



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

US federal commission says China sought “forced assimilation” of Tibetan Buddhism in 2018

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The Chinese government tried to forcibly bring Tibetans’ Buddhist faith under state control in 2018, a new report from a US federal government commission says.

Released today, April 29, the 2019 annual report from the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) documents China’s strategy of “forced assimilation and suppression” of Tibetan Buddhism and calls on China to release Tibetan political prisoners.

China has ruled Tibet, a historically independent country, since 1959, when Tibetan Buddhist leader the Dalai Lama was forced into exile.

In recent years, China has sought to “Sinicize” Tibetan Buddhism, meaning to place it under the control of China’s communist government, which is officially atheist.

Attacks on Tibetan Buddhism

The report provides many examples of China’s attempts to control Tibetans’ faith:

- In February 2018, the public security bureau of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) published a list of “organized crimes.” According to the report, this list “effectively banned civil society initiatives to promote Tibetan language and culture.”
- A new government policy introduced in August 2018 requires monks and nuns to show “political reliability,” “moral integrity” and a willingness to “play an active role at critical moments.” It is believed these requirements will compel monks and nuns to oppose protests against the Chinese government.
- A major fire damaged the sacred Jokhang Temple, a UNESCO World Heritage site, in Tibet’s capital of Lhasa on Feb. 17, 2018. As the International Campaign for Tibet reported, China restricted information about the fire, and it is feared that Chinese officials used inappropriate repair work to cover up the extent of the damage.
- Several hundred Tibetans who attended the Dalai Lama’s teachings in India had their passports confiscated and destroyed upon their return. Due to China’s hardline policies, the number of Tibetans who attended the Dalai Lama’s teachings in 2018 is believed to have decreased significantly.
- Tibetan schoolchildren in the TAR were banned from taking part in religious festivals during their holidays, and in December 2018, authorities in Qinghai Province forbade monasteries from teaching Tibetan language classes to children.

Release of political prisoners

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The reports notes China continued in 2018 to imprison Tibetans who advocated for their religious and cultural rights.

In May 2018, Tashi Wangchuk was given a five-year prison sentence after he appeared in a New York Times video speaking about the importance of teaching the Tibetan language to children.

Perhaps most egregiously, China continued to detain the Panchen Lama, the second most influential Tibetan Buddhist leader, who was abducted at age 6 shortly after he was officially recognized by the Dalai Lama.

On April 25, 2019, the Panchen Lama would have turned 30 years old. His whereabouts remain unknown.

Recommendations

The report calls for the release of the Panchen Lama and Tashi Wangchuk.

It also notes that in December 2018, Congress passed the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act, which requires the State Department to deny or revoke US visas for the Chinese officials responsible for blocking Americans from entering Tibet.

In the report, Tenzin Dorjee, chair of USCIRF and a Tibetan American, recommends the US government utilize the Reciprocal Access law, as well as the Global Magnitsky Act, which allows the President to freeze the assets and restrict the travel of human rights abusers in any country.

The report also lists China as a country of particular concern (CPC).

What they said

Tenzin Dorjee, chair of USCIRF:

“If there is one country in the world that epitomizes CPC designation it is China. Religious freedom only exists in name but not in reality in China. China has sinicized and securitized religions for a political agenda. The worst cases are in Tibet and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region [East Turkestan]. In Tibet, China has sinicized and politicized the reincarnation system and micromanaged the study of Buddhism in monasteries that are central to Tibetan Buddhism. Ironically, Chinese government officials assert the right to choose reincarnations of all Living Buddhas of Tibet only to serve their political agenda and domination...

“Unlike the Panchen Lama, China cannot control the next reincarnation of the Dalai Lama because he will reincarnate in a free country as long as Sino-Tibetan issues persist. The winning card is in the hand of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people. Thus, the Sino-Tibetan conflict will persist.”

Matteo Mecacci, president of the International Campaign for Tibet:

“ICT commends USCIRF for its strong report today, which details attacks on religious freedom that are sadly happening around the world, including in China. It is particularly important that American institutions recognize that the Chinese government continues to persecute Tibetan Buddhists and to undermine the foundation of Tibet’s ancient culture of wisdom, which the Dalai Lama has helped introduce to the entire world.

“By seeking to control Tibetan Buddhism, China is not only persecuting Tibetans, but is also endangering the right of people everywhere to meaningfully practice this rich and wise faith.

Therefore, the US government should seriously consider and implement the recommendation of the USCIRF, and make sure that statements that value religious freedom in China are followed by action."