

Religious Persecution in Tibet

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It is impossible to understand religious persecution in Tibet without understanding the political context in which it occurs and the political apparatus that the Chinese government uses to maintain control in Tibet. Religious persecution in Tibet is not just a matter of ethnic or religious conflict or discrimination by a majority against its minorities. Religious persecution in Tibet is politically motivated, and consciously implemented as policy to realize political ends.

During the first two decades after the People's Liberation Army moved into Tibet in 1950 and 1951, resistance was brutally suppressed. This was true particularly in the eastern Tibetan areas -- what Tibetans refer to as Kham and Amdo, which are now incorporated into a number of Chinese provinces -- where Chinese military forces were responsible for large-scale loss of life and the destruction of monasteries and nunneries. Their immediate objective was the implementation of the socialist reforms underway in China.

Following the 1959 uprising in Lhasa, when the Dalai Lama and some 100,000 Tibetans fled to India, the same policies were implemented in central Tibet. Within a few years, virtually all of Tibet's more than 6,000 monasteries and nunneries were destroyed. Nearly all of the more than 500,000 monks and nuns were driven from the monasteries and nunneries of Tibet; many were tortured, killed, imprisoned, or forced to disrobe. A few years later, during the Cultural Revolution, any display of religion was prohibited, punishable by beatings and imprisonment, and all religious objects were confiscated and destroyed.

There are certain continuities with the present Chinese policy on religion in Tibet. Though all of this destruction was conceived at the time as part of a socialist agenda to reconstruct Tibet, its aim was to obliterate the distinctive characteristics of Tibetan culture and civilization and absorb Tibet into China. Though Chinese society has itself undergone many changes since the end of the Cultural Revolution, the religion of Tibetans was then, as it is now, still seen as an obstacle to the goal of absorbing Tibet into China.

Religious practice did not reappear until after 1980. As restrictions were lifted during the 1980's there was a huge resurgence of religion in Tibet. Once it was clear they would not be punished, Tibetans set up altars in their homes, prayed in public, and made pilgrimages to holy places. There was, at the same time, an enormous amount of spontaneous rebuilding of temples and monasteries - almost entirely supported by people's voluntary labour and resources. Most importantly, monasteries and nunneries filled with young monks and nuns who wished to pursue a religious vocation.

Official documents from this period indicate that the attitude of the government toward religion had not changed. During this period of relative accommodation the Chinese government hoped to win the support of Tibetans while it pursued the new economic reforms. It certainly did not anticipate the enthusiasm for religion shown by a younger generation of Tibetans who had grown up under Chinese rule.

It was also during this period that the young monks and nuns began to organize demonstrations in support of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan independence, and to call for human rights and democracy. Monks and nuns were prepared to face beatings, arrest, imprisonment, and death for the peaceful expression of their beliefs. Though some of these demonstrations were large and resulted in troops opening fire on demonstrators and bystanders, many have been small - no more than a few who were prepared to face immediate arrest and imprisonment.

Since 1987 several thousand Tibetans have been arrested and imprisoned, with perhaps as many as a thousand now remaining in prison. Two thirds of those detained have been monks and nuns - most under thirty years of age and some just in their teens. Some have received sentences as long as twenty years for offences of shouting slogans, putting up posters, or distributing literature.

Religious practice is forbidden in prison. Defiance of restrictions inside the prisons results in beatings and torture, and lengthening of sentences. In a number of cases deaths have resulted from treatment received in prison.

Renewed Repression

A renewed repressive policy toward religion was given official approval at the Third National Forum on Work in Tibet, which took place in July of 1994 in Beijing. This called for a new assault on Tibetan religion and culture. In particular, the Dalai Lama is now vilified as a religious leader and denunciation of the Dalai Lama has been required as a test of loyalty. As the Chinese government has come to recognize the depth of Tibetan discontent, and how widespread nationalist feelings are, they have become obsessed with loyalty.

Propaganda has become more and more strident, and suspicion has extended to include more and more of the Tibetan population - not just monks and nuns. This has led to a climate of fear and coercion not seen since the days of the Cultural Revolution.

Some of the key documents of the Third Forum, as well as material documenting the subsequent implementation of that policy, have become available over the intervening years. There is an enormous amount of information on Chinese religious policy and its implementation available from government sources such as local newspapers and internal documents -as well as from reports of refugees. The policy of Western governments should reflect this information rather than relying on public reassurances from the Chinese government, guided tours offered to visiting dignitaries, and statements intended for foreign consumption.

A ban on the display of pictures of the Dalai Lama in public places was instituted in 1994. This was extended to include the display of all religious symbols in the homes of not just Party members, but all government workers and their families, who were required to allow their homes to be searched for altars, religious pictures, and other religious paraphernalia. A ban on the display of Dalai Lama pictures in temples and monasteries was instituted in 1996. Monasteries have been invaded by security forces and searches made of monks and nuns' quarters. In May 1996, when a team went to Ganden monastery near Lhasa to enforce a ban on Dalai Lama pictures, six monks were shot and wounded and one died. Three months later some 92 monks were expelled from the monastery for refusing to sign an affidavit denouncing the Dalai Lama. More and more expulsions have followed at Ganden, which now has just a handful of monks.

A campaign for political re-education -- the so-called Patriotic Education Campaign - was instituted in the monasteries in 1996 to implement the goals of the Third Work Forum. Political work teams were sent into monasteries and nunneries throughout Tibet, even in remote rural and nomad areas, including areas outside the Tibet Autonomous Region. This included many monasteries and nunneries in which the monks and nuns had never been involved in demonstrations or protest. These work teams frequently are accompanied by armed police, who stand guard over the monks and nuns as the work teams speak.

Political work teams remain for as long as three months. The re-education combines investigation and interrogation of individual monks and nuns with lectures by political workers. Monks and nuns are given the correct answers to a series of questions on Tibetan politics, history, and religion, and then required to take written examinations and sign a written affidavit of loyalty. To pass and be allowed to remain, monks and nuns must agree that Tibet has always been a part of China. They must assent to characterizations of the Dalai Lama as a criminal, unfit to be a religious leader, and not worthy of veneration. Refusing to participate in the re-education is not allowed. Monks and nuns who attempt to boycott the sessions are arrested and imprisoned. Failure to comply with the demands of the work team and to denounce the Dalai Lama results in expulsion or arrest. It is significant that the Dalai Lama has recently felt compelled to declare that monks and nuns should denounce him under these conditions, rather than face torture, arrest, and imprisonment.

In two cases from the spring of 1998, practitioners in retreat in mountain hermitages have been evicted and their dwellings destroyed on the grounds that the residents - mostly Buddhist nuns - had not received the requisite registration and permits from the authorities.

These two hermitages - Drag Yerpa near Lhasa and Chimpu near Samye -- have been in regular use by meditators for 1200 years and were rebuilt and occupied over the last fifteen years.

Human rights organizations have documented many cases of the closing down of monasteries, or their reduction to a skeleton staff following the arrival of the work teams.

Sometimes the monks shut down the monasteries themselves and walk out when they hear a political work team is due. A large number of these monks and nuns, after leaving or being expelled, or after serving several years in prison, head over the mountains through Nepal and become new refugees in India. As many as 10,000 monks and nuns have made this journey in the past ten years. Many have been caught and imprisoned along the way, some have been shot by border guards.

Others have died from exposure to the harsh weather in the mountains in their attempt to reach freedom.

The Panchen Lama

The ordinary practice of religion by lay people has also become more and more difficult in Tibet. In January of 1998, a new three-year campaign was launched to promote atheism. This campaign is directed at ordinary Tibetans from all walks of life, not just government officials. Its aim, according to the announcements that have accompanied the campaign, is to diminish the respect of farmers and herdsmen for religious leaders and to discourage reliance on religion. Perhaps the best single illustration of both the aims and consequences of Chinese religious policy in Tibet is the controversy surrounding the selection of the Panchen Lama. This too has resulted in the further expulsion of monks and nuns, arrests and imprisonment, the closing of monasteries and nunneries, and the flight of monks and nuns into exile - including senior religious figures who have attempted for years to work with the Chinese government. It also has led to the imprisonment of a six year-old boy -- Gendun Choekyi Nyima -- and his entire family. They have been held now for almost four years. They are guilty of no crime whatsoever. They have been allowed no visitors and their fate is unknown.

The controversy arose in May, 1995, when the Dalai Lama confirmed the selection of a boy from a nomad family living inside Tibet as the reincarnation of the 10th Panchen Lama who had died in 1989. The name of this boy had been submitted to the Dalai Lama by a search committee formed by the Panchen Lama's monastery, Tashilhunpo, near Shigatse. It is long-standing Tibetan religious tradition that the selection of a Panchen Lama must be confirmed by the Dalai Lama. This search committee had cooperated from the outset with the Chinese government, and operated under their auspices.

Examining the chronology of events going back to the hard-line policy on religion enunciated by the Third Work Forum, it is clear that the issue was not just that the Dalai Lama had announced his confirmation of the original choice independently of the Chinese government. The Dalai Lama clearly felt that he had no choice but to go ahead with the confirmation regardless of the Chinese government's wishes. The Chinese government had made its intention clear to Chadrel Rinpoche, the head of the search committee and abbot of Tashilhunpo monastery, that the final selection would be made by lottery from a list of names of several candidates. To do so would thus exclude the Dalai Lama from any religious role in the selection and establish the Chinese government as the final arbiter of religious tradition.

This lottery procedure proposed by the Chinese government has no legitimacy among Tibetans, nor was it used in the selection of the last Panchen Lama. The Chinese government was attempting to resurrect an antique procedure invented by a Manchu Emperor in the late 18th century as a way of validating its authority over Tibetan religion. Thus, we have here the bizarre spectacle of an officially atheist government determining the procedure for the selection of a religious leader.

Chadrel Rinpoche was immediately arrested. He was later sentenced to 6 years in prison, along with his assistant. A work team was sent to Tashilhunpo monastery. From that monastery alone some 32 monks were arrested for refusing to denounce Chadrel Rinpoche and for not accepting the government imposed lottery. In November, 1995, the Chinese government organized a lottery and a boy was selected. Religious leaders in Tibet, as well as ordinary monks and nuns, have been obligated to accept the choice or risk punishment. Virtually no Tibetans recognize the boy selected by the Chinese government lottery as the Panchen Lama.

Accepting the boy selected by the lottery and denouncing the boy confirmed by the Dalai Lama have become an additional test of loyalty to the Chinese government in the re-education campaign going on throughout Tibet. Failure to comply has had drastic consequences. For example, in July, 1997, at Jonang monastery in Shigatse prefecture, the 70 year-old abbot was imprisoned for several months and religious statues looted by government officials after the monks refused to comply with the conditions of the work

team. In November 1997, 100 armed soldiers were called in to force the nuns of Rakhor monastery near Lhasa to submit to patriotic education. The nuns were sent home after refusing to comply and the nunnery has now reportedly been destroyed except for the main assembly hall. These are monasteries and nunneries that have not been involved in protest before. The arrival of the work team and armed troops and the forced re-education provoke resistance - which in turn leads to a confrontation.

Links to denial of free expression

One of the most disturbing incidents occurred last spring in Drapchi prison, in the northern suburb of Lhasa, where many monks and nuns are serving sentences. At least 10 monks and nuns died as a result of attempting to stage demonstrations inside the prison on the 1st and 4th of May, 1998. The prisoners hoped to attract the attention of an official European Union delegation to Tibet making a visit to the prison. Several of the monks and nuns were shot and the remainder died from beatings. The delegation were unaware of the demonstration at the time and details of the incident did not come out until several days after the visit. To her credit, Mary Robinson, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights refused a visit to Drapchi prison during her visit to Tibet. Nevertheless, two Drepung monks were detained in September, 1998, for preparing a letter to present to her.

These few cases illustrate the dimensions of religious persecution in Tibet. These are not isolated or local events - they are the result of the implementation of a religious policy formulated at the highest levels of the Chinese government. As this policy has become harsher and harsher in its conception and implementation, the situation for Tibetans has become worse and worse. There will be no end to religious persecution in Tibet until Tibetans are allowed not just to practice their religion freely, but to think and express themselves freely. The two cannot be separated. The tragedy of religious persecution in Tibet demonstrates how interconnected all human rights are -- the denial of human rights in one area invariably means the denial of other human rights as well. In the case of

Tibet, it is difficult to see how the problem of religious persecution can be solved without addressing the legitimate demands of the Tibetan people for self-determination.

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