



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Tibetans imprisoned for Panchen Lama prayers and protest; High-level focus on ‘Sinicization’ in Kardze

<http://www.savetibet.org/tibetans-imprisoned-for-panchen-lama-prayers-and-protest-high-level-focus-on-sinicization-in-kardze/>

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- A Tibetan man and his aunt were imprisoned in Kardze (Chinese: Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan, after he recited prayers and called for the release of the 11th Panchen Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima. The Panchen Lama was “disappeared” by Chinese authorities in 1995 at the age of six and has not been seen in public since then.
- The arrests of the man and his aunt occurred four days after the Panchen Lama’s 30th birthday on April 25. Compounding his disappearance from public view, Chinese authorities have also sought to erase any mention of him or expression of loyalty to him, given the importance and symbolism of his role.
- The demonstration for the Panchen Lama by 20-year-old Wangchen—now sentenced to four and a half years in prison—coincided with a high-level political focus on Kardze, where there have been numerous peaceful protests and resistance to Chinese rule since 2008 and a cluster of self-immolations by Tibetan monks, nuns and laypeople since 2011. The demonstration was also linked to the increasing prominence China has given to its officially selected Panchen Lama, Gyaltsen Norbu.
- On May 25 to 27, 2019, top political advisor and Politburo Standing Committee member Wang Yang went to Kardze. Wang had met the Chinese-selected Panchen Lama in Beijing earlier last month. The state media cited Wang aggressively warning that Norbu “will take a firm political stand and lead the religious figures and believers in fighting against all separatist elements.” (Xinhua, May 6, 2019).¹ Meanwhile Chinese state media announced that Norbu had made his first foreign trip saying he visited Thailand in mid-May.
- Wang also spoke about the need for Tibetans to defend against “infiltration of foreign hostile forces.” a reference to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan exile diaspora. In the Serthar (Chinese: Seda) area of Kardze Prefecture, a county-level delegation to rural homes in April warned against having Dalai Lama pictures in local people’s shrines and instructed families to remove them immediately.

Prayers and protest for the absent Panchen Lama

According to the Tibetan service of Radio Free Asia (RFA), a 20-year-old Tibetan man named Wangchen was detained on April 29 after reciting prayers and shouting slogans calling for the release of the Panchen Lama, who disappeared into Chinese custody as a child in 1995 shortly after he was recognized by the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama are regarded as the “sun and moon” in Tibetan Buddhism; Panchen Lamas have traditionally played a role in the recognizing and educating Dalai Lamas, and vice versa, which is why management of the Panchen Lama is considered so politically crucial to Beijing.

¹ Featured in Global Times at: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1148646.shtml>

A Tibetan source in India told RFA that Wangchen was accused of making “a conspicuous protest in public” and sentenced by the Sershul County People’s Court in Kardze to a prison term of four years and six months. There are fears that Wangchen has been tortured, as he was observed walking unsteadily when taken to court on May 7, 2019.²

The same source said that Wangchen’s aunt Acha Dolkar was handed a prison term of one year and three months for her role in sharing news of Wangchen’s protest with contacts outside the region, and two other Tibetans, identified only as Lobsang and Yonten, were each fined 15,000 yuan (around U.S. \$2,211) and ordered to attend political re-education classes on “issues of national security” for six months. The latter appears to be a new form of punishment and consistent with other reports from Tibet about the existence of facilities used especially for re-education.³

The source told RFA: “During an offering ceremony and the hanging of prayer flags on the hill behind Sershul monastery, [Wangchen] shouted slogans calling for the release of the Panchen Lama and for the reunion of the Panchen Lama and the Dalai Lama in Tibet.” While, according to reports, only Wangchen recited the prayers and shouted the slogans, three others—Lobsang, Yonten, and another person who was physically disabled—were detained, with the disabled man eventually set free. Police called Wangchen’s aunt in for questioning on May 3 and then summoned her and other family members again four days later, according to RFA. There is now no information on the whereabouts of Wangchen and his aunt.

Sersul, where the protest occurred, is one of the biggest monasteries in the eastern Tibetan area and restrictions have tightened there linked to the political emphasis on the region promoted by Chinese official Wang Yang during his visit to Kardze. In July 2018, young Tibetan monks were compelled to leave Sershul as part of a drive by the Chinese government to replace monastic education with secular schooling that emphasizes Communist Party propaganda. According to reports from Tibetan sources, young monks in smaller monasteries in the area have been targeted as part of the same push for the ‘Sinicization’ of Tibetan Buddhism and political education in schools.⁴

Harsher approach demonstrates destructive campaign against Tibetan Buddhism

There has been a campaign to “Sinicize” Tibetan Buddhism, ongoing since January. As part of the political campaign, Chinese authorities seek to eradicate all mention of the Panchen Lama.

Wang Yang, the fourth highest ranking official in the Politburo hierarchy and head of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), visited Kardze at the end of May. Just as Wang’s emphasis on intensified Party control over religion coincided with a higher public profile of the Chinese-selected Panchen Lama last year, his visit to Kardze last week was immediately preceded by a meeting with Gyaltzen Norbu in Beijing on May 6.

At the meeting in Beijing, Wang underlined only the political importance of Norbu’s role and the key importance to the Party state of “interpreting religious doctrines to adapt them to China’s socialism.” According to Chinese state media outlet Global Times, the Chinese-selected “Panchen Lama said he will make his contributions to safeguarding the unification of the motherland, ethnic solidarity, social

² Radio Free Asia, ‘Tibetan man, aunt, sentenced for Panchen Lama protest in Sichuan’, May 8, 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/sentenced-05082019143525.html>

³ Further details of these institutions and systematic approach towards cultural and political “transformation” will feature in a forthcoming International Campaign for Tibet report.

⁴ International Campaign for Tibet report, ‘China forces young Tibetan monks out of monastery into government-run schools’, July 12, 2018, <https://www.savetibet.org/china-forces-young-tibetan-monks-out-of-monastery-into-government-run-schools-as-part-of-drive-to-replace-monastic-education-with-political-propaganda/>

stability, and religious harmony,” all of which are political imperatives that refer to crushing any views that differ from those of the ruling Communist Party and enforcing compliance with the dictates of the Beijing leadership. According to the same article, Norbu said he “will always remember the instructions given by [Communist Party] leaders and devote himself to religious studies and practices to serve his believers.”

Interestingly, the official China News Service said in a report June 10 that Norbu had gone to Thailand in the middle of May, the first time he had ever left China. The report said that he gave a speech at a Buddhist university in Bangkok and attended other Buddhist events and religious exchanges.

Wang has broad responsibility for religion in his role as head of the CPPCC, and has particularly emphasized the importance of “Sinicization”—a term meaning to make something Chinese—of the Tibetan Buddhist religion, an important element of the Chinese government’s new and far-reaching powers over people’s lives and beliefs that represent a deepening threat to the continued survival of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet. Sinicization involves more systematic efforts than before to mold and shape Tibetan Buddhism to the dictates of the Party, compounding increased regulations that have already expanded religious oppression over the last decade.

There have also been 16 self-immolations in Kardze since 2011, with the first by Nyitso monk Tsewang Norbu, who set fire to himself after distributing leaflets outside a county government building. On May 21, 2015, Tenzin Gyatso, a Tibetan father of four set fire to himself in Tawu (Chinese: Daofu), Kardze, apparently in response to tightened security in the buildup to the Dalai Lama’s 80th birthday.⁵ The most recent self-immolation in Kardze was a popular Tibetan monk in his 60s, Tenga, who had worked as a voluntary teacher; he set fire to himself and died in Kardze on Nov. 26, 2017, calling for freedom for Tibet as he burned.⁶

The intensification of restrictions on religious expression, and the requirement for Tibetans to denounce the Dalai Lama, have compounded frustration in the region and appear to have increased the likelihood of Tibetans taking risks to express their discontent.

In April 2008, at least eight Tibetans were killed in Kardze after armed police fired on a crowd of several hundred monks and laypeople after an incident in which monks were detained after they objected to a “patriotic education” campaign that included photographs of the Dalai Lama being thrown to the ground.⁷ A month later, more than 80 nuns were detained during a second phase of unrest in response to a severe “anti-separatist” and anti-Dalai Lama crackdown that followed the protests of March 2008.⁸

During his visit on May 25-27 of this year, Wang emphasized the need for religious practitioners and institutes to follow the lead of the Chinese Communist Party and devote themselves to “Sinicizing” Tibetan Buddhism and adhering to party policy. Using the metaphor in Chinese of “firmly holding the ‘bull nose’ of the temple [religious] management,” Wang said it is also necessary to “resolutely defend

⁵ International Campaign for Tibet report, ‘Tibetan father of four self-immolates after oppressive measures to prevent Dalai Lama birthday celebrations’, May 21, 2015, <https://www.savetibet.org/tibetan-father-of-four-self-immolates-after-oppressive-measures-to-prevent-dalai-lama-birthday-celebrations/>

⁶ International Campaign for Tibet report, ‘Respected Tibetan monk sets fire to himself in eastern Tibet’, November 30, 2017, <https://www.savetibet.org/respected-tibetan-monk-sets-fire-to-himself-in-eastern-tibet/>

⁷ International Campaign for Tibet report, ‘Eighty Tibetans killed in Kardze; new phase in protests in Tibet’, April 4, 2008, <https://www.savetibet.org/eight-tibetans-killed-in-kardze-new-phase-in-protests-in-tibet/>

⁸ International Campaign for Tibet report, ‘More than 80 nuns detained after peaceful protests in Kham’, May 30, 2008, <https://www.savetibet.org/more-than-80-nuns-detained-after-peaceful-protests-continue-in-kham/>

the defense against the infiltration of foreign hostile forces,” a reference to the influence of the Dalai Lama and Tibetans outside Tibet.⁹

Last year Rinzin Wangmo, daughter of the 10th Panchen Lama, visited Lhasa and was warmly received by the people. The 10th Panchen Lama was widely respected in Tibet as someone who defended and protected Tibetan religion and culture. This presented a stark contrast with the relatively lukewarm response to the visit of the Chinese-selected Panchen Lama.¹⁰

Tibetans ordered to remove Dalai Lama images

Just prior to Wang’s arrival in Kardze, on around April 24, 2019, a county-level delegation including officials from cultural and religious departments visited townships and villages in Serthar county in Kardze prefecture. During their inspection tour, they visited local households and found a number of images of the Dalai Lama on household shrines, according to information received by the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) from Tibetan sources. They later held meetings in which they instructed local Tibetans to remove the images immediately.

In recent years, “clean up” efforts seeking to eradicate Dalai Lama images have been enforced at various levels in different areas outside the TAR including Kardze, linked to the political drive to enforce “stability,” meaning compliance to Communist Party policies. In an article in Kardze People’s Daily on Nov. 5, 2014 entitled “Vigorously implementing Ten Actions to create good rule of law in Kardze,” one of the actions mentioned was to seize “suspicious photos and portraits” of the Dalai Lama. The article stated that the pictures were “seriously disturbing the religious masses.”¹¹

⁹ Xinhua, ‘Wang Yang Conducts Inspection Tour of Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture’, May 27, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-05/27/c_1124548409.htm . Translations cited are from the Party Watch Initiative, Center for Advanced China Research: <https://www.ccpwatch.org/single-post/2019/05/31/Weekly-Report-5252019-5312019>

¹⁰ International Campaign for Tibet report, ‘China tightens screws on Tibetan Buddhism’, September 11, 2018, <https://www.savetibet.org/china-tightens-screws-on-tibetan-buddhism/>

¹¹ November 5, 2014, http://paper.kbcmw.com/html/2014-11/05/content_55287.htm