

Religious Repression in Tibet

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 People's Republic of China (PRC) and the authority of the Communist Party, which requires PRC citizens to 'love the country' above all else.

The Chinese government attempts to convey an image to the world of official tolerance for religion. In Tibet, it may appear that some monastic institutions are thriving and that Tibetans are 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.

Since March 2008, the Chinese government and Communist Party have strengthened the very policies and measures that created the resentment and despair that led to protests across Tibet that transformed the political landscape. As a result of government and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) policies and campaigns to "educate" Tibetans about their obligations to conform to official demands detrimental to their cultural identity and heritage, the level of repression



A Jokhang monk answers to Chinese security personnel.

of Tibetans' freedoms of speech, religion, assembly and association has increased still further.

ICT has documented a trend of tightening control over religious practice and scholarship in Tibet today including the following:

- Disturbing precedents on restrictions to religious practice in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR);
- A stepping up of the "patriotic education" campaign in religious institutions as well as lay society, particularly since March, 2008;
- A commitment by the government of the PRC to strengthen the powers of the CCP's control mechanisms in religious institutions;
- A renewed determination by Chinese authorities to crack down on the influence of the Dalai Lama in Tibet;
- The severe undermining of traditional systems of monastic education;
- Appropriation by the atheist Chinese state of the authority for the transmission of teachings and the identification of reincarnate lamas;
- Torture and imprisonment of monks and nuns who fail to denounce the Dalai Lama, express dissent or engage in other peaceful expression of views.

Gedun Choekyi Nyima, recognized by the Dalai Lama as the 11th reincarnation of the Panchen Lama, was 21 on April 25, 2010, and his whereabouts and welfare remain unknown since he disappeared in 1995. The disappearance of the Panchen Lama, acknowledged as one of Tibet's most important religious leaders and the installation of an alternative candidate by Beijing, has come to symbolize for many Tibetans the crisis facing the survival of their religious culture in Tibet today.

The new restrictions on identification and control of reincarnate lamas (tulkus) reflect an attempt to deal with the Party's failure in ensuring the allegiance of key religious leaders, such as the 17th Karmapa, who escaped into exile

in 2000 following Beijing's attempts to groom him as a 'patriotic' figure, and Arjia Rinpoche, the then abbot of one of the most important Gelugpa monasteries in eastern Tibet, who defected in 2000 after Beijing sought his endorsement of the Chinese authorities' candidate for Panchen Lama, Gyaltsen Norbu. Both senior religious leaders made strong statements about the lack of religious freedoms in Tibet on arrival in exile.

The CCP, which promotes atheism, requires its citizens to "Love the Country, Love Religion" in other words, to respect the authority of the Party first and foremost, and above all would-be competing loyalties. The TAR Party Secretary Zhang Qingli has even stated that the CCP is the "real Buddha" for Tibetans (Xinhuanet, March 2, 2007). Political allegiance is an official prerequisite for registration at monastic institutions and to be considered by the state as a 'religious person.' This is an inversion of the priorities of a Buddhist practitioner, whose focus would naturally be to their spiritual path or religion first.

Obtaining a complete religious education in Tibet today remains difficult or impossible, especially in central Tibet. While Beijing has officially promoted the reinvigoration of the traditional Geshe degree, the most advanced level of scholarship possible in the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism (typically requiring 20 years of intense study), in practice, Beijing has taken measures both to undermine the degree's status and accessibility to teachers, and the course of study, which now includes the study of Marxist theory and CCP policies.

As part of the tightening control and regulation of religious practice, "patriotic education" campaigns in Tibetan monasteries, nunneries and the wider society have been stepped up, particularly since the wave of protests swept

across Tibet from March, 2008 onwards. (For a full account of the protests, see ICT report, "A Great Mountain Burned by Fire: China's Crackdown in Tibet" <http://www.savetibet.org/resource-center/ict-publications/publications>.)

Patriotic education campaigns are favored by the CCP as a means of pre-empting further nationalist protest in Tibet through persuasion, intimidation and coercion. In addition to the "Love the Country, Love Religion" campaigns being conducted in monasteries in past years, the present campaign targets ordinary people, especially schoolchildren, and aims for total coverage at grassroots level with the use of 'relay teams' and recruitment of vigilantes in local communities. Monks and nuns who resist patriotic education continue to be tortured and imprisoned. (See ICT report, <http://www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/determination-resist-repression-continues-%E2%80%98combat-ready%E2%80%99-chamdo-frontline-%E2%80%98patriotic-educa>).

The powers of the Democratic Management Committees (DMC), which have long supplanted the traditional role of the abbots and reincarnate lamas in the running of monasteries, nunneries and temples and which are responsible to the Party for control of religious institutions, have been strengthened.

The oppressive atmosphere has been underlined by Zhang Qingli, Party Secretary of the TAR, who has announced his intention to intensify strict political control over the practice of Buddhism. Using harsh rhetoric against the Dalai Lama reminiscent of Cultural Revolution jargon, Zhang Qingli has referred to a "life or death struggle" against the Dalai Lama and his "clique," and described the Tibetan religious leader as the "biggest obstacle hindering Tibetan Buddhism from establishing normal order."