

# Protests and Crackdown: The Transformation in Tibet's Political Landscape from March 2008

INTERNATIONAL  
**CAMPAIGN**  
**FOR TIBET**  
[www.savetibet.org](http://www.savetibet.org)

**APRIL, 2008, TIBET.** Nomads on horseback gallop down a rough trail towards a small town; a monk is seen raising his fist in the air, crying: "Return the Dalai Lama to Tibet!" The crowd around him roars its support. The blurred image shifts, and we see Tibetans tearing down a red Chinese flag, and raising the banned Tibetan national flag, two snow lions flanked by the Himalayan mountains.

The bold protest by the nomads and monks of Amchok Bora in eastern Tibet (which can be viewed on YouTube except in China), is one of the defining images of the protests that have swept across the Tibetan plateau since March 10 when hundreds of monks took to the streets in Lhasa. This tidal wave of protests has been the most significant uprising against Chinese rule in Tibet in more than half a century and has as yet unknown consequences for the Chinese government in Tibet. In the months immediately following March 2008, one or more protests occurred in at least 52 county-level locations in Tibetan areas of China, as well as in Chengdu (the capital of Sichuan Province), Lanzhou (the capital of Gansu Province), and Beijing, where Tibetan students held a silent vigil for those harmed or killed in the crackdown.

A new cycle of protests was sparked by the repression that followed the March protests and by the implementation of an intensified 'patriotic education' campaign requiring pledges of allegiance to the Chinese government and the



**Protests near Labrang Monastery, March 14th, 2008.**

denunciation of the Dalai Lama. In a single instance in May 2008, more than 80 nuns were imprisoned in the Tibetan area of Kardze (Chinese: Ganzi), Sichuan for peacefully protesting against the violent crackdown and calling for the Dalai Lama's return to Tibet. (See ICT Report: <http://www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/more-80-nuns-detained-after-peaceful-protests-continue-kham.>) Despite the repressive crackdown still in place and the harsh punishments for dissenters, Tibetans have continued to protest with relative consistency since the initial uprising, carrying out approximately 300 protests since 2008.

The Spring 2008 protests and the continued dissent, reveal the breakdown of the central government's Tibet policy. Beijing has had decades of unfettered control in Tibet to deliver good governance compatible with the cultural priorities of the Tibetan people. By any measure, it has failed. While Beijing abandoned its Cultural Revolution era approach in most of China, in Tibet it has instituted new hardline policies that target the Tibetan Buddhist identity and its most visible leaders; patriotic education has become a tool for spreading government propaganda, the Tibetan language has been downgraded in usage and replaced with Mandarin Chinese, and there is an increasing influx of Chinese migrants, further marginalizing the Tibetan population—all of this done in the absence of safeguards that would protect Tibetan livelihoods and the fragile environment (for more information please refer to ICT briefing page on "Tibetan Marginalization").

*(over, please)*



**Chinese response to Lhasa protest, March 14th, 2008.**

In the spring of 2008 the Tibetan people had reached a breaking point and in risking their lives to make their position known, they propelled Tibet to the top of the international news agenda, forcing governments and heads of state to view Tibet as an international issue, resolvable only through political means. The message from the Tibetan protests was: The Dalai Lama, and not the Chinese state, represents Tibetan interests.

The Chinese government has responded to the protests with a massive troop deployment across the Tibetan plateau. Monks and nuns were the primary targets and monasteries were swiftly sealed and encircled by armed soldiers. Thousands of Tibetans from all walks of life have simply disappeared. Less than six months from the initial uprising, someone had disappeared from almost every Tibetan household in Lhasa, where people were still sleeping in their clothes a year later, fearful of a knock on the door in the middle of the night. Most recently, the Chinese authorities have begun punishing Tibetan intellectuals and artists, who—despite the risks—have been vocal in their expressions of Tibetan identity in the cultural resurgence that has followed the protests.

Yet, in the almost 300 protests across the Tibetan plateau since monks from Lhasa conducted their peaceful protest on March 10, only the March 14 outburst in Lhasa appears to have escalated to serious violence. Certainly, there were other incidents that resulted in damage to private property and targeted police stations or other symbols of the government's presence in Tibet. For example, it appears that thousands of Chinese flags were ripped down from poles and destroyed. There are no discernable numbers from official or other sources for Tibetans or police and other security personnel injured or killed in the protests, however, Tibetan sources have estimated over 200 Tibetans have been killed by security personnel in the crackdown.

In the weeks and months following the protests, the Chinese government sealed off much of Tibet from the outside world. Only a trickle of foreign journalists and tourists were permitted inside until after the conclusion of August 2008's Beijing Olympics and a series of sensitive anniversaries—including the 50th anniversary of the failed March 10, 1959 uprising and the 50th anniversary of Chinese rule in Tibet, which the Chinese government commemorated with 'Serf Emancipation Day' on March 28, 2009. Near these sensitive dates, the Chinese government launched a 'strike hard cam-

paign,' stationing approximately 700,000 People's Armed Police in Tibet to keep order. However, Tibetans continued their protests, with more passive resistance including a farming boycott and a campaign to not celebrate Losar (Tibetan New Year) in order to mourn for Tibetans killed during the 2008 protests and crackdown (please see ICT Report: <http://www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/tension-tibet-tibetans-mark-new-year-prayers-dead>).

Tibet is at a turning point in its history and the future of the Tibetan people is in the balance. The Chinese leadership must reflect on the failures of its strategy for Tibet and the extent to which Tibetan grievances emerge from a deep-seated sense of national identity and dispossession. It is in China's long term interest to recognize its role in the dynamics that led to the current instability across the Tibetan plateau.

The international community has an important role to play in ensuring that the Chinese government provides a full accounting of the Spring 2008 protests and their consequences, and moves forward in a substantive, meaningful dialogue with the only legitimate representative of the Tibetan people, the Dalai Lama. Tibetans have put their lives on the line for nothing less than that.

For up to date reports on the evolving situation in Tibet, see <http://www.savetibet.org/news/insidetibet.php>. For a full accounting of the Spring 2008 Uprising and the crackdown which ensued, see ICT's Reports "Tibet at a Turning Point" and "A Great Mountain Burned by Fire"—both available at [www.savetibet.org](http://www.savetibet.org).) To join a free mailing list to receive these reports, send an email to: [press@savetibet.org](mailto:press@savetibet.org) with 'subscribe' in the subject header.