



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Surveillance in Tibet: ICT delivers remarks at 6th International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance Ministerial Conference in Berlin

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Kai Mueller, Executive Director of ICT Germany, addressed the 6th International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance Ministerial Conference in Berlin last week, raising the dystopian proportions of surveillance in Tibet, particularly in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries.

The high-profile conference was hosted by the German Federal Ministry on Development Cooperation and by the German Federal Commissioner for global religious freedom or belief, Frank Schwabe, and by Ambassador at Large, Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues, Interfaith Dialogue and Freedom of Religion of the Czech Republic, Robert Rehak. German Federal Minister Schulze as well as US Ambassador at Large Rashad Hussain delivered remarks on this year's conference topic which centered on artificial intelligence and freedom of religion and belief.

Remarksⁱ delivered by Kai Mueller at the International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) on October 11, German Federal Ministry of Development Cooperation (BMZ)

On behalf of the International Campaign for Tibet, thank you for organizing this important conference and the opportunity to speak today on the Chinese government's extensive use of surveillance targeting the Tibetan people.

Not surprisingly, China and thankfully the situation in Tibet and also the Uyghur region have been raised already several times today.

Rightfully so. Because China is a Leninist style one-party state that pursues a policy of so called Sinicization of religion towards Tibetan Buddhists, Uyghur Muslims and Chinese Christians, and others. And I urge for caution when using the term "Sinicization", as we should not accept the rather crude ideology of the Chinese Communist Party as the equivalent to Chinese culture. Whatever the latter may be.

In this context, the Chinese government is deliberately targeting Tibetan Buddhism.

Why? Because the tenets of Tibetan Buddhism are central to Tibetan civilization.

A multitude of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) so-called regulations and laws assert official control of all aspects of Tibetan Buddhism. This includes recognition of lamas, religious venues, affiliations, personnel, schools, and religious activities.

President Xi Jinping declared that religious institutions and clergy should serve the state's "highest interests" by prioritizing the political leadership, state socialism, and CCP priorities above the religious canon.

A particularly egregious violation of Tibetan Buddhists' rights is the CCP's interference in the reincarnation process of Tibetan spiritual leaders in and outside Tibet, most prominently its expected plan to disregard the 14th Dalai Lama's authority to determine his own successor.

Returning to surveillance and AI. The CCP's methods are of dystopian proportions aiming to eliminate the integrity and genuine practice of Tibetan Buddhism.

Both human and technological means are deployed.

It is important to understand that Tibetan Buddhist monasteries serve as both places of faith and community, and as schools and universities transmitting Buddhist philosophy, literature, art, and Tibetan history over generations.

This is why as many as more than 6,000 government cadres operate in as many as 1,800 monasteries in the "Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR)."

This means at least three to four cadres in every monastery. The number may be higher, as these figures are from 2015.

One of the more pervasive oppressive measures are "reeducation campaigns" that force the monastic community and laypeople to profess devotion to the Chinese Communist Party.

The aim of such campaigns in Party speak is to instill the so-called "three consciousnesses" among monks and Buddhist laypeople.

Specifically, "national consciousness", "civic consciousness" and - most bizarrely for an autocratic state without separation of powers - "consciousness for the rule of law".

Monks are forced to "expose and condemn" the Dalai Lama and to "preserve the unity of the motherland". They have to "learn the Party's policies, be grateful for the Party's care, and play an active role in the religious community."

I could go on with CCP language.

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At the same time, a sophisticated network of both human and electronic surveillance is used to control the monastic community.

The methods deployed are of dystopian proportions.

In a community predicated on trust and intimacy, of close bonds between teacher and student, sealed by vows, the suspicions caused by intrusive human intelligence gathering severely compromise the basis of meditative progress.

CCTV cameras are widely deployed for surveillance of the monasteries within and outside their vicinities.

These deliberately visible cameras are the most prominent tool used by law enforcement agencies to maintain surveillance of the monastic community, retain a cumulative record, and proactively crush any hint of dissent.

The presence of ever-watching cameras produces a suffocating environment for the monastic community.

Less visible means are equally pervasive. The messaging App WeChat is popular among the monastic community. As the dominant social media app in Tibet and China, it is subject to state laws on content control.

Monks face arrest for messages as simple as sharing images of the Dalai Lama or talking about the state of Tibetan language.

Facial recognition and artificial intelligence technology for surveillance is also used to classify Tibetans as a “problematic group”. Monks and nuns are subject to the same surveillance as all other Tibetans.

Digital forensic analysis of an app Tibetans are being forced to install at police checkpoints revealed it is a surveillance tool providing access to sensitive data and control over key device functionalities.

The CCP’s imposition of fear and suspicion via human and technological intelligence gathering erodes the core of the Tibetan Buddhist’s tradition of close community and trust and intimacy between teacher and student.

It constrains the way people communicate by creating a society-wide ‘chilling effect’ on the way they think, feel and relate to each other.

I would like to offer the following recommendations to governments.

- Raise electronic surveillance of Tibetan Buddhists as violations of both the right to privacy and freedom of religion.
- Recognize the CCP’s concept of “Sinicization” as a systematic assault on religion, and prioritize combatting this human rights violation.
- Understand AI as the “spider in the web” – integrating facial recognition technology, cameras, control of the internet, surveillance apps, DNA data collection, QR codes on residential buildings, and physical surveillance.
- As China is exporting such technology abroad, states should not just view these products as a threat to their own public safety, but also as an ethical question. Do we want to see the same cameras on our public spaces that we see in Tibetan monasteries? I do not believe so.

Let me end on a positive note.

In 2022, Tibetan Buddhist monk Geshe Lobsang Monlam, and a team of more than 150 editors and staff in Dharamsala, India, published the 223 volume “Grand Monlam Tibetan Dictionary,” containing over 360,000 Tibetan-language definitions. This has given rise to 37 apps and a website.

In December 2023, Dr. Lobsang Monlam launched Monlam AI, a platform providing access to four machine learning models comprising machine translation, optical character recognition, speech-to-text, and text-to-speech functionalities.

Uniquely, the software is based on 30 million pages of Tibetan literature, from the fields of religion, philosophy, and psychology.

These examples demonstrate the innovations possible when Tibetans are empowered and free to practice, explore, and evolve their religious practice and language.

Thank you.



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ⁱ Remarks based on information published by the International Campaign for Tibet. The author is grateful for reports by the Central Tibetan Administration, the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy and by Tibet Watch/Turquoise Roof.