



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Sinicization poses new threats to the survival of Tibetan Buddhist culture and values in Tibet

<https://savetibet.org/sinicization-poses-new-threats-to-the-survival-of-tibetan-buddhist-culture-and-values-in-tibet/>

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The second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, being hosted by the State Department in Washington, DC from July 16 to 18, 2019, comes at a time when the International Campaign for Tibet has obtained information from sources inside Tibet about threats to the survival of Tibetan Buddhist culture and values at a time the Dalai Lama has described as “the darkest period” in Tibetan history.

One Tibetan—whose name, like those of other Tibetans quoted in this report, has been left anonymous due to serious safety concerns—said: “On the surface, what is happening looks like a chaotic imposition of communism on Tibetan Buddhism, but in fact this is actually a threat to the entire survival of Tibetans and Tibet.”

The teachings, values and practices of Tibetan Buddhism, which are integral to Tibetan identity, are facing an unprecedented attack in Tibet—a historically independent nation that China has occupied for the past 60 years—due to a five-year plan announced by China at the beginning of this year to “Sinicize” Buddhism announced in January of this year.¹ This is a more far-reaching effort than before to mold and shape Tibetan Buddhism to the dictates of the Chinese Communist Party. This new political direction is compounded by a regulatory framework that has already deepened religious oppression over the last decade and a dystopian system of high-tech surveillance and policing of monasteries and nunneries.

Matteo Mecacci, president of the International Campaign for Tibet, said: “The five-year campaign to ‘Sinicize,’ Buddhism is a much more systematic imposition of Communist Party priorities than we have seen before, striking at the very core of a religious philosophy based on moral, compassionate values. Sinicization not only targets the trappings of religious practice, such as large teachings, but also represents a far-reaching intrusion into people’s inner lives by a repressive government, contracting the space for genuine religious practice and freedom.

“In China’s official focus on the eradication of ‘foreign’ influence, there is also no doubt an intention to ensure Tibetans in Tibet are separated from the teachings and presence of their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, isolating them still further. It is time for all who believe in religious freedom and human rights to listen to Tibetans who have raised the alarm about this policy and to challenge Beijing directly.”

¹ China passes five-year plan to sinicise Islam, as Beijing tightens grip on major faiths in China, January 9, 2019
<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-passes-five-year-plan-to-sinicise-islam-as-beijing-tightens-grip-on-major>

Observations by Tibetans from inside Tibet

Despite the dangers of expressing even moderate or mild critiques of Beijing's policies, some Tibetan scholars and religious practitioners are raising the alarm about the direction of China's policies and implementation and the impacts they're having on Tibetan lives. Below are views on the latest developments in Tibet from some highly educated Tibetans from different areas who are known to ICT but who cannot be identified in this report. They concur that rather than ensure future "stability" in the region, China's measures of "amputating" and appropriating Tibetan Buddhism, a philosophical and religious tradition strongly based on moral values, increases the threat of instability.

- One Tibetan scholar observed that while visitors can commonly experience a traditional welcome at religious sites, being greeted by "warm smiles and khatags [traditional greeting scarves,]" once there is a deeper understanding of the stories of monks and nuns, it becomes clear that the reality is completely different. There has been a major decline in the number of monks and nuns, with some monasteries and nunneries virtually empty, according to the same source. The dwindling number of monks and nuns who remain face serious challenges in carrying out their religious practices.
- In many monasteries and nunneries across the Tibetan Plateau, such as the major monasteries in Lhasa as well as Kirti Monastery in Ngaba (Chinese: Aba), the Tibetan area of Sichuan, high-tech surveillance has been installed, ensuring the watchful eye of the state on all religious activity. The scrutiny of the ever-present Chinese state, which can at any point lead to the removal of monks, along with torture and imprisonment for perceived misdemeanors or lack of compliance, is creating immense pressures on monastic life.
- According to one Tibetan account: "The surveillance covers everything. For instance, any trace of financial transaction from monasteries in Tibet to [the] outside world, such as the exile Tibetan community and Dalai Lama, or exiled head lama of those monasteries in Tibet, the ages of monks, limitation of monastic population, movements of monks. Tibetan Buddhist monasteries are supposed to be the institutions which actively develop and train more talented people in religion and Buddhism, but now the situation has changed, and the talents that are being developed are those of 'patriotism,' which means reliable to the Party, and those who have made contributions to 'social stability' and work on behalf of Party government. On the surface, what is happening looks like a chaotic imposition of communism on Tibetan Buddhism, but in fact this is actually a threat to the entire survival of Tibetans and Tibet."
- Another Tibetan source said the current political drive of "Sinicization" is "unbearable" for monks and nuns. He said: "The 'Sinicization' policy emerges from the 'patriotic education' campaigns of the past decade, but re-programmed. It was crafted from official language and gives an additional impetus to the thousands of grassroots Party cadres operating now in Tibet. It is now much stronger and penetrates religious life more deeply, bringing immense difficulties for the religious community—for instance the legal education exams that involve thousands of monks and nuns, and which involve study, and questions, and a whole process."
- One of the Tibetans stated that according to these "tough policies," "every single individual now on the official reincarnation database has to go through an entire political procedure, entirely separate to a 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 the fight against 'separatism' and Dalai Lama. This training is focused on manipulating them to be a bridge between the Party and religious community and believers. That means that now the Tibetan reincarnations are becoming Communist-trained talents rather than religious leaders. The government is manipulating the role of reincarnation for engaging religious believers and conveying the Party's ideology and propaganda to grassroots society. This is also creating a distance

between reincarnate lamas and Buddhist believers as the Party is using them in this way. Also, the government is restricting the religious activities of those with reincarnate lama status who are not approved by the Chinese Communist Party.”

- Tibetan monasteries and nunneries have for centuries served also as centers of education and learning, with the great religious institutes having a comparable reputation to top universities such as Harvard, Yale, Cambridge or Oxford. Monks first enrolled to lay a foundation of theoretical knowledge about Buddhism, pursuing further studies in different monasteries, and many went on to participate in major philosophical debates and earned the higher (Geshe Lharampa) degree in Tibetan Buddhism. A Tibetan scholar observed that this traditional system was nurtured in order to educate religious personnel and preserve Tibetan Buddhist civilization—but now the system has been “amputated,” broken up and appropriated by the Chinese state. Monks are not allowed to travel freely between monasteries or on pilgrimage, and children are no longer allowed to study at monastic schools.²
- While Communist Party work teams first began preventing young monks from joining monasteries in the mid-1990s, the level of enforcement has varied from monastery to monastery. According to ICT sources, efforts to compel young monks to join government-run secular schools is increasingly happening in Tibetan areas, including areas in Qinghai, and is of deep concern to Tibetans. A former monk from Labrang Monastery in Amdo explained why this is significant: “In Tibetan monasteries, young monks are raised to be protectors of their own culture and Buddhist values from a young age. And then when they grow up, they pass on their education to a young monk, so it goes full circle. I learned from older monks at my monastery, and when I was in my early thirties, I then taught the young monks, not only about the scriptures and studying, but also how to do their homework, how to behave, and how to do practical tasks such as fetching water and cleaning. When young monks are forced to leave the monasteries, this vital connection between generations is broken, and they will be subjected to Party propaganda from a young age.”
- Highly educated Tibetan monks who have graduated from major monasteries in exile in India have frequently been banned from rejoining their monasteries in Tibet or even attending teachings and lectures. “They feel hopeless and desperate, and it also means that Tibetans cannot benefit from their learning,” said one Tibetan. Monks and nuns in Tibetan monasteries who have stayed now feel despair about the intrusions of rules and regulations and monastic management on their lives, which often leaves little time and opportunity for religious study.
- The Chinese authorities have also taken over the higher-level training of a new generation of Tibetans at institutes including the Tibetan Buddhist College in Beijing, which was founded in 1987.³ The college was originally founded at the suggestion of the late 10th Panchen Lama, whose searing critique of the Party’s policies against religion was known as the ‘70,000-character petition.’ Although the 10th Panchen Lama’s intentions were to sustain and develop authentic Tibetan Buddhism, the college is now under tight Party control and used simultaneously as a showcase for the religion and as a reminder that religious practice can only be carried out under the auspices of the Party. A Tibetan monk told ICT that now those monks ordained by Beijing are called ‘Bei-rampa’ by other monks. “Bei-rampa” is a play on the Tibetan Buddhist degree of Lharampa, with “Bei” most probably referring to “Beijing.”

² International Campaign for Tibet report, ‘China forces young Tibetan monks out of monastery into government-run schools as part of drive to replace monastic education with political propaganda’, July 12, 2018, <https://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/>

³ The Chinese authorities began to initiate their own version of the Geshe Lharampa qualification in 2004, although the official media acknowledges that the history of Lharampa “goes back 400 years.” Some 105 monks in the Tibet Autonomous Region have been awarded the Chinese-administered version of the degree since 2004, according to official sources.

- In December 2018, TAR authorities launched a five-year training program for teachers of Tibetan Buddhism as part of an effort to better “adapt Tibetan Buddhism to the socialist society.” A Tibetan monk who has travelled to Tibet recently said: “There is no doubt that the government is more powerful than a religion and national laws are above religious rules. Religion and monks are always under law of the country as everything and everybody else. The religious communities are not struggling to turn upside down the government and burn Chinese constitution. They were pushed to the limit by the government misusing the power and law. It’s actually the government that needs to set up the concept of equality as promised by Chinese law.”

Developments concerning Tibetan Buddhism

- China’s “Sinicization” of religion is consistent with its intensified efforts to attack the Dalai Lama and twist Tibetan Buddhism into conformity with Chinese Communist Party doctrines. Controlling the reincarnation of Tibetan lamas—with a government-run ‘reincarnate lama database’ specifying only officially recognized lamas—is an integral element, leading to disturbing impacts described below.
- In Tibet, religious practice is viewed by authorities as “separatism” and deliberately conflated with threats to China’s security, creating a more dangerous political environment for monks, nuns, and lay Buddhists and isolating them further from their counterparts outside China. This was underlined at a meeting last month in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa by Wu Yingjie, the Communist Party boss of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), an administrative region representing about half of traditional Tibet. Wu Yingjie positioned Chinese authorities on the frontline of a political struggle against peaceful practitioners and moral values when he said: “We should also be aware that there are still many difficulties and problems in the management of Buddhist monasteries in the TAR...The ongoing severe challenge of the anti-separatism struggle remains grim and complicated.”⁴ Chinese authorities’ answer to this challenge is to strengthen their control still further and to seek to compel allegiance to the Communist Party. The mention of “difficulties and problems” is likely to be an acknowledgement of the continued influence of the Dalai Lama despite China’s many efforts to demonize and sideline him.
- With the same objective, authorities have stepped up a drive to force Tibetans to display images of Chinese President Xi Jinping and other leaders in their homes and even to wear these images. At the same meeting in Lhasa on June 28, Wu Yingjie said: “We should educate monks and nuns and religious believers to respect and love party leaders...wear Party leaders’ images, consciously listen to the Party and follow the Party forever. Party members and cadres stationed in Buddhist monasteries must always bear in mind the identity of Party members and the purpose of their beliefs, and must be Marxist atheists without a single other faith.”⁵ New housing in one area of eastern Tibet came already equipped with small altars—not with Buddhist icons, but with images of Communist Party leaders.⁶ A Tibetan source told ICT: “Some poor families hang the image of the Party leaders on their living walls otherwise the government subsidies will be cut if seen by any officials or villager leaders.”
- In recent weeks, a new phase of thousands of expulsions of nuns and monks has begun at the well-known religious institute of Yachen Gar in eastern Tibet, with reports that those

⁴ Wu Yingjie was addressing a “monastic management work forum” held in Lhasa on June 28, 2019. It was covered in the Chinese language media, China Tibet News online, on July 1, 2019, http://epaper.chinatibetnews.com/xzrb/html/2019-07/01/content_897485.htm

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ International Campaign for Tibet report, ‘Tibetans ordered to prostrate to pictures of Chinese President as Tibet leaders prioritize anti-Dalai Lama stance’, January 15, 2019 <https://savetibet.org/tibetans-ordered-to-prostrate-to-pictures-of-chinese-president-as-tibet-leaders-prioritize-anti-dalai-lama-stance/>

evicted are now being subjected to “political re-education,” most likely in detention in extra-legal facilities where there is a high risk of torture. The demolitions and expulsions at Yachen Gar, which follow similarly ruthless actions at the Larung Gar institute in Sichuan, involve increasingly aggressive measures to curb and manage the growing influence and number of monks and nuns—both Chinese and Tibetan—at these important monastic centers of study and Buddhist ethics in eastern Tibet, the largest such institutes in the world.

Recommendations

The Chinese government has signed but not ratified the International Covenant on Political and Civil Rights.

Based on international human rights standards, ICT makes the following recommendations:

To the international community:

- Take a public position on the right of the Tibetan Buddhist community to practice their faith, including on the issue of recognition, installment and education of reincarnations, according to the traditional Tibetan process without any Chinese governmental interference
- Urge the Chinese government to ratify the ICCPR and to provide a concrete timeline for the ratification
- Urge the Chinese government to fully revise religious affairs regulations and bring them in conformity with Article 18 of ICCPR and international human rights standards
- Urge the Chinese government to refrain from using broad and vague language such as “National Security,” “terrorism” or “religious extremism” as a pretext for wide ranging interventions into Tibetan Buddhist life
- Use international fora, such as the United Nations Human Rights Council and the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, to publicly address the restrictions of freedom of religion with regard to Tibetan Buddhists
- Use bilateral dialogues with China to address the restrictions of freedom of religion in China
- Seek close consultation with the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhist leaders living in exile on the status of religious freedom in Tibet.

For the Chinese government:

- Ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); provide a concrete timeline for the ratification process
- Refrain from appointing or approving religious personnel, in accordance with the 1981 Declaration of the General Assembly and Human Rights Committee general comment 22, para. 4
- Refrain from using broad and vague language such as “state security,” “religious extremism” and “terrorism” as a pretext for swift interventions in religious activities, groups, practitioners or religious professionals, in accordance with Human Rights Committee general comment 22, para. 8, ICCPR, Article 18, para 3, CRC, Article 14, para. 3, Commission on Human Rights resolution 2005/40, para. 12 and Human Rights Council resolution 6/37, para. 14
- Refrain from applying censorship to Buddhist literature or related information disseminated in publications or via the internet, in accordance with 1981 Declaration of the General Assembly, Commission on Human Rights resolution 2005/40 (paragraph 4 (d)) and Human Rights Council resolution 6/37 (paragraph 9 (g)), Human Rights Committee general comment 22, para. 4
- Refrain from requiring approval, oversight and management of religious affairs, in accordance with Article 18 ICCPR

- Refrain from penalizing Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage abroad, in accordance with Article 12 ICCPR.