots, as television broadcasts showed footage of Tibetans attacking Han Chinese and burning down Han and Hui businesses.

The authorities have intensified efforts to forcibly resettle traditionally nomadic Tibetan herders in permanent-housing areas. According to official reports, in 2008 alone, the government relocated some 312,000 Tibetan farmers and herders to housing projects in urban areas.

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

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