



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Tibetans detained prior to Dalai Lama Nobel Prize anniversary in apparent WeChat crackdown

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A Tibetan “thangka” artist and two other Tibetans have been detained in eastern Tibet, possibly due to tightened security and surveillance of the social media platform WeChat around the 30th anniversary of the Dalai Lama receiving the Nobel Peace Prize.

According to information the International Campaign for Tibet received from Tibetan sources in exile, the detentions took place a few days before the anniversary on Dec. 10. The three Tibetans appear to have been detained in response to their communications with friends and family outside Tibet via WeChat, the surveillance of which has led to a number of arrests across Tibet.

The three Tibetans are Tsegan, in his mid-30s; Lubum Dorjee, who has been deaf from birth and became an artist of the “thangka”—a form of traditional Tibetan painting—with support from his family; and a third person whose name is not known.

They were detained in Ri’ngon (Chinese: Ren’ai) village in Gangya (Ch: Ganjia) township in Sangchu (Ch: Xiahe) county, Kanlho (Ch: Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Gansu Province. Their current whereabouts are unknown, and there are fears for their safety and welfare.

Criminalizing ordinary behavior

A circular released by Chinese government departments in Kanlho warned that cyber restrictions would be in place starting March 1 of this year, the anniversary month of the 1959 Tibetan Uprising and protests across Tibet in 2008.

The warning states that “March is an unusual month of special security concerns and extra efforts will be added in terms of monitoring and managing WeChat groups...If any WeChat group members publish any illegal information against the laws, he or she will be sentenced to [between] one and eight years in prison, and the same thing will be done to the WeChat group organizer.”

The circular also warns that Tibetans should “not spread rumors or believe in rumors,” and that those who do so will be “responsible for the consequences.” Such opaque language can be used by Chinese authorities to define as a “crime” almost any expression of Tibetan cultural or religious identity, reference to the Dalai Lama or his teachings, or mild statement of opinion.

Increasingly dangerous for Tibetans

Operated by the Chinese company Tencent, WeChat has become the dominant social networking platform in China as well as in Chinese-occupied Tibet. Tibetans outside Tibet or anyone with family or relationships based in Tibet tend to download the messaging app to stay in contact, as other global social media applications are banned in Tibetan areas.

But WeChat, which is constantly updating its technology to monitor and censor content from its users, is increasingly dangerous for Tibetans to use.

Earlier this year around the anniversary of the Tibetan National Uprising in March, the authorities in Sangchu launched a crackdown on communication via WeChat, stating that posting “any information harmful to the [Chinese Communist] Party, government and society” on WeChat would be regarded as “a criminal act.”¹

ICT’s sources said other Tibetans have been arrested in the area over their use of WeChat, although full details are not known due to China’s efforts to prevent information from reaching the outside world.

Arrested for WeChat messages

In August, a Tibetan named Rinso from the Amdo region was held in custody for 10 days after sharing a photograph of the Dalai Lama via WeChat, according to Radio Free Asia (RFA).

Chinese authorities in Tibet offer cash awards of as much as 300,000 yuan (US \$42,582) for information leading to the arrests of social-media users deemed disloyal to China, according to RFA.

On Sept. 19, a Tibetan monk named Sonam Palden, 22, from Kirti Monastery in in Amdo was detained apparently in connection with his WeChat posts about the Tibetan language and Chinese policy, according to an exile Kirti monk, Kanyag Tsering. In recent years, the Chinese government has increasingly restricted the use of the Tibetan language in schools, courtrooms and other spaces in Tibet.

In 2014, a Tibetan monk was arrested for allegedly sharing the Dalai Lama’s teachings on WeChat. Lobsang Choejor of Drongsar Monastery in Chamdo (Ch: Changdu) was arrested on March 4 of that year after being accused of using his phone to send information to “outside contacts” through WeChat and distributing teachings and talks by the Dalai Lama, according to Radio Free Asia.

According to researcher Tenzin Dalha of the Tibet Policy Institute, based in Dharamsala, India, a Tibetan woman from Tibet’s capital of Lhasa was “called in by government officials for severe interrogation, and warned against creating any future chat groups for classmates” after she created a chat group for harmless, non-political conversation.

According to the institute, the woman eventually quit WeChat.

¹ The text of the circular was obtained by the International Campaign for Tibet after it was published in March, 2019.