



REPRESSION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



Riot police at the Kumbum Monastery during the Monlam Prayer Festival in 2014

The Chinese government's implementation of state religious policy is particularly harsh in Tibet. Tibetan Buddhism is an integral element of Tibetan identity and Tibetan nationalism and therefore, is perceived as a potential threat to the unity of the country and the authority of the Communist Party, which requires Chinese citizens to 'love the country' above all else.

China attempts to convey an image to the world of government tolerance for religion. In Tibet, it may appear that some monastic institutions are thriving, and that Tibetans are still able to express their devotion through traditional rituals; yet, the reality behind the appearance is quite different. Monasteries that once housed thousands of monks are now reduced to a few hundred, whose main responsibility is no longer

religious study but tending to the buildings and tourists.

New regulations in 2005, 2007 and 2008 gave Chinese authorities greater control over all aspects of Tibetan Buddhism through a number of policies restricting traditional practices. Under the new rules, the Chinese government claimed the authority to confer the Geshe degree; meaning that the equivalent of a doctorate in the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism is arbitrated by lay bureaucrats instead of senior lamas. Traditionally Geshe degrees were conferred only after a monk had passed an arduous course of study and been examined by other monk scholars; but due to restrictions on religious practice and the poor quality of teachings and traditional instruction in many areas, the content is much simpler than before and the hollow degree lacks legitimacy.



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In fact, according to a Tibetan scholar based in exile, “candidates for the Geshe have to be selected before the exam not on the basis of achievements in Buddhist studies but on the basis of their political studies.”

In September 2007, the Chinese government announced measures stating that all reincarnated lamas (tulku) must have government approval. The measures, which are deliberately targeted at one of the core belief systems of Tibetan Buddhism, reveal the CCP’s agenda to undermine and supplant the Tibetan religious hierarchy and weaken the authority of Tibetan religious leaders including the Dalai Lama.

The new “management measures for the reincarnation of living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism”, which are described by the official press as “*an important move to institutionalize the management of reincarnation*” were passed by the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) for implementation from September 1, 2007. In the measures, SARA states that reincarnations of “Living Buddhas” who do not have government approval are “*illegal or invalid*”, which is intended to convey that the Tibetan system of recognizing and educating reincarnate lamas is no longer relevant, because it is the government that decides whether a reincarnation is a legitimate religious figure or not.

Regarding the official disapproval of display of pictures of the Dalai Lama, origins of this practice can be traced back to the “Third Forum on Tibet Work” in 1994. After this important strategy meeting of PRC policy makers on Tibet, an “Advisory Opinion” by the official “Chinese Buddhist Association” emerged in 1996, presumably based on unpublished party orders. Both in public statements and regional and

local regulations, restrictions on the sale, reprinting and the possession of portraits of the Dalai Lama have been reiterated since the apparent formulation of these policies in 1994, albeit with different nuances, and differentiating between public places and monasteries, and between the targeted groups, monks and nuns or the general populace. In February 2015, new regulations published in the Rebkong (Chinese: Tongren) area of eastern Tibet warn that various activities, including praying and lighting butter-lamps for the Dalai Lama or people who have self-immolated, are ‘illegal’ and will be penalized.¹

Moreover, ‘patriotic education’ campaigns are a regular feature of monastic life and have intensified since the March 2008 demonstrations. Chinese government authorities have used the Spring 2008 protests in Tibet as justification for imposing further restrictions on monasteries. The intensification of patriotic education has been accompanied by punitive searches of monasteries by security forces (including those previously uninvolved in protests), arrests of monks for possession of photos of the Dalai Lama, and the requirement that individuals sign statements confessing involvement in the protests. In many cases, heads of monasteries have had to promise to fly the Chinese flag and guarantee that no further demonstrations will take place. Monks without proper residency permits are expelled and sent home, and severe travel limitations are in place restricting movement from monastery to monastery. Some monks have chosen to leave voluntarily after finding the new levels of surveillance too burdensome to their religious practice. A core requirement of patriotic education is to denounce the Dalai Lama, often in writing and sometimes on video.

¹ *Praying and lighting butter-lamps for Dalai Lama ‘illegal’: new regulations in Rebkong*, ICT, April 14, 2015. <http://www.savetibet.org/praying-and-lighting-butter-lamps-for-dalai-lama-illegal-new-regulations-in-rebkong/>



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The Chinese authorities have singled out many important and influential centers of Tibetan Buddhist culture – notably Kirti monastery in Ngaba (Chinese: Aba), Sichuan (the Tibetan area of Amdo). The day after the self-immolation of a young Kirti monk called Phuntsog on March 11, 2011, the military presence in Ngaba was intensified, with increased numbers of troops arriving in the town. On March 20, 2011, officials arrived at Kirti monastery and announced that any monk who needed to leave should first take a letter of guarantee from his class tutor, one from the relevant “discipline monk” (Gekoe) and one from government officials who were now stationed at Kirti. Monks were not allowed to leave the monastery without these three documents. Officials also began an intensive patriotic education campaign called “Love the nation, love religion”.²

In September 2014, a new ‘rectification campaign’ was introduced at a county level in Driru (Chinese: Biru), Nagchu (Chinese: Naqu) prefecture of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). It was implemented as part of a broader political campaign and paramilitary crackdown following Tibetan resistance against the authorities’ efforts to compel Tibetans to display the Chinese national flag from their homes. The campaign intensified in early October 2013 when villagers refused to fly the flags, with some throwing them into a river instead. Since September 2013, dozens of Tibetans have been detained and authorities have instituted more systematic oppression and deployment of troops in a bid to prevent political unrest spreading to other parts of Nagchu and the Tibet Autonomous Region.

According to new measures imposed in September 2014³, monasteries deemed ‘illegal’ will be torn down and Tibetans who possess images of the Dalai Lama or place traditional prayer (mani) stones will be severely punished.

The new Driru measures indicate a trend towards severe penalties imposed not only on individuals, but also on entire communities in an attempt to compel Tibetans to fall in line with government policies.

Following the imposition of these new regulations, at least 26 Tibetan Buddhist nuns were expelled from a nunnery in Driru in a police raid on November 15, 2014 after the nunnery failed to denounce the Dalai Lama. This led a work team of officials to examine the registration records of the nunnery to check that its population was in line with the officially imposed quota of 140 nuns.

The language in the regulations on what constitutes an offense is deliberately opaque. This means it can be subject to interpretation by local officials according to the political climate and drive to secure a conviction of a specific individual or set a particular example.

² For more information on repression of religious freedom in Tibet see ICT’s report ‘Chinese Crackdown on Tibetan Buddhism. A report published for the People’s Republic of China’s second Universal Periodic Review’, available at <http://www.tibetpolicy.eu/wp-content/uploads/EN-report-Tibet-4.pdf>

³ The new measures have been translated by ICT from Tibetan into English and are available at <http://www.savetibet.org/harsh-new-rectification-drive-in-driru-nuns-expelled-and-warning-of-destruction-of-monasteries-and-mani-walls/>