



Tibet's “Intolerable” Monasteries:
The role of monasteries in Tibetan resistance since 1950

SUMMARY



TIBET WATCH

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Thematic Report
April 2016

Executive Summary

Buddhism has had a major presence in Tibet since the end of the 8th century. It was brought to Tibet from India by King Trisong Detsen (755-797) and it was during his reign that Buddhism was established as the official state religion. Tibetan Buddhism has four schools of which the Gelugpa School is the largest and the Dalai Lama is the head.

Prior to the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950, government was largely theocratic with the Dalai Lama leading both politics and religious affairs. Religious institutions played a number of different roles. First and foremost, they were institutes of religious study and practice. However, they also provided education for the lay communities that lived around them. They acted as financial institutes, offering loans but also investing in local agriculture, herding and other projects. They offered an arbitration service and resolved disputes between neighbours and families. Monks were strongly represented in the government and monasteries often acted as local political centres.

Since the invasion, China has adopted different approaches towards Tibetan Buddhism and the influence of religious institutions. It has tried to control religious activity through the imposition of 'work teams', surveillance cameras within monastery grounds, dedicated police stations, frequent inspections and numerous arbitrary regulations. It has tried to co-opt Tibetan Buddhism for its own purposes by interfering in reincarnation processes or turning monasteries and pilgrimage sites into tourist attractions. It has tried to buy the loyalty of institutions through gifts, donations or favourable treatment. It has also tried intimidation - the presence of security forces at prayer festivals and other religious gatherings has become a common sight.

Despite an initial period of relative quiet following the invasion, Mao soon embarked upon a process of appropriation which saw many monasteries and nunneries stripped of their land and much of their property. This triggered a period of protest and unrest, culminating in the uprising of 1959 in Lhasa. Religion was systematically attacked, once again, during the Cultural Revolution when even private religious observance became illegal. The repression then lifted somewhat with the death of Mao and the new leader, Deng Xiaoping, initiated a gentler approach. Religion regained its place in day-to-day life in Tibet during the 1980s.

The protest that sparked the unrest of the late 1980s was staged by 21 monks from Drepung Monastery, just outside Lhasa. Monks and nuns continued to be at the forefront of the protests in Lhasa throughout 1987, 1988 and 1989, after which martial law was imposed by Hu Jintao, then Communist Party Secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region. Areas outside of the Tibet Autonomous Region were not subject to the same crackdown and moderate religious policies remained in force for a few years.

Consequently, larger monasteries outside the Tibet Autonomous Region were able to function and house thousands of monks until the mid-1990s, after which the more relaxed policies started to be reversed across all Tibetan areas. Patriotic re-education campaigns were introduced in religious institutions in 1996 and became one of the main sources of grievance for monks and nuns, who were unwilling to denounce the Dalai Lama.

More recently, during the 2008 uprising, monks again led the protests and suffered the brunt of the subsequent crackdown. It is possible, therefore, to see a correlation between religious institutions and Tibetan political resistance.

Post-2008, new forms of protest have emerged from Tibet. Since 2009 (until the end of March 2016), there have been 142 confirmed self-immolation protests, of which, 63 have been undertaken by

practising or former monks and nuns. China's reaction to self-immolations has included threatening and detaining the family members of those who set fire to themselves and banning any form of funeral rites for the dead protesters. An increase in the number of alternative solo protests by monks has also been notable, particularly in Ngaba County where, in September 2015, three separate incidents took place on the same day with five Kirti monks detained the next day.

In January 2016, the State Administration of Religious Affairs published an online database of official Rinpoches, where all reincarnated lamas who have been approved by the central government are listed. According to the Chinese government, those who are not part of this list are not to be recognised as authentic. The Dalai Lama is not to be found on this database.

Case studies of selected religious institutions closely involved in Tibetan resistance provide a detailed insight into the relationship between Tibetan Buddhist institutes, political activism and state control.

Labrang Tashikyil Monastery, Amdo (Gansu Province)

Labrang Monastery has actively resisted Chinese occupation since the 1950s and produced some of the most prominent Tibetan human rights defenders in recent history. Despite being actively promoted as a tourist destination by the Chinese government since the early 1990s, state intrusion has also taken many forms, such as restrictions on the number of monks and the number of admissions to the monastic assembly, patriotic re-education programmes and police surveillance. Labrang monks played an important role in the 2008 uprising in Tibet, in particular in the disruption of a government-led tour of foreign journalists.

Kirti Monastery, Amdo (Sichuan Province)

The eastern location of Kirti Monastery has meant that it had a foretaste of China's repression as early as 1935. However, the invasion in the 1950s heralded a new era of repression, with a particularly devastating period during the Cultural Revolution. It has only been since 1991 that Kirti Monastery was rebuilt and opened again, albeit under tight surveillance. State intrusion has also taken many forms, such as restrictions on the number of monks, restrictions on travel for monks and a sustained military presence. Kirti Monastery has also been the main target of patriotic re-education programmes since 1997. Kirti Monastery and the people of Ngaba experienced deadly crackdowns in 2008, when a number of Tibetans were shot by security forces, and have subsequently developed a reputation as a hotbed of resistance. Monks from Kirti Monastery have been at the forefront of self-immolation protests since 2009 and, more recently, solo protests by monks.

Nyitso Monastery, Kham (Sichuan Province)

Nyitso Monastery has become the focal point of resistance for the community in the Tawu area, acting as a safe place of refuge during times of political turbulence, such as immediately following self-immolation protests. In recent years, large scale celebrations for the Dalai Lama's birthday have been subject to intimidation and security forces have opened fire at these peaceful gatherings.

Shak Rongpo Gaden Dargyeling Monastery, U-Tsang (Tibet Autonomous Region)

Shak Rongpo Gaden Dargyeling Monastery experienced a severe wave of repression in 2010 starting with the introduction of patriotic re-education programmes and the placement of permanent work teams monitoring all activities within the monastery. For several years, the monastery underwent turmoil as the main Abbot was accused of having contact with the Dalai Lama and was detained, along with several

other monks. Chinese state media designated Shak Rongpo Gaden Dargyeling as the "number one intolerable monastery" in Tibet.

Jhada Gon Palden Khachoe Nunnery, U-Tsang (Tibet Autonomous Region)

Jhada Gon Palden Khachoe Nunnery has experienced heavy state intrusion in the form of patriotic re-education programmes. Resistance to these programmes has led to work teams descending on the nunnery, subjecting the nuns to strict controls and resulting in the expulsion of many. Most recently, in 2015, 106 nuns were expelled and their living quarters demolished.

Each section of the report features excerpts of original interviews with former monks and a former nun, now living in exile, who have personally experienced violations of their right to freedom of religion.

China perceives, and treats, acts of religious devotion as political protests. Loyalty to the Dalai Lama is almost equated with treason and expressions of Tibetan culture and identity are branded as splittism and sometimes even criminalised. Buddhism in Tibet is an integral part of the social fabric and the day-to-day lives of lay people as well as monks and nuns. Attacks and restrictions on Buddhism in Tibet are, therefore, not peripheral issues; they are attacks on the Tibetan people, culture and way of life.



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