

Tibet's Last Stand?

Warren W. Smith

The demonstrations and riots that broke out in Tibet this past March were the largest anti-Chinese protests there since March 1989, when martial law was imposed for a year, and arguably the most serious since the massive and bloody revolt of 1959. Not only their magnitude, but the spread of these protests to all parts of the Tibetan Plateau—including areas outside the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR)—fully justify characterizing them as a Tibetan national uprising.

The explosion of anger and violence has arguably been building for years in response to deliberate Chinese policies designed to extinguish, once and for all, the last vestiges of Tibetan separatism. Indeed, the popular Tibetan reaction has had an air of finality, even desperation, about it, as though 2008 is the last chance Tibetans may have to preserve their national and cultural identity.

The response of the Chinese government and its security forces to the Tibetan Uprising has been entirely predictable, as has its incessant propaganda line ever since. The Han Chinese leadership feels close to its goal of extinguishing the Tibetan spirit of resistance, as it has done over many centuries to other peoples now thoroughly integrated as Han people. Any sign of weakness risks reversing decades of patient effort and might also be interpreted by other non-Han people within the borders of the People's Republic—the Uighurs of East Turkestan, for example—as an

invitation to defy the central authorities. In this context, perhaps the leadership also reasons that its claims to Taiwan will be harmed if Tibetan nationalism is allowed any expression.

What neither Tibetan nor Chinese leaders seem to have expected, however, is that the Tibetan Uprising has triggered a vast rally-round-the-flag phenomenon in support of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This is true for the vast majority of Chinese in China, who have been inculcated with Chinese propaganda on Tibet since the day they were born. But it is also true of most Chinese living outside of China, who adhere to the CCP's version of Tibetan history despite their access to another version of Tibetan reality. This reaction speaks volumes about the character of contemporary Chinese nationalism, and it bears important implication for the policies of the United States and other democratic nations.

On March 10, 2008, the 49th anniversary of the 1959 revolt that led to the exile of the Dalai Lama into India, some 200 monks of Drepung (Zhebang) monastery, located a few miles northwest of Lhasa, attempted to march into the center of the city. They were soon stopped by Chinese security police; some were arrested and beaten and the rest were confined to their monastery, which was surrounded by police. Meanwhile, a smaller number of monks from another of Lhasa's large monasteries, Sera (Sela), were arrested near the Jokhang (Dazhao), the central temple of Lhasa, for carrying the banned Tibetan flag. There were also smaller demonstrations in other parts of Tibet, including eastern Tibet outside the TAR.

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The purpose of the protests was clear from their symbols and slogans, which included the Tibetan national flag and shouts for freedom and independence from Chinese rule. Given that the last monk to carry a Tibetan flag in a demonstration back in 1989 was shot through the head, the courage of these monks was astounding. Additional sources of discontent were the marginalization of Tibetans and their culture due to the flood of Chinese to Tibet after the opening of the railroad in 2006; new restrictions on religion; patriotic education campaigns in monasteries; and frustration at the lack of progress in the Dalai Lama's attempt to engage the Chinese in a dialogue about Tibetan autonomy.

On March 11, an estimated 600 monks from Sera were prevented from marching on Lhasa to demand the release of their fellows arrested the day before. Again some monks were beaten and arrested, and their monastery was subsequently surrounded by police. The next day, some twenty miles to the east, security forces also prevented monks from the last of the three great monasteries near Lhasa, Ganden, from demonstrating, along with nuns from the Chutsang (Qusang) nunnery in Lhasa. The tactic of surrounding monasteries to prevent further protests and to facilitate subsequent police investigations was to become a factor in later events. Monks confined to their quarters were deprived of food and water and those arrested were reportedly mistreated in police custody. Most Chinese security personnel were occupied with these duties when a much larger protest broke out on Friday, March 14.

Some 200 monks from an important monastery in the old Tibetan section of Lhasa called Ramoche (Xiaozhao) attempted to demonstrate and were again beaten. This set off a large-scale riot by thousands of Tibetans that lasted for



Tibetan monks protesting in Qinghai province, March 17, 2008

several hours. When mostly unarmed security personnel quickly abandoned the scene, the Tibetans ransacked and burned as many as 1,200 Chinese shops, offices and residences in the area and overturned and set fire to 84 vehicles. Some 325 people, mostly Han Chinese, were injured; 22 were killed, most of them Han shopkeepers. Total damage was estimated at 280 million yuan (\$40 million).¹

Later that day Chinese security personnel, both the paramilitary People's Armed Police and disguised units of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), were ordered to use lethal force against the demonstrators. They did so, killing an estimated fifty to one hundred Tibetans and injuring many others. As this was taking place, another demonstration erupted in eastern Tibet, in what is now a part of Gansu Province. Some 400 monks from the Labrang (Labuleng) monastery were forcibly dispersed by security police, leading to a protest the next day by 5,000–10,000 local Tibetans, who again burned the shops of local Han and Hui (Chinese Muslims) in the town adjacent to the monastery. Several Tibetans were reportedly

¹“More Than 300 Innocent People Injured in Lhasa Riot, Damage up to 200 Million Yuan”, Beijing Xinhua in English, March 19, 2008; “Magnitude of Riot Losses Much Larger”, Beijing *China Daily* in English, April 10, 2008.

killed by Chinese security forces.

Further demonstrations and riots by Tibetans, and repression by Chinese security forces, continued for several days, spreading into eastern Tibet. The basic pattern of escalation remained the same: Monks protested, police attacked them, and in angry response more monks and laypeople took to the streets, leading to more beatings, shootings and arrests, and to the surrounding of monasteries by security forces. All told, more than ninety demonstrations and riots erupted. Property damage was extensive and, according to information received by the Tibetan government in exile, as many as 140 protestors were killed by Chinese security forces and police.

China's Reaction

As these events were transpiring Tibetan and Chinese Communist leaders were gathered in Beijing for the annual meeting of the National People's Congress. The Tibetan chairman of the TAR government, Jampa Phuntsok (Qiangba Puncog), told the foreign press that security personnel in Lhasa had exercised remarkable restraint and had used no lethal force. He also said that the PLA was not involved. This falsehood may have reflected the instructions that he and Chinese officials had issued upon leaving Lhasa, or the reluctance of those remaining to tell him what had actually transpired. Or perhaps he knew what happened but simply lied about it. In any event, his version of reality became official truth; to this day, the Chinese government has denied that any Tibetans died at the hands of the security police. Significantly, only Zhang Qingli, the Han Chinese chief of the CCP in Tibet, returned to Lhasa to handle the situation, while Tibetan officials all remained in Beijing.

World leaders quickly called on the Chinese authorities to exercise restraint and to talk to the Dalai Lama. Whether Chinese leaders even debated such a response is unknown, although their instructions to Lhasa security forces to exercise restraint at least indicated some sensitivity to adverse publicity before the Olympics. Once the Lhasa riots got out of control, however, Chinese officials opted for the traditional tactics of

massive repression accompanied by a flood of propaganda denouncing the Dalai Lama and blaming him for having instigated the riots. China's evidence for this claim was based upon attempts of the "Dalai Clique", by which the Chinese mean all Tibetan organizations in exile, to organize protests worldwide against the Beijing Olympics.

One such event, a quixotic "March on Tibet" organized by Tibetans in India, had been given the rather provocative name "Tibetan People's Uprising Movement", in reference to the 1959 events being commemorated. The Chinese dutifully cited the phrase as irrefutable evidence of the Dalai Clique's involvement. In fairness, China may be justified in claiming that the Dalai Lama's "clique" was involved, but not the Dalai Lama himself, who was so upset at the deviation from his policy of non-violence and dialogue that he threatened to resign from his position as head of the Tibetan government in exile. As some Tibetans pointed out, had the Dalai Lama really instigated the protests in Tibet they would have been far more massive.

Tibetans in exile undoubtedly intended to exploit China's hosting of the Olympics to publicize their cause. Those within Tibet also no doubt had that in mind. Tibetans and their supporters were subsequently able to turn the Olympic Torch relay that Beijing had promoted as a "Journey of Harmony" into a propaganda disaster for China. Protestors disrupted the torch's journey in London and Paris, leading to efforts to conceal it from the public in San Francisco, Islamabad, New Delhi and Jakarta. Attempts by the Chinese Embassy and student organizations in Australia to "let China's voice be heard" at the Canberra relay led to conflicts with Tibet supporters. Chinese students in Seoul, organized there as elsewhere by the Chinese Embassy, offended many Koreans with their behavior.

Chinese around the world reacted with outrage at what they considered an attempt by Tibetan separatists to defame China and spoil the Beijing Olympics. Comments by many Chinese, both within China and abroad, revealed that they were unaware of any reason why Tibetans should question or oppose Chinese rule. The Chinese people have been taught that China liberated Tibetans from their own

feudal misrule. Chinese people accept as fact that Tibetans are now vastly better off than they were under the “feudal” oppression of the Dalai Lama, and that this has all been due to the generosity of the Chinese government and people. They have been taught that the Dalai Lama then betrayed his motherland in 1959, that he has done nothing but make trouble for China ever since, and that his only goal is the restoration of his feudal rule.

China’s fundamental justification for its rule over Tibet is based on Marxist ideology. As one of Mao’s most famous and pithy remarks had it, “the national issue is in essence a class issue.” Lenin and Stalin used this theory, based upon Marx’s belief that man’s consciousness is determined by his class status, to further “proletarian internationalism” at the expense of national self-determination in the former Soviet Union, and Mao did the same in Communist China.

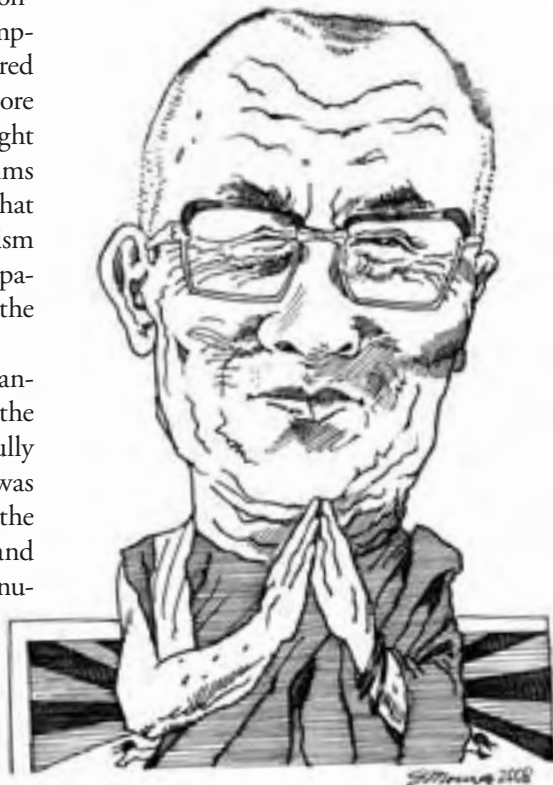
Clearly, most Chinese want to believe their government’s propaganda about Tibet, since they understandably prefer to see themselves as benevolent toward Tibetans rather than as oppressors and exploiters. That is why they seem genuinely to believe the propaganda that Tibetans actually have enjoyed autonomy, that they in fact have ruled their own autonomous region, and even that they, as minority nationalities, have received preferences such as exemption from the “one-child policy” and preferred admission to educational opportunities. More than that, however, Chinese have been taught all their lives that *they* have been the victims of Western imperialism, and so to suggest that they may in fact be *perpetrators* of imperialism is to risk undermining the entire mental apparatus that enables them to make sense of the world.

The Party hastened to repeat all the standard propaganda themes in the wake of the March 2008 uprising: Tibet was “peacefully liberated” in 1950; the 1959 Tibetan revolt was an attempt by the feudal serf-owners, led by the Dalai Lama, to perpetuate their oppression and exploitation of Tibetan “serfs and slaves”; genuine liberation from Tibet’s dark, barbaric, cruel, feudal hell on earth was achieved by the subsequent “democratic reforms.” The Chinese Communists also deny that there ever was any question about Tibet’s political

status or the legitimacy of Chinese rule, for Tibet had “always” been a part of China.

Chinese also like to cite the funds that their government has devoted to the preservation of monasteries and cultural relics in Tibet, apparently ignorant of the government-sponsored looting of the vast wealth of Tibet’s monasteries during the democratic reforms and the destruction of every monastery save a dozen during the Cultural Revolution. They speak of how Tibetans have benefited from China’s official largesse and economic development, without mentioning the exploitation of Tibet’s forest and mineral wealth, or the fact that economic development in Tibet has mostly benefited Chinese who have moved there in large numbers, not Tibetans.

Chinese are also unaware that hundreds of thousands of Tibetans were killed in the 1950 and 1959 events, or died in prisons or labor camps or during the subsequent famine. Chinese officials ridicule the claim of the Tibetan government in exile that 1.2 million Tibetans were killed in the course of the imposition of Chinese rule over Tibet by citing statistics that there were only 1 million Tibetans in Tibet at the time. However, what the Chinese refer to as Tibet is only what they designated as the



Tibetan Autonomous Region, while the total population of Tibetans in actual Tibetan lands was 2.8 million. Tibetan claims may be exaggerated, but most independent estimates agree that at least hundreds of thousands died during that period. Similarly, Chinese citizens and many foreign commentators tend to accept statistics that show that Tibetans are still 92 percent of the population of the TAR, despite all evidence to the contrary.

China's reaction to the recent Tibetan uprising has also included a vociferous denial of any Chinese government responsibility for Tibetan discontent. Chinese officials and Chinese citizens have aggressively attacked all critics of China and even the relatively few Chinese who have expressed any sympathy for Tibetans, or suggested that China should have a dialogue with the Dalai Lama. Chinese opinions online have tended to favor even more severe repression of Tibetans for their disloyalty and supposed ingratitude.

Chinese government propaganda now labels the Tibetan protests and riots the "3.14 incident" and emphasizes the death of innocent Chinese at the hands of Tibetan rioters. Chinese media ignore the peaceful protests and their violent repression in the days preceding March 14, and they ignore as well as the widespread protests in other parts of Tibet in the days thereafter. By confining its account to the single day of the protests when Tibetans turned violent and killed several Chinese, the Chinese government has intentionally inflamed Chinese animosity against Tibetans and has fueled anger against what is internally regarded as distorted Western media coverage.

China's self-righteous indignation at what it considers to be its critics' willful distortion of reality in Tibet, and its total unwillingness to admit any legitimate reasons for Tibetan discontent, have led it to blame the usual scapegoats—not only the Dalai Clique but also "hostile Western forces." Several Chinese articles have suggested that the CIA was behind the riots in Tibet, and that various CIA-funded organizations in the United States, particularly the National Endowment for Democracy, have funded "Dalai Clique" organizations. In an attempt to label Tibetans as terrorists, China has charged the Tibetan Youth Congress with having been a primary instigator

of the riots, and called it a terrorist organization "more catastrophic than bin Laden."²

These accusations have made China look more like a 19th-century state desperately trying to hold on to its empire than the modern 21st-century state image it had hoped to promote at the Olympics. Indeed, China's angry intransigence has exposed many of the elements of the Chinese sense of aggrieved nationalism. The CCP has maintained itself in power partly by constantly reminding the Chinese people of the "hundred years of humiliation" suffered at the hands of Western powers before liberation. Thanks to this cultivated sense of victimhood, most Chinese regard any foreign criticism as an attempt to prevent China from resuming its rightful role as a major world power. They instinctively dismiss foreign criticisms on any subject as "groundless", as an "interference in China's internal affairs", and, perhaps most tellingly, as having the potential to "hurt the feelings of the Chinese people."

This sort of reaction, and the Chinese leadership's cultivation of it, gives an important clue to the meaning of the CCP's new slogans promoting a "harmonious society" in domestic policy and a "harmonious world" in foreign policy. The Chinese conception of harmony is based upon Confucian doctrines of coerced and enforced cultural and political conformity. The goal of these doctrines is internal unity, which has certainly been achieved among the Han Chinese in regard to Tibet, and international acceptance of China's political system as a legitimate alternative to Western democratic traditions. China denounces its critics for politicizing the Olympics, but China itself has politicized the Olympics by using them to promote these manipulative themes, as well as the legitimacy of the CCP's one-party rule. The harmonious society theme will no doubt be illustrated at the Olympics by happy minorities singing and dancing, prominently among them the colorful Tibetans, a travesty that is by itself sufficient reason for any respectable world leader to decline to witness the opening ceremonies.

²"TYC a Terrorist Organization More Catastrophic than Bin Laden", *Renmin Ribao* (Beijing), April 10, 2008.

International Reaction

The international response to the events in Tibet has been almost exclusively confined to platitudes from world leaders suggesting that China should exercise restraint in Tibet and that Chinese leaders should talk to the Dalai Lama. But can any of these leaders possibly believe that China might suddenly abandon all its anti-Dalai Lama denunciations and decide that he is the solution after all? Their animosity toward him for having spoiled China's celebration of the Olympics makes that most unlikely. The Dalai Lama's Middle Way strategy has evoked only contempt from China, which maintains that it will talk to him only under "certain conditions" that turn out, on examination, to mean his total capitulation to Chinese demands. These conditions would require his abandoning all "splittist activities", apparently meaning all his international activities and perhaps even the existence of his government-in-exile.

This interpretation is confirmed by China's line in recent months. On April 24, China repeated its conditional willingness to talk with the Dalai Lama, but with the added stipulation that he should stop trying to sabotage the Beijing Olympics. China's real goal in offering talks was obvious from the statement of the Chinese Foreign Ministry:

It is hoped that through contact and consultation, the Dalai side will take credible moves to stop activities aimed at splitting China, stop plotting and inciting violence and stop disrupting and sabotaging the Beijing Olympic Games so as to create conditions for talks.³

The Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamsala uncharacteristically refused to hold anything more than "informal meetings" until Beijing restored "normalcy" in Tibet. It demanded further that the Chinese leadership should "understand the reality and acknowledge the positive role of His Holiness the Dalai Lama rather than indulging in a vilification campaign that is even contained in the same Xinhua report [offering talks]."⁴ Dharamsala eventually had to accept the Chinese offer,

pressured to do so no doubt by its Western government supporters, but the subsequent meeting in Shenzhen on May 4 led to nothing but a Chinese demand that the Dalai Lama should stop his campaign for Tibetan independence, stop instigating violence in Tibet and stop trying to sabotage the Olympics before any real talks could begin. Given that the Dalai Lama is guilty of none of these accusations, the potential for an actual dialogue seems small indeed.

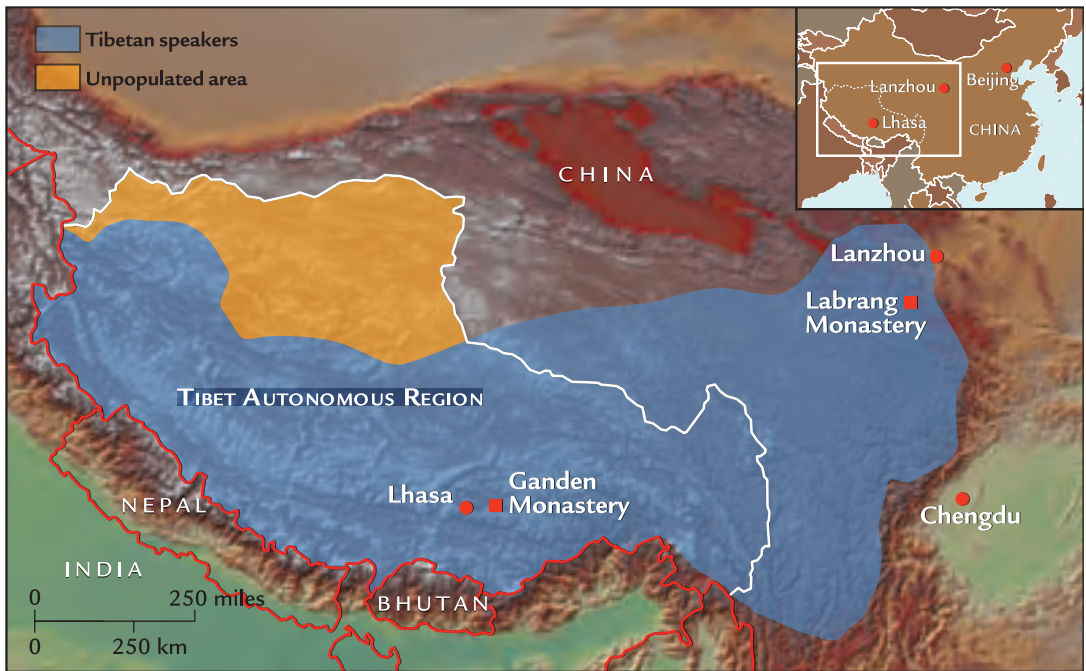
The adherence of the Chinese government and people to their own version of Tibetan history leaves little room for international understanding or progress toward a political solution to the Tibet issue. It seems clear that China so fears the potential for any remnant of Tibetan culture and corporate identity to spark a revival of Tibetan nationalism and separatism that it has had to abrogate all its promises of genuine autonomy in favor of the traditional Chinese assimilationist solution to frontier problems. China has apparently realized that virtually all aspects of Tibetan culture have nationalist implications, and therefore cannot be allowed to survive without posing a threat to China's territorial integrity.

As a result, many Tibetans no longer believe in the possibility of real autonomy under China, or that China will allow any remnant of Tibetan culture to survive. Given that real autonomy is infeasible, Tibetans have been moved to demand independence, or at least self-determination. That may be infeasible too, but no less so than autonomy.

Despite a certain Tibetan sense of euphoria, now that their struggle for survival has briefly caught the attention of the world, China's repressive methods may achieve a more lasting effect. Thousands of Tibetans have been detained and hundreds formally charged with crimes in Lhasa and eastern Tibet. Many if not most of those detained will have suffered beatings, and they are the

³"China's Central Government Department to Meet with Dalai's Private Representative", Xinhua, April 24, 2008.

⁴"Press Statement by Kalon Tripa on Xinhua Report of China's Wishing to Meet His Holiness the Dalai Lama's Envoys", Central Tibetan Administration, April 25, 2008.



Source: Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, University of Texas Library, 1990. Design by Archeographics.

lucky ones. They will have been coerced through threats to their families to reveal the names of the leaders and the instigators of the demonstrations and riots, and those so named will surely suffer far worse fates. If past Chinese practice against Tibetans is any guide, these named leaders will be tortured to confess their crimes and reveal the names of others involved. Those found responsible for the killings of Chinese shopkeepers will be given death sentences, and others involved in “beating, smashing, looting and burning” will receive long prison sentences from which many will emerge, if they emerge at all, as broken remnants of their former selves.

All Tibetans, even supposedly loyal Tibetan cadres, will be subjected to ever more intense “patriotic education” and pressure to publicly denounce the Dalai Lama. Monks will be coerced to denounce their spiritual leader and pledge loyalty to China and the CCP. Even escape from Tibet is now very difficult; thanks to the almost total lock-down of Tibet by Chinese security, the Tibetan Reception Center in Kathmandu, which usually has a few hundred Tibetan refugees at any time, was at the end of April reportedly almost empty.

China’s ultimate defense for its claim to Tibet is similar in some ways to the American Manifest Destiny arguments of the 19th century

in regard to the North American continent and its natives. As Chairman Mao said openly to Tibetans in the early 1950s, Tibet should fulfill China’s need for natural resources while China would fulfill Tibet’s need for people. Much like 19th-century American attitudes toward the unexplored West, Chinese have tended to regard Tibet not as a nation or Tibetans as a distinct people, but as an essentially empty territory open for settlement and exploitation.

The difference is that Tibetans have had for many centuries a high and ancient civilization with a unique language, an extensive literature, a singular religious culture, a functioning government administering a defined territory, and a Tibetan consciousness as a unitary and distinct nation. Americans, too, never disguised their objectives, while Chinese pretend that Tibet has always been part of China, and that China has “liberated” Tibetans from “feudalism.”

The Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876 was not only Custer’s last stand; it was also the last real victory for the remaining free Indian nations, who gained a gratifying win but knew that it meant their end. Given the severity of China’s current campaign of repression in Tibet, and the utter lack of Chinese acceptance of any responsibility for Tibetan discontent, one can only hope that the Tibetan uprising of 2008 is not Tibet’s last stand. 🇧🇹

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