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Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2019 - Tibet

Not Free

1 /100

Overview:

Tibet is ruled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government based in Beijing, with local decision-making power concentrated in the hands of Chinese party officials. Residents of both Chinese and Tibetan ethnicity are denied fundamental rights, but the authorities are especially rigorous in suppressing any signs of dissent among Tibetans, including manifestations of uniquely Tibetan religious belief and cultural identity. State policies encourage migration from other parts of China, reducing the ethnic Tibetan share of the population.

Key Developments:

Key Developments in 2018:

- In March, the CCP announced significant structural reforms that placed the party's United Front Work Department more explicitly in charge of policy areas like religious affairs and ethnic minorities, including in Tibet.
- Businessman Tashi Wangchuk was sentenced to five years in prison in May on charges of inciting separatism; he had given an interview to the *New York Times* in 2015 about his efforts to use the Chinese legal system to challenge the lack of Tibetan-language education. The case illustrated the heavy penalties imposed on Tibetans who seek to preserve their culture.
- Chinese officials continued to consolidate control over Larung Gar, a major center for Tibetan Buddhist learning located in Sichuan Province, during the year. They have expanded CCP cadres' management of the center and increased the political education components of the curriculum in the wake of large-scale demolitions and evictions of monks and nuns that began in 2016.
- Amid tighter restrictions on passports for Tibetans, significantly fewer Tibetan pilgrims were able to travel to India to hear teachings of the Dalai Lama in 2018 compared with previous years.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

POLITICAL RIGHTS: -2 / 40

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 0 / 12

A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

The Chinese government rules Tibet through administration of the TAR and 12 Tibetan autonomous prefectures or counties in the nearby provinces of Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu, and Yunnan. Under the Chinese constitution, autonomous areas have the right to formulate their own regulations and implement national legislation in accordance with local conditions. In practice, however, decision-making authority is concentrated in the hands of unelected ethnic (Han) Chinese officials of the CCP, which has a monopoly on political power. In 2016, Wu Yingjie replaced Chen Quanguo as TAR party secretary.

The few ethnic Tibetans who occupy senior executive positions serve mostly as figureheads or echo official doctrine. Che Dalha, one of two ethnic Tibetan members of the CCP's 205-member Central Committee, has served as chairman (governor) of the TAR since January 2017. The chairman is formally elected by the regional people's congress, but in practice such decisions are predetermined by the CCP leadership.

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

The regional people's congress of the TAR, which is formally elected by lower-level people's congresses, chooses delegates to China's 3,000-member National People's Congress (NPC) every five years, but in practice all candidates are vetted by the CCP. The current TAR people's congress held its first session in January 2018, and the current NPC was seated in March 2018.

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 0 / 4

As in the rest of China, direct elections are only permitted at the lowest administrative levels. Tight political controls and aggressive state interference ensure that competitive races with independent candidates are even rarer in Tibet than in other parts of the country. Regulations published in 2014 placed significant restrictions on candidates for village elections, excluding those who have attended religious teachings abroad, have communicated with overseas Tibetans, or have relatives studying at monasteries outside China.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 0 / 16

B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 0 / 4

All organized political activity outside the CCP is illegal and harshly punished, as is any evidence of loyalty to or communication with the Tibetan government in exile, based in Dharamsala, India.

The exile government includes an elected parliament serving five-year terms, a Supreme Justice Commission that adjudicates civil disputes, and a directly elected prime minister, also serving five-year terms. Votes are collected from the Tibetan diaspora around the world. The unelected Dalai Lama, the Tibetan spiritual leader who also traditionally served as head of state, renounced his political role in 2011. Lobsang Sangay was elected prime minister in the same year, replacing a two-term incumbent and becoming the exile government's top political official; he was reelected in April 2016.

B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 0 / 4

As in the rest of China, the one-party system rigorously suppresses the development of any organized political opposition. Tibet has never experienced a peaceful and democratic transfer of power between rival groups.

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 0 / 4

The authoritarian CCP is not accountable to voters and denies the public any meaningful influence or participation in political affairs.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 0 / 4

Political opportunities for ethnic Tibetans within Tibet remain limited by the dominance of ethnic Chinese officials at all levels of the CCP. The ethnic Tibetan population's objections to party policies are actively suppressed.

Women are well represented in many public-sector jobs and CCP posts within the TAR, though most high-level officials are men, and women are unable to organize independently to advance their political interests.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 1 / 12

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 0 / 4

Unelected CCP officials determine and implement government policies in Tibet. In March 2018, the CCP Central Committee announced significant structural reforms that reduced the already limited separation between the party and state governance, placing

CCP entities—like the United Front Work Department—more explicitly in charge of policy areas including religious affairs and ethnic minorities, which are especially relevant for Tibet.

C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 1 / 4

As in the rest of China, corruption is believed to be extensive, though little information is available on the scale of the problem. There have been moves in recent years to curb graft among the region’s officials as part of Chinese president Xi Jinping’s nationwide anticorruption campaign. However, many prosecutions are believed to be politically selective or amount to reprisals for perceived political and religious disloyalty.

C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 0 / 4

Governance is opaque in all of China, but even more so in Tibet. A study by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences published in 2017 ranked cities and counties nationwide by their level of government transparency; Lhasa scored lowest among the cities, and the TAR’s Nang County was the lowest among the counties under examination.

ADDITIONAL DISCRETIONARY POLITICAL RIGHTS QUESTION

Is the government or occupying power deliberately changing the ethnic composition of a country or territory so as to destroy a culture or tip the political balance in favor of another group? -3 / 0

The Chinese government’s economic development programs in Tibet have strongly encouraged ethnic Chinese migration to the region, disproportionately benefited ethnic Chinese residents, and exacerbated the marginalization of ethnic Tibetans, who have also been displaced by mass resettlement campaigns within Tibet. Ethnic Tibetans account for some 90 percent of the permanently registered population of the TAR, but many ethnic Chinese migrants have moved to the region without changing permanent residency. In recent years, officials have announced major new urbanization projects that risk further diluting the region’s Tibetan population; one such plan aims to increase the “permanent urban population” of Tibet by approximately 30 percent by 2020, with many new settlers likely to be ethnic Chinese.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 3 / 60

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 0 / 16

D1. Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4

Chinese authorities tightly restrict all news media in Tibet. Individuals who use the internet, social media, or other means to share politically sensitive news content or commentary face arrest and heavy criminal penalties. Tibetan cultural expression, which the authorities associate with separatism, is subject to especially harsh restrictions; those incarcerated in recent years have included scores of Tibetan writers, intellectuals, and musicians.

Deliberate internet blackouts are common in Tibet, including in areas where public demonstrations have occurred. International broadcasts are jammed, and personal communication devices are periodically confiscated and searched. The online censorship and monitoring systems in place across China are applied even more stringently in the TAR, while censorship of Tibet-related keywords on WeChat has become more sophisticated. Heavy censorship of the news media and online communications was imposed in February 2018 to suppress news and information about a fire at Jokhang Temple in Lhasa, a UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage site, fueling concerns that the damage was more serious than officially claimed.

Access to the TAR is highly restricted for foreign journalists, who are also regularly prevented from entering Tibetan areas of Sichuan and other provinces, though no permission is technically required to travel there. Tibetans who communicate with foreign media without permission risk arrest and prosecution. Businessman Tashi Wangchuk was sentenced to five years in prison in May 2018 on charges of inciting separatism, having given an interview to the *New York Times* in 2015 about his efforts to use the Chinese legal system to challenge the lack of Tibetan-language education; his appeal was denied in August.

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 0 / 4

Freedom of religion is harshly restricted in Tibet, in large part because the authorities interpret reverence for the Dalai Lama and adherence to the region's unique form of Buddhism as a threat to CCP rule. New regulations on religious affairs came into effect in February 2018, reiterating many existing restrictions while strengthening controls on places of worship, travel for religious purposes, and children's religious education, including in Tibetan areas.

Religious Affairs Bureaus control who can study in monasteries and nunneries. Officials enforce a minimum age requirement of 18 for those who wish to become monks or nuns, although some institutions continue to accept younger children without registration. Monks and nuns are required to sign a declaration rejecting Tibetan independence, expressing loyalty to the government, and denouncing the Dalai Lama. Since 2012, the CCP has set up committees of government officials within monasteries to manage their daily operations and enforce party indoctrination campaigns. Police posts are increasingly common even in smaller monasteries.

Ideological education campaigns reach most monasteries and nunneries in the region. In 2018, the effort included obligatory study of the "spirit" of the October 2017 19th Party Congress. Such campaigns typically force participants to recognize the CCP claim that China "liberated" Tibet and to denounce the Dalai Lama. They have been extended to the lay population in recent years, with students, civil servants, and farmers required to participate in discussions, singing sessions, and propaganda film screenings. Possession of Dalai Lama-related materials—especially in the TAR—can lead to official harassment, arrest, and punishment, including restrictions on commercial activity and loss of welfare benefits.

The Chinese government has asserted its intention to select the successor of the current Dalai Lama, who turned 83 in July 2018, and promoted its own appointee to serve as the Panchen Lama, a religious figure who plays an important role in identifying the reincarnation of a Dalai Lama according to traditional Tibetan Buddhist rituals. The location of the Panchen Lama who was originally recognized by the current Dalai Lama remains unknown, as he was abducted by Chinese officials in 1995, when he was six years old.

Chinese officials continued in 2018 to consolidate control over Larung Gar, a major center for Tibetan Buddhist learning located in Sichuan Province. Since June 2016, the center's size has been reduced dramatically through mass demolitions of buildings and evictions of monks and nuns. In 2017, CCP cadres were appointed to take over management of Larung Gar at every level. According to a January 2018 report by Human Rights Watch, real-name registration has been imposed on visitors, and 40 percent of the curriculum is now dedicated to political and nonreligious study. A similar campaign has affected Yachen Gar, another Tibetan Buddhist religious community in Sichuan Province.

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 0 / 4

University professors cannot lecture on certain topics, and many must attend political indoctrination sessions. The government restricts course materials to prevent circulation of unofficial versions of Tibetan history and has reduced use of Tibetan as the language of instruction in schools in recent years. In 2018, students in Lhasa were reportedly required to sign a commitment to avoid religious activities during the summer break.

D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 0 / 4

Freedom of private discussion is severely limited by factors including the authorities' monitoring of electronic communications, the heavy security presence, and regular ideological campaigns in Tibetan areas.

Tibetans continue to be detained or sentenced to prison for actions like verbally expressing support for the Dalai Lama and freedom for Tibet, sharing images of the Dalai Lama or the Tibetan flag on social media, or sending information abroad about recent self-immolation protests. As they implement the 2017 Cybersecurity Law, authorities have held meetings with managers of WeChat groups in Tibetan areas, warning them to ensure that discussions in their groups remain "appropriate," while informing residents at monasteries of the risks of sharing illicit information. In January 2018, former political prisoner Tsegon Gyal was sentenced to three years in prison for a post on WeChat in which he criticized the Chinese government for failing to genuinely promote its proclaimed policy of "ethnic unity." In April, two Tibetan monks in Qinghai Province were reportedly detained after they admitted to posting politically sensitive images and articles on WeChat.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 0 / 12

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 0 / 4

Chinese authorities severely restrict freedom of assembly as part of the government's intensified "stability maintenance" policies in Tibet. Control and surveillance of public gatherings extends beyond major towns to villages and rural areas. Even nonviolent protesters are often violently dispersed and harshly punished. Nevertheless, Tibetans continue to seek ways to express dissatisfaction with government policies; several individuals held solo protests in public places during 2018, briefly calling for the return of the Dalai Lama and freedom in Tibet before being seized by police. As in the rest of China, authorities have occasionally responded to environmental protests with minor concessions, such as temporary suspension of mining operations.

At least three Tibetans set themselves on fire to protest Chinese rule during 2018, though self-immolations have declined in recent years, due in part to state-imposed deterrents. Officials respond to self-immolation incidents with information blackouts, a heightened security presence, increased surveillance, and large-scale arrests of those associated with the self-immolators. Engaging in self-immolation and organizing, assisting, or gathering crowds related to such acts are considered criminal offenses, including intentional homicide in some cases. In addition to mass arrests, the government employs collective-punishment tactics—for both self-immolations and other forms of protest—that include financial penalties on protesters' families, cancellation of public benefits for their households, and termination of state-funded projects in their communities.

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 0 / 4

Nongovernmental organizations, including those focused only on apolitical issues like development and public health, operate under highly restrictive agreements and periodically face closure. A July 2018 Human Rights Watch report documented the effects of a February TAR police notice and earlier regulations that banned a wide range of social and community engagement, including initiatives to promote the Tibetan language and to protect the environment, as well as traditional forms of mediation.

E3. Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 0 / 4

As in the rest of China, independent trade unions are illegal. The only legal union organization is the government-controlled All-China Federation of Trade Unions, which has long been criticized for failing to properly defend workers' rights. Labor activism in Tibet is riskier and therefore much more rare than in other parts of China. According to the China Labour Bulletin, no strikes took place in the TAR during 2018, compared with about 1,700 strikes elsewhere in the country.

F. RULE OF LAW: 0 / 16

F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 0 / 4

The CCP controls the judicial system, and courts consequently lack independence. Courts at all levels are supervised by party political-legal committees that influence the appointment of judges, court operations, and verdicts and sentences. Given the political sensitivity of Tibetan areas, the scope for autonomous judicial decision-making is even more limited than elsewhere in China.

F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 0 / 4

Defendants lack access to meaningful legal representation. Trials are closed if state security interests are invoked, and sometimes even when no political crime is listed. Chinese lawyers who offer to defend Tibetan suspects have been harassed, disbarred, or blocked from attending relevant hearings. Security forces routinely engage in arbitrary detention, and detainees' families are often left uninformed as to their whereabouts or well-being.

F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 0 / 4

Detained suspects and prisoners are subject to torture and other forms of abuse. Tibetan prisoners of conscience have died in custody under circumstances indicating torture, and others have been released in poor health, allegedly to avoid deaths in custody. According to a partial database maintained by the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China, there were still hundreds of Tibetan political prisoners behind bars as of late 2018.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 0 / 4

Ethnic Tibetans face a range of socioeconomic disadvantages and discriminatory treatment by employers, law enforcement agencies, and other official bodies. The dominant role of the Chinese language in education and employment limits opportunities for many Tibetans; Tibetans receive preferential treatment in university admission examinations, but this is often not enough to secure entrance.

As in the rest of China, gender bias against women remains widespread, despite laws barring workplace discrimination. LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people suffer from discrimination, though same-sex sexual activity is not criminalized. Social pressures discourage discussion of LGBT issues.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 3 / 16**G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 0 / 4**

Obstacles including troop deployments, checkpoints, roadblocks, required bureaucratic approvals, and passport restrictions impede freedom of movement within and beyond Tibetan areas, particularly for travel to and from the TAR. Increased security efforts and Nepalese government cooperation have made it difficult for Tibetans to cross the border into Nepal. Obtaining a passport for foreign travel is extremely difficult for Tibetans. It was reported in March 2018 that at least 60 Tibetan pilgrims from Sichuan Province who had traveled to Nepal and India to visit religious sites were detained upon returning to the country. In December, many fewer pilgrims were able to travel to India to hear teachings by the Dalai Lama than in previous years, due in part to government campaigns to revoke Tibetans' passports.

Authorities continue to restrict access to the TAR for human rights researchers, as well as for some tourists. Foreigners are often denied entry surrounding politically sensitive dates. During other periods, tourists must travel in groups and obtain official permission to visit the TAR, and even then, last-minute travel bans are periodically imposed.

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 1 / 4

The economy is dominated by state-owned enterprises and private businesses with informal ties to officials. Tibetans reportedly find it more difficult than ethnic Chinese residents to obtain permits and loans to open businesses.

Since 2003, the authorities have intensified efforts to resettle rural and nomadic Tibetans—forcibly or with incentives—into permanent-housing areas that often have little economic infrastructure. As in the rest of China, land expropriation for development projects is regularly carried out with little consultation and inadequate compensation.

G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 1 / 4

China's restrictive family-planning policies are formally more lenient for Tibetans and other ethnic minorities. Officials limit urban Tibetans to two children and encourage rural Tibetans to stop at three. As a result, the TAR is one of the few areas of China without a skewed sex ratio. Nevertheless, the authorities continue to regulate reproduction, and related abuses are occasionally reported. State policies actively encourage interethnic marriages with financial and other incentives, and couples must designate a single ethnicity for their children. Separately, Tibetan women are vulnerable to human trafficking schemes that result in forced marriage.

G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 1 / 4

Exploitative employment practices are pervasive in many industries, as is the case across China, though ethnic Tibetans reportedly face additional disadvantages in hiring and compensation. Human trafficking that targets Tibetan women can lead to prostitution or exploitative employment in domestic service and other sectors elsewhere in China.

Explanatory Note:

**** Indicates a territory as opposed to an independent country.***

This report assesses the Tibet Autonomous Region and areas of eastern Tibet that are incorporated into neighboring Chinese provinces.

ecoi.net summary:

Tibet: Annual report on political rights and civil liberties in 2018



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