RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
IN
TIBET

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Introduction

Tibetan Buddhism is practiced by the majority of Tibetans and has been a core element of Tibetan culture and identity for centuries. However, since the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950's, the Chinese government has imposed successive repressive policies against its practice.

Today in Tibet, monasteries are forbidden to give traditional monastic education which forms an integral part of Tibetan Buddhism. Monks and nuns are, instead, subjected to regular "patriotic education" and other political campaigns that are fundamentally against the basic tenets of Tibetan Buddhism. Political indoctrination has replaced Buddhist education in monastic institutions where monks are drawn to serve the interest of the Beijing government and are made to work as docent in monasteries.

Chinese authorities often restrict or cancel religious festivals, forbid monks from traveling to villages to conduct religious ceremonies and maintain stringent control over the activities of religious leaders and during religious gatherings of Tibetans. Those who speak up for religious freedom are often charged on political ground, allegedly linking with the "Dalai Lama and his clique", and given harsh punishments.

One of the biggest concerns in Tibet today is the harassment, imprisonment, torture, and harsh sentencing of lamas and other Tibetan spiritual leaders for their loyalty towards the Dalai Lama. Possessing an image of the Dalai Lama or any object which resembles devotion to him and other spiritual teachers is 'political' in nature and perceived as 'insufficient' loyalty to the state and the Communist leadership which results in punishment.

The Chinese government propaganda of preservation of Tibetan culture and investment of millions of Chinese Yuans to renovate monasteries are nothing more than state's effort to boost tourism in Tibet. In her book *Last Seen in Tibet*, Claire Scobie, who visited Tibet several times, reveals that Potala Palace–once the chief residence of successive Dalai Lama– is "now a museum with monks as caretaker".

The worsening religious freedom in Tibet is documented in various reports, including the annual US Report on Global Religious Freedom for 2012, released on 30 April, 2013. The report states that religious freedom in Tibet is "worse now than at any time over the past decade".

Spate of Self-Immolation protests

Since 2009, 122 Tibetans have self-immolated[1], of which 105 have died on the scene or shortly thereafter, whereas the conditions and whereabouts of surviving self-immolators are unknown.

[1] As of 12 November 2013

All of them have called for freedom in Tibet and return of their spiritual leader, His Holiness the Dalai Lama to Tibet.

Tenzin Phuntsok, a former monk of Karma monastery, died after self-immolation protest on 6 December 2011 in Chamdo, TAR. He wrote in his last testament "Don't be disheartened, never be afraid. How long can we trust the policy which forbids us from practicing our religion?" The series of protests, including self immolations, are undoubtedly the expression of unbearable situation where Tibetans live under constant fear and suppression. The Chinese government responded to the self-immolation with more repressive policies, heightened restrictions, detention and by giving harsh sentence to friends and relatives of self immolators.

Enforced Disappearance, Detention and Harsh Sentencing of Tibetans Religious Heads

Enforced disappearance, detention and harsh sentencing of Tibetans, including religious heads are rampant in Tibet. The Chinese authorities have arbitrarily arrested, tortured, and sentenced thousands of Tibetans, including hundreds of religious heads, mostly due to their religious belief and faith towards the Dalai Lama.

Brief information of disappearance and imprisonment of prominent religious figures are;

Gedun Choekyi Nyima, 11th Panchen Lama: The Panchen Lama, one of Tibet's most revered religious leaders, has been missing since May 1995. Three days after the Dalai Lama named six years old Gedun Choekyi Nyima as the 11th reincarnation of the Panchen Lama, the Chinese authorities abducted Gedun Choekyi and his family, and instead, appointed Gyaltsen Norbu as their Panchen Lama in November 1995. Gedun Choekyi was not seen since then.

Repeated requests from international human rights groups to visit him were denied by the Chinese government. The concluding observation report of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in October 2013 urged the Chinese government to immediately allow an independent expert to visit Gedun Choekyi Nyima and verify his health and living conditions.

Tulku Tenzin Delek: Tulku Tenzin Delek is a Buddhist religious leader, widely known for his social works in Karze, eastern Tibet (*Ch: Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province*), where he has established schools, clinics, orphanages, and old-age homes. He was arrested from his monastery in Nyagchu on April 2002 along with his attendant Lobsang Dhondup.

Given his leading role in public welfare and efforts in preserving Tibetan Buddhism, the Chinese authorities viewed him as a threat to the "social stability". Hence, Tulku Tenzin Delek, along with Lobsang Dhondup, was charged with masterminding a bomb blast in Chengdu and sentenced to death. Lobsang was executed on 26 January 2003 and Tulku's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment on 24 January 2005 following international protest.

The imprisonment of Tulku Tenzin Delek has subsequently led to the closing down of his projects. According to a report released by Human Rights Watch 2004, "schools quickly failed due to the absence of leadership and fund. At the end of December 2003, schools windows and doors were broken and every one left. Two homes for the elderly were closed due to lack of funds". His health clinics in Karze area were also shut down.

Patriotic Re-education Session

Patriotic re-education (or simply patriotic Education) was initially launched in Tibet in 1996 as a part of Beijing's "Strike Hard" campaign against crime and corruption. The campaign has been expanding ever since, and today it has reached to the entire region, even to the remotest part of Tibet. The core message of the campaign was that the "loyalty to the state is pre-requisite to be a good monk or nun".

Under this campaign, Work Team (*Tib: ledon rukhag*), consisting both Chinese and trusted Tibetan officials, visit monasteries and nunneries and force monks and nuns to denounce His Holiness the Dalai Lama and declare their absolute support for the Communist Party leadership. During these campaigns, Tibetans must express their allegiance to the Communist party through an examination, or by signing a pledge. Moreover, under "Nine Must Haves" program, which is under the umbrella of Patriotic Re-education campaign, all monasteries and nunneries must display the portrait of the Chinese communist leaders and the Chinese National flag. Any attempts to boycott the session or defy the demands of the Work Team may result in expulsion, arrest or torture.

In Driru *(Ch:Nagchu Prefecture, TAR)*, more than 18,000 Chinese cadres have arrived since September 2013 to conduct "patriotic re-education" campaign, demanding local Tibetans to pledge their love and gratitude for the party and the nation, and to put up Chinese flags on their rooftops ahead of the founding anniversary of the PRC on 1st October. This led to confrontation between local Tibetans and Chinese police and resulted in harsh crackdown which left at least 40 Tibetans injured two of them critically injured. Whole County was under lockdown and resident of Mowa village in Driru were left with no access to food and water supply for more than 48 hours.

Similarly, Lodoe Rabsel, 40 and Namsey Sonam, 44, the abbots of Karma monastery along with seven monks, were arrested around 29 October, 2011 in Chamdo, TAR, after they refused to denounce the Dalai Lama[2].

Additionally, to tighten the control over the religious practice in the monasteries, the government controlled Democratic Management Committee (DMCs) has taken over the administrative role

[2] Two abbots of Karma Monastery arrested available at http://www.tchrd.org/2012/01/two-abbots-of-karma-monastery-arrested/ retrieved on 8 October, 2013

of abbots, traditional heads of monastery. The committee is composed of state-approved 'patriotic' monks and nuns, party cadres and government officials, in some cases 'trusted' Tibetan officials. It is given the responsibility of administering monasteries and imposing rules and regulation through Patriotic Education. It serves as a link between the Chinese government and the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and monitors activities and movements of monks and nuns.

Reportedly, the Chinese government has so far established Monastery Management Committees in 1,787 monasteries since November 2011[3].

Interference over Reincarnation of Lamas and Tulkus

On January 2007, China's State Administration of Religious Affairs issued a new regulatory measure called "Order no. Five" on "management measures for the reincarnation of living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism". The decree makes it compulsory for all the tulkus (reincarnated teachers) to get government approval.

According to China's 1991 Regulation on Religion, tulkus could not be used as means for "foreign infiltration", whereas 2007 regulation Article 2 says that "reincarnating living Buddhas shall not be interfered with or be under the dominion of any foreign organization or individual" and shall be (article 7)"recognized by the provincial or autonomous regional Buddhist Association or the China Buddhist Association in accordance with religious rituals and historically established systems".

In August 2013 the Chinese government has forcibly shut down Gaden Dhargyeling monastery in Shak Rongpo in Nagchu County, eastern Tibet, (*Ch: Nagchu Prefecture, TAR*) over its alleged link with the Dalai Lama. The clampdown began in 2010 when it was alleged that the monastery had consulted the Dalai Lama over the reincarnation of its spiritual head, Rongpo Choejey Rinpoche. Same year, 75 years old Lama Dawa and another important monk of the monastery were arrested and sentenced to 7 years in prison under false charges.

China's interference in the centuries-old Tibetan Buddhist reincarnation practice is a gross violation of religious freedom enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Chinese constitution. More importantly, it is in complete violation of the collective rights of Tibetans to belief and practice their own religion.

Raids in Monasteries

The Chinese security forces often conduct night raids in monasteries to search images of the Dalai Lama, CDs of his religious teachings and any other object that is deemed 'subversive' to

[3] Committees to ensure stability in Tibet's monasteries, Global times available at http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/696094.shtml retrieved on 9 October, 2013

the party. Monks and nuns are often subjected to arbitrary detention, beating and torture during these night raids, some may even go disappear.

During one such raid in Nyitso Zilkar Monastery in Zatoe, eastern Tibet, (*Ch: Yulshul TAP, Qinghai Province*) dozens of monks were beaten and five monks[4] : Sonam Sherab, 40, Lobsang Jinpa 30, Tsultrim Kalsang 25, Ngawang Monlam, 30 and Sonam Yignyen were arrested. Similarly, three monks of Tsodun Kirti monastery: Lobsang Senge, 19, Tenpa Yarphel 18, and Namse, 18 were arrested during an arbitrary night raid. Their whereabouts still remain unknown[5].

Conclusion

Due to the consistent gross violation of human rights in Tibet, and more so in the field of religious freedom, numbers of UN member states, international human rights groups and leaders have raised their concern over the deteriorating human rights situation in Tibet.

During the 17th session of the Universal Periodic Review on 23 October 2013, several UN member states(Canada, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, Poland, Switzerland, the US, the UK and Iceland) pressed China over its systematic attempts to undermine the religion and cultural rights of minorities, including Tibetans and Uyghurs.

The Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) based in Dharamshala, India calls upon the international community to urge the People's Republic of China to immediately stop the ongoing patriotic re-education campaigns in monasteries and allow free and unrestricted access to Tibet by international media, observers and UN mandate holders.

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[4] Monks beaten, detained in Nyatso Zilkar monastery raid available at http://www.tchrd.org/2012/09/monks-beaten-detained-in-nyitso-zilkar-monastery-raid/ retrieved on 8 October, 2013

[5] Police Raids at Gunpoint Raise Tension at Kirti available at http://tibet.net/2012/08/18/tense-situation-at-tsodun-kirti-monastery-after-police-raid-and-arrest-monks-at-gunpoint/ retrieved on 8 October, 2013