



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Investigation of Tibetan officials in historical Dechen reveals rampant corruption in Chinese bureaucracy

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Several senior officials in Dechen (Ch: Diqing) prefecture in present-day Yunnan Province have been investigated in recent months by China's anti-graft agency, an indication of the high levels of corruption among Chinese officialdom – or, perhaps, of political instability.

The officials under investigation are ethnic Tibetans, one of whom had served as governor while at least three others had served at the level of deputy governor of Dechen Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, the only Tibetan prefecture in Yunnan province. Two of them even headed the United Front Work Department (UFWD) of Dechen and nearby Lijiang, a prefecture-level city. Chinese state media announced that they have undergone investigation “suspected of serious violations of discipline and laws,” the standard reasoning cited for all such investigations.

Corruption is endemic in Tibet under Chinese rule. Since the beginning of Xi Jinping's rule, striking against corruption has been one of his signature campaigns. Instead of effectively tackling the endemic socio-political problem, in the absence of real checks and balances or any form of transparency Xi's anti-graft campaign in fact serves the purpose of shoring up legitimacy for the Party and popular support for his indefinite rule.

Since April 2024, investigations have been started or actions taken against the following senior Tibetan officials from Dechen: Kalsang Namgyal (under investigation as of September 22, 2024), the head of the UFWD (as well as former deputy governor) of Dechen; Tashi Dhondup (under investigation as of August 30, 2024), member of the Standing Committee of Dechen and Secretary of the Political and Legal Committee; Feng Yuxiang (under investigation as of June 24, 2024), deputy secretary of the Lijiang City Party Committee and head of UFWD; Jangchup (Jiang Chu) (dismissed on May 19, 2024) executive vice governor of Dechen; and Qi Jianxin (dismissed on April 9, 2024), former governor of Dechen, who was dismissed from his then government position of Counselor in the prefecture after investigations were launched against him by the anti-corruption agency.

Namgyal spent all his professional career in Dechen, where he began working in 1991 in the finance bureau. Feng and Qi are both mentioned as being of Tibetan ethnicity despite using Chinese names; in the Kham and Amdo areas of eastern Tibet some Tibetans have been given Chinese names. Feng comes from Dechen and worked there before being transferred to Lijiang.

Historic Dechen

Dechen is in the southern part of Kham and covers an area of 9,189 square miles, making it larger than Israel and approximately the size of the American state of New Hampshire. It is currently divided into three administrative counties: Gyalthang (Xianggelila, formerly Zhongdian), Jol (Dechen), and Balung (Weixi). Until the formation of the prefecture in 1957, when it was renamed as Dechen, Gyalthang was the most well-known place in the region, and was part of the traditional trio of regions

known in Tibetan as Baligyal (Bathang and Lithang, which are in current Sichuan, and Gyalthang). It was an important stop in the historical “Ancient Tea Horse Trading Route” for the lucrative tea trade to the Tibetan capital Lhasa and beyond.

At the end of 2022, Dechen’s total population was listed as 371,700 with Tibetans being the largest community with a population of 134,800, accounting for 36.26% of the total population, according to Yunnan Government statistics.

Among the present-day Tibetan areas, Dechen is less well known internationally. In an attempt to attract Chinese tourists, on December 17, 2001 the authorities in China renamed the prefecture capital Gyalthang as Shangri-La City (Xianggelila) after the fictional land of Shangri-La in the 1933 James Hilton novel Lost Horizon.

Even though Dechen is at a great distance from Lhasa, it had close political and spiritual connections to Tibet and Tibetan rulers of the past. The fifth Dalai Lama had established Gyalthang’s most famous monastery of Gaden Sumtsenling. The 65th Gaden Tripa (1801-1807), head of the Gelug lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, Gedun Tsultrim, was from Gyalthang. Like many other Tibetan Buddhists of Gyalthang, he began his spiritual education first in Gaden Sumtsenling and then went to Lhasa to study at Sera Monastery.

When the Chinese People’s Liberation Army started occupying eastern Tibet, including Gyalthang, the people “clearly identified and aligned themselves with the government in Lhasa under the Dalai Lama’s administration,” [according to scholar Dawa Lokyitsang](#), whose grandfather is from Gyalthang.

In June 2003, envoys of the Dalai Lama, led by special envoy Lodi Gyari, visited Gyalthang as part of the rounds of talks between Tibetan and Chinese officials. In his statement, [Gyari said](#), “We have been impressed by efforts to protect the beautiful environment of Gyalthang as well as the living conditions of some of the families that we visited. However, we emphasized to the officials the importance of maintaining Tibetan religious, cultural and linguistic identity along with the material development. Our visit was too short for us to assess in an adequate manner how effectively the Tibetan language, culture, religion and identity are being preserved, protected and promoted in this Tibetan area.”

Among contemporary prominent Tibetans from Dechen include the former head of the Central Tibetan Administration, Samdhong Rinpoche, who was born in Jol. He began his spiritual study in the Gaden Dechenling Monastery in Jol and did his further studies in Drepung Monastery in Lhasa. In fact, there were reports in the media in 2017 that the Dalai Lama had sent him on “[a discreet visit to Kunming](#)” which is the capital of Yunnan, in November of that year. Some other reports indicated that he had gone to Gyalthang, too. Within Tibet, Che Dalha (Qi Zhala), the former governor of the Tibet Autonomous Region, was born in Gyalthang and worked in the prefecture before being transferred to Lhasa in 2017.

Of particular interest is the fact that two of the officials being investigated were heading the UFWD. The UFWD is the key authority implementing policies aimed at controlling all aspects of Tibetan life under the People’s Republic of China. Therefore, leadership of the UFWD at all levels is chosen through the utmost scrutiny and only the most trust-worthy individuals find a place in the organization. The current governor of Dechen Prefecture, Zhang Weidong, who is said to be a Tibetan, was also head of the UFWD in 2015.

In 2018, significant structural reforms were announced in the role of the UFWD and in 2022, [Xi Jinping gave major guidelines](#) during the UFWD conference.

The Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), that oversees all such investigations against officials, including those in Dechen, is secretive at all levels. Only after charges have been levelled and sentencing finalized will we come to know the reasons for the investigations and dismissals of the Tibetan officials from Dechen.



International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) | 1825 Jefferson Place NW | Washington, DC 20036 | United States of America
Phone: (202) 785-1515 | Fax: (202) 785-4343 | info@savetibet.org

ICT Europe
Funenpark 1D | 1018 AK
Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Phone: +31 (0)20 3308265
Fax: +31 (0)20 3308266
icteurope@savetibet.nl

ICT Deutschland e.V.
Schönhauser Allee 163 | 10435
Berlin, Germany
Phone: +49 (0)30 27879086
Fax: +49 (0)30 27879087
info@savetibet.de

ICT Brussels
11, rue de la linière | 1060
Brussels, Belgium
Phone: +32 (0)2 609 44 10
Fax: +32 (0)2 609 44 32
info@savetibet.eu