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2016 scores

Freedom Status: Not Free

Aggregate Score: 1

Freedom Rating: 7.0

Political Rights: 7

Civil Liberties: 7

OVERVIEW

No official dialogue between Beijing and the Tibetan government in exile took place in 2015; such talks were last held in 2010. In April the Chinese government released a white paper on the region, and in August the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held its Sixth Forum on Tibet, led by party head and Chinese president Xi Jinping. Reports on both signaled the Chinese government's intent to maintain a hard-line position on the issue of Tibetan autonomy while intensifying indoctrination campaigns within the region.

Over the course of the year, at least seven Tibetans set themselves on fire to protest CCP rule. The authorities responded with arrests of family members, "patriotic education" campaigns, travel restrictions, and intrusive controls on monasteries. The security clampdown that has been in place since a 2008 popular uprising increasingly extended to Tibetan areas outside the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).

The Chinese authorities have had difficulty quelling popular reverence for the Dalai Lama. In June, despite an official ban and threats of arrest by the Chinese government, many Tibetans celebrated the religious figure's 80th birthday in public and private.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: -2 / 40

A. Electoral Process: 0 / 12

The Chinese government rules Tibet through administration of the TAR and 12 Tibetan autonomous prefectures or counties in the nearby provinces of Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu, and Yunnan. Under the Chinese constitution, autonomous areas have the right to formulate their own regulations and implement national legislation in accordance with local conditions. In practice,

however, decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of senior, ethnic (Han) Chinese CCP officials. In 2011, Chen Quanguo replaced Zhang Qingli as TAR party secretary. The few ethnic Tibetans who occupy senior positions serve mostly as figureheads and echo official doctrine. Losang Gyaltsen, an ethnic Tibetan, has served as chairman of the TAR government since 2013.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 0 / 16

All political activity outside the CCP is illegal and harshly punished, as is any evidence of loyalty to or communication with the Tibetan government in exile in Dharamsala, India. The exile government includes an elected parliament serving five-year terms, a Supreme Justice Commission that adjudicates civil disputes, and a directly elected prime minister, also serving five-year terms. The unelected Dalai Lama, who traditionally served as head of state, renounced his political role in 2011. Lobsang Sangay was elected prime minister in the same year, replacing a two-term incumbent and becoming the exile government's top political official. In 2014, the Dalai Lama announced that he may not reincarnate, which would make him the last to hold the religious title.

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

C. Functioning of Government: 1 / 12

Corruption is believed to be extensive in Tibet, as in the rest of China. Little information is available on the scale of the problem, but there were reports in 2015 of moves to curb corruption among the region's officials as part of Chinese president Xi Jinping's nationwide anticorruption campaign. In January, state media reported that 15 CCP officials in Tibet had been found guilty of "serious discipline violations" in 2014, employing a euphemism commonly used for corruption but also applied to political infractions. Official reports on the investigations revealed a focus on suspected religious sympathies and support for Tibetan independence among officials, leaving it unclear whether the 15 individuals were punished for abuse of office or for their religious or political views. In June, state media reported that antigraft authorities were investigating Le Dake, deputy chief of the Tibet People's Congress and former head of state security in the region, for vague "violations of discipline and law." Also in June, the media reported a bribery and embezzlement case against Huang Xiangtian, former CCP chief of Lhasa's economic development zone.

Discretionary Political Rights Question B: -3 / 0

The Chinese government's economic development programs in Tibet have strongly encouraged ethnic Chinese migration to the region, disproportionately benefited ethnic Chinese residents, and exacerbated the marginalization of ethnic Tibetans, who have also been displaced by mass resettlement campaigns. In late 2014 and early 2015, officials announced new railway and urbanization projects that risk further diluting the Tibetan population in the region; one such plan aims to increase the "permanent urban population" of Tibet by approximately 30 percent by 2020, with many new settlers likely to be ethnic Chinese.

Civil Liberties: 3 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 0 / 16

Chinese authorities tightly restrict all media in Tibet. In 2015, officials continued to suppress information about self-immolations and related security crackdowns. According to overseas

advocacy and rights groups, scores of Tibetan writers, intellectuals, and musicians have been arrested since 2008 as part of an effort to curb dissent and control Tibetan cultural expression, with some sentenced to lengthy prison terms.

Internet blackouts are periodically imposed at protest sites and in 2015 included a months-long shutdown in Ngaba (Aba) County, Sichuan Province, where monks had led individual protests in September. International broadcasts are jammed and communications devices periodically confiscated. The online restrictions and monitoring in place across China are enforced even more stringently in the TAR. In August, authorities reportedly shut down the website Choemei, one of the longest-running Tibetan-language platforms for news, cultural writings, and literature.

Internet and mobile-telephone users have been arrested for accessing or transmitting banned information, particularly during politically sensitive periods. In June 2015, reports emerged that Tsering Dondrub, a young Tibetan, was detained by police in Qinghai Province for using WeChat, a popular mobile messaging platform, to share images of the Tibetan flag and the Dalai Lama in advance of the leader's 80th birthday; no further details on his status were available at year's end.

Access to the TAR is highly restricted and regulated for foreign journalists, who are also consistently prevented from entering Tibetan areas of Sichuan and other provinces, though no permission is technically required to travel there. Residents who assist foreign journalists are reportedly harassed. In a rare case, in September 2015, Chinese authorities took a small group of foreign journalists on a closely supervised visit to the TAR; the tour was arranged to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the founding of the TAR.

The authorities regularly suppress religious activities, particularly those seen as forms of dissent or advocacy of Tibetan independence. Several monks, including a 15-year-old, were arrested in 2015 for publicly protesting CCP rule. Possession of Dalai Lama-related materials can lead to official harassment, arrest, and punishment, including restrictions on commercial activity and loss of welfare benefits in some places; many Tibetans nevertheless secretly possess such items.

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

Intrusive government interference in both large religious celebrations and small, personal rituals is extensive. In June 2015, authorities issued a ban on public gatherings and canceled several planned events in advance of the Dalai Lama's 80th birthday on July 6. Officials in Qinghai Province's Malho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture circulated a document in early 2015 outlining various activities that were construed as support for Tibetan independence, calling for harsh punitive measures; the list included ordinary activities like reciting prayers and burning incense. In December, Chinese officials announced plans to compile an online database of "living Buddhas" in an attempt to root out an allegedly growing number of fraudulent ones.

Ideological education campaigns reach most monasteries and nunneries in the region. Such campaigns typically force participants to recognize the CCP claim that China "liberated" Tibet and to denounce the Dalai Lama. Some monks and nuns have reportedly left their institutions to avoid the sessions. The effort has also been extended to the lay population in recent years, with students, civil servants, and farmers required to participate in discussions, singing sessions, and propaganda film screenings. In April 2015, Chen Quanguo announced a new round of "patriotic education" tests at monasteries and nunneries in the TAR.

University professors cannot lecture on certain topics, and many must attend political indoctrination sessions. The government restricts course materials to prevent the circulation of unofficial versions of Tibetan history, and has reduced the use of Tibetan as the language of instruction in schools in recent years.

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

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 0 / 12

The Chinese authorities severely restrict freedoms of assembly and association. Independent trade unions and human rights groups are illegal, and even nonviolent protests are often harshly punished. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including those focused only on apolitical issues like development and public health, operate under highly restrictive agreements. Nevertheless, Tibetans continue to seek avenues for expressing dissatisfaction with government policies. In 2015, Tibetans held periodic demonstrations or vigils to protest CCP rule. Authorities often responded with arrests or violent crackdowns. In July, security forces in Sichuan Province's Kardze (Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture reportedly opened fire to disperse a group of approximately 1,000 people gathered to mourn the death in custody of religious leader Tenzin Delek Rinpoche; no injuries were reported. Individuals are periodically detained for engaging in solitary protests to air demands such as freedom in Tibet or the return of the Dalai Lama.

F. Rule of Law: 0 / 16

The CCP controls the judicial system in Tibet, and courts consequently lack independence. Critics of Chinese rule continue to face arrests and disappearances. Torture is reportedly widespread. According to a partial database compiled by the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China, there were 646 Tibetan political prisoners behind bars as of September 1, 2015 – including 51 individuals detained in 2015. Defendants lack access to meaningful legal representation. Trials are closed if state security is invoked, and sometimes even when no political crime is listed. Chinese lawyers who offer to defend Tibetan suspects have been harassed or disbarred. Security forces routinely engage in arbitrary detention, and detainees' families are often left uninformed as to their whereabouts or well-being. Amnesty International reported two deaths of Tibetan prisoners of conscience in custody in 2015, including that of Tenzin Delek, who died in July while serving a life sentence on charges of "terrorism and separatism," which he had repudiated. Chinese authorities cremated his body without his family's permission, and suppressed public efforts to mourn the religious leader and protest his mistreatment.

The use of self-immolation to protest Chinese rule declined further in 2015, following harsh punishments inflicted by the Chinese authorities. Authorities responded to immolations with information blackouts, a heightened security presence, and increased surveillance. Guidelines unveiled in 2012 state that engaging in self-immolations and organizing, assisting, or gathering crowds related to such acts should be considered criminal offenses, including intentional homicide in some cases. Officials have offered cash rewards of hundreds of thousands of yuan for information on planned self-immolations. Since 2013, the government has also employed collective-punishment tactics in various counties in Sichuan and Qinghai Provinces to deter self-immolations and other protests against Chinese rule, imposing financial penalties on families, canceling public benefits for the households of self-immolators or other activists, and ending state-funded projects in their villages.

LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people suffer from discrimination. No LGBT-focused groups operate in the TAR, and discussion of LGBT issues remains taboo.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 3 / 16

Heightened restrictions on freedom of movement – including the use of troop deployments, roadblocks, and passport restrictions – continued in 2015, particularly in areas where self-immolations took place. Increased security efforts and the cooperation of the Nepalese government have made it difficult for Tibetans to cross the border into Nepal. Approximately 100 Tibetans were reported to have crossed successfully in 2014, continuing a trend of declines from more than 2,000 in 2007. Obtaining a passport is extremely difficult for Tibetans. In July 2015, a Human Rights Watch report detailed the various additional requirements, excessive delays, and arbitrary denials in the issuance of passports for Tibetans and some other minorities, finding that a slower and more restrictive system is in place in minority-dominated areas than elsewhere in China. Authorities continue to restrict access to the TAR for human rights researchers as well as some tourists. They are often denied entry surrounding politically sensitive dates, such as the annual anniversary of the 2008 protests. During other periods, tourists are required to travel in groups and obtain official permission to visit the TAR, and even then, last-minute travel bans are periodically imposed.

Tibetans receive preferential treatment in university admission examinations, but this is often not enough to secure entrance. The dominant role of the Chinese language in education and employment limits opportunities for many Tibetans. Private employers favor ethnic Chinese for many jobs, and Tibetans reportedly find it more difficult to obtain permits and loans to open businesses.

Since 2003, the authorities have intensified efforts to resettle rural Tibetans – forcibly or with incentives – into permanent-housing areas with little economic infrastructure. According to Human Rights Watch, more than two million TAR residents have been resettled since 2006, and plans to continue the program persisted in 2015. Many have reportedly tried to return to their previous lands, risking conflict with officials.

China's restrictive family-planning policies are more leniently enforced for Tibetans and other ethnic minorities. Officials limit urban Tibetans to two children and encourage rural Tibetans to stop at three. As a result, the TAR is one of the few areas of China without a skewed sex ratio. Women are well represented in many public-sector jobs and CCP posts within the TAR, though most high-level officials are men. However, advocates noted in 2015 that women suffer specific religious and political persecution related to Chinese suppression of Tibetan identity. Tibetan women continue to be targets of human trafficking, with many taken to China for domestic service or forced marriages.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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