



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

State Department's International Religious Freedom Report for 2017 says China Continues to deny Religious Freedom in Tibet

<http://www.savetibet.org/state-departments-international-religious-freedom-report-for-2017-says-china-continues-to-deny-religious-freedom-in-tibet>

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The State Department's International Religious Freedom Report for 2017 states that in the Tibetan areas, the Chinese "authorities continued to engage in widespread interference in religious practices, especially in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and nunneries. There were reports of forced disappearance, physical abuse, prolonged detention without trial, and arrests of individuals due to their religious practices. Travel restrictions hindered traditional religious practices and pilgrimages."

The report, released in Washington, DC on May 29, 2018, by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and US Ambassador for International Religious Freedom states that the "primary sources of grievances among Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns included the requirement that all monks under the age of 18, who are legally unable to join monasteries and Buddhist religious institutions, undergo "patriotic education"; strict controls over religious practice; and intrusive surveillance of many monasteries and nunneries, including the permanent installation of CCP and public security officials and overt camera surveillance systems at religious sites and monasteries."

In his remarks during the release of the report, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that protecting and promoting global respect for religious freedom is a priority of the Trump administration. He also announced that the United States will host the first ever Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom at the Department of State on July 25 and 26. He said this will not just be a discussion group, but will identify "concrete ways to push back against persecution and ensure greater respect for religious freedom for all."

Matteo Mecacci, President of the International Campaign for Tibet said, "This report confirms that the Chinese government claim that Tibetans in Tibet enjoy religious freedom is absurd and not grounded in reality. From "patriotic education" for Tibetan monks and nuns to the government-approved system to select Tibetan Lamas, Beijing continues to believe that it can brainwash the Tibetan people and the world. The Chinese government will never gain the trust of the Tibetan people, unless it radically changes course."

"We welcome the Ministerial initiative to promote religious freedom announced today by Secretary Pompeo," added Matteo Mecacci, "multilateral initiatives to promote human rights are essential in a globalized world, and the promotion of religious freedom can help societies to be more tolerant and inclusive, and in the end to move towards democracy."

The US Ambassador for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback said, “Our goal is to protect the freedom of conscience for all people.” Talking about his work since assumption of office, he said he had been meeting with people in the administration and on the Hill about what’s happening in China, “about the situation for Tibetan Buddhists that continues to be a very difficult situation for them”.

The report says, “U.S. officials repeatedly raised Tibetan religious freedom issues with Chinese government counterparts at multiple levels, such as the Chinese government’s refusal to engage in dialogue with the Dalai Lama and the ongoing demolition campaign at the Larung Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute and Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute.”

It says, “In a deviation from traditional custom, government officials, rather than religious leaders, continued to manage the selection of the reincarnate lamas’ religious and lay tutors in the TAR and some other Tibetan areas.”

The report adds, “The government continued to exercise its authority over the approval of reincarnations of Tibetan Buddhist lamas and the supervision of their religious education.”

The report also touches on the issue of access to Tibet for American officials saying, “While diplomatic access to the TAR remained tightly controlled, three U.S. visits occurred: one consular visit in July and visits by the U.S. Consul General in Chengdu in April and November.”

It also mentions the difficulties faced by Tibetan religious practitioners in exercising their religious freedom. It says, “Many Tibetans, including monks, nuns, and laypersons, continued to encounter difficulties traveling to India for religious purposes. In many cases, Public Security Bureau officials refused to approve their passport applications.”

Following is the full text of the Tibet section of the report. [The entire report can be seen here.](#)

Department of State - International Religious Freedom Report for 2017 China (Includes Tibet, Hong Kong, and Macau) - Tibet

Executive Summary

The United States recognizes the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and Tibetan autonomous prefectures and counties in other provinces to be part of the People’s Republic of China. The constitution of the People’s Republic of China states that citizens “enjoy freedom of religious belief” but limits protections for religious practice to “normal religious activities” without defining “normal.” In the TAR and other Tibetan areas, authorities continued to engage in widespread interference in religious practices, especially in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and nunneries. There were reports of forced disappearance, physical abuse, prolonged detention without trial, and arrests of individuals due to their religious practices. Travel restrictions hindered traditional religious practices and pilgrimages. Repression increased around politically sensitive events, religious anniversaries, and the Dalai Lama’s birthday, according to numerous sources. Self-immolations, which led to life-threatening injuries or even death, in protest of government policies continued, and at least six individuals set

themselves on fire during the year, including two monks. Another report stated a man in Lhasa died after he slit his own throat in protest near the Jokhang Temple. As part of an ongoing multi-year project, according to local sources, during the year authorities continued to evict at least 11,500 monks and nuns from Buddhist institutes at Larung Gar and Yachen Gar, destroying as many as 6,000 homes where they resided and subjecting many of them to “patriotic re-education.” The government routinely denigrated the Dalai Lama, whom most Tibetan Buddhists revere as their most important spiritual leader, and forbade Tibetans from venerating him and other religious leaders associated with him. Authorities often justified their interference with Tibetan Buddhist monasteries by claiming the religious institutions engaged in separatist or pro-independence activities, and undermined the leadership of the Communist Party of China.

Some Tibetans encountered societal discrimination when seeking employment, engaging in business, or when traveling for pilgrimage, according to multiple sources. Because expressions of identity and religion are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religion.

The U.S. government repeatedly pressed Chinese authorities to respect religious freedom for all faiths and to allow Tibetans to preserve, practice, teach, and develop their religious traditions and language without interference from the government. U.S. officials expressed concerns to the Chinese government at the highest levels about the severe restrictions imposed on Tibetans’ ability to exercise their human rights and fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom and cultural rights. Embassy and other U.S. officials urged the Chinese government to re-examine the policies that threaten Tibet’s distinct religious, cultural, and linguistic identity, including the continuing demolition campaign at the Larung Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute and Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute. U.S. officials underscored that decisions on the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama should be made solely by faith leaders. While diplomatic access to the TAR remained tightly controlled, three U.S. visits occurred: one consular visit in July and visits by the U.S. Consul General in Chengdu in April and November. U.S. officials emphasized to TAR officials during the April and November visits the importance of respecting religious freedom in Tibet. In July the Acting Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor met with the Gyalwang Karmapa to highlight continued U.S. support for religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to official data from China’s most recent census in November 2010, 2,716,400 Tibetans make up 90 percent of the TAR’s total population. Han Chinese make up approximately 8 percent. Other ethnicities make up the remainder. Some experts, however, believe the number of Han Chinese and other non-Tibetans living there is significantly underreported. Outside of the TAR, official census data show Tibetans constitute 24.4 percent of the total population in Qinghai Province, 2.1 percent in Sichuan Province, 1.8 percent in Gansu Province, and 0.3 percent in Yunnan Province, although the percentage of Tibetans is much higher within jurisdictions of these provinces designated as autonomous for Tibetans.

Most Tibetans practice Tibetan Buddhism, although a sizeable minority practices Bon, a pre-Buddhist indigenous religion, and small minorities practice Islam, Catholicism, or Protestantism. Some scholars estimate there are as many as 400,000 Bon followers across the Tibetan Plateau who follow the Dalai Lama, and some of whom consider themselves Tibetan Buddhist. Scholars also estimate there are up to 5,000 Tibetan Muslims and 700 Tibetan Catholics in the TAR. Other residents of traditionally

Tibetan areas include Han Chinese, many of whom practice Buddhism (including Tibetan Buddhism), Taoism, Confucianism, traditional folk religions, or profess atheism; Hui Muslims; and non-Tibetan Catholics or Protestants.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution of the People's Republic of China states citizens enjoy "freedom of religious belief," but limits protections for religious practice to "normal religious activities" without defining "normal." The constitution bans the state, public organizations, and individuals from compelling citizens to believe in, or not believe in, any religion. It says religion may not be used to disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens, or interfere with the educational system. The constitution states religious bodies and affairs are not to be "subject to any foreign control." The constitution also stipulates the right of citizens to believe in or not believe in any religion. Only religious groups belonging to one of five state-sanctioned "patriotic religious associations" (Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant), however, are permitted to register with the government and legally hold worship services or other religious ceremonies and activities.

Regulations issued by the central government's State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) codify its control over the selection of Tibetan religious leaders, including reincarnate lamas. These regulations stipulate that, depending on the perceived geographic area of influence of the lama, relevant administrative entities may deny permission for a lama to be recognized as reincarnated and the entities must approve reincarnations. The State Council has the right to deny the recognition of reincarnations of high lamas of "especially great influence." The regulations also state that no foreign organization or individual may interfere in the selection of reincarnate lamas, and all reincarnate lamas must be reborn within China. The government maintains a registry of officially recognized reincarnate lamas.

Within the TAR, regulations issued by SARA assert state control over all aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, including religious venues, groups, and personnel. Through local regulations issued under the framework of the national-level Management Regulation of Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries, governments of the TAR and other Tibetan areas control the registration of monasteries, nunneries, and other Tibetan Buddhist religious centers. The regulations also give the government formal control over the building and management of religious structures and require monasteries to obtain official permission to hold large-scale religious events or gatherings.

In September the central government's State Council issued revisions to the Regulations on Religious Affairs, slated to take effect on February 1, 2018. The revisions require religious groups to register with the government, increase penalties for "providing facilities" for unauthorized religious activities, and restrict contact with overseas religious institutions, including a new requirement for religious groups to seek approval to travel abroad and a prohibition on "accepting domination by external forces." The revisions increase regulations for religious schools and place new restrictions on religious groups conducting business or investments. Additionally, the revisions require that religious activity "must not harm national security." While the existing regulations stipulate the obligations of religious groups to abide by the law and safeguard national unity, the new revisions specify steps to respond to "religious extremism." The new regulations also place limits on the online activities of religious groups, requiring activities be approved by the provincial Religious Affairs Bureau.

To establish places of worship, religious organizations must receive approval from the religious affairs department of the relevant local government both when the facility is proposed and again before any services are held at that location. Religious organizations must submit dozens of documents in order to register during one or both approval processes, including detailed management plans of their religious activities, exhaustive financial records, and personal information on all staff members. Religious communities not going through the formal registration process may not legally have a set facility or worship meeting space. Therefore, each time they want to reserve a space for worship, such as by renting a hotel or an apartment, they need to seek a separate approval from government authorities for each service. Worshipping in a space without pre-approval, either through the formal registration process or by seeking an approval for each service, is considered an illegal religious activity, which may be criminally or administratively punished.

The TAR government has the right to deny any individual's application to take up religious orders. The regulations also require monks and nuns to obtain permission from officials in both the originating and receiving counties before traveling to other prefectures or "county-level cities" within the TAR to "practice their religion," engage in religious activities, study, or teach. Tibetan autonomous prefectures outside of the TAR have similar regulations.

At the central government level, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee's Central Tibet Work Coordination Group, the CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD), and SARA are responsible for developing religious management policies, which are carried out with support from the five "patriotic religious associations" (Buddhist, Protestant, Catholic, Islamic, and Taoist). At local levels, party leaders and branches of the UFWD, SARA, and the state-controlled Buddhist Association of China (BAC) are required to coordinate implementation of religious policies in monasteries, and many have stationed party cadres and government officials, including public security agents, in monasteries in Tibetan areas.

CCP members, including Tibetans and retired officials, are required to be atheists and are forbidden from engaging in religious practices. CCP members who belong to religious organizations are subject to expulsion, although these rules are not universally enforced.

Government Practices

Summary Paragraph: Across the Tibetan Plateau there were reports of forced disappearance, physical abuse, prolonged detention, and arbitrary arrest of persons due to their religious practice, as well as forced expulsions from monasteries, restrictions on religious gatherings, and destruction of monastery-related dwellings, according to media reporting and human rights organizations. There were six cases of self-immolation and one reported suicide by other means in protest of government policies. Human rights advocates stated authorities continued to use intimidation, including collective punishment of family or community members for acts of dissent, to compel acquiescence with government regulations and to attempt to reduce the likelihood of antigovernment demonstrations, thereby projecting an image of stability and the appearance of popular support. Security forces maintained a permanent presence at some monasteries, sometimes dressing in monastic clothing. As part of an ongoing multi-year project, according to local sources, during the year authorities continued to evict at least 11,500 monks and nuns from Buddhist institutes at Larung Gar and Yachen Gar, destroying as many as 6,000 homes where they resided and subjecting many of them to "patriotic re-education." In many Tibetan areas police detained monks and laypersons who called for freedom, human rights, and religious liberty, or who expressed support for the Dalai Lama or solidarity with

individuals who had self-immolated. Several monks were detained without formal criminal charges. For example, in February authorities detained Lobsang Tsultrim, a monk from Kirti Monastery, for shouting slogans supportive of Tibetan freedom and the Dalai Lama. Restrictions on religious activities were particularly severe around politically and religiously sensitive anniversaries and events. Tibet scholars stated the Chinese government's ban on minors entering monasteries and nunneries and restrictions on travel of monks and nuns threatened the traditional transmission and practice of Tibetan Buddhism. According to human rights organizations, authorities scrutinized and sought to control monastic operations and restricted travel for religious purposes, including to neighboring countries such as India and Nepal. According to reports, Bon members were subject to many of the same restrictions as Tibetan Buddhists.

As in previous years there were cases of self-immolation as a means of protest against government policies. During the year, six Tibetans reportedly self-immolated, as compared to three individuals in 2016, seven in 2015, 11 in 2014, and 26 in 2013. Some experts attributed reports of the continued relatively low number of self-immolations to tighter controls by authorities. Local authorities prosecuted and imprisoned an unknown number of Tibetans whom authorities said had aided or instigated self-immolations, including family members and friends of self-immolators, according to press reports. Authorities also reportedly took measures, including threatening anyone who shared this information with foreigners with up to 15-year prison sentences, to limit news of self-immolations and other protests from spreading within Tibetan communities and beyond. There were also numerous reports of officials shutting down or restricting local access to the internet and cellular phone services for this purpose.

The International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) and other groups reported 16-year-old Chagdor Kyab set fire to himself in Bora (Bola) Township of Xiahe (Sangchu) County, Gansu Province, in May while calling for Tibetan freedom and the return of the Dalai Lama. According to a number of local sources, following the self-immolation, prefecture police detained Chagdor's parents and other family members for interrogation and threatened them with "severe consequences" should they fail to cooperate with security officials. As of December, local sources reported authorities had released Chagdor's parents, but instructed them not to discuss the incident.

Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported that on March 18, a 24-year-old Tibetan farmer named Pema Gyaltzen, from Nyagrong, set himself ablaze in Kardze in protest of government policies. His fate remained unclear.

RFA also reported that on April 15, another Nyagrong resident, Wangchuk Tseten, a 39-year-old father of four, set himself ablaze in Kardze. As he burned, RFA's sources said he called for a long life for the Dalai Lama. The source added there seemed to be little chance that Tseten survived.

Jamyang Losel, a 22-year-old monk at Gyerteng monastery, self-immolated on May 19, close to a hospital in Kangsta (Gangcha) county in Qinghai's Tsojang (Haibei) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. A source cited in an RFA article said, "He did not survive his protest," but that police who took away Losel's body refused to give his remains to family members who requested it.

A 63-year-old Tibetan monk named Tenga, from a monastery in Kardze (Ganzi) county, reportedly died of his injuries after he set himself on fire November 26. While burning, Tenga called out for

freedom for Tibet. Afterwards, there reportedly was a heavy security lockdown in the area, and Tenga's family members in Dando village were placed under watch by Chinese police.

RFA reported that a former Kirti monastery monk named Konpe set himself ablaze on December 23. Konpe self-immolated on the main road in Ngaba, a site of numerous other self-immolations and protests calling for Tibetan freedom. Detailed information on Konpe's identity and condition were delayed, reportedly due to a clampdown imposed by Chinese authorities in the area. Konpe was approximately 30 years old and joined the monastery as a young child but later disobeyed. Konpe's father was reportedly detained by authorities who talked to him about his son's medical costs.

In June FreeTibet.org reported that a Tibetan man died after slitting his own throat near the Jokhang Temple in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa. The man shouted "We don't have freedom and rights" before he took his own life. Authorities referred to the event as a suicide and did not mention any form of protest.

In February Nyima Lhamo, the niece of prominent reincarnate lama political prisoner Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, testified at the 9th Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy that Chinese authorities denied her uncle a fair trial and medical parole even as his health deteriorated. Nyima Lhamo recounted what she said were mysterious circumstances leading to the Rinpoche's death in prison in 2015 and the government's denial of permission for his family to perform post-death Buddhist rites and for his religious order to seek his reincarnation. According to Nyima Lhamo, her family remained in Tibet until 2016, and Chinese authorities continued to harass and threaten them with prosecution for Nyima Lhamo's continued advocacy for her late uncle. She reported other local Tibetans seeking justice for the Rinpoche were arrested and "sustained injuries from gunshots" from authorities.

The government continued to insist that Gyaltsen Norbu, whom it selected in 1995, was the Panchen Lama's true reincarnation, and not Gedhun Choekyi Nyima. According to numerous Tibetan Buddhist monks and scholars, UFD and Religious Affairs Bureau officials frequently pressured monks and laypersons, including government officials, to attend religious study sessions presided over by Gyaltsen Norbu, including ordering every Tibetan family in Chamdo (Changdu) city to send family members to a September teaching session in order to ensure hundreds of thousands of people paid him respect. Authorities have installed Gyaltsen Norbu in Tashi Lhunpo Monastery in Shigatse (Xigaze), a prefecture-level city in the TAR, the traditional seat of the Panchen Lama. Chinese authorities detained Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the 11th Panchen Lama, who is recognized by the Dalai Lama and most Tibetans, and his parents in 1995 when he was six years old and have not responded to requests by international observers to visit him. Members of the Tibetan community inside the country and in exile consider him to be forcibly disappeared by the Chinese government, and have been unsuccessful in their attempts to visit him for more than two decades. His and his parents' whereabouts remain unknown. The Panchen Lama is the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism's second-most prominent teacher after the Dalai Lama.

The government continued to exercise its authority over the approval of reincarnations of Tibetan Buddhist lamas and the supervision of their religious education. In addition, authorities closely supervised the education of many key young reincarnate lamas. In a deviation from traditional custom, government officials, rather than religious leaders, continued to manage the selection of the reincarnate lamas' religious and lay tutors in the TAR and some other Tibetan areas. Religious leaders

reported as part of the interference by authorities in reincarnate lamas and monks' religious education, authorities were incentivizing these young men to voluntarily disrobe by emphasizing the attributes of secular life as compared to the more disciplined and austere religious life. These and other interferences continued to cause concern to religious leaders about the ability of religious traditions to survive for successive generations. According to media reports, as of December, the government added seven additional "living buddhas" below the age of 16 to last year's list of more than 1,300 approved "living buddhas." The new additions continued to undergo training on patriotism and the Chinese Communist Party's socialist political system. The BAC announced its database of 1,311 "living buddhas" that it deemed "authentic" was nearly complete. Neither the Dalai Lama nor Tenzin Delek Rinpoche was on the list.

The government placed restrictions on the size of Buddhist monasteries and other institutions. According to local sources, at Larung Gar, Kardze (Ganzi), Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, site of the world's largest Tibetan Buddhist institute, during the year the government evicted approximately 9,000 monks and nuns from a population that was at least 20,000 in 2016, and demolished an estimated 4,000 residences. According to Chinese press reports, the government stated the demolition was to prevent fires and promote crowd control. Rights groups said that if safety were the primary motivator for this government action, then other provisions, such as building additional housing that met fire safety codes, could be a way to resolve the issue instead of large scale demolitions and expulsions. Local sources stated the destruction was to clear the way for tourist infrastructure and to prevent nuns, monks, and laypersons from outside the area, particularly ethnic Han, from studying at the institute. Reportedly in hopes of saving the institute, Larung Gar's monastic leadership continued to advise residents not to protest the demolitions.

According to local sources, during the year authorities destroyed at least 2,000 residences and evicted approximately 2,500 monks and nuns from an estimated population of 10,000 religious practitioners in Yachen Gar, also in Kardze (Ganzi) Prefecture. Local sources reported monks and nuns from Yachen Gar who returned to their hometowns in the TAR were told they were prohibited from joining any other monastery or nunnery there or participating in any public religious practices.

In a 2016 letter to Chinese authorities that was made public in March before the UN Human Rights Council, six UN special rapporteurs, including the special rapporteur for religious freedom and belief wrote: "While we do not wish to prejudge the accuracy of these allegations, grave concern is expressed over the serious repression of the Buddhist Tibetans' cultural and religious practices and learning in Larung Gar and Yachen Gar."

Chinese authorities targeted centrally or conveniently located monasteries or temples to make it more difficult for Tibetan Buddhists to worship. For example, local sources reported Chinese authorities recently demolished Bagar (Baiyanshan) Monastery in Linzhi, TAR – the main worship place for Buddhists in Linzhi city and a popular tourist destination – citing transportation safety concerns.

There were reports of the arbitrary arrest and physical abuse of religious prisoners and prolonged detention of religious figures without criminal charges. In February authorities detained Lobsang Tsultrim, a monk from Kirti Monastery, for shouting slogans supportive of Tibetan freedom and the Dalai Lama and holding his photo in public. Local sources reported police severely beat Tsultrim. His condition and whereabouts remained unknown following his detention in Aba (Ngaba) Prefecture.

In March authorities reportedly arrested Lobsang Dhargyal, a young monk from Kirti Monastery, for staging a solo protest against the Chinese government in Aba (Ngaba) Prefecture. Police detained Dhargyal shortly after his protest, and his whereabouts remained unknown.

In May authorities reportedly detained Gonpo (only name given), a monk from the Oephung Monastery in Nyagrong (Xinlong) County, Kardze (Ganzi) Prefecture, Sichuan Province, after local authorities suspected he had disseminated information regarding local protests to outside contacts. The protests reportedly involved Wangchuk Tseten and Pema Gyaltzen, who self-immolated earlier in the year. Gonpo's whereabouts remained unknown.

In May Chinese police in Machu County of Gansu Province detained Khedup, a 50-year-old Tibetan doctor and monk from the Mura Monastery, for the second time. According to the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy, authorities accused Khedup of posting the Dalai Lama's teachings on social media, writing and reposting blog posts that expressed support for the monks and nuns displaced from Larung Gar, and advocating for religious freedom and cultural rights for Tibetans. Khedup's condition and whereabouts remained unknown.

According to the Tibet Post, on July 29 Chinese authorities released Lobsang Kelsang from Deyang Prison. Police originally detained Kelsang, a Kirti Monastery monk, in 2011 following his self-immolation in protest against Chinese repressive rule. Following his release, the Tibet Post's source stated Kelsang was under strict surveillance at his home in northeastern Tibet. There was no additional information regarding his condition. On March 28, authorities released another Kirti monk named Lobsang Kunchok from Deyang Prison in Sichuan Province after he had served more than six years in prison for staging a self-immolation protest. His leg was amputated in prison. After his release Kunchok remained under strict surveillance in his Meruma home.

The condition and whereabouts of Lobsang Tsering, a monk from Kirti Monastery whom authorities reportedly detained in 2016 in Aba (Ngaba) County following a solo protest against Beijing's rule in Tibet, remained unknown. During the protest he wore a ceremonial scarf and carried a photo of the Dalai Lama, calling for his long life. Prison officials reportedly beat him in custody.

In addition, the condition and whereabouts of Ven Pagah and Geshe Orgyen, the abbot and a monk from the Chongri Monastery in Kardze (Ganzi) Prefecture, Sichuan Province, remained unknown. Authorities detained them in 2016 after the monastery helped organize a mass prayer for the recovery of the Dalai Lama, who was then undergoing medical treatment in the United States.

Limited access to information about prisoners made it difficult to ascertain the exact number of Tibetan prisoners of religious conscience, determine the charges brought against them, or assess the extent and severity of abuses they suffered. The U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China's Political Prisoner Database included records of 1,414 political or religious prisoners known or thought to be in custody as of November 5. A later accounting specific to Tibet included 512 Tibetan political prisoners who had been detained by December 29, and who were presumed to remain detained or imprisoned. Of the 512 political prisoners, 506 were detained on or after March 2008, the start of a wave of political protests that spread across the Tibetan areas of China. Tibetan Buddhist monks, nuns, and teachers made up 212 cases of the 506 persons serving known sentences.

According to reports, authorities continued “patriotic re-education” campaigns at many monasteries and nunneries across the Tibetan Plateau, forcing monks and nuns to participate in “legal education,” denounce the Dalai Lama, express allegiance to the government-recognized Panchen Lama, and study Mandarin as well as materials praising the leadership of the CCP and the socialist system. Human Rights Watch reported a video circulated on social media that showed what appeared to be 25 young Tibetan nuns with shaven heads, dressed in military jackets and standing at attention, in rows inside a police or government office. Authorities had reportedly expelled the group from the Larung Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute. The women chanted in unison, “The Tibetans and the Chinese are daughters of the same mother, the name of the mother is China.” Another video reportedly showed Tibetan nuns singing and dancing to a Communist Party song. Since Buddhist nuns vow to refrain from singing, dancing, and viewing entertainment, the report suggests these performances were coerced as part of political re-education.

According to many observers, primary sources of grievances among Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns included the requirement that all monks under the age of 18, who are legally unable to join monasteries and Buddhist religious institutions, undergo “patriotic education”; strict controls over religious practice; and intrusive surveillance of many monasteries and nunneries, including the permanent installation of CCP and public security officials and overt camera surveillance systems at religious sites and monasteries. Senior monks at some monasteries continued to report informal agreements with local officials whereby resident monks would not stage protests or commit self-immolation as long as the government adopted a hands-off approach to the management of their monasteries.

The CCP continued to forbid its members from participating in religious activities of any kind, despite reports that many Tibetan government officials and CCP members held religious beliefs.

Government officials regularly denigrated the Dalai Lama publicly and accused the “Dalai Clique” and other outside forces of instigating Tibetan protests, stating such acts were attempts to “split” China. In February new TAR Party Secretary Wu Yingjie called for monks and nuns in the region to “resolutely fight against the ‘Dalai Clique’ and defend the unity of the motherland.” In September Wu instructed various party and government organs to reduce “negative religious influence” and ensure religious figures in the region were aware they needed to draw a clear line between themselves and the “14th Dalai Lama clique.” Authorities in the TAR continued to prohibit registration of children’s names that included parts of the Dalai Lama’s name or names included on a list blessed by the Dalai Lama.

Although authorities permitted some traditional religious ceremonies and practices, they continued to maintain tight control over the activities of religious leaders and religious gatherings of laypersons, confining many religious activities to officially designated places of worship, restricting or canceling religious festivals, and preventing monks from traveling to villages for politically sensitive events and religious ceremonies. The government suppressed religious activities it viewed as vehicles for political dissent. For example, local authorities again ordered many monasteries and laypersons not to celebrate or organize any public gatherings for celebrations of the Dalai Lama’s 82nd birthday in July, the anniversary of the March 10, 1959, Tibetan uprising, or the March 14, 2008, outbreak of unrest across the Tibetan Plateau. TAR authorities banned monks and nuns from leaving their monasteries and nunneries during such celebrations. According to local sources, Sichuan provincial authorities patrolled major monasteries in Tibetan areas and warned that those holding special events or celebrations would face severe consequences.

During Lunar New Year celebrations in January and February, ICT reported the authorities, among other measures, imposed “intimidating” military force at a prayer ceremony at Kumbum Monastery; hosted a series of meetings in Lhasa telling monks and nuns to comply with party policy; and inspected “armed forces” and cadres at Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. They deployed troops to monitor prayer festivals elsewhere in the TAR and other Tibetan areas. In early November the government banned the annual Dechen Shedrub prayer festival from occurring in Larung Gar, citing overcrowding and unfinished reconstruction. The ban marked the second consecutive year the government did not allow the 21-year-old festival to take place.

Multiple sources reported open veneration of the Dalai Lama, including the display of his photograph, remained prohibited in almost all areas. Local officials, many of whom considered the images to be symbols of opposition to the CCP, removed pictures of the Dalai Lama from monasteries and private homes during visits by senior officials. The government also banned pictures of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, whom the Dalai Lama and the overwhelming majority of Tibetan Buddhists recognize as the 11th Panchen Lama. Punishments in certain counties inside the TAR for displaying images of the Dalai Lama included closing of venues, expulsion from monasteries, and criminal prosecution.

The TAR government maintained tight control over the use of Tibetan Buddhist religious relics and declared them, religious buildings, and religious institutions to be state property.

Sources continued to report security personnel targeted individuals in religious attire, particularly those from Nagchu (Naqu) and Chamdo (Changdu) Prefectures in the TAR and Tibetan areas outside the TAR, for arbitrary questioning on the streets of Lhasa and other cities and towns. Many Tibetan monks and nuns reportedly chose to wear nonreligious garb to avoid such harassment when traveling outside of their monasteries and around the country.

In many areas, monks and nuns under the age of 18 were forced to leave their monasteries. In July in Draggo (Luhuo) County in Kardze (Ganzi) Prefecture, sources reported the government had removed minors from local monasteries following a January 2015 provincial mandate to remove all monks and nuns under the age of 18 from monasteries and Buddhist schools to receive “patriotic education.”

According to a December 18 report from the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, authorities told parents of an eight-year-old girl in Manchu County, Gansu Province, she would not be allowed to attend school because her father, who was reportedly tortured and denied medical assistance in prison, had participated in protests for Tibetan freedom.

The traditional monastic system reportedly continued to decline as many top Buddhist teachers remained in exile or died in India or elsewhere, and some of those who returned from India were not allowed to teach or lead their institutions. The heads of most major schools of Tibetan Buddhism – including the Dalai Lama, Karmapa, Sakya Trizin, and Taklung Tsetrul Rinpoche (who died in 2015), as well as Bon leader Gyalwa Menri Trizin (who died in September) – all resided in exile.

Multiple sources also reported that during the past three years the Chinese government increasingly restricted Tibetan Buddhist monks from visiting Chinese cities to teach. For example, prominent Larung Gar Buddhist Institute religious leaders Khenpo Tsultrim Lode and Khenpo So Dargey, who both previously taught in Chinese cities, were no longer allowed to do so. Authorities also restricted

Tibetans' travel inside China, particularly for Tibetans residing outside the TAR who wished to visit the TAR, during sensitive periods. During the year, many religious figures reported it was very difficult for them to enter the TAR to teach or study. The government also restricted the number of monks who could accompany those who received permission to travel to the TAR. Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns stated these restrictions have negatively impacted the quality of monastic education. Many monks expelled from their TAR monasteries after the 2008 Lhasa riots and from Kirti Monastery after a series of self-immolations from 2009 to 2015 had not returned, some because of government prohibitions.

Many Tibetans, including monks, nuns, and laypersons, continued to encounter difficulties traveling to India for religious purposes. In many cases, Public Security Bureau officials refused to approve their passport applications. In other cases, prospective travelers were able to obtain passports only after paying bribes to local officials, or after promising not to travel to India or to criticize Chinese policies in Tibetan areas while overseas. Numerous Tibetans in Gansu, Qinghai, and Sichuan Provinces waited for up to five years before receiving a passport, often without any explanation for the delay, according to local sources. There were also instances of authorities confiscating and canceling previously issued passports as a way of preventing Tibetans from participating in religious events involving the Dalai Lama in India. Restrictions also remained in place for monks and nuns living in exile, particularly those in India, that made it difficult or impossible for them to travel into Tibetan areas.

Authorities reportedly often hindered Tibetan Buddhist monasteries from delivering religious, educational, and medical services.

According to government policy, newly constructed government-subsidized housing units in many Tibetan areas were located near township and county government seats or along major roads. These new housing units had no nearby monasteries where resettled villagers could worship, and the construction of new temples was prohibited. Traditionally, Tibetan villages were clustered around monasteries, which provided religious and other services to members of the community. Many Tibetans continued to view such measures as CCP and government efforts to dilute religious belief and weaken the ties between monasteries and communities.

Authorities continued to justify interference with Tibetan Buddhist monasteries by associating the monasteries with "separatism" and pro-independence activities, as reported in state media. General administrative affairs in TAR monasteries, which traditionally were managed by monks, were instead overseen by Monastery Management Committees and Monastic Government Working Groups, both of which were composed primarily of government officials and CCP members, together with a few government-approved monks. Since 2011 China has established such groups in all monasteries in the TAR and in many major monasteries in other Tibetan areas, such as Sichuan Province's Kirti Monastic Management Committee.

In August Deputy Chief of the Public Security Bureau of Kardze (Ganzi), Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan Province, Zha Ba was appointed to serve concurrently as party secretary general and president of Larung Gar Buddhist Academy, the largest Tibetan Buddhist monastery in the world. In addition to Zha Ba, six other party cadres were appointed to various positions in the monastery, including deputy party secretaries, vice presidents, and deputy managing directors.

In accordance with official guidelines for monastery management, the leadership of and membership in the various committees and working groups remained restricted to “politically reliable, patriotic, and devoted monks, nuns, and party and government officials.” The TAR CCP committee and government required all monasteries to display prominently the PRC flag and the portraits of five CCP chairmen from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping.

Provincial, prefectural, county, and local governments continued to station CCP cadres in, and established police stations or security offices adjacent to or on the premises of, many monasteries. For example, the TAR had more than 8,000 government employees working in 1,787 monasteries, according to local sources and Chinese government reporting in September. Security forces continued to block access to and from important monasteries during politically sensitive events and political religious anniversaries.

Authorities hindered Tibetan Buddhist monasteries from carrying out environmental protection activities, an important part of traditional Tibetan Buddhist practices, out of fear such activities could create a sense of pride among Tibetans, particularly children, and an awareness of their distinctness from Chinese culture, according to local sources.

In some cases, authorities enforced special restrictions on Tibetans staying at hotels inside and outside the TAR. Police regulations forbade some hotels and guesthouses in the TAR from accepting Tibetan guests, particularly monks and nuns, and required other hotels to notify police departments when Tibetan guests checked in, according to an RFA report confirmed by several hotels.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because expressions of identity and religion are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religion. Tibetans, particularly those who wore traditional and religious attire, regularly reported incidents in which they were denied hotel rooms, avoided by taxis, and discriminated against in employment opportunities or business transactions.

In July some Tibetan scholars and monks reportedly tried to organize an informal event to discuss current trends of Tibetan language education in a hotel in Chengdu, but the hotel refused to rent the conference room and told the organizers that “religious and ethnic minority gatherings” required advance approval from relevant government departments. As a result, the event was held in a tea shop.

Many Han Buddhists were interested in Tibetan Buddhism and donated money to Tibetan monasteries and nunneries. Tibetan Buddhist monks frequently visited Chinese cities to provide religious instruction to Han Buddhists. In addition, a growing number of Han Buddhists visited Tibetan monasteries, although officials sometimes imposed restrictions that made it difficult for Han Buddhists to conduct long-term study at many monasteries in Tibetan areas.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. government officials, including the Acting Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, the U.S. Consul General and other officers in Chengdu, and officers at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing continued sustained and concerted efforts to encourage greater religious freedom in Tibetan areas.

The Office of the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues continued to coordinate U.S. government programs to preserve Tibet's distinct religious, linguistic, and cultural identity as well as efforts to promote dialogue between the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama. U.S. officials repeatedly raised Tibetan religious freedom issues with Chinese government counterparts at multiple levels, such as the Chinese government's refusal to engage in dialogue with the Dalai Lama and the ongoing demolition campaign at the Larung Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute and Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist Institute. In addition to raising systemic issues, such as passport issuance to Tibetans, U.S. officials expressed concern and sought further information about individual cases and incidents of religious persecution and discrimination.

In April officials from the U.S. Embassy in Beijing and the U.S. Consulate General in Chengdu met with Chairman of the TAR People's Congress Lobsang Gyaltsen and TAR Governor Qi Zhala. U.S. officials emphasized the importance of upholding cultural and religious rights in Tibet, and expressed concern about the TAR government's failure to protect the rights of local Tibetans to worship freely and assemble in public places.

U.S. officials regularly expressed concerns to the Chinese government at the highest levels regarding severe restrictions imposed on Tibetans' ability to exercise their human rights and fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom and cultural rights.

In July the Acting Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor met with the Gyalwang Karmapa, who along with the Dalai Lama leads two of the four major religious schools in Tibetan Buddhism, to highlight continued U.S. support for religious freedom. Also in July, U.S. officials met with Arjia Thubten Lobsang Rinpoche, one of the highest-ranking reincarnate lamas to flee into exile, following his opposition to becoming the tutor of the Chinese government-appointed Panchen Lama Gyaltsen Norbu. In November the Consul General in Chengdu met with various TAR government officials, including TAR Executive Vice Chairman and TAR Standing Committee Member Norbu Dhundrup (Luobu Dunzhu), TAR National People's Congress Standing Committee Vice Chairman Ju Jianhua, and Nyingchi (Linshi) Party Secretary Ma Shengchang. The Consul General called for the TAR government to respect the Tibetan people's right to practice their religion freely.

U.S. officials maintained contact with a wide range of religious leaders and practitioners as well as NGOs in Tibetan areas to monitor the status of religious freedom, although travel and other restrictions made it difficult to visit and communicate with these individuals. Although diplomatic access to the TAR remained tightly controlled, U.S. officials did receive access during the year, with authorities granting one U.S. consular visit in July, and two Consul General visits in April and November.