

The 2008 Protests in Tibet: Main Facts & Analysis

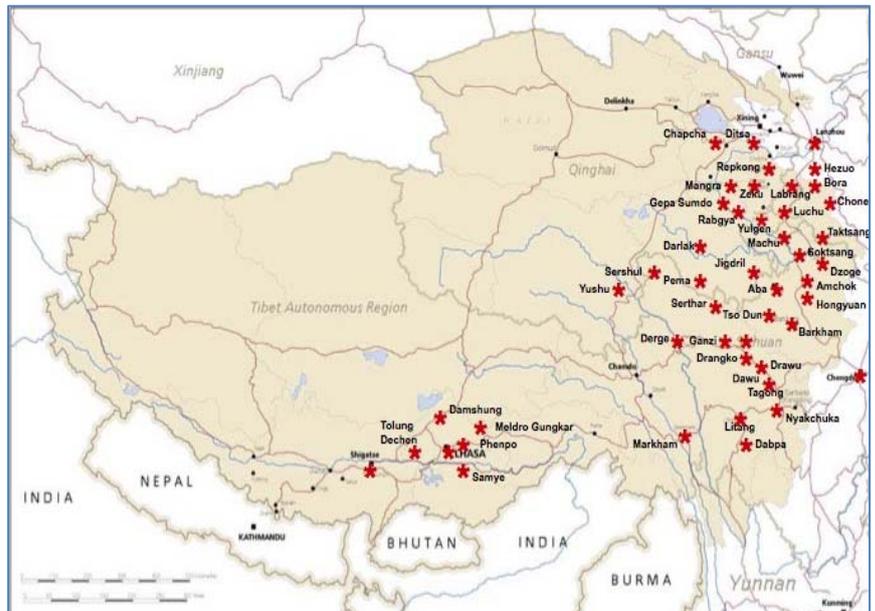
(Prepared by Cross-Party Group on Tibet - 6th April 2008)

Introduction

Between 10-12 March 2008, on the anniversary of the March 1959 Tibetan Uprising (see 'Historical Background') ,peaceful demonstrations were carried out by monks of the major Buddhist monasteries of Lhasa, capital city of Tibet, to call for the ending of state restrictions on religious practice in the region. Some spontaneous slogans also called for "free Tibet" and a return of the 14th Dalai Lama to Tibet. Reports speak of these early protests being subdued with beatings, teargas and the cutting off of water and food supplies by the Chinese Peoples' Armed Police (PAP) in the city, rumours of which brought out many Buddhist laity in defence of protesting monks on 14th March. These lay protests on the 14th involved a full-scale confrontation between local Tibetans and the state authorities; the three-hour long withdrawal of security forces from the city centre then saw widespread looting and burning of Chinese shops in Lhasa. This conflict involved the indiscriminate beating and perhaps killing of Chinese civilians: according to the Chinese *Xinhua* news agency, at least 18 died in beatings or in fires, and one policeman was killed; Tibetan exiled sources claim 80 people were shot dead when PAP finally moved in to reclaim the city, although this figure is unconfirmed. As news of the earlier protests spread throughout ethnic Tibet, other demonstrations began across Central Tibet, and in the neighbouring regions of Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan, prompting a swift and draconian clampdown by the Chinese authorities, and the widespread shooting and arrest of demonstrators across the region. The closing of Tibetan areas to all tourists and foreign media has ensured that little in the way of news is now getting out: estimates at the end of March place the number of dead outside Lhasa at between 50-150, and the number of those arrested so far at approximately 2500.

Where were the protests?

As can be seen from the map¹, the overwhelming majority of protests have occurred outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region, in the ethnically-Tibetan areas of Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan provinces (see 'The Boundaries of Tibet'). The distribution of protests is indicative: while the North and West of Tibet are both comparatively unpopulated and have little access to media, the protests seem overwhelmingly concentrated in those regions of Central and Eastern Tibet which have seen the most systematic economic sinification and state control (especially of religion) in recent years.



The Boundaries of Tibet

Historical and cultural Tibet comprises five regions: Ü & Tsang (Central Tibet), Ngari (Western Tibet), and Kham and Amdo (Eastern Tibet). The first three of these areas are presently designated the 'Tibetan Autonomous Region' (TAR) by the PRC, largely because they constituted the limits of the independent rule of the Dalai Lama's government at the time of the Chinese invasion in 1950 and were thus given special status by Mao. The other two regions, Kham and Amdo, had previously been incorporated under Chinese rule, and thus – while being designated Tibetan Minorities Areas – do not have 'autonomous' status. Instead, they are regulated as parts of the existing Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan.

Who are the protesters?

As with previous widespread unrest in 1987-9 (see 'Historical Background'), the 2008 protests in Tibet began in Lhasa by the monks of the 'Three Great Seats', Lhasa's old monastic universities. The involvement of laity from the 14th onwards has, however, massively diversified this picture: while Buddhist monks and nuns remain at the heart of the peaceful protests, the rioting clearly involved traders, labourers and shopkeepers. Other, peaceful protests were staged elsewhere by teachers, university students, even schoolchildren. In this respect, the protests appear to focus a wide diversity of grievances, and an equally wide cross-section of political opinion in Tibet: concerns over religious restrictions and forced ideological education have combined with economic grievances which have seen some poorer Tibetans increasingly marginalized in China's boom economy (see 'Causes of the protests'), generating profound inter-ethnic tensions. Certain Chinese intellectuals have expressed sympathy over a perceived return by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to 'cultural revolution'-style tactics and slogans. It is indicative of the depth of feeling in the region that even those few government-stipended monks (whose political credentials are most thoroughly checked, and who are widely regarded as 'monks for show') used a carefully-staged international media conference at the Jokhang temple in central Lhasa on 27th March, as an opportunity to protest, despite the clear threat to their own welfare.

It is difficult to reduce all of these groups down to a single political agenda: certainly they cannot necessarily be understood as primarily 'splittist' or secessionist in the way the Chinese authorities apparently understand them. Whilst some of the more Chinese-educated Tibetans involved may be counted as 'Tibetan nationalist' (that is, their primary concern is with realising a 'Tibetan nation' as a sovereign entity), most - especially among the monastic population - are primarily religious loyalists, while others are simply part of that growing cohort of the dispossessed within the PRC's profoundly uneven economic and political resurgence.

The Tibetan protests of 2008 therefore appear to be both more widespread and more intense than those that preceded them between 1987-9, despite twenty years of government policies specifically designed to integrate Tibet more thoroughly into the PRC, and to ensure no repeat of the 1980s protests. As the Chinese intellectual Wang Lixiong commented of Tibet in 2002:

Historical Background to the Protests

Tibet was incorporated into the Peoples' Republic of China in 1950, when the region - which had declared independence from Chinese imperial rule in 1913 - was invaded by the People's Liberation Army (PLA). After a brief military conflict in Eastern Tibet, Tibet's small and ill-equipped army collapsed in the face of overwhelming odds. Between 1950 and 1959, the Dalai Lama's government (called the Ganden P'odrang) was allowed to continue in reduced form, and communist reforms in Central Tibet were put on hold by Mao's government in light of the 'special conditions' of the region (see 'Boundaries of Tibet'). However from 1956 onwards, communist reforms in Eastern Tibetan (including the destruction of Buddhist temples & monasteries, class reforms and the 'struggling of class enemies' such as landowners, monks and nuns) led to violent uprisings against Chinese rule, led by the 'Four Rivers, Six Ranges' guerrilla movement. By 1959, a growing flood of refugees from Eastern Tibet, deteriorating relations between the Dalai Lama's government and the PLA, and runaway inflation all served to create widespread sympathy for the Eastern Tibetan insurrection in Central Tibet. When rumours of a potential kidnap plot against the Dalai Lama circulated in Lhasa on the 10 March 1959, ordinary Tibetans surrounded the Dalai Lama's summer palace (Norbulingka) in their tens of thousands, leading to a full-scale (if unequal) armed conflict between Tibetans in Central Tibet and the occupying Chinese forces, and the flight of the present 14th Dalai Lama into exile in India along with some 80,000 other Tibetans.

In the wake of the 1959 Uprising, the PLA carried out widespread reprisals in Central and Eastern Tibet (internal PLA documents from 1960 place the number of Tibetans killed and executed in the 3-month wake of the 10 March at 87,000), and Central Tibet's 'special status' was revoked. Full-scale 'democratic reforms' were instituted, followed in the early 1960s by Mao's disastrous Great Leap Forward and, between 1966 and 1976, the Cultural Revolution. Only with the death of Mao and the arrest of the Gang of Four in 1976 did policy change occur in Tibet, with the economic and cultural liberalizations of 1979. Despite growing prosperity, however, protests broke out across Central Tibet between 1987-9, followed by the imposition of martial law. Since then, new policies have been introduced in Tibet intensifying control of religious and political thought and expression (see 'Causes').

*Tibet is more prosperous now than ever before in its history. However, this has not gained the PRC the allegiance of the Tibetans, more and more of whom have become attached to the Dalai Lama... It would be wrong to regard the present situation as more stable than in 1987 [when the Lhasa protests first occurred]. At that time, it was mainly monks and disoriented youth who led the riots. Nowadays, opposition lurks among cadres, intellectuals, state employees. In the words of one retired official: 'The current stabilization is only on the surface. One day people will riot in much greater numbers than in the late eighties'*ⁱⁱ

Causes of the Protests

On the 14 March 2008, the authorities in charge of the Tibetan autonomous region declared that they had significant evidence that the protests were masterminded by 'splittists' in league with the 'Dalai clique', shorthand for the 14th Dalai Lama's Tibetan government-in-exile (TGIE), located in Dharamsala, India. As yet, this evidence has not been made available to the international community, and even if it were true then this could not explain the sheer ubiquity and social breadth of the protests reported. In examining the protests, academics and Tibet specialists have identified three principal areas of conflict that could more adequately explain the uprisings:

- **Growing state restrictions on religious freedoms:** Since the early 1990s, the Religious Affairs Bureau and other sections of the CCP] have issued increasingly restrictive regulations on the practice of religion in the Peoples' Republic of China, with a direct effect on monastic institutions and religious life in Tibet. These include in particular: a reduction of the definition of legal religion to those traditions that came within the compass of close state control; the limiting of the size of religious establishments; the state vetting and registration of who may become a monk or nun; the state control of the selection and training of religious leaders; restrictions on the construction of public or outdoor religious monuments and buildings; the forbidding of religious membership to government employees and, their close relatives; forbidding of monastic membership to those with histories of political dissidence; the close control of daily religious activities in individual monasteries through a state-appointed Democratic Management Committeeⁱⁱⁱ. Since the early 2000s, these new regulations has been used as a basis for the demolition of several prominent Tibetan monasteries in Eastern Tibet (such as Yachen Gar, Baiyul County, and Larung Gar in Gandze province in 2001, which had over 8000 Buddhist adherents in residence) and religious monuments (such as the statue of Guru Rinpoche, one of the founders of Tibetan Buddhism, in Samye monastery, Lhokha, in February 2008). At the same time, the recent "Management Measures for the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism", implemented in September 2007, asserted complete state control over the search for, discovery, and ratification of Tibetan reincarnating lamas (including the influential Dalai, Panchen and Karmapa lamas), a right traditionally reserved for the immediate disciples of those lamas.
- **Intensified ideological and military control:** In response to the 1987-9 protests in Tibet, the CCP's 1994 Third Forum on Work on Tibet asserted the need to closely control the ideological and political education of monks and nuns in Tibet. This was accompanied by a 'Strike Hard' campaign, and was attended by new policies forbidding the display of photographs of, or worship of, the Dalai Lama throughout the PRC; literature by him was already forbidden^{iv}. At the heart of these was the 'patriotic education' campaign, an intensive process of political indoctrination designed to instill in monks and nuns a 'fine tradition of patriotism', a 'love of the nation as the basis of a love of religion', and a recognition that 'Tibet has been a part of China since ancient times, and all plots to split off Tibet will fail'. A defining component of this process was the necessity for monks and nuns to openly denounce the Dalai Lama, which was one of the principal criteria of examination and the political vetting^v. This process was stepped up in late 2005. In the latter months of 2007, control of monastic life was intensified, with contingents of Peoples' Armed Police being drafted in to ensure order during all religious days and Buddhist teachings, and the forbidding of communal prayer meetings and performance of incense offerings. To these could be added the issue of the authorities' *modus operandi* in responding to the initial monastic protests. Just as monks and nuns of the Tibetan

Buddhist tradition see their spiritual welfare as deriving very much from their religious teachers, or lamas (including the Dalai Lama), so too do Buddhist laity in the region see their own welfare as depending upon the members of the monastic tradition.

- **Economic and educational inequalities:** Whilst enacting these regulations, the PRC government provides almost no financial assistance to Tibetan religious organisations, which is left to the monks. Restrictions on the number of monk allowed in Tibetan monasteries tend to mean that those that are allowed spend most of their efforts on the upkeep of buildings, with little opportunity for religious study. Tourism regulations also mean that monastery guides must read and write Mandarin Chinese fluently, a rare quality amongst Tibetans given the dismal condition of state education in the region. Similarly, while Tibetans are allowed to enter the state bureaucracy, the necessary education in one of the PRC's universities is practically open to very few (in 1990, only 0.57% of Tibetans had a university degree). In this regard, many Tibetans see themselves as economically marginalized, sitting on the sidelines of someone else's boom economy. The huge influx of Han and Hui traders into the TAR alone (capitalizing on its estimated 4.63 million tourist visitors per annum) has led to Tibetans becoming a minority population in key cities such as Lhasa, Shigatse and Chamdo. Much of the expansion of this sector – in Lhasa especially – has occurred without state regulation, and has increased exponentially since the completion of the Qinghai-Lhasa rail link. It was these incoming traders and other economic migrants that bore the brunt of the lay-dominated riots that spread through Lhasa on 14 March.

Most of these policies have been intensified over the last 24 months, since the inauguration of Zhang Qingli as Secretary of the Tibetan Autonomous Committee, a known hardliner who was posted to the region after successes dealing with separatism in the PRC's troubled Xinjiang region, to the north of Tibet.

Preliminary Conclusions:

While reliable information remains scarce as to numbers (particularly in terms of arrests and casualties), the following preliminary conclusions may be drawn from what information is available:

1. There is little evidence to support the conclusion that such widespread protests were, or could have been, organised from the outside (specifically by the 'Dalai clique').
2. Peaceful protests were started by monks as a consequence of grievances over state restrictions on religion, but quickly spread to laity, where demonstrations dissolved into riots with strong economic and ethnic dimensions. These two generally involved fundamentally different kinds of protest, for different reasons.
3. While many protesters called for 'freedom' (Tibetan, *rangwong*) and 'independence' (*rangtsen*), the evidence suggests that these protests were largely responses to state policies within Tibetan areas - policies on religion, trade, tourism, etc., especially over the last 12-24 months – rather than direct moves in favour of secession. Ironically, some of these policies may have been implemented primarily to ensure the *absence* of protest in the region prior to the politically-sensitive Olympics.
4. In comparison with earlier protests in the 1980s, the 2008 unrest was both more widespread, more intense, and showed a greater tendency to (largely disorganised, mob-based) violence. In this regard, it clearly signalled a weakening of moral control by figures such as the Dalai Lama, who has always advocated non-violent protest.

ⁱ Source: *International Campaign for Tibet*, verified against Chinese news reports.

ⁱⁱ Wang Lixiong. "Reflections on Tibet". *New Left Review*, 14: March-April 2002.

ⁱⁱⁱ US Department of State. *International Religious Freedom Report 2002: China*.

^{iv} Human Rights Watch. *Cutting Off the Serpent's Head: Tightening Control in Tibet, 1994-5*. HRW, March 1996.

^v Tibet Information Network. *A Sea of Bitterness: Patriotic Education in Qinghai Monasteries*. London, 1999.