

Nationalism, discrimination and the Tibet Issue

The situation in Tibet has frequently been raised at the UN Human Rights Council and by the various UN Special Procedures, concerned governments and NGOs. These various actors have noted specific violations of fundamental human rights, such as the use of torture, arbitrary detention, use of force against unarmed civilians and lack of religious freedom and freedom of speech in Tibet. However, behind many of these violations lie a form of ethnic nationalism and discriminatory practices, which undermine Chinese President Hu's efforts to create and maintain a 'harmonious society' that respects ethnic diversity and the differences of perspective that flow from this.

Discriminatory policies in Tibet with regards to political participation, language in education, socio-economic policies and migration have not shown significant improvement in the past 10 years. For many Tibetans inside China, gains made are being rolled back, and since unrest in Tibet following protests last March, Tibetans have frequently described this period as a return to the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. They speak of a deliberate, concerted effort by Chinese officials and state media to portray Tibetans as ungrateful, violent and anti-Chinese, a situation which they argue entrenches mutual distrust, drives the two populations further apart and makes a sustainable solution for Tibetans inside China all the more elusive.

Atmosphere since March 2008 unrest

Following nearly a year of protests across the Tibetan plateau since March 2008, there is increasing evidence of ethnic tension and discrimination of Tibetan and Chinese people, due at least in part to misinformation and propaganda by the Chinese authorities that has resulted in an upsurge of Chinese nationalism and hostility against Tibetans. An official notice obtained by ICT from one area of Beijing immediately prior to the Beijing Olympics required every hotel and public bathhouse to check on the 'circumstances' of all Tibetan and Uyghur visitors, and their presence should be reported to local police¹. This official acknowledgement that Tibetans and Uyghurs are under suspicion simply because of their ethnicity is supported by numerous anecdotal and eyewitness reports of new discrimination against Tibetans and a breakdown in communications among Chinese and Tibetan colleagues in different workplaces, including at government meetings.

The Chinese authorities have consistently represented the uprising in Tibet as a 'violent riot'. For weeks after March 14, state-run television showed selective footage of monks hurling rocks at police, protesters destroying shop fronts and plumes of black smoke from burned-out cars in Lhasa. TV newsreaders presented the official line that the violence was orchestrated by the "Dalai clique". But in more than 125 protests across the Tibetan plateau since March 10, only the events of March 14 in Lhasa escalated to serious violence against Chinese civilians, according to ICT's information. The majority of the protests have been non-violent.

A visitor to Tibet told ICT: "Tibetans now find themselves under relentless suspicion and disregard. Even when Tibetans on official business - by invitation from Beijing or Chengdu hosts - do travel into mainland China, cabs will pass them by or order them out when their ethnicity is discovered by their language; or 'vacant hotels' suddenly have no rooms, one hotel after another."

¹ Urgent Notice: To all hostelries and public baths in the jurisdiction:

According to the demands of the [Public Security Bureau] branch office, from now onwards hostelries and public baths under the jurisdiction of Haidian District [in central Beijing] should conduct checks on the circumstances of all Tibetans and Uyghurs staying on business premises. Efforts should be strengthened to verify the identification of all such people who check in, and at the same time [their presence] reported to the police station.

Note, all hostelries and public bathhouses should carefully check and correctly record information on guests' ethnicity.

All hostelries receiving Tibetans and Uyghurs should immediately report to the police station.

Participation in Governance

At the root of discriminatory policies in Tibet lies the lack of participation in governance. Although Tibetans make up over 50% of government cadres, they are vastly underrepresented in decision-making bodies. Over the past decade not only have heads of counties on a large scale been replaced by Chinese cadres, but the Lhasa Communist Party Committee that administers the region has its lowest proportion of Tibetans since 1966². The Party Secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region, the most influential power broker of the region, has never been an ethnic Tibetan since the inception of the TAR. The Chinese Constitution regulates that most of the leaders and representatives of an “Autonomous Region” and the “People’s Congress” should be derived from the ethnic population of the region. This, however, does not apply to the Party Organs, of which the Party Committee is a critical component.

Ethnically exclusionary growth

Large-scale Development projects in Tibet such as railways and highways mostly benefit ethnic Chinese in urban areas with access to government agencies and business networks in China³. Economic development and growth are urban-biased, whereas 80% of Tibetans live in rural areas. Large infrastructure projects contribute to further ethnic disparity because they disproportionately benefit members of the largely Chinese immigrant population, with their advantages in language and access to officials and business networks⁴. Tibetans have no equal say in the exploitation of natural resources on the Tibetan plateau. Infrastructure development brings disproportionately low benefits for Tibetan people, and mainly facilitate resource extraction, deployment capacity of troops, domestic and international tourism flows and movements of migrants into the plateau⁵.

State involvement in direct and indirect migration and demographic transformation

Investments in higher and professional education in Tibet lag behind the rest of the PRC. Chinese language requirements in secondary schools leads to the domination of Chinese-relevant topics in the curriculum and contributes to high dropout rates of Tibetan children and very low levels of competition for higher education. Poor standards cause a dependency of the local economy on the import of highly skilled labour from non-ethnic communities outside Tibetan areas. Han-dominated administration and business in return, through networks and language requirements, contribute to a further in-migration of non-Tibetans into the labour market. Economic marginalization reinvigorates this vicious circle of poorly funded education and dependency on migration of labour and expertise. Weak education policies and a lack of economic development geared towards capacity building of Tibetan entrepreneurship and diversification of rural income, leads to further immigration and ethnic tensions.

Religious policies

China maintains a policy of transforming Tibet into an atheist region where “Communist spiritual civilization” will prevail, and now publicly states that the Communist Party of China is a “living Buddha” and a “parent” to the Tibetan people.⁶ Obtaining a complete religious education in Tibet today remains difficult or impossible, especially in central Tibet. While Beijing has officially promoted the reinvigoration of the traditional ‘Geshe’ degree, the most advanced level of scholarship possible in the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism (typically requiring 20 years of intense study), in practice, Beijing has taken measures both to undermine the degree’s status and accessibility to teachers and the course of study.⁷ The oppressive atmosphere has been underlined by the leadership of Tibet Autonomous Region Party chief Zhang Qingli, who has announced his intention to intensify strict political control over the practice of Buddhism. Using harsh rhetoric against the Dalai Lama reminiscent of Cultural Revolution jargon, Zhang Qingli has referred to a “life or death struggle” against the Dalai Lama and his “clique”, and described the Tibetan religious leader as the “biggest obstacle hindering Tibetan Buddhism from establishing normal order”.⁸

Restrictions on flow of information and expression of Tibetan characteristics

The use of policing, the judicial process, and sentencing in Tibet all have a distinctly ethnic character. These institutions are used to target Tibetans who frame any dissent regarding local or central government policy in terms of Tibet’s unique circumstances or separate identity, and Tibetans are frequently jailed under vaguely defined laws such

² Human Rights Watch, 7 November 2006: China: Fewer Tibetans on Lhasa’s Key Ruling Body.

³ See ICT, 2007: Tracking the Steel Dragon

⁴ Fisher, A.M. 2005: Close encounters of an Inner-Asian kind: Tibetan-Muslim coexistence through the case of Tibet, Development Studies Institute, working papers series.

⁵ Asia scholar Jogn W. Garver writes in Tracking the Steel Dragon, ICT, 2007: “... New lines of new lines of transportation will be bearers of China’s influence. Railways and better roads will bring Chinese goods, businessmen and businesses, investment and cultural influences. Trade flows and inter-dependencies will develop. [...] distant natural resources will increasingly be plugged into China’s industry [...] China’s influence will increase, in regions where it was historically limited by the tyranny of distance and terrain.”

⁶ <http://www.savetibet.org/news/newsitem.php?id=1140>

⁷ Official China Xinhuanet, 2 March 2007

⁸ The Communist Party as Living Buddha-The Crisis Facing Tibetan Religion Under Chinese Control: <http://savetibet.org/documents/document.php?id=226>

as 'splitting the nation' or 'endangering state security'. Expression of disagreement over issues that in the rest of China are much more openly debated, such as the environment and socio-economic issues, are problematic in Tibet because they are framed according to the special characteristics of the situation in Tibet and thus risk especially severe responses from the state.

In the wake of last year's protests, sentencing of Tibetans has been particularly harsh where it involves the sharing of information through internet and mobile phone use. The Chinese authorities have imposed a virtual information blackout, with increasingly systematic measures to block information flow. Not only have Tibetan areas been closed to all foreigners for many months in 2008 and in the run up to the 10 March anniversary in 2009, but the trickle of information from the region is severely restricted and monitored and the transmitting of all information about political unrest is criminalized.⁹ Compared with restrictions on Han Chinese, Tibetans receive a markedly different treatment when it comes to their ability to raise concerns, question policies, suggest alternative methods or communicate with the outside world.¹⁰

Re-education drives and targeting of the Dalai Lama

Patriotic education campaigns in Tibet have intensified over the past year and have been combined with unprecedented waves of pre-emptive detentions over the 2008-2009 Winter as part of an extensive "Strike Hard" campaign. The space for Tibetans to express their discontent is narrowed to the extent that the mere expression of hope in mediation of their exiled spiritual leader or an expression of trust in the Dalai Lama as a 'root lama', can lead to imprisonment and sentencing¹¹. ICT has details of over 650 detainees of whom more than 110 have received sentences. A further 1200 Tibetans are still unaccounted for since the widespread, mostly peaceful demonstrations inside Tibet.¹²

⁹ Ahead of the 10th march anniversary this year once more all these areas were closed to foreigners. The monitoring of the phone calls of Tibetans has been identified by TAR Party Secretary Zhang Qingli as he said that there was a need to focus: "people's stand, to investigate telephone communication". In an apparent adaptation of a nation wide anti-porn drive, XZTV reported on November 3, 2008 about a new nation-wide campaign on the theme of people talking about events, called "smash mischievous rumours and correct wrong views". Also the "listening to rumours" had to be stopped.

¹⁰ According to a November 8, 2008 article in the state-run Lhasa Evening News, Migmar Dondrub 米玛顿珠 (Mima Dunzhu) and Wangdu 旺堆 (Wangdui) were sentenced to 14 year and life sentence respectively for accused of collecting "intelligence concerning the security and interests of the state and provid[ing] it to the Dalai clique... prior to and following the 'March 14' incident".

¹¹ Andrew Fisher says: "Lack of tolerance [to an evolving nationalist discourse and response to ethnic exclusion] adds force to feelings of resentment and alienation among many Tibetans, even if the material situation of some slowly improves with the annual addition of motorcycles, mobile phones and other consumer durables to their stock of goods. In this way, the government strategy of winning over the hearts and minds of Tibetans with a dazzling display of subsidies is sabotaged by its own internal contradictions".

¹² ICT, 2009: A Great Mountain Burned by Fire