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2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: China — Tibet

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Executive Summary

The constitution of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which cites the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), states that citizens “enjoy freedom of religious belief,” but limits protections for religious practice to “normal religious activities,” without defining “normal.” CCP regulations allow only Chinese citizens to take part in officially approved religious practices and stipulate religious activity “must not harm national security.” CCP regulations control all aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, including religious venues, groups, personnel, and schools, and prohibit “accepting domination by external forces,” which authorities said included Tibetans in exile, particularly the Dalai Lama. The CCP continued to promote “Sinicization” policies that aimed to interpret religious ideas in accordance with CCP ideology and to emphasize loyalty to the CCP and the state. The CCP’s Administrative Measures for Religious Organizations regulation, released in February, further formalized the administrative procedures for Sinicizing all religions, including Tibetan Buddhism. In the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and other Tibetan areas there were reports of forced disappearances, arrests, torture, physical abuse, and prolonged detentions without trial of individuals due to their religious practices. There were reports of individuals dying in custody after being beaten, and one nun in a detention facility committed suicide. There were multiple reports of individuals who had been released from detention dying as a result of long-term illnesses and injuries suffered following beatings and mistreatment during incarceration. According to nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and academic research, the PRC government undertook a large-scale and aggressive campaign of “reeducation” or “vocational training” in military-style camps to conduct forced political indoctrination and to transform traditional farmers and herders into laborers in other industries; the vocational training process required “diluting the negative influence of religion.” In some cases, this program involved transferring Tibetans away from their home districts as part of so-called labor transfer programs. Authorities arrested multiple writers, singers, and artists for promoting Tibetan language and culture. Media and human rights groups reported that 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 security officials of anyone who “links up with the Dalai clique.” The PRC 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 because access to Tibetan areas remained restricted, according to multiple sources, between 2016 and 2019, 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 and photographs showed that thousands of dwellings at these locations had been destroyed since 2018. PRC authorities continued to restrict the religious practices of monks, nuns, and laypersons. Travel and other 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. The government canceled some religious festivals, citing COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, although some sources stated this was a pretext. The government surveilled religious sites, encouraged families to inform on their neighbors, and attempted to control access to social media. It continued to force monasteries to display portraits of CCP leaders and the national flag and required Tibetans to replace images of the Dalai Lama and other lamas with portraits of prominent CCP leaders, including Chairman Mao and General Secretary and PRC President Xi Jinping, in their homes. Media and NGOs reported that authorities erected two Chinese-style pagodas in front of the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa, a UNESCO World Heritage Site generally considered to be the most sacred temple in Tibet, and closed the square in front of the temple to worshippers. PRC authorities continued to restrict children from participating in many traditional religious festivals and from receiving religious education. As part of efforts to Sinicize the population, schools in some areas required instruction in Mandarin, and some students were sent to other parts of the country to expose them to Han culture. Authorities continued to engage in widespread interference in monastic practices, including by appointing government and CCP personnel and government-approved monks to manage religious institutions. The government continued to control the selection of Tibetan Buddhist lamas and supervised their religious and political education. It 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.

Officials routinely made public statements denigrating the Dalai Lama and promoting the Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism. In a statement issued in December, the Standing Committee of the Tibetan People’s Congress stated reincarnations of lamas were to take place in accordance with state laws regulating religious affairs and the reincarnation of living buddhas. The statement said the 14th Dalai Lama’s own selection had been reported to the government for approval. Authorities continued in state media to justify interference with Tibetan Buddhist monasteries by associating the monasteries with “separatism” and pro-independence activities.

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

The PRC continued to tightly restrict diplomatic access to the TAR and deny the U.S. embassy in Beijing and the then-open consulate in Chengdu requests to visit the area. No U.S. diplomats were allowed to visit the TAR during the year. The outbreak of COVID-19 in January led to country-wide restrictions on travel within the PRC and entry into the PRC, which also affected the ability of foreign diplomats, journalists, and tourists to travel to the TAR and other Tibetan areas. U.S. officials repeatedly raised concerns about religious freedom in Tibet with Chinese government counterparts at multiple levels. U.S. officials, including the Secretary of State, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, Ambassador to China, and other embassy officers 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. officials underscored that decisions on the succession of the Dalai Lama should be made solely by faith leaders and raised concerns about the continued disappearance of Panchen Lama Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, missing since 1995. On July 7, the Secretary of State announced the United States was imposing visa restrictions on PRC government and CCP officials that it had determined to be “substantially involved in the formulation or execution of policies related to access for foreigners to Tibetan areas,” pursuant to the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2018. In November, Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) President Lobsang Sangay met in Washington, D.C. with the U.S. Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues. On December 27, the President signed into law the Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020. The law states in part that decisions regarding the selection, education, and veneration of Tibetan Buddhist religious leaders are exclusively spiritual matters that should be made by the appropriate religious authorities. The embassy and consulates used social media to deliver direct messaging about religious freedom in Tibet to millions of Chinese citizens.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to official data from the 2018 estimate of the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the total population of the TAR is 3,371,500, of which Tibetans make up approximately 90 percent. 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, most 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 majority of ethnic Tibetans in the People’s Republic of China live in the TAR, Tibetan autonomous prefectures (TAPs), and counties in Sichuan, Qinghai, Yunnan, and Gansu provinces. The PRC constitution, which cites the leadership of the CCP and the guidance of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping 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 the 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.

CCP 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).

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 (a tenet of Tibetan Buddhism), and that these administrative entities must approve reincarnations. The UFWD claims 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 CCP maintains a registry of officially recognized reincarnate lamas.

Regulations issued by the UFWD allow only Chinese citizens to take part in officially approved religious practices; these regulations assert CCP control over all aspects of religions, 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 CCP 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 who provide facilities for unauthorized religious activities, and restrict contact with overseas religious institutions. The regulations require religious groups to seek approval to travel abroad and prohibit “accepting domination by external forces,” which authorities say include Tibetans in exile, particularly the Dalai Lama. 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 Propaganda Department of the CCP Central Committee.

The regulations also require that religious activity “must not harm national security.” While the regulations stipulate that religious groups must 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 must be approved by the provincial UFWD.

Children younger than the age of 18 are prohibited from participating in religious activities and receiving religious education, even in schools run by religious organizations. Enforcement and implementation of these rules vary widely across and within regions. One regulation states that no individual may use religion to hinder the national education system and that no religious activities may be held in schools. These regulations have effectively barred Tibetan youth from entering monasteries prior to reaching 18 years of age.

On January 11, the government adopted the “Regulations on the Establishment of a Model Area for Ethnic Unity and Progress in the Tibet Autonomous Region.” These require “equal opportunities” for non-Tibetan ethnic groups at all levels of government and in schools, private business companies, religious centers and the military in the TAR.

A government policy introduced in 2018 requires Tibetan monks and nuns to undergo political training in CCP ideology. Monks and nuns must not only demonstrate competence in religious studies, but they must also show “political reliability,” “moral integrity capable of impressing the public,” and a willingness to “play an active role at critical moments.”

Self-immolation (setting oneself on fire as a form of protest) 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 local UFWD, 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 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 CCP 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 the TAR CCP Committee to take up religious orders and the 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 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: The Three-Self Patriotic Movement (Protestant), the

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

The government continued carrying out its 2019-2024 five-year plan to Sinicize all religious groups in China by emphasizing loyalty to the CCP and the state. The plan included Tibetan Buddhism, with the involvement of the state-run BAC. The CCP's Administrative Measures for Religious Organizations regulation, released in February, further formalized the administrative procedures for Sinicizing all religions, including Tibetan Buddhism. Article 17 stated that religious organizations shall “follow the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, abide by laws, regulations, rules and policies, correctly handle the relationship between national law and canon, and enhance national awareness, awareness of the rule of law, and citizenship.”

Human rights groups and media reported that during a high-level meeting in Beijing held August 29-30, President Xi announced plans to intensify efforts to Sinicize Tibetan Buddhism and the “reeducation” of Tibetans. According to the government media outlet *Xinhua*, “Xi stressed that patriotism should be incorporated into the whole process of education in all schools. He called for continuous efforts to enhance recognition of the great motherland, the Chinese nation, the Chinese culture, the [CCP], and socialism with Chinese characteristics by people of all ethnic groups. Tibetan Buddhism should be guided in adapting to the socialist society and should be developed in the Chinese context, Xi said.”

During President Xi's remarks at the Seventh Tibet Work Forum in September, he stressed the PRC should help guide Tibetan Buddhism “to adapt to the socialist society and promote the Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism.” Many Tibetan organizations condemned Xi's remarks, including the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW), which said, “Xi's campaign of Sinicization is a model of anti-rights policies, especially as far as religious freedom is concerned.”

Human rights groups stated authorities used the “Regulations on the Establishment of a Model Area for Ethnic Unity and Progress in the Tibet Autonomous Region” that were adopted in January to further impose central government control and Han culture on the Tibetan population and to encourage Tibetans to become informants on each other. The NGO International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) stated, “The regulations reflect the culmination of Chinese Chairman Xi Jinping's focus on consolidating power in the party and eliminating threats, as well as the ideas of a new generation of ethnic policy thinkers who advocate for the dilution of ethnic difference. These thinkers seek to force the assimilation of Tibetans and therefore further undermine Tibetans' inherent freedom to preserve their unique culture, religion and way of life.”

On September 28, the NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) published a report entitled *In Prison for their Faith 2020*. In the report, HRWF stated, “Due to [the] strong link to the Dalai Lama, the CCP considers religious beliefs in Tibet to be intrinsically opposed to socialism and the Chinese state. As a result, the CCP suppresses their Tibetan Buddhist religious identity, including any association with the Dalai Lama. Instead, the aim is to establish Buddhism with so-called Chinese characteristics and without Tibetan characteristics, in line with Chinese socialism. The religious laws in place allow for this state intervention into religious affairs since religious activities must align with political goals to safeguard ethnic unity and preserve socialism.” HRWF stated the CCP “seeks to gain maximum control over every aspect of societal activities that it considers a threat to its legitimacy, by using any means possible. Although the Chinese Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, the CCP's objective is to control the lives of all Buddhists, their temples and their institutions.” According to HRWF, every monastery and nunnery had an official state-imposed management committee that was involved in the internal decision-making process of that institution. In its report, HRWF stated, “It is the politicisation of Buddhism that drives the persecution of Buddhists in Tibet.”

In October, HRW reported a herder named Lhamo from Driru County, Nagechu Prefecture, died in August in a hospital where police sent her for treatment of injuries she suffered while in police custody. Sources said police detained Lhamo and her cousin, Tenzin Tharpa, in June on charges of sending money to family members and other Tibetans in India. According to HRW, Lhamo was in good health prior to her arrest, but when family members were summoned to the hospital, they found her badly bruised and unable to speak. Konchog Rinchen, a Tibetan living in exile, told *Radio Free Asia* (RFA), “Her family believes her death was caused by severe torture she suffered in custody.” Rinchen said the family wanted to perform traditional funeral ceremonies, but authorities forced them to cremate the body immediately. HRW noted the cremation also prevented Lhamo's family from obtaining an autopsy.

There were no reported cases during the year of Tibetans self-immolating as a means of protesting against government policies, compared with one individual in 2019. According to the ICT, from 2009 to December 2019, 156 Tibetans 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. 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 family were reportedly abducted. Media reported that on May 19, Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said Nyima “received free compulsory education when he was a child, passed the college entrance examination, and now has a job.” Zhao said neither Nyima nor his family wished to be disturbed in their “current normal lives.” 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 31st birthday. Advocacy groups called on the government to release him and allow him to resume his religious duties.

In September, Tenzin Dhadon, a member of the UN and Human Rights Desk staff of the CTA (the Tibetan government in exile in Dharamsala, India) stated, “Chinese authorities disappearing and secretly sentencing Tibetans are their key political tool in suppressing the Tibetan dissent in Tibet. The Chinese government has been practicing enforced disappearances by detaining incommunicado Tibetans deemed a threat to PRC’s unity and stability.”

Media reported that on December 2, authorities arrested Tibetan writer and poet Gendun Lhundrup in Rebkong (Chinese: Tongren) County, Malho (Huangnan) TAP, Qinghai Province. Lhundrup, a former monk, was a proponent of preserving Tibetan culture and language, and he released an anthology of poems entitled *Khorwa* (cycle of repeated birth) in October. He also contributed to a website called Waseng-drak that promotes freedom of expression for writers and artists. His whereabouts were unknown at year’s end.

In December, the ICT issued a statement calling for the release of Rinchen Tsultrim, a Bon monk whom authorities continued to hold incommunicado following his arrest in August 2019 for “suspected incitement to split the country.” According to the ICT, police originally took Tsultrim into custody in Barma (Waerma) Township, Ngaba County, Sichuan Province for “peacefully expressing his thoughts on a range of Tibetan political, social and culture issues” on WeChat. The ICT stated it was concerned Tsultrim might be tortured while in custody.

Sources reported that the whereabouts of several monks remained unknown. These included Dorje Rabten, who in September 2018 protested against government policies restricting young people from becoming monks; Tenzin Gelek, who had protested Dorje’s detention; Lobsang Thamke, who was arrested in 2018 and sentenced on July 30 to four years in prison on unknown charges; Lobsang Dorje, who was arrested in August 2018; and Thubpa, whom police took from the Trotsik Monastery in Ngaba County, Sichuan Province, toward the end of 2017.

Sources told media that authorities routinely abused Tibetan prisoners. In May, a Tibetan former political prisoner told RFA, “Living conditions in Chinese prisons are extremely poor. Especially while inmates are being pressed to confess under questioning, interrogators use extreme violence against them that is beyond anyone’s imagining.”

Sources told RFA many monks and nuns who were evicted from Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute were placed in internment camps, where treatment of detainees was poor. RFA reported that an unnamed nun who had been expelled from Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute in 2019 and held at an internment camp in Sichuan Province committed suicide in February at the camp due to the harsh conditions. According to a source, “She was defiant of the political reeducation in the camp and always protested against the Chinese officials’ instruction and education, which often resulted in her being beaten.”

There were multiple reports of individuals who had been released dying as a result of illnesses and injuries suffered following beatings and mistreatment during incarceration. In August, RFA reported that authorities released a woman named Dolkar due to failing health after 15 months’ incarceration. She was convicted in May 2019 of telling others that her nephew publicly called for the release of the Panchen Lama. Sources told RFA, “While she was in prison, she was tortured and made to lift heavy stones and do other hard work, and her body is all bruised. Because she was not able to get treatment on time, her limbs are crippled, and she is now immobilized.”

Media reported that Gendun Sherab, a Tibetan monk arrested in 2017 and charged with sharing politically sensitive materials on social media, died in April shortly after being released. According to a source, authorities had charged Sherab with “sharing and disseminating politically sensitive documents on WeChat and social media.” He had shared a letter from the Dalai Lama on WeChat that recognized the reincarnation of religious figure Choedon Rinpoche, from Sera Je Lhopa Khantsen. The source said that during his incarceration, Sherab’s health deteriorated due to beatings, torture, and poor prison conditions, while authorities denied him medical treatment. The source said, “The torture was so bad that he could not even move his body and was unable to speak. They only let him go because it was pretty clear he was about to die.” Before his arrest, Gendun had been expelled from Rongpo Rabten Monastery in Sog County, TAR, for holding what the source said were controversial political views.

Tibetan Review reported that in May, Choekyi, a former monk, died at home in Serthar (Seda) County, Sichuan Province, after authorities denied him permission to travel to a hospital in Lhasa to be treated for damage to his liver and kidneys suffered as a result of torture during his incarceration from 2015 to 2019. According to *Tibetan Review*, Choekyi had been jailed in 2015 in Sichuan’s Mianyang Prison for making a T-shirt that celebrated the 80th birthday of the Dalai Lama.

The India-based Tibetan media outlet *Phayul* reported that in February, Samdup, a former monk from Drepung Monastery in TAR, died of diabetes-related complications linked to his seven-year incarceration. Authorities had arrested Samdup for taking part in peaceful protests in 1992 and had not allowed him to return to his monastery after his release.

RFA reported that Tsering Bagdro, a former monk at the Ganden Monastery, died on April 26 in Maldro Gongkar (Mozhugongka) County, near Lhasa. A source told RFA, “His untimely death is certainly related to the physical torture and suffering he endured while he was in prison.” Authorities had arrested Bagdro and others in 1992 for demonstrating in Lhasa for Tibetan independence and carrying the Tibetan flag. He was released in 2000. One source said, “During his time in prison, he experienced physical torture and psychological trauma like the other political prisoners held there.... He was not really free even after his release, though. Like other former political prisoners, he lived under constant surveillance by the Chinese authorities, and his movements, activities, and speech were restricted.”

In September, the Jamestown Foundation published a report entitled *Xinjiang’s System of Militarized Vocational Training Comes to Tibet*. The report noted that government documents indicated TAR authorities had launched a large-scale and aggressive “reeducation” or “vocational training” campaign to transform farmers and herders into laborers. The report also stated the vocational training process required “diluting the negative influence of religion.” Satellite imagery from 2018 showed that facilities built for “reeducation” purposes included high walls and large-scale, barracks-style buildings. According to the report and human rights advocates, the government claimed the campaign was aimed at poverty alleviation, but there was evidence that farmers and herders were forced to participate in the program and were then subjected to coercive labor practices. According to the report, CCP documents showed these programs used “military drill and military-style training to produce discipline and obedience; emphasize the need to ‘transform’ laborers’ thinking and identity, and to reform their ‘backwardness’; teach law and Chinese; aim to weaken the perceived negative influence of religion; prescribe detailed quotas; and put great pressure on officials to achieve program goals.” The report stated, “While some documents assert that the [training and labor assignment] scheme is predicated on voluntary participation, the overall evidence indicates the systemic presence of numerous coercive elements.”

The report stated there was evidence that internment camps in the region were increasingly transitioning from political indoctrination to labor training facilities, with detainees being sent to other regions within the TAR, as well as to other parts of the country, to work in low-skilled jobs that included road construction, cleaning, mining, cooking, and driving as part of so-called labor transfer programs. In September, RFA reported Tibetans were also being forced to work in cotton and textile factories.

Limited access to information and travel restrictions, due both to government policies limiting access to Tibetan areas and to the COVID-19 pandemic, 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.

In its report *In Prison for Their Faith*, HRWF stated “It is common for Buddhists to be imprisoned with no official criminal charges or convictions. Instead, they often face vague accusations such as: ‘possession of banned photos of the Dalai Lama’, ‘praying to the Dalai Lama’, ‘found with books and religious audio recordings of the Dalai Lama’, ‘taking part in birthday celebrations of the Tibetan spiritual leader’, ‘inciting self-immolation and sending information on self-immolations abroad’, and ‘leading a conspicuous protest in public against the law of the land, calling for the release of a Tibetan spiritual leader.’ These accusations have no legal basis in the Constitution or the Penal Code and are often related to the Dalai Lama. As the Dalai Lama is considered to be a ‘splittist’ by the CCP, any affiliation with him is seen as against the communist state.”

In July, authorities sentenced lyricist Khadro Tseten and singer Tsego to seven years and three years in prison, respectively, for “subversion of state power” and “leaking state secrets” after they composed and circulated a song praising the Dalai Lama on social media.

Sources told media that officials handed down long prison sentences to writers, singers, and artists for promoting Tibetan national identity and culture. The NGO Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) reported that in June, authorities sentenced Tibetan singer Lhundrub Drakpa to six years in prison for performing the song “Black Hat,” which denounced years of repressive policies and practices. Authorities arrested Drakpa two months after “Black Hat” debuted and held him in pretrial detention for one year with no access to legal representation.

According to multiple sources, political prisoners, particularly monks and nuns, often were forced to perform patriotic songs and dances praising the CCP and to watch propaganda films. If participants seemed uninterested, authorities considered it evidence of disloyalty to the state and subjected them to severe punishment, including beatings, and refused them permission to receive gifts of food or clothing from visiting family members.

In September, *Tibet.net*, the news outlet of the CTA, reported that according to official sources, in September, authorities released Phagba Kyab, whom the CTA described as a Tibetan political prisoner, in Khanlo TAP, Gansu Province. Authorities had arrested Kyab in 2012 and had held him for more than eight years in a Chinese prison for his involvement in the case of a Tibetan who self-immolated in 2012. According to local sources, during a series of interrogations, authorities beat him, deprived him of sleep and food, and told Kyab to denounce the Dalai Lama. Following his release, he was forbidden to travel outside his home village.

The NGO Dui Hua reported that from June to August, the Kardze (Ganzi) TAP Intermediate People’s Court in Sichuan Province convicted nine individuals of “inciting splittism.”

According to Dui Hua’s political prisoner database, at year’s end there were 1,008 known cases of Tibetans detained due to “ethnic minority activism.” It was unclear how many of these cases were connected to religion, but often charges contained vague references to political or religious activities. Observers 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 continued to report extensions of pretrial detention periods were common for Tibetans accused of engaging in prohibited political activities or threatening national security, 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 and human rights groups 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 January, authorities charged 12 villagers from Sog County, Nagqu Prefecture, TAR, for running a “criminal gang.” Court documents stated these individuals had disseminated “negative religious influences” throughout their village.

Sources told *tibet.net* that from November 2019 through January, officials in Dze Mey Township, Kardze TAP, Sichuan Province, arrested nearly 30 persons, including monks from the Dza Wonpo Ganden Shedrub Monastery, on a variety of charges, including scattering pro-independence leaflets in front of a government building, using social media, displaying pictures of the Dalai Lama, and having contact with individuals outside of Tibet. Sources said authorities held the detainees for more than a month. The detainees were fed only barley flour and attended political reeducation classes for two weeks. One source told RFA that following the arrests, Chinese police patrolled the streets in Wonpo Township and other nearby townships, conducted mobile phone searches and interrogations, and extracted forced confessions.

RFA reported that in January and February, authorities detained seven Tibetans in Chamdo (Changdu) Prefecture, TAR, and charged them with “spreading rumors” about the spread of COVID-19. Tengchen County authorities punished a man identified as “Tse” for posting messages to WeChat asking readers to recite prayers 10 times in order to protect themselves against the virus. Tse also requested that readers share the post with their friends and families. Local authorities held him in administrative detention for seven days for positing information that did not comply with laws and regulations.

Media reported that sources said on or about December 30, 2019, police in Dzogang (Zuogong) County, Chamdo Prefecture, TAR, arrested 75-year-old Jampa Dorje and his son for listening to recordings of the Dalai Lama’s teachings on a mobile phone and for communicating with Dorje’s daughters living in exile in India. A source said authorities subsequently released them after recording the phone numbers on their phones and forcing them to sign a document stating they would not communicate with the women or listen to recordings of the Dalai Lama again.

The NGO Free Tibet reported that in February, authorities released a man named Chochok, a monk at the village monastery in Zamey Wonpo, Serchul County, Kardze TAP, Sichuan Province, after imprisoning him for two years for a message he posted on WeChat in which he used the picture of Konpe, a Tibetan monk who self-immolated in December 2017, as the background.

RFA reported that on December 14, the Golog People’s Intermediate Court in Qinghai Province sentenced Lhundup Dorje, a nomad, to one year in prison, followed by one year of probation, for promoting “separatism.” According to a source, in 2019 Dorje posted a New Year’s greeting message to the CTA on his Weibo account and a 10-second video clip of teachings by the Dalai Lama. The source said that on March 11, he posted slogans calling for Tibetan independence, and that on May 3, Dorje posted a picture of the Dalai Lama as a young man, “along with praises and compliments to him.” According to the source, these postings were viewed on social media at least 2,383 times, and all were listed separately in the indictment against Dorje.

Media reported that in late March or early April, authorities released a shopkeeper named Sonam Dhargyal from prison. According to sources, Ngaba County police had arrested Dhargyal in 2015, two months after he attended the Monlam prayer festival at Ngatog Goman monastery, where he carried a blue religious flag showing a world peace symbol and a color photograph of the Dalai Lama with two other prominent Tibetan figures.

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 between 2016 and 2019, 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.

In October, *India.com* reported that authorities destroyed large portions of the Larung Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute. Accompanying the article were before-and-after photographs of each institute showing large areas where structures had been demolished. Media and local sources stated that during the year, authorities completed demolition of many structures at both Larung Gar and Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institutes, and that authorities encouraged Han Chinese to visit the sites as tourists or to move there.

During the year, the government reportedly 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 that 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 continued to view such measures as CCP and government efforts to dilute religious belief and weaken the ties between monasteries and communities.

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. 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 and preventing monks from traveling to villages for politically sensitive events and religious ceremonies. Religious figures and laypersons frequently reported difficulty traveling to monasteries outside their home regions, both within the TAR and in other parts of the country. Travelers said they encountered 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. 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 monasteries after 2008 protests in Lhasa and other areas, such as Ngaba, had not returned, some because of government prohibitions.

According to sources, PRC authorities, citing COVID-19 concerns, continued to restrict many major monasteries across the Tibetan Plateau from holding large scale religious events. Many of these sources said officials were using pandemic restrictions to prevent individuals from participating in religious activities. In March, ICT reported that authorities cancelled public religious festivals and prayer ceremonies for Losar (Tibetan New Year) in February, citing COVID-19 restrictions.

On April 17, ICT reported that in similar notifications, dated April 14 and 15, respectively, Samye and Yasang Monasteries in Lhokha (Shannan) Prefecture, TAR announced they were closed as “per circular from higher authorities, and in accordance with the need of work relating to the prevention of the infectious coronavirus.” According to ICT, “These announcements are surprising, as China claims that there were no newly confirmed or suspected cases for 78 consecutive days in the TAR.” ICT stated the PRC, “to bolster its image internationally and indicate a sense of normalcy after the coronavirus crisis,” announced on March 30 that some monasteries in Lhasa would reopen, but with restrictions.

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 85th 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.

A source told RFA that officials visited monasteries in Sichuan and Qinghai Provinces and parts of Kanlho (Gannan) TAP, Gansu Province, warning staff not to host “outside visitors” on the Dalai Lama’s birthday. In Kardze Prefecture, Sichuan Province, a government group led by Wang Shu Yin, a CCP official and head of the local police department, inspected Ganden Phuntsok Ling Monastery in Rongdrag (Danba) County on July 5. The source said that during their tour, the Chinese officials “urged the residents to become ‘exemplary and patriotic’ monks and watch out for any outside visitors in the area and in the monastery itself. The officials urged the monks to report any suspicious persons to the local government or police department.”

In May, *Asianews.it* reported authorities banned Tibetan students and civil servants from participating in religious events during Saga Dawa, the month-long festival that marks the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment, and death. Sources said authorities threatened there would be “serious consequences” for individuals who defied the ban. Authorities intensified surveillance of and restrictions on access to the Jokhang Temple complex on the fifteenth day of Saga Dawa, the holiest day of the month. Free Tibet reported, “The residents of Lhasa have been watched carefully by the local police, military personnel and officers dressed in civilian clothes. The offering sites at the temple and the circumambulation areas were packed with these police officers patrolling around. Tibetans who intended to go to the temple to carry out circumambulations and make offerings were stopped and their mobile phones were checked, reportedly making some of them feel anxious.”

According to local sources, security forces continued to block access to and from important monasteries during politically sensitive events and religious anniversaries. Police maintained heavy security during the Shoton festival held from August 15-25 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.

In August, the NGO Tibet Watch reported authorities barred Tibetan government workers, school children, and retirees from entering the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa, considered the most sacred temple in Tibet, while an increasing number of Chinese tourists were allowed in during the year. A source told Tibet Watch the Chinese tourists did not respect sacred Buddhist spaces. The source said, “The Chinese visitors smoke in holy sites like the central Barkhor area and the Potala Palace. They litter the ground with empty bottles and throw waste everywhere.”

In August, the government again banned the annual Dechen Shedrub prayer festival from occurring at the Larung Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute. Authorities cited overcrowding and COVID-19 concerns as reasons for the ban. The ban marked the fifth consecutive year the government prohibited the 22-year-old festival from taking place.

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

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.

According to human rights groups and local sources, authorities continued to install overt camera surveillance systems at monasteries. RFA reported in October that authorities had opened “security centers,” or convenience police stations, throughout Lhasa. RFA described the security centers’ role as “subverting local indigenous populations through surveillance.”

According to multiple sources in Ngaba County, Sichuan Province, officials there 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.

The report *Xinjiang’s System of Militarized Vocational Training Comes to Tibet* stated that the government employed “grid management” and a “double-linked household” system to surveil and control communities. Under the grid management system, neighborhoods and communities were divided into smaller units with dedicated administrative and security staff who maintained detailed databases on everyone living in that grid. The “double-linked household” system “corrals regular citizens into the state’s extensive surveillance apparatus by making sets of 10 ‘double-linked’ households report on each other.”

According to human rights groups and media sources, authorities frequently checked mobile phones for pictures of the Dalai Lama and other content that was considered sensitive. There were reports that authorities surveilled ordinary Tibetans for years after finding such material. In May, RFA reported authorities continued to surveil a walnut seller named Jampa Sonam eight years after police arrested him for a photograph of the Dalai Lama they found on his mobile phone in a random search. A Tibetan living in exile told RFA, “Now, whenever Jampa Sonam needs to go outside his place of residence, he needs to ask permission from the Chinese authorities, first at the village and then at the township level. Thus, he has remained in a virtual prison for the last eight years.”

In a March report entitled *Repressed, Removed, Re-Educated: The stranglehold on religious life in China*, the NGO CSW (formerly Christian Solidarity Worldwide) reported the presence of military surveillance and armed police in riot gear at monasteries during religious occasions such as prayer days. CSW wrote “religious ceremonies can resemble military exercises.”

Sources stated authorities forced monasteries to display portraits of CCP leaders and the national flag.

In April, Free Tibet reported authorities expanded the requirement that families replace images of the Dalai Lama and other lamas with portraits of preeminent CCP leaders, including Chairman Mao and President Xi, in their homes. Previously, this policy was only compulsory for families that were dependent on state support under the poverty alleviation program. According to Tibet Watch’s sources, authorities in the region stated that, in order to “remember the gratitude of the party and in the spirit of following the party, all households, monasteries, schools and offices must display the portrait of top party leaders.” As part of the program, authorities across Tibet gathered villagers together and distributed images of party leaders for them to hang on their walls or altars. Authorities also distributed images to be hung in schools, monasteries, and offices. Sources said authorities conducted inspections of each household to check for compliance. Tibet Watch reported an estimated 14,000 images of President Xi and other CCP leaders were distributed.

In June, RFA reported authorities ordered that prayer flags and the flagpoles from which they hung be taken down in TAR villages as part of what sources said the government called an “environmental cleanup drive” and “behavioral reform” program. One source said this was “an act of contempt and utter disregard for local Tibetans’ customs and faith.” In June, *Bitter Winter*, an online publication that tracks religious liberty and human rights abuses in China, reported TAR officials embarked on a campaign to remove Tibetan prayer flags from hilltops and villages. *Bitter Winter* stated the CCP “is trying to destroy Tibetan religion and culture, leaving only a ‘Disneyfied’ version for the benefit of naive tourists.”

According to HRW, 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 *kora* 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 the potential loss of pensions and social benefits.

The CCP reportedly 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.

According to *The Diplomat*, on April 1, officials used bulldozers to demolish a building under construction that was to house 16 monks at Langdi Monastery in Markham County, Chamdo Prefecture, TAR. The building was reportedly built by the local community in traditional Tibetan style. The abbot of the monastery appealed against the demolition, but he was beaten. Authorities threatened to imprison him and two other monks. According to *The Diplomat*, photographs taken prior to the demolition showed two Chinese flags displayed on the main building, with Tibetan prayer flags beside them. *The Diplomat* reported, “Now the monastery is empty, as all the [20] monks were compelled to leave.”

Sources reported that authorities destroyed Tibetan religious sites outside the TAR. According to *Bitter Winter*, in July, the local government demolished the Fuyan Temple, a 1,000-year-old Tibetan Buddhist Temple in Jinzhong City, Shanxi Province, and expelled the monks. The Fuyan Temple was a popular tourist attraction, but in November 2019, local authorities ordered the removal of Tibetan prayer flags and two statues of Buddha. Accompanying the article were “before” photographs that showed the temple, which contained both Tibetan and Chinese architectural styles, and “after” images of the barren field where the temple had stood. According to an eyewitness, prior to bulldozing the temple, police, urban management officers, and village officials had broken some statues, looking for valuables inside them, and taken away all mahogany tables and chairs.

Media and NGOs reported that in April, authorities began erecting two Chinese-style pagodas in front of the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa, a UNESCO World Heritage Site originally built in 652 that is generally considered to be the most sacred temple in Tibet. In February 2018, a fire had damaged the temple complex, and the government started renovations that included laying pipes under the square in front of the temple that were aimed at improving security and firefighting facilities at the complex. ICT said the alterations appeared to be incompatible with traditional Tibetan architecture. In October, RFA reported the construction was completed in August but that the square in front of the temple remained closed to worshippers. One source told RFA the square was surrounded by fencing that barred entry to devotees. The source said, “The pilgrims have nowhere to prostrate and worship, and only Chinese police and Chinese visitors can come inside the fenced enclosure. You don’t see any activities by Tibetan Buddhist devotees.”

In addition to the prohibition on the open veneration of the Dalai Lama, including the display of his photograph, the government continued also to ban pictures of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, whom the Dalai Lama and nearly all Tibetan Buddhists recognize as the 11th Panchen Lama. In some counties of the TAR, punishments for displaying images of the Dalai Lama included expulsion from monasteries. Local sources told RFA that officials from government bureaus monitoring religious practice visited Tibetan schools and warned teachers and students not to keep or display photographs of the Dalai Lama.

Local sources reported that “The 20 Prohibitions” were still in force. These regulations, instituted in the TAR in 2019, forbade 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.

Authorities increased the surveillance of and efforts to restrict access to WeChat and other social media. In May, HRW stated that a TAR official from Lhasa said, “The government monitors the WeChat and social media activity of monks even more strictly than that of ordinary citizens.” In June, *Tibetan Review* reported that according to Free Tibet, TAR officials also blocked the WeChat accounts of monks and nuns living outside the PRC. According to Tibet Watch, these measures were designed to restrict and control communication between Tibetan monks living abroad and friends and family inside Tibet. According to Tibet Watch, TAR officials investigated 4,000 to 5,000 Tibetan households with family ties to exiles living in Nepal and India.

In December, TCHRD reported that on November 24, Chinese internet police in the TAR again announced criminal prosecutions against individuals who used online communication tools to “split the country” and “undermine national unity.” The notice listed a range of illegal online activities, such as using virtual private networks (VPNs) and joining discussion groups. The notice said authorities would “strike hard” against offenders “in accordance with law.” TCHRD stated that in February 2019, authorities had released a similar notice that criminalized online activities that purported to “collect, produce, download, store, publish, disseminate, and publicize malicious attacks against the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese government, the socialist system, the regional ethnic autonomy system, and the party and the government’s policy of managing TAR.” The 2019 notice offered rewards of up to 300,000 renminbi (RMB) (\$45,900) for information regarding violators of the policy.

According to HRW, in anticipation of National Uprising Month in March (which commemorates the 1959 Lhasa uprising and large riots in 2008 protesting Beijing’s rule over Tibet), the PRC increased its censorship and security posture in Lhasa to deter any public gatherings or displays of support for the Dalai Lama. HRW reported the PRC staged mass rallies in Lhasa and other provincial cities on March 7. In Lhasa, thousands of armed police and other security forces from across the region gathered to “pledge” loyalty to the party and its political objective of “comprehensive, long-term stability.” Ding Yexen, head of the TAR Stability Maintenance Command, addressed the police, calling on them to “intimidate and terrify hostile forces and splittist forces, giving them nowhere to hide.” This was followed by a parade of armored vehicles and military equipment through the city.

Multiple sources reported the government continued to interfere in the religious education of laypersons and children. According to *Bitter Winter*, during the Seventh Tibet Work Forum organized by the CCP Central Committee on August 28 and 29, President Xi said the CCP should build a “new modern socialist Tibet that is united” and that this would be achieved through school reforms that “plant the seeds of loving China deep in the heart of every youth.” Authorities in the TAR required monks to cancel all classes with children, warning that monks and parents could have their social security benefits restricted or be detained if classes continued. The ban on religious education was also implemented in some places outside of the TAR.

A source told *Bitter Winter* that one of the government’s strategies to Sinicize Tibet was to send high performing students from Tibetan areas to other parts of the country to expose them to Han culture and Mandarin so that these students could become “reliable successors who will build Tibet and guard borders, [and] shoulder the great mission of ethnic unity.” The students were required to live with Han families with “strong political views and [the] correct ethnic minority outlook.” Host families were instructed to “pay attention to students’ spiritual growth” and to educate them with “correct” views that conformed to CCP ideology. Discussing Tibetan Buddhism and other “sensitive topics” was strictly forbidden in Han homes and in schools. A Tibetan college student studying in Qinghai Province told *Bitter Winter* that students who were found to possess images of the Dalai Lama on their computers were subject to academic probation and other punishments for “being anti-Communist” or “having ideological problems.” The student said this might affect their studies, graduation, and future employment. The student said, “No one dares to touch the topics of religion.”

In September, RFA reported authorities closed primary schools in several towns in Rebkong County, Qinghai Province and forced the students to attend boarding schools in other regions of the country against the wishes of their parents. A source told RFA that police suppressed a protest by parents using police vehicles and blaring sirens and took one protester into custody. Authorities merged two middle schools in Themchen (Tianjun) County, Qinghai Province and changed the curriculum so that only the Tibetan-language class was taught in Tibetan, while all other subjects were taught in Mandarin.

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

Local sources stated authorities in the TAR and some areas in Sichuan Province continued to prohibit Tibetan students from undertaking long-distance travel to other parts of the country during their two-month winter break. It was the fourth consecutive year authorities had implemented such restrictions. Tibetan rights advocates said the prohibition was an effort by authorities to stop parents from taking their children to visit temples outside the capital during the break.

During September testimony before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China in Washington, DC, Zeekgyab Rinpoche, Abbot of Tashi Lhunpo Monastery, which serves as the traditional seat of the Panchen Lama, said, “The Chinese government interferes and intervenes in the functioning of the monastic education system by imposing restrictions on our monks and nuns. Even in schools, we see this malign design to wipe out our unique identity in the form of restructuring the curriculum and banning the learning of Tibetan language.”

The government continued to insist that Gyaltsen 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. 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 Norbu.

In accordance with official guidelines for monastery management, 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, continued instead to be 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 progovernment 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.

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.” The Dalai Lama was reportedly not on the list.

According to sources, “Every single individual now on the official reincarnation database has to go through an entire political procedure, entirely separate to 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 the declining numbers of young monks. Religious leaders and scholars continued to say these and other means of interference continued to cause them concern about the ability of religious traditions to survive for successive generations. In a June letter about the continued enforced disappearance of the Panchen Lama, three UN special rapporteurs, including the special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and representatives of two UN working groups, wrote, “Many Tibetan Buddhists have expressed their concerns about the regulation of reincarnation as it undermines the Tibetan religious traditions and practices while such regulation allow the State to interfere in the choice of their religious leaders.”

The government continued to require 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 in 2018, many major monasteries and religious institutes have implemented political training programs.

According to media 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 President Xi’s speeches, learn Mandarin, and hear lectures praising the leadership of the CCP and the socialist system.

According to the government media outlet *China Tibet Net*, from November 6 to 14, 168 Tibetan Buddhists in Lhasa attended training sessions on the constitution, religious affairs regulations, cybersecurity laws, and other subjects. Sources stated that 26 Buddhist nuns in Lhatse County of Shigatse (Xigaze) City, TAR, completed a similar training session. One participant, Luosang Taba, Executive Deputy Director of the Kangma Temple Management Committee in Dangxiong County, said that after the training he had “the determination and confidence to take the lead in educating and guiding the monks and religious believers to firmly support the leadership of the party, adhere to the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, take a clear-cut stand against division, safeguard the unity of the motherland, [and] strengthen national unity.”

According to Tibet Watch, on May 1, the Department of Justice and the TAR Religious Affairs Bureau conducted online training for more than 30,000 monks and nuns in “popularization activities” that included lessons on the constitution, national security law, antiterrorism law, and cyber security law.

Authorities continued to ban minors younger than 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, were beaten by police, and that parents and other family members were also threatened with loss of social benefits if underage monks did not comply.

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 March, TAR Communist Party Secretary Wu Yingjie publicly criticized the Dalai Lama’s “reactionary” nature and called on all Tibetans to strictly adhere to the CCP’s “guiding principles.” In July, Wu publicly called on security officials to crack down on the “Dalai Lama clique’s infiltration and destructive activities” and to “educate the masses to draw a clear line between them and the Dalai Lama.”

Tibet Watch reported that from July 6 to 8, Wang Yang, chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, toured monasteries, nomadic areas, and sites of relocated settlements in and around the cities of Lhasa and Shigatse. During the inspections, he reportedly said, “Tibetan religion is tied to the long term stability of Tibet, primary effort should be made on integrating Buddhism into China’s socialist society, and religious activities and monasteries should be strictly managed according to the law.” He also said laws of the state “are above religion. Tibetans should resolutely fight against the force of separatism... Training of model individuals and monks and promotion of patriotism should continue.”

In comments broadcast on CCTV on July 9, Wang said leaders needed to “thoroughly study and comprehend Xi Jinping’s ideas on Tibet and the CCP’s strategy for governing Tibet in the new era.” Wang said it was necessary to focus on improving the level of Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism.

The government outlet *Chinese Communist Party News* reported that at a province-level party meeting on September 2, TAR Party Secretary Wu vowed to “eliminate the negative religious influence of the 14th Dalai Lama” in order to implement the CCP Central Committee’s Tibet policy.

The Standing Committee of the Tibetan People’s Congress issued a statement in December that said, “Living Buddha reincarnation is a unique way of inheritance of Tibetan Buddhism, with fixed religious rituals and historical customization. The Chinese government has promulgated the ‘Regulations on Religious Affairs’ and the ‘Administrative Measures for the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas of Tibetan Buddhism’ to respect and protect the inheritance method of Tibetan Buddhism.” The statement, which was published in response to passage of the U.S. Tibet Policy and Support Act of 2020, said the 14th Dalai Lama’s own selection had been reported to Chinese authorities for approval.

Authorities continued to justify in state media the interference with Tibetan Buddhist monasteries by associating the monasteries with “separatism” and pro-independence activities.

During the year, there were no reports that the Boundary Management System Agreement signed by the PRC and the government of Nepal in 2019 had been used to return long-staying Tibetan refugees to the PRC from Nepal. Tibetan advocacy groups had stated when the agreement was signed that the provision that would require both countries to hand over citizens who illegally crossed the Nepal-China border 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 as the “gentlemen’s agreement” with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees which provides for Tibetan refugees in Nepal’s custody to transit to India.

Many Tibetans, including monks, nuns, and laypersons, reported continued difficulties traveling to India for religious training, meetings with religious leaders, or to visit family members living in 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 said they could only obtain passports after promising not to travel to India or not 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 travel. 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 in India involving the Dalai Lama.

Tibetans who traveled to Nepal and planned to continue to India reported that PRC officials visited their families’ homes in Tibet and threatened their relatives if they did not return immediately. 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.

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 they required other hotels to notify police departments when Tibetan guests checked in.

RFA reported that on June 11, a recruitment notice for government jobs restricted employment to those who “have a firm stand on the political principals of anti-secession, criticizing the Dalai [Lama], safeguarding the reunification of the motherland, and national unity.” According to RFA, applicants for low-wage positions such as drivers, office cleaners, and kitchen staff were required to support the CCP’s leadership and socialist system.

In June, RFA reported that according to Shide Dawa, a Tibetan living in exile in India, Tibetans wishing to join the PRC army were required to have no record of engaging in political activities. A former resident of Chamdo Prefecture living in exile in India told RFA, “My younger brother tried to enroll in the Chinese police force. But because I’m now in India, they have denied my brother the job.”

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 being denied hotel rooms, refused service by taxi drivers, and discriminated against in employment and in business transactions.

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.

Media and NGOs reported that monasteries collected donations to purchase and distribute personal protective equipment to local residents and populations in other parts of China during the COVID-19 pandemic. The India-based Tibetan media outlet *Phayul* reported that in February, Kumbum Jampa Ling Monastery in Amdo Prefecture, Qinghai Province, donated RMB 1,000,000 (\$153,000) to the city of Wuhan, then the epicenter of China’s COVID-19 outbreak, to purchase items such as masks and goggles for affected people. Sera Monastery in Lhasa conducted prayers and collected donations for COVID-19 patients. A monk from the Shedrup Tenphel Choeling Monastery in Tawu (Daofu) County, Kardze Province said, “This is the least we can do in service to the people living in Tawu. We can only hope that we can be of some help in preventing [the further spread of] this pandemic.” Monks of the Minyak Pel Lhagang Monastery in Dartsedo, Kardze contributed RMB 130,000 (\$19,900). ICT reported that Tibetans posted images on social media of butter lamps they lit in memory of Dr. Li Wenliang, the Han physician whom authorities arrested for attempting to warn the public about the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan.

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 Secretary of State, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, Ambassador to China, and other Department and embassy officials 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 senior PRC officials on the government’s refusal to engage in dialogue with the Dalai Lama. U.S. officials continued to underscore that only the Dalai Lama and other faith leaders could decide the succession of the Dalai Lama, and they also raised concerns about the 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 they sought increased access to the TAR for U.S. officials, journalists, and tourists, including religious pilgrims and those traveling for religious purposes.

Due to COVID-19 and tight PRC restrictions on access to the TAR, U.S. officials were not allowed to visit the TAR during the year. Before the PRC ordered the closure of the consulate in Chengdu in retaliation for the closure of the PRC consulate general Houston, the Consul General’s request to visit the TAR was denied. In July, the PRC extended an invitation to the *Charge d’Affaires* to visit the TAR but rescinded it after the U.S. government announced that same month visa restrictions in accordance with the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2018.

On May 17, on the 25th anniversary of the disappearance of the 11th Panchen Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the Secretary of State said in a statement, “The United States remains deeply concerned about the PRC’s ongoing campaign to eliminate the religious, linguistic, and cultural identity of Tibetans, including through the ongoing destruction of communities of worship and learning, such as the Larung Gar and Yachen Gar Buddhist Institutes. Tibetan Buddhists, like members of all faith communities, must be able to select, educate, and venerate their religious leaders according to their traditions and without government interference. We call on the PRC government to immediately make public the Panchen Lama’s whereabouts and to uphold its own constitution and international commitments to promote religious freedom for all persons.”

On June 3, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom told participants at an online forum organized by the ICT, “They [Tibetans] need to be able to practice their faith freely. The Dalai Lama needs to be able to go and return to his homeland if he would so choose. And yet these are all denied.”

On July 7, the Secretary of State announced the United States was imposing visa restrictions on PRC government and CCP officials determined to be “substantially involved in the formulation or execution of policies related to access for foreigners to Tibetan areas,” pursuant to the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2018. In making the announcement, the Secretary stated, “The United States will continue to work to advance the sustainable economic development, environmental conservation, and humanitarian conditions of Tibetan communities within the People’s Republic of China and abroad. We also remain committed to supporting meaningful autonomy for Tibetans, respect for their fundamental and unalienable human rights, and the preservation of their unique religious, cultural, and linguistic identity.”

On September 2 remarks to the press, the Secretary of State said, “We’re also concerned about Chinese actions in Tibet, in light of the general secretary’s recent calls to Sinicize Tibetan Buddhism and fight ‘splittism’ there. We continue to call upon Beijing to enter into dialogue with the Dalai Lama or his representatives without preconditions, to reach a settlement that resolves their differences.”

In November, at the virtual global Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom said, “Tibetan Buddhists have successfully picked their leader for hundreds of years.... [T]he United States supports that religious communities have the right to pick their own leadership.”

On October 14, the Secretary of State designated the Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor to serve concurrently as the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues. In his announcement, the Secretary said the Special Coordinator would “carry forward the Department’s engagement with and support for Tibet’s global diaspora and their many courageous advocates for the protection of human rights, including the freedom of religion or belief.” 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. In November, CTA President Lobsang Sangay met with the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues in Washington, DC.

On December 4, the Special Coordinator for Tibet Issues spoke at a forum hosted by the US Mission to International Organizations in Geneva entitled, “Religious Freedom in Tibet: The Appointment of Buddhist Leaders and the Succession of the Dalai Lama.” The Special Coordinator said, “The United States is committed to helping Tibetans safeguard their way of life – not just in Tibet but also in India, Nepal, Bhutan, and everywhere that it flourishes.” The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and the Permanent Representative of the United States of America to the Office of the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva also pressed the PRC to respect the unique language, culture, and religion of Tibetans.

On December 27, the President signed into law the Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020. The law states (in part): “(1) decisions regarding the selection, education, and veneration of Tibetan Buddhist religious leaders are exclusively spiritual matters that should be made by the appropriate religious authorities within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and in the context of the will of practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism; (2) the wishes of the 14th Dalai Lama, including any written instructions, should play a determinative role in the selection, education, and veneration of a future 15th Dalai Lama; and (3) interference by the Government of the People’s Republic of China or any other government in the process of recognizing a successor or reincarnation of the 14th Dalai Lama and any future Dalai Lamas would represent a clear violation of the fundamental religious freedoms of Tibetan Buddhists and the Tibetan people.” The law further states the U.S. government may impose sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act and visa restrictions under the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act on Chinese officials “who are responsible for, complicit in, or have directly or indirectly engaged in the identification or installation of a candidate chosen by China as the future 15th Dalai Lama of Tibetan Buddhism[.]”

Although U.S. officials were denied access to the TAR during the year, they maintained contact with a wide range of religious leaders and practitioners, as well as NGOs in other 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 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 posted by the embassy and consulates on Twitter and the PRC-controlled Weibo and WeChat platforms over the course of the year, the embassy also published many social media messages on Twitter that directly and indirectly promoted the religious freedom of the Tibetan people. Over the course of the year, statements from the Secretary of State and others supporting religious freedom for Tibetans reached millions of Chinese social media users. The Secretary’s call on Beijing to enter into dialogue with the Dalai Lama or his representatives without preconditions, the appointment of a Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, and statements of concern over continuing interference with the religious freedom of Tibetans drew particularly high attention on social media despite China’s online censorship.

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