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2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: China - Tibet

Executive Summary

The constitution of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which cites the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the guidance of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, states that citizens “enjoy freedom of religious belief,” but limits protections for religious practice to “normal religious activities” without defining “normal.” Central government regulations control all aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, including religious venues, groups, personnel, and schools. They stipulate religious activity “must not harm national security.” Regulations prohibit “accepting domination by external forces,” which authorities said included Tibetans in exile, particularly the Dalai Lama. In the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and other Tibetan areas there were reports of forced disappearances, arrests, torture, physical abuse, including sexual abuse, and prolonged detentions without trial of individuals due to their religious practices. Former detainees reported being beaten until they lost consciousness and being shocked with electric batons. There were reports that monks and nuns were forced to wear military clothing and undergo political indoctrination in detention centers. The nongovernment organization (NGO) Free Tibet and local sources reported that on November 26, a 24-year-old former monk from the Kirti Monastery set himself on fire in Ngaba (Chinese: Aba) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP), Sichuan Province, and died of his injuries on the same day. Media sources reported local officials in Tibetan areas explicitly stated supporters of the Dalai Lama and other religious leaders could be arrested under the government’s nationwide anti-organized crime program and that Tibetans were told to inform on anyone who “links up with the Dalai clique.” The government continued to restrict the size of Buddhist monasteries and other institutions and to implement a campaign begun in 2016 to evict monks and nuns from monasteries and prohibit them from practicing elsewhere. While exact numbers were difficult to ascertain, according to multiple sources, since 2016 authorities evicted between 6,000 and 17,000 Tibetan and Han Chinese monks and nuns from Larung Gar and Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institutes. Satellite imagery showed thousands of dwellings at these locations had been destroyed since 2018. Authorities continued to engage in widespread interference in religious practices, especially in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and nunneries, including by appointing government and CCP personnel and government-approved monks to manage religious institutions. “Sinicization” policies, which aimed to interpret religious ideas in accordance with CCP ideology and to emphasize loyalty to the CCP and the state, were pursued more intensely. Media reported that on January 7, the government announced a formal five-year plan to

Sinicize all religions in the country, including Tibetan Buddhism. Despite a decree by President Xi Jinping, chairman of the CCP, that all members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) must be “unyielding Marxist atheists,” the government continued to control the selection of Tibetan Buddhist lamas and supervised their religious and political education. Authorities forced monasteries to display portraits of CCP leaders and the national flag, and in some cases went door to door insisting laypersons replace images of the Dalai Lama and other lamas in their home shrines with those of CCP leaders, including Chairman Xi and Chairman Mao Zedong. Travel restrictions hindered monastics and laypersons from engaging in traditional religious practices and pilgrimages. Repression, including arbitrary surveillance, increased around politically sensitive events, religious anniversaries, and the Dalai Lama’s birthday. Sources reported local authorities increased scrutiny of social media postings regarding religious belief. Authorities restricted children from participating in many traditional religious festivals and from receiving religious education. The government continued to force monks and nuns to undergo political training in state ideology. Religious leaders and government employees were often required to denounce the Dalai Lama and express allegiance to the government-recognized Panchen Lama, Gyaltzen Norbu. Authorities continued in state media to justify interference with Tibetan Buddhist monasteries by associating the monasteries with “separatism” and pro-independence activities. Officials routinely made public statements denigrating the Dalai Lama. In a July interview, Wang Neng Shang, vice minister of the TAR and director general of the People’s Government Information Office, said the selection of the next Dalai Lama was not the current Dalai Lama’s decision to make, and instead must be recognized by the central government in Beijing, adding, “The centrality of the central government must be recognized.”

Some Tibetans continued to encounter societal discrimination when seeking employment, engaging in business, and traveling for pilgrimage, according to multiple sources.

While diplomatic access to the TAR remained tightly controlled, officials from the U.S. embassy and consulate general in Chengdu made five visits there during the year, during which they met with both government and religious leaders and emphasized the importance of respecting religious freedom in Tibet. The Ambassador visited the TAR in May, the first U.S. ambassador to do so since 2015. While there, he visited several religious sites and met with local leaders, religious figures, and students. In July the Vice President told attendees at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington, D.C., “China’s oppression of Tibetan Buddhists goes back decades... [T]he American people will always stand in solidarity with the people of all faiths in the People’s Republic of China.” At the U.S. government’s invitation, Tibetan exile and survivor of religious persecution Nyima Lhamo met with the President and addressed the ministerial, describing how the harsh treatment by government authorities of her uncle, Lama Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, led to his 2015 death in captivity. The U.S. government repeatedly urged the Chinese government to end policies that threaten Tibet’s distinct religious, cultural, and linguistic identity, including the continuing demolition campaigns at Larung Gar and Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institutes. U.S. officials underscored that decisions on the succession of the Dalai Lama should be made solely by faith leaders and also raised concerns about the continued

disappearance of the Panchen Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima. The embassy and consulates used social media to deliver direct messaging about religious freedom in Tibet to millions of citizens.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to official data from China’s most recent census in November 2010, 2,716,400 Tibetans make up 90 percent of the TAR’s total population. Han Chinese make up approximately 8 percent. Other ethnicities comprise the remainder. Some experts, however, believe the number of Han Chinese and other non-Tibetans living there is significantly underreported. Outside the TAR, official census data show Tibetans constitute 24.4 percent of the total population in Qinghai Province, 2.1 percent in Sichuan Province, 1.8 percent in Gansu Province, and 0.3 percent in Yunnan Province, although the percentage of Tibetans is much higher within prefectures and counties of these provinces designated as autonomous for Tibetans.

Most ethnic Tibetans practice Tibetan Buddhism, although a sizeable minority practices Bon, a pre-Buddhist indigenous religion. Small minorities practice Islam, Catholicism, or Protestantism. Some scholars estimate there are as many as 400,000 Bon followers across the Tibetan Plateau, some of whom also follow the Dalai Lama and consider themselves also to be Tibetan Buddhists. Scholars estimate there are up to 5,000 Tibetan Muslims and 700 Tibetan Catholics in the TAR. Other residents of traditionally Tibetan areas include Han Chinese, many of whom practice Buddhism (including Tibetan Buddhism), Taoism, Confucianism, or traditional folk religions, or profess atheism, as well as Hui Muslims and non-Tibetan Catholics and Protestants.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The United States recognizes the TAR, TAPs, and counties in other provinces to be part of the PRC. The constitution, which cites the leadership of the CCP and the guidance of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, states that citizens enjoy “freedom of religious belief,” but limits protections for religious practice to “normal religious activities” without defining “normal.” The constitution bans the state, public organizations, and individuals from compelling citizens to believe in, or not believe in, any religion. It says religion may not be used to disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens, or interfere with the educational system. The constitution states religious bodies and affairs are not to be “subject to any foreign control.” The government recognizes five official religions – Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. Only religious groups belonging to one of five state-sanctioned “patriotic religious associations” representing these religions are permitted to register with the government and legally hold worship services or other religious ceremonies and activities.

Central government regulations regarding religion are issued by the CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD). The UFWD's Bureau of Ethnic and Religious Work manages religious affairs through the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA). While technically a state agency, SARA was subsumed into the UFWD under the State Council's 2018 revisions to the Regulations on Religious Affairs.

The UFWD controls the selection of Tibetan religious leaders, including lamas. Regulations stipulate that, depending on the perceived geographic area of influence of the lama, relevant administrative entities may deny permission for a lama to be recognized as reincarnated and these administrative entities must approve reincarnations. The State Council has the right to deny the recognition of reincarnations of high lamas of “especially great influence.” The regulations also state no foreign organization or individual may interfere in the selection of reincarnate lamas, and all reincarnate lamas must be reborn within China. The government maintains a registry of officially recognized reincarnate lamas.

Regulations issued by the UFWD assert state control over all aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, including religious venues, groups, personnel, and schools. Through local regulations issued under the framework of the national-level Management Regulation of Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries, governments of the TAR and other autonomous Tibetan areas control the registration of monasteries, nunneries, and other Tibetan Buddhist religious centers. The regulations also give the government formal control over building and managing religious structures, and require monasteries to obtain official permission to hold large-scale religious events or gatherings.

The central government's Regulations on Religious Affairs require religious groups to register with the government, impose fines on landlords for providing facilities for unauthorized religious activities, and restrict contact with overseas religious institutions, including requirements for religious groups to seek approval to travel abroad and a prohibition on “accepting domination by external forces.” The regulations submit religious schools to the same oversight as places of worship and impose restrictions on religious groups conducting business or investments, including placing limits on the amount of donations they may receive, thereby constraining property ownership and development. Publication of religious material must conform to guidelines determined by the State Publishing Administration.

The regulations also require that religious activity “must not harm national security.” While the regulations stipulate the obligations of religious groups to abide by the law, safeguard national unity, and respond to “religious extremism,” the term “extremism” is undefined. Measures to safeguard unity and respond to “religious extremism” include monitoring groups, individuals, and institutions, and recommending penalties such as suspending groups and canceling clergy credentials. The regulations stipulate that the online activities of religious groups be approved by the provincial Religious Affairs Bureau.

A government policy introduced in 2018 requires Tibetan monks and nuns to undergo political training in state ideology. Monks and nuns must demonstrate – in addition to competence in religious studies – “political reliability,” “moral integrity capable of impressing the public,” and a willingness to “play an active role at critical moments.”

Self-immolation is considered homicide, and family members, teachers, and religious leaders may be charged as accessories to homicide if a relative, pupil, or follower chooses to self-immolate.

To establish formal places of worship, religious organizations must receive approval from the religious affairs department of the relevant local government both when the facility is proposed and again prior to the first time any services are held at that location. Religious organizations must submit dozens of documents in order to register during these approval processes, including detailed management plans of their religious activities, exhaustive financial records, and personal information on all staff members. Religious communities not going through the formal registration process may not legally have an established facility or worship meeting space; they must seek a separate approval from government authorities each time they want to reserve a space for worship, such as by renting a hotel or an apartment. Worshipping in a space without prior approval, either through the formal registration process or by seeking an approval for each service, is considered an illegal religious activity that may be criminally or administratively punished.

Individuals must apply to take up religious orders and the TAR CCP Committee may deny any application. Regulations also require monks and nuns to obtain permission from officials in both the originating and receiving counties before traveling to other prefectures or “county-level cities” within the TAR to “practice their religion,” engage in religious activities, study, or teach. TAPs outside the TAR have similar regulations.

At the central government level, the CCP Central Committee’s Central Tibet Work Coordination Group and the UFWD are responsible for developing and implementing religious management policies, which are carried out with support from the five state-sanctioned patriotic religious associations – Three-Self Patriotic Movement (Protestant), Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, the Chinese Taoist Association, the Islamic Association of China, and the Buddhist Association of China (BAC). At local levels, party leaders and branches of the UFWD, SARA, and the BAC are required to coordinate implementation of religious policies in monasteries.

CCP members, including Tibetans and retired officials, are required to be atheists and are forbidden from engaging in religious practices. CCP members who belong to religious organizations are subject to various types of punishment, including termination of their employment and expulsion from the CCP.

Government Practices

There was one reported case of a Tibetan self-immolating as a means of protesting against government policies, compared to four individuals in 2018. According to the NGO International Campaign for Tibet (ICT), from 2009 to December, 156 Tibetans had

set themselves on fire in protest against what they said was the occupation of Tibet and abuses of Tibetans’ religion and culture under PRC rule. The NGO Free Tibet and media reported that on November 26, a 24-year-old man identified as Yonten set himself on fire in Ngaba TAP, Sichuan Province. He died of his injuries on the same day. According to Free Tibet, Yonten had previously been a monk in the Kirti Monastery and left the monastery sometime prior to his self-immolation. Radio Free Asia reported that shortly after his death, authorities detained family members for questioning and kept them isolated from outside contact for a period of time. Some experts and local sources attributed the decrease in the number of self-immolations to tighter control measures by authorities and the fear that family members and associates of self-immolators might be punished, including by being charged as accessories to homicide.

The whereabouts of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, recognized as the 11th Panchen Lama by the Dalai Lama and most Tibetan Buddhists, remained unknown since his 1995 forced disappearance by Chinese authorities. Nyima was six years old at the time he and his parents were reportedly abducted. Authorities did not provide information on his whereabouts, and stated previously that he was “living a normal life” and did “not wish to be disturbed.” The Panchen Lama is considered by the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism to be the second-most-prominent leader after the Dalai Lama. On April 25, Tibetans in exile marked the occasion of Nyima’s 30th birthday. Advocacy groups called on the government to release him and allow him to resume his religious duties.

In August the ICT reported that in late July authorities sentenced Buddhist monk Lobsang Thapke, from Kirti Monastery, Ngaba TAP, Sichuan Province, to four years in prison. As of year’s end, the location of his incarceration and the details of his charges remained unknown. According to the ICT, on September 3, authorities sentenced Lobsang Dorje, also a monk from Kirti Monastery, to three years in prison on unknown charges. Fellow monks said he may have been arrested for having contact with persons outside Tibet. Prior to the sentencing, Dorje had been held incommunicado for more than a year.

The whereabouts and condition of Sangay (also spelled Sanggye) Gyatso remained unknown throughout the year. Sources said police beat and arrested Sangay, a monk at the Kirti Monastery, in December 2018 after he demonstrated for Tibetan freedom on the anniversary of the Dalai Lama’s receiving the Nobel Peace Prize.

The location and condition of many other Tibetans detained in 2018 remained unknown, including Karma, a village leader in the TAR who refused to allow local authorities to conduct mining activities near the sacred Sebra Zagyen mountain, and Gangye, a man from Sog (Suoxian) County, Nagchu (Nagqu) Prefecture, TAR, detained in May 2018 for possessing religious books written by the Dalai Lama and CDs featuring the religious leader’s teachings. Sources reported the whereabouts of several monks also remained unknown, including Dorje Rabten, who in September 2018 protested against government policies restricting young people from becoming monks; Tenzin Gelek, who protested Dorje’s detention; Lobsant Thamke, who was arrested in 2018 and sentenced on July 30 to four years in prison on unknown charges; Lobsang Dorje, who was arrested sometime in August 2018; and Thubpa, whom police took from the Trotsik Monastery in Ngaba TAP, Sichuan Province, sometime toward the end of 2017.

Human rights groups stated individuals arrested in the 2008 protests reportedly experienced ongoing physical and mental health problems related to abusive treatment in prison. Free Tibet reported that on May 1, activist Yeshe Gyatso died. According to the NGO Tibet Watch, he suffered frequent and severe beatings, torture, and interrogation during his time in prison from 2008 to 2018 that led to persistent mental and physical ailments after his release. According to Free Tibet, Buddhist monk Thapkey Gyatso was arrested in 2008, reportedly for taking a leading role in 2008 protests in Sangchu (Xiahe) County, Gansu Province, and became partially paralyzed as a result of being beaten during an interrogation soon after his arrest. His condition subsequently deteriorated and during the year he was being held at a prison medical facility in a condition of “half paralysis” and with damage in both eyes. Sources told Free Tibet that Buddhist monk Tsaltrim Gyatso, arrested in 2008, suffered permanent eye damage and trauma after being beaten severely during prison interrogations, and that he was transferred to a hospital for emergency surgery.

In May the Voice of America Tibetan Service reported on a journal it obtained from a former inmate of the Sog County “reform through re-education center” in Nagchu Prefecture, TAR. The former inmate wrote, “Those whom officials didn’t like would be captured and tortured with electric devices. When they became unconscious, [the torturers] would splash water on their faces until their victims regained consciousness. After doing that for a long time, they would use a black rubber tube as well as an electric baton to torture people.”

In July Radio Free Asia’s Tibetan Service reported that between May and July authorities removed approximately 3,500 monks and nuns from Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute in Sichuan Province to undergo political indoctrination at detention centers in their home counties in the TAR. A Tibetan exile told the news service some nuns were being held in Jomda (Jiangda) County, Chamdo (Changdu) Prefecture, TAR, where they learned and performed patriotic songs and dances praising the CCP and watched propaganda films each day. Authorities forced the nuns to wear military clothing. If the nuns wept, authorities considered it evidence of disloyalty to the state and subjected them to severe punishments, including beatings, extending their confinement in the detention centers, and refusing permission for the nuns to receive gifts of food or clothing from visiting family members.

According to Radio Free Asia, Ngawang Gyaltsen, a monk from Sog County, Nagchu Prefecture, TAR, was released from prison in March. Local sources reported Ngawang, arrested in 2015, was repeatedly beaten and deprived of sleep and food while incarcerated on unknown charges. Following his release, he was forbidden to return to his monastery.

Nuns who had been released from detention told the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy there were instances in which authorities subjected nuns who had been forcibly removed from Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute to sexual assault and sexual violence. Voice of America reported that in a journal it obtained from a former inmate of the Sog County detention center in Nagchu Prefecture, TAR, the writer wrote that officers fondled the breasts of nuns who had fainted during military training and lay in the nuns’ cells “pressing unconscious nuns underneath.”

Limited access to information made it difficult to ascertain the exact number of individuals imprisoned because of their religious beliefs or affiliation, or to determine the charges brought against them or assess the extent and severity of abuses they suffered. The Congressional-Executive Commission on China examined publicly available information and, as of November 7, its Political Prisoner Database (PPD) contained 273 records of Tibetans known or believed to be currently detained or imprisoned by authorities in violation of international human rights standards. Of those, 122 were reported to be current or former monks, nuns, or lamas. Of the 115 cases for which there was information on sentencing, punishments ranged from one year and three months to life imprisonment. Observers, including commission staff, stated they believed the actual number of Tibetan political prisoners and detainees to be much higher, but the lack of access to prisoners and prisons, as well as the lack of reliable official statistics, made a precise determination difficult. Authorities continued to hold an unknown number of persons in pretrial detention facilities and in “reeducation centers” rather than prisons. Human rights groups reported extensions of pretrial detention periods were common for Tibetans accused of engaging in prohibited political activities and on national security grounds, resulting in suspects spending long periods of time in jail without being formally charged or brought to trial. Security officials could confine citizens to reeducation centers without formal legal procedures. Local sources said stays in reeducation centers could last more than one year.

Media sources reported local officials in Tibetan areas explicitly stated supporters of the Dalai Lama and other religious leaders could be arrested under the government’s nationwide anti-organized crime program, and that Tibetans were told to inform on anyone who “links up with the Dalai clique.” In September a Tibetan living in exile told Radio Free Asia that authorities in Qinghai Province had expanded the government’s “anti-gang” campaign to include wider suppression of political activities by Tibetans.

According to the ICT, Choekyi, a monk from Phugu Monastery in Kardze (Ganzi) TAP, Sichuan Province, was released on January 18, five months before the end of his four-year sentence, due to poor health. During his imprisonment, authorities reportedly subjected Choekyi to hard labor and solitary confinement and denied him healthcare. Choekyi was arrested in 2015 for wearing a t-shirt with Tibetan writing celebrating the Dalai Lama’s birthday and posting birthday wishes on social media, and charged with conducting “separatist activities.” According to local sources, following his release, authorities allowed him to receive medical treatment but kept him under surveillance and barred him from returning to his monastery.

The Indian news outlet *The Print* reported on February 12 that satellite imagery from September, October, and November 2018 showed what it said were three large-scale reeducation centers under construction in the TAR. The report said that the imagery showed that these centers included high walls, double-wire fencing, guard posts, and large barracks-style buildings.

According to Radio Free Asia, authorities detained a Tibetan man identified as Wangchen on April 29 after he recited prayers and shouted slogans calling for the release of the 11th Panchen Lama. Wangchen was accused of making “a conspicuous protest in public” and sentenced to four years and six months in prison. In addition,

Wangchen’s aunt, Acha Dolkar, was sentenced to 15 months in prison for helping to share news of Wangchen’s protest with contacts outside the region, while two other Tibetans identified as Lobsang and Yonten were each fined renminbi (RMB) 15,000 (\$2,200) and ordered to attend political reeducation classes on “issues of national security” for six months.

According to Free Tibet, authorities sentenced Lodoe Gyatso (also spelled Gyamtso) to 18 years in prison in March for praising the Dalai Lama’s Middle Way Approach during a protest in Lhasa in 2018. The Middle Way Approach is the Dalai Lama’s proposal that Tibet remain part of the PRC while giving Tibetans what the Dalai Lama described as “a means to achieve a genuine autonomy for all Tibetans living in the three traditional provinces of Tibet within the framework of the People’s Republic of China.” Free Tibet reported that Lodoe, who was sentenced in a secret trial after being held in pretrial detention for 15 months, had previously served a total of 23 years in prison for two previous convictions related to dissident activities. His wife, who filmed the protest, was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment.

In July sources told Radio Free Asia that approximately 70 monks and nuns who had been evicted from Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute during the year were being held in a detention center in Jomda County, Chamdo Prefecture, TAR, where they were “undergoing thorough political reeducation.” The sources said, “As soon as they are brought to the detention centers, their cellphones are confiscated, rendering them incommunicado with the outside world...The monks and nuns are forced to wear the clothes of laypersons at the detention center and the Chinese authorities make them denounce the Dalai Lama on a daily basis, as well as memorize political propaganda, which they are later tested on.”

The government continued to place restrictions on the size of Buddhist monasteries and other institutions and to implement a campaign begun in 2016 to evict monks and nuns from monasteries. While exact numbers were difficult to ascertain, human rights groups and local sources said that since 2016 authorities evicted between 6,000 and 17,000 Tibetan and Han Chinese monks and nuns from Larung Gar and Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institutes, both in Kardze TAP, Sichuan Province. Monastics expelled from Larung Gar and Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institutes were specifically prohibited from transferring to other monasteries to continue their religious education.

According to the NGO Human Rights Watch and local sources, since 2016, the government evicted approximately three-quarters of the 20,000 Tibetan and Han Chinese monks and nuns who lived at Larung Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute, the world’s largest Tibetan Buddhist institute. Radio Free Asia reported that since 2001, authorities have demolished an estimated 7,000 residences in what the government reportedly stated were efforts to prevent fires and promote crowd control. According to the online media source Buddhistdoor Global, in June 2017, a senior abbot at Larung Gar said 4,725 monastic dwellings had been torn down over the course of one year. Local sources stated the destruction was to clear the way for tourist infrastructure and to prevent nuns, monks, and laypersons, particularly ethnic Han Chinese, from studying at

the institute. Reportedly, in hopes of saving the institute, Larung Gar’s monastic leadership continued to advise residents not to protest the demolitions and urged them to “behave appropriately in their actions and their speech.”

The government continued its program of evicting residents and destroying dwellings at Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute. In July Radio Free Asia reported that according to one source, “The Chinese authorities have ordered that the number of monks and nuns staying at Yachen Gar not exceed more than 4,700, and because of that many monks and nuns have been evicted from the institute.” Local sources estimated that 3,500 monastics were removed in May and an additional 3,600 removed by July. Another source said, “Those monks and nuns who were forcefully returned to their birthplaces have now been rounded up by local Chinese police and made to attend political re-education classes [at detention centers] in their hometowns.” Local sources reported authorities prohibited monks and nuns expelled from Yachen Gar from joining any other monastery or nunnery in the area or participating in any public religious practices.

Exact figures of the extent of destruction could not be obtained because authorities denied visitors, including foreign diplomats, access to the Yachen Gar complex. Satellite images taken August 24 obtained by Free Tibet and photos from local sources obtained by Radio Free Asia both showed nearly half the residences of Yachen Gar destroyed since previous images were taken in April 2018. A local source told Radio Free Asia that starting on July 19, within a few days authorities demolished at least 100 dwellings that had previously housed nuns.

The government continued its policy of resettling previously nomadic Tibetans in government-subsidized housing units. In many areas, these were located near township and county government seats or along major roads, and had no nearby monasteries where resettled villagers could worship. The government prohibited construction of new temples in these areas without prior approval. Traditionally, Tibetan villages were clustered around monasteries, which provided religious and other services to members of the community. Many Tibetans reportedly continued to view such measures as CCP and government efforts to dilute religious belief and weaken the ties between monasteries and communities. According to Tibetan author Tsering Woesser, the absence of “temples, stupas, or resident monks in these ‘modern’ settlements prevents Tibetans from overcoming their feelings of emptiness and dislocation following resettlement.”

Media and human rights groups reported that on January 7, the government announced a formal five-year plan to continue to “Sinicize” all religious groups in China by emphasizing loyalty to the CCP and the state. This plan includes Tibetan Buddhism, with the involvement of the state-run BAC. ICT president Matteo Mecacci said in July, “The five-year campaign to ‘Sinicize’ Buddhism is a much more systematic imposition of Communist Party priorities than we have seen before, striking at the very core of a religious philosophy based on moral, compassionate values. Sinicization not only targets the trappings of religious practice, such as large teachings, but also represents a far-reaching intrusion into people’s inner lives by a repressive government, contracting the space for genuine religious practice and freedom.”

The government continued a policy introduced in 2018 requiring Tibetan monks and nuns to undergo political training in state ideology. Monks and nuns were required to demonstrate – in addition to competence in religious studies – “political reliability,” “moral integrity capable of impressing the public,” and willingness to “play an active role at critical moments.” Since the policy’s inception, many major monasteries and religious institutes implemented political training programs.

Local authorities invoked regulations concerning safeguarding national unity and responding to “religious extremism” to monitor individuals, groups, and institutions, and to punish adherents of religious leaders such as the Dalai Lama.

One local source told the ICT the Sinicization campaign had intensified in recent years and was “unbearable” for monks and nuns. The source said, “It is now much stronger and penetrates religious life more deeply, bring[ing] immense difficulties for the religious community, for instance the legal education exams that involve thousands of monks and nuns, and which involve study and questions, and a whole process.”

The government continued to control the selection of Tibetan Buddhist lamas and supervision of their religious and political education. According to media and NGO reports, the CCP maintained a list of state-approved “living buddhas.” Such individuals reportedly continued to undergo training on patriotism and the CCP’s socialist political system. In 2018 the BAC announced its database contained 1,311 “living buddhas” that it deemed “authentic.” In September a Tibetan academic told *The Irish Times* that to be included in the database, monks were required to go through an indoctrination process in which they were trained to promote love of the CCP and social harmony, and fight against the Dalai Lama and other “splittists.” In 2018 the BAC announced its database of 1,311 “living buddhas” that it deemed “authentic” was nearly complete. The Dalai Lama was reportedly not on the list.

According to one Tibetan source, “every single individual now on the official reincarnation database has to go through an entire political procedure, entirely separate to a religious training, in which they are advised about the need for their career and role in the religious community to motivate religious believers to love the party, love the country and social stability maintenance work, as well as fight against ‘separatism’ and the Dalai Lama.... This means that now the Tibetan reincarnations are becoming Communist-trained talents rather than religious leaders.” Religious leaders continued to report that authorities were incentivizing lamas and monks to leave monastic life voluntarily by emphasizing the attributes of secular life as compared to the more disciplined and austere religious life. Monastery leaders cited continued revisions to education policies, religion regulations, and government control of monastery management as reasons for declining numbers of young monks. Religious leaders and scholars said these and other means of interference continued to cause them concern about the ability of religious traditions to survive for successive generations.

Multiple sources reported open veneration of the Dalai Lama, including the display of his photograph, remained prohibited in almost all areas. The government continued also to ban pictures of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, whom the Dalai Lama and nearly all

Tibetan Buddhists recognized as the 11th Panchen Lama. In certain counties of the TAR, punishments for displaying images of the Dalai Lama included expulsion from monasteries. In October the India-based Tibetan magazine *Contact* reported authorities routinely detained individuals for possessing a photo of the Dalai Lama.

The TAR CCP committee and the government required all monasteries to display prominently the Chinese flag and the portraits of five CCP chairmen, from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping. Local sources told Radio Free Asia that officials from government bureaus monitoring religious practice visited Tibetan schools and warned teachers and students not to keep or display photos of the Dalai Lama.

According to Free Tibet, following a January 9-13 meeting of the People’s Congress of the TAR, officials ordered citizens to place shrines to Chairman Xi and other CCP leaders in their homes, replacing altars venerating religious figures, and also required them to prostrate themselves in front of those portraits. Authorities reportedly told Tibetans government subsidies and aid – including money for school fees and groceries – would cease if they failed to comply.

According to Tibet Watch and local sources, while households in more remote areas had previously generally been able to circumvent the prohibition against displaying the Dalai Lama’s portrait, authorities were increasingly demanding they replace it with portraits of Chairman Xi and Chairman Mao as part of the Sinicization drive. According to Tibet Watch, “In certain areas, officials go house to house to check that [the CCP portraits] are on the altar.” In January Free Tibet reproduced photographs originally posted on state media of home shrines displaying portraits of CCP leaders. One photograph showed a Tibetan family smiling in their home in front of a shrine to CCP leaders. Another showed a Tibetan man holding up a *khata* (prayer scarf) before a home shrine displaying CCP leaders, including Chairman Xi and Chairman Mao.

A Tibetan living in exile told Radio Free Asia in June that in Arte village in Tsolho (Hainan) TAP, Qinghai Province, authorities promised RMB 6,000 (\$860) to more than 30 families to hang Chairman Xi’s portrait in a prominent place in their homes. According to the source, Xi’s portrait must be placed as high as any picture of the Potala Palace in Lhasa, the traditional winter home of the Dalai Lama. The source said, “The families are choosing to do this because they need the money to survive, but they regret this immensely.”

NGO groups and other sources reported that in August TAR government officials hung a banner outside Shalu Temple in Shigatse (Xigaze) Prefecture, TAR, prohibiting CCP members and all persons under age 18 from entering. Officials also required the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa to hang a banner wishing the CCP to last 10,000 years. A Tibetan exile living in Great Britain posted a photograph of the banner on Twitter on September 16. Monasteries and schools throughout the region were required to display additional Chinese flags and patriotic banners throughout the year.

Chinese official state media released a video on September 22 showing monks at Jambaling Monastery in Chamdo Prefecture, TAR, participating in a choreographed ceremony celebrating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the CCP. In the video, the

monks and worshipers waived Chinese flags and sang patriotic songs praising the CCP. The video showed monks hoisting a Chinese flag on the rooftop of the monastery and hanging *thangkas* (devotional wall hangings) with images of five Chinese leaders on the monastery wall. According to Free Tibet, at an event marking the release of the video, Tsering Norbu, Secretary of the Party Committee of Jambaling Monastery's Management Committee, said all monks “should be grateful, feel the party, listen to the party, and go with the party,” in addition to adhering to the socialist system and the party's vision for Tibetan Buddhism. Free Tibet reported that at the same event, Tsunglo-Shamba Khedu, Vice Chairman of the TAR and abbot of the Jambaling Monastery, told the monks present “they should bravely stand up and expose the 14th Dalai Lama's reactionary thoughts,” and that monks should be a model of patriotism and love for the party. Students and monks across Tibetan areas were instructed to participate in national day events praising the CCP. NGOs reported at least five Tibetans were arrested for refusing to take part in official National Day events.

The CCP continued to forbid its members from participating in religious activities of any kind, despite reports that many local government officials and CCP members held religious beliefs. The TAR regional government punished CCP members who followed the Dalai Lama, secretly harbored religious beliefs, made pilgrimages to India, or sent their children to study with exiled Tibetans.

In accordance with official guidelines for monastery management, the leadership of and membership in committees and working groups remained restricted to individuals the guidelines described as “politically reliable, patriotic, and devoted monks, nuns, and party and government officials.” General administrative affairs in TAR monasteries, which monks traditionally managed, were instead overseen by monastery management committees and monastic government working groups, both of which were composed primarily of government officials and CCP members, in addition to a few government-approved monks. Since 2011, the government has established such groups in all monasteries in the TAR and in many major monasteries in other Tibetan areas.

The traditional monastic system reportedly continued to decline as many senior Buddhist teachers remained in exile or died in India or elsewhere. The heads of most major schools of Tibetan Buddhism – including the Dalai Lama, Karmapa, Sakya Trizin, and Khatok Getse Rinpoche, as well as Bon leader Kyabje Menr Trizin – all continued to reside in exile. The government also banned India-trained Tibetan monks, most of whom received their education from the Dalai Lama or those with ties to him, from teaching in Tibetan monasteries in China, although there were reportedly rare exceptions made for pro-government monks.

As in previous years, senior monks at some monasteries continued to report informal agreements with local officials whereby resident monks would not stage protests or commit self-immolations as long as the government adopted a hands-off approach to the management of their monasteries.

Sources said authorities monitored all financial transactions involving monasteries inside Tibet and entities abroad.

The government continued to insist that Gyaltzen Norbu, whom it selected in 1995, was the Panchen Lama’s true reincarnation, and not Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, whom authorities had disappeared that same year. Norbu remained the vice president of, and highest ranking Tibetan in, the government-affiliated BAC. The state media outlet Xinhua News Agency reported that on June 22, Norbu was elected president of the Tibet Autonomous Regional Branch of the BAC. According to numerous Tibetan Buddhist monks and scholars, SARA and provincial religious affairs bureau officials frequently pressured monks and laypersons, including government officials, to attend religious study sessions presided over by Gyaltzen Norbu.

The pro-government media outlet *Global Times* reported that in August in Lhasa approximately 100 monks from 73 monasteries attended a training session on reincarnation of a living Buddha, presided over by Norbu and organized by the government-sponsored TAR branch of the BAC, the Institute of Socialism, and regional authorities in charge of religious affairs. According to *Global Times*, at the session, Suolang Renzeng, deputy chief of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference Tibet Autonomous Regional Committee, told trainees the reincarnation system “is never a religious-only issue or a living Buddha’s personal right,” but an important representation of the CCP’s strategies and policies in the region. Bianba Lamu (Tibetan: Pempa Lhamo), head of the South Asia Institute of the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences, told *Global Times* the training could educate key figures in Tibetan Buddhism to lead the religion in the direction of better compatibility with socialist society. The ICT said the training was part of the government’s efforts to control the succession of the Dalai Lama.

Reuters reported that in March foreign ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang said, “[R]eincarnations, including that of the Dalai Lama, should observe the country’s laws and regulations and follow the rituals and history of religion.” In a July interview with the India-based media outlet Daily News and Analysis, Wang Neng Shang, vice minister of the TAR and director general of the People’s Government Information Office, said the selection of the next Dalai Lama was not the current Dalai Lama’s to make, but must be recognized by the central government in Beijing, adding, “The centrality of the central government must be recognized.” Human rights groups said these comments reflected the CCP’s continued efforts to interfere with the succession of the Dalai Lama.

Sources continued to report that while authorities permitted some traditional religious ceremonies and practices, they continued to exercise control over the activities of religious leaders and religious gatherings of laypersons, confining many such activities to officially designated places of worship, restricting or canceling religious festivals, and preventing monks from traveling to villages for politically sensitive events and religious ceremonies. Sources said clergy could not travel freely between monasteries or go on pilgrimages.

Local sources said the government continued to suppress religious activities it viewed as vehicles for political dissent. There were reports that local authorities again ordered many monasteries and laypersons not to celebrate or organize any public gatherings to celebrate the Dalai Lama’s 84th birthday on July 6, or to commemorate the anniversary of the March 10, 1959, Tibetan uprising or the March 14, 2008, outbreak of unrest

across the Tibetan Plateau. TAR authorities banned monks and nuns from leaving their monasteries and nunneries during such times, and pilgrimage sites were heavily policed. According to local sources, Sichuan, Qinghai, and Gansu provincial authorities warned major monasteries in Tibetan areas, including Labrang, Amchok, and Bora Monasteries, that those holding special events or celebrations would face unspecified “severe consequences.” Local sources reported that in July religious affairs officials instructed senior monks at Kirti, Karzde, Draggo, and Tawu Monasteries in Kardze TAP, Sichuan Province, not to celebrate the Dalai Lama’s birthday. As a result, the monks did not organize any public celebrations. One source told Radio Free Asia that authorities forced students to attend classes on March 10, a Sunday, and on July 6, a Saturday, as part of efforts to keep them from marking these anniversaries. The source said, “Preventing Tibetan students from visiting places of worship and from taking part in religious festivals is a deliberate attempt by the Chinese government to separate them from the influence of Tibetan religion and culture[.] This is an effort to Sinicize young Tibetans at an early age.”

According to local sources, authorities deployed the military to monitor pilgrims and worshipers at prayer festivals in the TAR and other Tibetan areas. A man told Radio Free Asia the presence of armed, uniformed police and plain-clothes officers during sensitive political and religious anniversaries was so pervasive that Tibetans considered it “a part of their daily lives.” During Lunar New Year celebrations in February, multiple local sources reported authorities again deployed military forces at prayer ceremonies at Drephung, Sera, and Gandan Monasteries in the TAR, and at Draggo, Kirti, and Tawu Monasteries in Sichuan Province. In August the government again banned the annual Dechen Shedrub prayer festival from occurring at Larung Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute. As they did in 2018, authorities cited overcrowding, unfinished reconstruction of the partially demolished site, and fire safety concerns as reasons for the ban. The ban marked the fourth consecutive year the government prohibited the 22-year-old festival from taking place.

Radio Free Asia reported that authorities in Lhasa banned students, schools officials, and government employees from taking part in the Ganden Ngachoe festival on December 20-21. The festival commemorated the 600th anniversary of the death of Tsongkhapa, the 14th century founder of the Gelugpa school of Buddhism, of which the Dalai Lama is now the leader. One source told Radio Free Asia parents were being held responsible for their children’s compliance with the ban.

The TAR government reportedly maintained tight control over the use of Tibetan Buddhist religious relics and declared them, religious buildings, and religious institutions to be state property.

According to Human Rights Watch, the department under the TAR party committee in charge of overseeing retired government employees issued an official notice requiring TAR party and government officials, including nonparty members, to submit a list by August 18 of any retired personnel performing the *kora*, a Tibetan practice of circumambulating a sacred site or temple while reciting prayers or mantras. The

practice is a standard form of religious devotion among Tibetan Buddhists, particularly the elderly, for whom it is often a daily religious practice as well as a form of exercise. Those named faced potential loss of pensions and social benefits.

According to sources, security forces continued to block access to and from important monasteries during politically sensitive events and religious anniversaries. Radio Free Asia reported police maintained heavy security during the Shoton festival held from August 30 through September 5 in Lhasa. There were large numbers of uniformed and plain-clothes police monitoring crowds of worshippers. Officials delivered speeches at the festival denouncing the Dalai Lama and urging attendees to be loyal to the CCP.

On February 15, Tibet Watch reported authorities in Serthar County, Sichuan Province, and Markham County, Chamdo Prefecture, TAR, as well as in Lhasa, denied government employees time off to celebrate Losar, the Tibetan New Year festival typically celebrated with visits to temples and pilgrimages, and prohibited them from visiting monasteries during the event. Some major temples were closed for much of the 15-day Losar holiday, while other religious sites had a marked increase in military presence. Tibet Watch said in Markham County and Chamdo Prefecture, TAR, police and military personnel were stationed in the streets. The NGO posted a photo on its website showing police blocking the gate of the Lhasa Tsuklakhang Shrine, also known as the Jokhang Shrine, Tibet’s holiest shrine, during Losar.

There were reports that party leaders and branches of the UFWD, SARA, and the state-controlled BAC continued to station party and government officials, including security agents, in monasteries in Tibetan areas. Provincial, prefectural, county, and local governments continued to establish police stations or security offices adjacent to or on the premises of many monasteries and nunneries. While no updated statistics were available, sources estimated that in 2018 more than 15,000 government employees were working in approximately 3,000 Tibetan monasteries. One source told Radio Free Asia approximately 600 Chinese officials were permanently stationed at Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute to “maintain a tight watch” over the monks and nuns who remained and check all outside visitors. The source said authorities strictly monitored and restricted travel to and from the institute.

According to human rights groups and local sources, authorities continued to install overt camera surveillance systems at monasteries. On July 12, the ICT posted on its website an image of surveillance cameras in a control room in Kirti Monastery in Ngaba TAP, Sichuan Province. The image showed 35 separate monitors displaying different areas of the compound and the roads surrounding it.

A local source told Radio Free Asia that during the year, authorities built walls around large sections of Larung Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute and put in place three checkpoints to prevent unauthorized entry. According to the source, “The arrivals and departures of monks and nuns are closely monitored, and they are kept under strict surveillance around the clock.” The source told Radio Free Asia that in a speech to monks and nuns at the institute on April 16, senior teacher Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro said, “Almost any kind of problem may be encountered if we don’t exercise necessary caution and care.”

According to many sources in Ngaba TAP, Sichuan Province, officials continued to maintain a security watch list of family members, relatives, and close friends of self-immolators to prevent them from meeting and communicating with international visitors and, in some cases, deprived them of public benefits.

Sources stated that during the year, local authorities increased scrutiny of social media postings. A local source told Radio Free Asia, “Chinese authorities are closely monitoring discussions on WeChat, and are quick to intervene.” The source told Radio Free Asia that in July authorities detained Rinso, a Tibetan from Thangkor Township, Sichuan, after he posted a photo of the Dalai Lama on WeChat.

Multiple Tibetan rights advocacy NGOs reported that in February, TAR officials issued guidance to monks entitled “The 20 Prohibitions” forbidding monks from using social media to “incite subversion, defame or insult others, assist extremist religious groups, provide undisclosed information of the state to domestic or foreign individuals or organizations, or receive or release illegal information.” TAR government offices also announced that those who misused social media could be imprisoned for up to eight years. In August Tsering Tsomo, director of the India-based Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, told Radio Free Asia the TAR government also increased its cash awards from RMB 1,000 (\$140) in 2018 to RMB 300,000 (\$43,100) for information about social media users “advocating extremism,” including those who expressed support for the Dalai Lama’s Middle Way policy.

Free Tibet reported that on March 13, during a press conference, Tsetan Dorjee, abbot of Sera Monastery, told an audience of 320 monks, monastic party members, and public security officials connected to the monastery to comply with the “20 Prohibitions.” According to Free Tibet, members of the monastery’s management committee emphasized the need for all monks to show gratitude to the CCP and reject separatism.

Free Tibet reported the government continued to interfere in the religious education of laypersons. Authorities in Nangchen (Nangqen) County, Yushu (Yuxu) TAP, Qinghai Province, required monks to stop all classes with children, warning that monks and parents would be punished if classes continued. Authorities stated such classes were harmful, saying the government must oversee “ideological education for children and youth, firmly upholding the leading role of the party and government in education.” According to *Contact*, “For many Tibetan students, Buddhism can only be studied in a language that is not Tibetan.” According to Tibet Watch and *Global Times*, during the summer, schools in Gyantse (Gyangze) County, Shigatse Prefecture, TAR, began using a new textbook which characterized life under the Dalai Lama’s pre-1959 leadership as oppressive. Tibet Watch criticized the textbook as a tool of “greater suppression in Tibet.”

Media reported that during the year, provincial officials in the TAR and in Qinghai Province again banned all underage students from participating in religious activities during school holidays. School officials required students to sign an agreement stating they would not participate in any form of religious activity during the summer.

According to the ICT, on December 31, at the start of the two-month winter break, the Lhasa Chengguan Haicheng Elementary School sent a directive to parents stating, “Students are not allowed to participate in any form of religious activity during the break, and in principle long-distance travel with students is not allowed.” Tibetan rights advocates interpreted the prohibition on travel as an effort by authorities to stop parents from taking their children to visit temples outside the capital during the break. The directive stated, “In the event of an accident, all consequences are the responsibility of the parents.” According to ICT, this was the third year in a row Lhasa school authorities had imposed the ban. There were reports that similar directives were issued elsewhere in Tibet.

According to NGO reports, authorities continued “patriotic reeducation” campaigns at many monasteries and nunneries across the Tibetan Plateau. All monks and nuns were required to participate in several sessions of “legal education” per year, during which they were required to denounce the Dalai Lama, express allegiance to the government-recognized Panchen Lama, study Xi Jinping’s speeches, learn Mandarin, and hear lectures praising the leadership of the CCP and the socialist system.

In April, as part of a five-year training program initiated in 2018, 179 religious figures from the TAR attended a training session at the Regional Socialist College. According to the TAR office of the UFWD, during the session, participants were called upon to improve their political awareness and show loyalty to the CCP. The training program used specially developed curricula to reinforce government religious policies. On May 6, government officials conducted an eight-day training session for 100 monks and nuns in Driru (Biru) County, Nagchu Prefecture, TAR. The training’s stated purpose was to strengthen participants’ “recognition of the party and understanding of socialist values.”

Free Tibet reported in May that approximately 30,000 Tibetan monks and nuns at Sera, Ganden, and Drepung Monasteries in Lhasa, as well as at other locations in the TAR, were required to take tests on Chinese law that included questions on religious affairs, national security, and anti-terrorism laws. The program, run by the UFWD, also included training on how to resist the Dalai Lama and Tibetan separatism. According to Free Tibet, individuals were threatened with detention and other penalties if they did not participate. Senior officials, including Deputy Director of the District People’s Congress Xu Xueguang, conducted inspections of the monasteries while exams were underway.

Authorities banned minors under age 18 from participating in any monastic training. Multiple sources reported authorities forced underage monks and nuns to leave their monasteries and Buddhist schools to receive “patriotic education.” Journalists reported that some underage monks who refused to cooperate were arrested and, in some cases, beaten by police, and that parents and other family members were also threatened with loss of social benefits if underage monks did not comply. In May Sichuan provincial law enforcement officials announced police would forcibly remove all underage monks and nuns from all monasteries in the province.

According to Radio Free Asia, a local source said that in April authorities notified senior monks at Larung Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute that no new enrollments would be allowed and ordered no new residents be admitted to live and study there. The source

said, “If the institute learns that any new residents have been admitted, those enrollees are to be turned away immediately.” The source said authorities warned that failure to comply with government orders would lead to harsh policies being imposed.

Radio Free Asia reported that authorities forced Tibetan college graduates seeking government jobs to denounce the Dalai Lama and display loyalty to the CCP in order to be considered for government positions.

Government officials regularly denigrated the Dalai Lama publicly and accused the “Dalai clique” and other “outside forces” of instigating Tibetan protests, stating such acts were attempts to “split” China. In May Zhu Weiqun, the former head of the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, said government took the position that it was impossible to talk to the Dalai Lama without preconditions. Zhu criticized the Dalai Lama for being a “loyal instrument of international anti-China forces.” In official statements, government officials often likened supporters of the Dalai Lama to terrorists and gang members. In March the TAR Communist Party Committee published a series of articles criticizing the Dalai Lama and accusing him of being a “loyal instrument of anti-Chinese forces” who was instigating violence within Tibet.

The state media outlet Xinhua News Agency reported that from May 25 to 27, Wang Yang, the fourth-highest ranking member of the Politburo Standing Committee and head of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, visited Kardze TAP, Sichuan Province, where he told a symposium it was necessary to comprehensively implement the CCP’s basic guidelines for religious work and to guide the religious community to consciously support the CCP and patriotism. Wang also said it was necessary to defend against “the infiltration of foreign hostile forces,” which the ICT said was a reference to the Dalai Lama and Tibetans outside Tibet.

In April TAR CCP Secretary Wu Yingjie instructed party members to “eliminate the negative impact from the Dalai Lama on religion and effectively guide the monks, nuns, and religious followers to rally around the party.”

Authorities continued in state media to justify interference with Tibetan Buddhist monasteries by associating the monasteries with “separatism” and pro-independence activities. During an inspection tour of the TAR in June, former director of the UFWD Zhu Weiqun stated the government would “strongly oppose and resolutely crack down on any separatist force in the name of ethnicity or religion, which are mainly organized by the Dalai clique.”

According to local sources, authorities continued to hinder Tibetan Buddhist monasteries from carrying out environmental protection activities, an important part of traditional Tibetan Buddhist practices, due to fear such activities could create a sense of pride among Tibetans, particularly children, and an awareness of their distinctness from Chinese culture.

In October the PRC and the government of Nepal signed the Boundary Management System Agreement, which contained a provision that would require both countries to hand over citizens who have illegally crossed the Nepal-China border. Tibetan advocacy groups said they were concerned this provision could be used to return long-staying Tibetan refugees to the PRC from Nepal, and the groups also stated that the provision was potentially in conflict with Nepal’s international commitments under the Convention Against Torture and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as well the so-called “gentlemen’s agreement” with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and India.

Religious figures and laypersons frequently reported continued difficulty traveling to monasteries outside their home region, both within the TAR and in other parts of China. Travelers said they encountered an increased number of roadblocks and police checkpoints surrounding major monasteries, with security personnel often checking their identity cards and refusing entry to nonresidents. Tibetans wishing to visit family members residing in monasteries noted frequent refusals or limits on their ability to visit. A senior monk visiting relatives in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, was forced to remain in his hotel room for the entirety of his trip. Other local sources reported similar restrictions on their movements and said checkpoints and fear of detention prevented them from visiting monasteries and participating in religious events. Many monks expelled from their TAR monasteries after the 2008 Lhasa riots and from Kirti Monastery after a series of self-immolations from 2009 to 2015 had not returned, some because of government prohibitions.

Many Tibetans, including monks, nuns, and laypersons, reported difficulties traveling to India for religious training, meetings with religious leaders, or to visit family members living within monasteries. In many cases, Public Security Bureau officials refused to approve their passport applications. In other cases, prospective travelers were able to obtain passports only after paying bribes to local officials. Some individuals seeking to travel elsewhere said they could only obtain passports after promising not to travel to India or to criticize government policies in Tibetan areas while overseas. In some cases family members were required to sign a guarantee that passport applicants would return from their overseas travel. Sichuan Province and TAR officials continued to require religious travelers returning from India to attend political training sessions. According to sources, these restrictions had prevented thousands of Tibetans from attending religious training in India. One senior Tibetan leader in India estimating “only a handful” of Chinese Tibetans visited India during the year, down from over 10,000 per year prior to 2014. According to local sources, numerous Tibetans in Gansu, Qinghai, and Sichuan Provinces waited up to 10 years to receive a passport, often without any explanation for the delay. There were also instances of authorities confiscating and canceling previously issued passports, reportedly as a way of preventing Tibetans from participating in religious events involving the Dalai Lama in India.

Restrictions remained in place for monks and nuns living in exile, particularly those in India, which made it difficult or impossible for them to travel into Tibetan areas. Tibetans who returned from India reported facing difficulties finding employment or receiving religious or secular education. Returning Tibetans were not allowed to study at Chinese monasteries and most were denied admission to secular schools because

they did not have education certificates recognized by the government. Local sources said they were subject to additional government scrutiny as a result of having relatives at religious institutions in India.

According to sources, authorities in some areas continued to enforce special restrictions on Tibetans staying at hotels inside and outside the TAR. Police regulations forbade some hotels and guesthouses in the TAR from accepting Tibetan guests, particularly monks and nuns, and required other hotels to notify police departments when Tibetan guests checked in.

On March 7, *Time Magazine* published a profile of the Dalai Lama and world leaders in which it said the government was attempting to exert political and economic pressure on foreign governments to avoid meeting with him. Media reported government officials canceled several exchange programs and criticized the mayor of Prague, Zdenek Hrib, after he flew a Tibetan flag above city hall and hosted Central Tibetan Administration President Lobsang Sangay in March.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because expressions of Tibetan identity and religion are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religion. Tibetans, particularly those who wore traditional and religious attire, regularly reported incidents in which they were denied hotel rooms, avoided by taxis, and discriminated against in employment or in business transactions.

Media reported that on September 30, 15 Tibetan monks from Golok (Guoluo) TAP, Qinghai Province, attempted to check in to a hotel in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, but the management told them ethnic minorities were not allowed to stay in hotels downtown and summoned the police, who checked their IDs, and ordered them to go to the Tibetan area of Chengdu immediately.

Many Han Buddhists continued to demonstrate interest in Tibetan Buddhism and donated money to Tibetan monasteries and nunneries, according to local sources in such monasteries and nunneries. Tibetan Buddhist monks frequently visited Chinese cities to provide religious instruction to Han Buddhists. In addition, a growing number of Han Buddhists visited Tibetan monasteries, although officials sometimes imposed restrictions that made it difficult for Han Buddhists to conduct long-term study at many monasteries in Tibetan areas.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. officials repeatedly raised concerns about religious freedom in Tibet with Chinese government counterparts at multiple levels. U.S. officials, including the Vice President, Secretary of State, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, the Ambassador to China, the Consul General in Chengdu, and other officers in both the consulate general in Chengdu and the embassy in Beijing continued sustained and

concerted efforts to advocate for the rights of Tibetans to preserve, practice, teach, and develop their religious traditions and language without interference from the government. U.S. embassy and consulate officials regularly expressed concerns to the Chinese government at senior levels, including central government and provincial leaders, regarding severe restrictions imposed on Tibetans' ability to exercise their human rights and fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom and cultural rights. The Ambassador pressed TAR officials on the government's refusal to engage in dialogue with the Dalai Lama; the Consul General in Chengdu raised concerns about the ongoing demolition campaigns at Larung Gar and Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institutes. U.S. officials continued to underscore that only the Dalai Lama and other faith leaders can decide the succession of the Dalai Lama, and also raised concerns about the continued disappearance of the Panchen Lama. In addition to raising systemic issues such as impediments to passport issuance to Tibetans, U.S. officials expressed concern and sought further information about individual cases and incidents of religious persecution and discrimination, and sought increased access to the TAR for U.S. officials, journalists, and tourists, including religious pilgrims and those traveling for religious purposes.

Although diplomatic access to the TAR remained tightly controlled, U.S. officials obtained limited access during the year. The Ambassador visited the TAR in May, the first U.S. ambassador to do so since 2015. While in Lhasa, he met with local leaders, religious figures, and students, and visited several important religious sites. In these forums, he encouraged substantive dialogue between the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama and greater openness for foreigners to visit Tibetan areas. He also reiterated that the succession of the Dalai Lama is a religious process that should not be interfered with by any government.

During the year, authorities also granted permission for four official visits to the TAR by the Consul General in Chengdu and other officials from the embassy and the consulate general in Chengdu in March, April, October, and December. U.S. officials emphasized to TAR officials during their visits the importance of respecting religious freedom in Tibet.

During the year the Consul General in Chengdu submitted three requests to Sichuan provincial authorities to visit Larung Gar and Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institutes, but all were denied. While limited tourist access was possible at Larung Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute, no foreign officials or foreign media were allowed to visit. No visitors were allowed to Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute during the year.

In October the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom traveled to Dharamsala, India, where he met with the Dalai Lama. While there, he delivered remarks at the 60th anniversary celebration of the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts focused on religious freedom, including the right of Tibetan Buddhists to select and venerate their own leaders, including the Dalai Lama.

On July 16-18 during the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington, D.C., the Vice President and Secretary of State highlighted the severe repression and discrimination Tibetan Buddhists faced due to their beliefs. The Vice President told

ministerial attendees, “China’s oppression of Tibetan Buddhists goes back decades... [T]he American people will always stand in solidarity with the people of all faiths in the People’s Republic of China.” At the U.S. government’s invitation, Tibetan exile and survivor of religious persecution Nyima Lhamo, who fled China in 2016, addressed ministerial attendees. She spoke of the detention, sentencing, and death in prison of her uncle, Lama Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, and the treatment of Tibetan monks and nuns within China. She also called for greater religious freedom and foreign access to Tibetan areas. On July 17, Lhamo and other survivors of religious persecution met with the President.

The Office of the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues continued to coordinate U.S. government efforts to preserve Tibet’s distinct religious, linguistic, and cultural identity as well as efforts to promote dialogue between the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama. On February 8, it organized a Losar New Year celebration at the Department of State for Tibetan Americans, diplomats, NGOs, and media. The Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs and Ngodup Tsering, the Dalai Lama’s representative for North America, addressed attendees.

U.S. officials maintained contact with a wide range of religious leaders and practitioners, as well as NGOs in Tibetan areas, to monitor the status of religious freedom, although travel and other restrictions made it difficult to visit and communicate with these individuals.

The embassy and consulates delivered direct messaging to the public about religious freedom in Tibet through social media posts on PRC-controlled Weibo and WeChat platforms, on Twitter, and on the embassy’s official website, which is required to be hosted on a PRC server and registered in an official PRC domain. In addition to more than 100 general messages promoting religious freedom, over the course of the year the embassy and consulates published many social media messages about Tibet that directly and indirectly promoted the religious freedom of the Tibetan people. For example, in amplifying information about the Ambassador’s trip to Tibet in May, the embassy and consulates emphasized his visits to monasteries and his discussions with Tibetan leaders, and quoted his direct statements in support of religious freedom for the people of Tibet, including his call for the Chinese government not to interfere with the succession of the Dalai Lama. During the July ministerial in Washington, the embassy emphasized participants’ statements supporting religious freedom for the people of Tibet. Over the course of the year, statements from the Ambassador and others supporting religious freedom for Tibetans reached millions of Chinese social media users.

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