

IV: Tibetan Buddhism

Degree of persecution:

Tibetan
Buddhism

VERY HIGH

Trajectory of persecution:

Tibetan
Buddhism



Key findings

- 1 **Revival and expansion:** Tibetan Buddhism has revived significantly since the rampant destruction of the Cultural Revolution. Over the past decade, it has gained millions of new believers from the urban Han elite across China, joining the widespread piety among roughly six million Tibetans.
- 2 **Extensive controls:** The Chinese authorities impose severe constraints on the religious practice of Tibetan Buddhists, particularly devotion to the exiled Dalai Lama, a core tenet for many believers. Intrusive official presence in monasteries, pervasive surveillance, routine reeducation campaigns, limits on travel and communications, and regulations discouraging religiosity among government employees and university students affect most monastics and many lay believers. Nevertheless, some controls are implemented unevenly across different geographic areas or schools of Tibetan Buddhism.
- 3 **Violent repression:** Chinese security forces in Tibetan areas are quick to employ coercive measures to suppress perceived religious dissent, including the use of live ammunition against unarmed civilians. Human rights groups and media reports indicate that at least 321 Tibetans have been detained since November 2012 in connection with religious activism or expression, of whom 75 were given prison sentences.⁹ Several individuals die in police custody each year.¹⁰
- 4 **Under Xi Jinping:** President Xi Jinping has largely continued Hu Jintao-era policies and campaigns while deepening and expanding certain controls. Some new measures have escalated tensions with monastics and lay believers. These include criminalizing assistance to



The prominent Larung Gar Buddhist Academy before and during demolitions in 2016. The authorities reportedly sought to reduce the number of Tibetan and Chinese students in residence.

Credit: Wikimedia/Jimmy Lee, Contact Magazine

self-immolators, canceling previously permitted festivals, increasing intrusive restrictions on private religious practice, and more proactively manipulating Tibetan Buddhist doctrine and the selection of religious leaders.



- 5 Economic carrots and sticks:** Various rewards and punishments encourage local officials to use coercive rather than cooperative methods to handle disputes with Tibetan religious communities. Economic incentives are also increasingly being used as a form of collective punishment to deter acts of protest or resistance to religious repression, often affecting the livelihood of entire families or villages.

- 6 Resilience and resistance:** Tibetans' private devotion to the Dalai Lama has proved incredibly resilient despite over two decades of suppression efforts. The constant denunciation and vilification of the Dalai Lama by Chinese officials and state media remains one of the most offensive aspects of the government's religious policy. The expansion of campaigns forcing monastics and lay believers to denounce him has been a key factor motivating protests, including 140 self-immolations since 2009. Many Tibetans also employ more subtle forms of resistance, creating avenues to discreetly engage in forbidden religious practices or share information.

"The central party committee is the real Buddha for Tibetans."

—Zhang Qingli, former party secretary of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, March 2007⁷

"The [government's] propaganda efforts don't work, as everybody knows these are false. His Holiness means the world to all Tibetans. Everyone in Tibet hopes to meet His Holiness one day."

—Nyima Lhamo, recently exiled refugee from Sichuan Province, August 2016⁸

Tibetan Buddhism in China today

For centuries, Tibetan Buddhism and its vast network of monasteries and nunneries have been a central component of economic, social, political, and religious life in Tibet. Many of the region's religious sites date back to the seventh century. Political and religious authority have been closely intertwined, particularly since a Dalai Lama began ruling the Tibetan Plateau in the mid-17th century.

Restrictions have intensified in most Tibetan areas over the past decade, but enforcement has varied among different monasteries and lay communities.

The unique religious traditions of Tibetan Buddhism—its religious texts, dances, tantric practices, and the philosophical debates that are central to monastic education—differ significantly from the form of Mahayana Buddhism practiced widely in other parts of China. Lay practice typically involves making offerings at temples, reciting prayers, maintaining a home shrine, celebrating annual festivals, and completing pilgrimages to sacred sites in Lhasa or elsewhere on the plateau.⁵ These activities are quite common and visible in Tibetan areas of China. Also visible, however, are the heavy paramilitary and police presence surrounding key monasteries and video surveillance cameras installed within or near religious sites.

According to official statistics, as of 2014 there were 3,600 active Tibetan Buddhist monasteries or temples and 148,000 Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns throughout China, far exceeding the number of Chinese Buddhist monastics and illustrating the particularly important position that religious institutions hold in Tibetan communities.⁶ Of these, 1,787 religious sites and over 46,000 monks and nuns are reportedly located within the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).⁷ Although no specific figures are available on the number of lay believers, the vast majority of the 6.28 million Tibetans living in China are thought to engage in some kind of Tibetan Buddhist practice, unless they are members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or government officials.⁸

In addition to public displays of both devotion and control, there is an array of behind-the-scenes restrictions on religious practice for monastics and many lay believers, and security forces regularly engage in severe—and at times fatal—acts of repression. Restrictions have intensified in most Tibetan areas over the past decade, but enforcement has varied among different monasteries and lay communities and fluctuated at particular moments in time. Several factors account for this variation:

- **Geography:** Conditions are significantly worse in the TAR compared with Tibetan prefectures in surrounding provinces, although the gap has been shrinking in recent years. Controls appear to be tighter in areas of Sichuan, Qinghai, and Gansu Provinces that are home to major monasteries, and looser in more rural areas and in the only Tibetan prefecture in Yunnan Province.⁹ Thus while some villages have undergone repeated rounds of “patriotic reeducation” that include obligatory denunciation of the Dalai Lama, other areas have been largely spared.¹⁰ Adherents of Tibetan Buddhism from China's ethnic Han majority often practice a hybridized version of the faith, combining its elements with Chinese Buddhist traditions; their practice may not include veneration of the Dalai Lama, meaning they encounter fewer official constraints.
- **Attitudes of local officials:** Despite hard-line policies that emanate from the central CCP,

local officials have some flexibility in governing their jurisdictions. In a small number of prefectures, certain officials, particularly those of Tibetan origin, tend to be more familiar with religious practice and retain a more cooperative relationship with local monasteries. They employ fewer hostile measures or turn a blind eye to infractions unless pressured by central authorities or forced to respond to high-profile protests.¹¹ Even in the TAR, distinctions in the degree of repression have been evident over time under different party secretaries.¹²

- **Schools of Tibetan Buddhism:** The Dalai Lama heads the largest school of Tibetan Buddhism, the Gelugpa school, although Tibetans from other schools also revere him. Many religious restrictions are also applied to monasteries and believers affiliated with the Nyingma and Karma Kagyu schools. Nevertheless, particularly in relations with local officials, it may be easier for senior monastics from non-Gelugpa schools to push back against restrictive measures. Meanwhile, worshippers of Shugden, a Tibetan Buddhist deity, have their own historical animosity toward the Dalai Lama. In recent years, the Chinese authorities have sought to exploit this internal division, providing funding and other support to Shugden monasteries and religious leaders, and even encouraging monks at Gelugpa institutes to adopt worship of the deity.¹³
- **Size of monastery:** Monasteries range in size from quite small institutions housing just 10 to 20 monks or nuns to enormous city-like complexes with thousands of people in residence. Large monasteries are more likely to draw government attention and generate political dissent, leading to security crackdowns and intrusive controls.
- **Sensitive dates or incidents:** The deployment of security forces, imposition of communications blackouts, and restrictions on large gatherings are not necessarily permanent in nature. Instead the authorities often resort to these measures ahead of politically sensitive dates—such as the March anniversaries of past Tibetan uprisings or the Dalai Lama’s birthday in July—or in response to incidents such as a self-immolation or a small protest at a marketplace.

Many of these variations have flattened out in recent years, as authorities have expanded intrusive restrictions, patriotic reeducation campaigns, and surveillance to more areas outside the TAR and to smaller monasteries.

While the number of practicing Tibetan Buddhists among ethnic Tibetans has remained more or less constant, one significant change to the religion over the past decade has been the growing number of Han Chinese followers, particularly urban elites. Several million are believed to have adopted the religion.¹⁴ Some observers attribute the rising popularity of Tibetan rather than Chinese Buddhism in this population to the more extensive spiritual guidance that Tibetan Buddhist monastics provide directly to lay believers, and to an interest in obtaining supernatural abilities.¹⁵

This change has had both positive and negative repercussions for religious practice in Tibetan areas. On the one hand, Tibetan Buddhist monasteries or temples with affluent Han Chinese devotees have greater access to donations and funding from nongovernmental sources, as well as greater political influence in Beijing. Such supporters may be able to

intervene in times of crisis, mitigate repressive actions, and encourage negotiated solutions to conflicts between local officials and monastic leaders.¹⁶

On the other hand, the increase in Han devotees may be motivating new state interference. For example, some experts interpret the Chinese government's publication of a database of approved reincarnated lamas in January 2016 as an effort to guide the growing number of Han Chinese followers of Tibetan Buddhism, since such pronouncements carry little legitimacy for Tibetan believers.¹⁷ One scholar also attributed a series of demolitions at the Larung Gar Buddhist Academy that began in the summer of 2016 to official concerns about its influence on Han believers, after at least 10,000 reportedly completed studies there and a senior religious leader garnered over two million followers on Chinese social media platforms.¹⁸

The ups and downs of Communist Party policy

In 1950, Chinese Communist forces entered ethnographic Tibet and easily defeated the Tibetan army. The region was formally incorporated into the People's Republic of China the following year. Initially, the CCP-led government tried to cultivate a cooperative relationship with Tibet's spiritual and political leader—the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso. But this approach quickly unraveled.¹⁹ In 1959, Chinese troops suppressed a major uprising in Lhasa, reportedly killing tens of thousands of people. The Dalai Lama was forced to flee to India with some 100,000 supporters.²⁰

The increase in Han devotees may be motivating new state interference.

In 1965, much of Tibet's territory was reorganized into the TAR, while eastern portions of the plateau were incorporated into neighboring Chinese provinces as autonomous prefectures. Before and during the Cultural Revolution, nearly all of the region's monasteries were shuttered or destroyed. Hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns were disrobed, and any displays of religiosity were strictly forbidden and harshly punished.²¹

Under reforms introduced in 1980, limited religious practice was allowed again, as was the gradual reconstruction of monasteries. The scale and pace of the revival soon alarmed party leaders, who attempted to impose some intrusive controls on monasteries in the late 1980s. Between 1987 and 1989, these and other grievances spurred some 200 mostly peaceful demonstrations in Lhasa and surrounding areas. After antigovernment protests escalated in March 1989, martial law was imposed until May 1990, a period when Hu Jintao, who would later head the CCP from 2003 to 2012, was party secretary of the TAR.

The 1990s featured a steady escalation of CCP efforts to control Tibetan Buddhism and undermine the influence of the exiled Dalai Lama. The 1994 Third Forum on Tibet, at which party leaders identified the Dalai Lama as an enemy, proved pivotal. State media subsequently stepped up their vilification of him, and bans on possessing his image or worshipping him were soon reported, though their legal basis remains unclear and implementation has been uneven.²² Over the following years, the party's United Front Work Department (UFWD) launched campaigns of patriotic reeducation in monasteries. These coercive study sessions routinely include requirements that monks and nuns denounce the Dalai Lama verbally and in writing.²³

By the mid-2000s, conditions were already highly restrictive in the TAR, but more open in

surrounding provinces, and travel across provinces and out of the country was permitted. As recently as 2007, thousands of Tibetans took advantage of opportunities to travel to Lhasa, and even to India, for pilgrimage or to listen to religious teachings.²⁴ Beginning around 2005, however, the Chinese authorities started expanding patriotic reeducation and other aggressive measures to reduce the influence of the Dalai Lama in Tibetan areas outside the TAR.

Scholars say this expansion was a crucial factor contributing to unrest that began on March 10, 2008, with a march by monks from Lhasa's Drepung monastery to mark the anniversary of the 1959 uprising.²⁵ After security agents suppressed the monks' protest, a riot erupted. Some Tibetans attacked Han Chinese residents and burned Han- or Hui-owned businesses and government offices. Over 150 other predominantly peaceful protests soon broke out in Tibetan-populated areas of the TAR and other provinces.

After initial hesitation, apparently to avoid a high-profile confrontation just months before the Beijing Olympics, the government responded with a massive deployment of armed forces. Security personnel opened fire on protesters on at least four occasions.²⁶ The authorities reported that 19 people were killed in Lhasa, primarily in fires,²⁷ but overseas Tibetan groups claimed that at least 100 Tibetans were killed as security forces suppressed the demonstrations.²⁸ After the initial clampdown, monasteries were inundated by security forces for months, while hundreds of both monastic and lay Tibetans suspected of involvement in the protests or of relaying information overseas were arrested and imprisoned.²⁹

The many large-scale protests by Tibetans across the plateau reportedly caught officials by surprise, as many had assumed that the absence of mass demonstrations in the previous nine years was the result of Tibetans accepting Chinese rule and reduced devotion to the Dalai Lama.³⁰ In their aftermath, party leaders reexamined policies in the region, but rather than easing restrictions that were fueling grievances, they reinforced them. Monks and scholars interviewed for this report repeatedly pointed to 2008 as a turning point in the government's management of Tibetan Buddhism. The years since have featured greater restrictions on travel, intensified political education campaigns, and enhanced deployments of security personnel at religious ceremonies and institutions.³¹

Tibetan Buddhism under Xi Jinping

When Xi Jinping took the helm of the CCP in November 2012, he inherited a particularly tense situation across the Tibetan Plateau. A series of self-immolation protests that began in 2009 were reaching their peak.³² The desperate acts were reportedly fueled by a sense of resentment and helplessness among both monastics and lay Tibetans as they faced long-term encroachment on Tibetan cultural space and growing restrictions on religious belief, travel, children's education, and day-to-day life in the wake of the 2008 protests.³³ During November 2012 alone, human rights groups reported 28 self-immolations, indicating that at least some Tibetans were hoping to draw Xi's attention and encourage him to adopt a less heavy-handed policy.³⁴

"Efforts should be made to promote patriotism among the Tibetan Buddhist circle, encouraging interpretations of religious doctrines that are compatible with a socialist society."

– Xi Jinping, 2015

During the first half of 2013, there was a brief, rare political moment when a handful of Chinese intellectuals studying Tibet published articles calling for a more tolerant policy in the region. One expert at the Central Party School suggested that the Dalai Lama no longer be viewed as “an enemy” and even be permitted to visit Hong Kong as a “religious leader.”³⁵ Some observers thought that the January 2015 arrest of Ling Jinghua³⁶—a former aide to Hu Jintao and head of the UFWD, which has played a central role in promoting hard-line policies in Tibet—might also create space for a “softer” policy.³⁷

Such optimism has gone unrewarded to date. Xi has not renewed talks with representatives of the Dalai Lama; the last known dialogue took place in 2010. Chinese authorities under Xi’s leadership have largely continued the approach taken under Hu Jintao, including severe, large-scale infringements on religious freedom and human rights more broadly, sometimes with fatal results.

During 2015, CCP policy regarding Tibet appeared to be high on the official agenda, with a series of senior-level discussions taking place. In April, the Chinese government released a white paper on the region,³⁸ and in August the CCP held its Sixth Forum on Tibet, led by Xi himself. State media reports on both signaled the Chinese government’s intent to maintain a hard-line position while intensifying indoctrination campaigns. Official statements explicitly rejected the Dalai Lama’s proposed Middle Way of genuine Tibetan autonomy within China, and asserted that the CCP would select his successor. Importantly, a top-level Strategy Forum in July focused on coordinating measures to ensure “stability” in both the TAR and Tibetan areas of surrounding provinces, which could signal more restrictions in the latter.³⁹

Despite the overall policy continuity, authorities have deepened and expanded the reach of a number of existing restrictions. Some of the measures cited below—including judicial guidelines on self-immolation cases and programs to alter Tibetan Buddhist doctrine—are directly driven by central authorities. At the Sixth Forum on Tibet held in August 2015, for example, Xi declared that “efforts should be made to promote patriotism among the Tibetan Buddhist circle ... encouraging interpretations of religious doctrines that are compatible with a socialist society.”⁴⁰ Other measures appear to be the initiatives of various lower-level authorities.

- 1. Collective punishment to stem self-immolations:** Beginning in late 2012, officials in some areas employed tactics such as canceling public benefits for the households of self-immolators or ending state-funded projects in their villages.⁴¹ In December 2012, central judicial and public security agencies unveiled guidelines indicating that engaging in self-immolations and organizing, assisting, or gathering crowds related to such acts should be considered criminal offenses, including intentional homicide in some cases.⁴² In 2013, the government implemented the new policy by arresting relatives and friends of self-immolators and handing down lengthy prison sentences.
- 2. Frequent festival bans:** Although some religious commemorations, such as the Dalai Lama’s birthday, had been previously banned, since 2012 local authorities have restricted a wider range of observances. In May 2014, a travel ban was issued for those attempting to visit Mount Kailash, a principal pilgrimage site for Tibetan Buddhists. The following month, a local regulation in Driru County severely restricted Tibetan Buddhists’ ability to celebrate the Great Prayer Festival, one of their most important religious ceremonies.⁴³ Some nonreligious events—like a June 2015 horse race in Gansu Province—have also

been canceled due to indirect expressions of reverence for the Dalai Lama.⁴⁴ Even when festivals are permitted, they are frequently accompanied by a heavy paramilitary presence, disturbing the serene atmosphere that believers prefer and creating conditions in which even minor altercations could rapidly escalate into fatal clashes.⁴⁵

3. Intensified reprisals for lay religious practice: While CCP members across China are required to be atheists, all government employees, students, and teachers in Tibetan areas are barred or actively discouraged from participating in routine elements of Tibetan Buddhist practice that are generally permitted for others, such as making offerings at temples or maintaining a private shrine at home.⁴⁶ In an apparent bid to enforce this ban during 2015, authorities in the TAR moved to punish disciplinary violations among both CCP cadres and civil servants. The effort partly targeted “those who act like they don’t believe in religion but covertly do,” according to a media interview with then TAR party secretary Chen Quanguo.⁴⁷ Separately, in early 2015, officials in Qinghai Province’s Malho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture circulated a document outlining various activities that would draw harsh penalties because they were construed as support for Tibetan independence; the list included ordinary religious activities like reciting prayers and burning incense.⁴⁸

4. Doctrinal manipulation: One Hu-era initiative that has gained momentum under Xi aims to alter Tibetan Buddhist doctrine so that it better conforms to “socialism with Chinese characteristics” and acceptance of CCP rule.⁴⁹ In his 2016 book *Buddha Party*, professor John Powers describes this program in detail. Among other elements, it has included hosting Tibetology conferences since 2012 to identify favorable elements of Tibetan Buddhist doctrine and producing annual pamphlets with titles such as “Outline for the Work of Interpreting Tibetan Buddhist Doctrines” (published in 2011). The pamphlets are reportedly required reading in monasteries and have become a central focus of patriotic reeducation sessions.

In a parallel development, a new government-supported Tibetan Buddhist Institute opened in Lhasa in October 2011, and its first graduating class completed training in 2013; a partner nunnery is under construction.⁵⁰ One scholar linked such efforts to the 2016 demolitions at Larung Gar after years of relative tolerance of the Buddhist academy.⁵¹ In recent years, monastic leaders there have played a central role in promoting an ethical Buddhist Reform Movement that has gained tens of thousands of Tibetan followers and may be viewed by authorities as competition for their own attempts to transform Tibetan Buddhist beliefs.⁵²

A number of factors may account for the leadership’s continued pursuit of a hard-line approach that has clearly stoked resentment and achieved little success in curbing the Dalai Lama’s influence.

First, the CCP’s underlying anxieties about religion generally and Tibetan Buddhism in particular remain unchanged. As scholar Ben Hillman notes in a recently published book, “Organized Tibetan Buddhism is widely perceived as the greatest potential threat to Communist Party rule in Tibetan areas.”⁵³

Second, these policies reflect a core Marxist assumption that religious belief—and with it

religiously rooted ethnic identity—will fade in the face of further economic development. Chinese leaders remain confident in their ability to achieve this long-term goal with the tools at their disposal, despite occasional setbacks in the form of unrest.⁵⁴

Third, individual leaders have played a role. TAR party secretary Chen Quanguo assumed his post in August 2011 and remained in his position until August 2016. He almost immediately began implementing projects to monitor the populace and inculcate CCP doctrine among monastics and lay believers alike. For that portion of Tibet, the regional leadership change seems to have had more of an impact on day-to-day government actions than the broader transition that occurred in Beijing over a year later.

Fourth, despite the purge of Ling Jinghua, the UFWD remains a powerful entity within the CCP and key driver of tactics of control and co-optation in Tibet, such as patriotic reeducation. It is currently overseen by Politburo Standing Committee member Yu Zhengsheng, who also chairs the committee's Tibet Leading Small Group.

Lastly, structural incentives related to official promotions and centralized sources of funding for Tibetan areas encourage local officials to focus on short-term economic growth and suppressing unrest, rather than community needs or developing a cooperative relationship with monastics.

Meanwhile, the billions of yuan being channeled to local government for “maintaining stability” have fueled the growth of a security apparatus that has an institutional interest in continuing repressive campaigns.⁵⁵

Key methods of political control

The Chinese government imposes a wide array of controls on Tibetan monastics and lay believers. They have become increasingly intrusive, encroaching on areas of life that had previously been left unmolested. Travel restrictions and an extensive apparatus of surveillance—via security forces, informants, closed-circuit television, internet and mobile phone monitoring, and even drones⁵⁶—have created a stifling and intimidating environment for many Tibetans' religious practice. Ubiquitous propaganda posters and slogans in public places and monasteries remind clerics and laypeople of official regulations on religious management, demands to prioritize loyalty to the state, and penalties for violating rules like carrying prayer beads or other religious symbols into government buildings or schools.⁵⁷

Taken together, such measures, along with the other major controls enumerated below, appear to serve several CCP goals with regard to managing Tibetan Buddhism:

- Weakening the bond between monasteries and the surrounding community
- Severing residents' bond with the Dalai Lama and other exiled religious leaders
- Promoting the influence of politically loyal religious leaders and doctrinal interpretations, most notably the government-appointed Panchen Lama
- Cultivating a Tibetan socioeconomic elite with a weaker religious identity
- Limiting the size of the monastic community and the quality of monastic education
- Discouraging protests motivated by spiritual beliefs or loyalty to the Dalai Lama

Travel restrictions and an extensive apparatus of surveillance have created a stifling and intimidating environment for Tibetan religious practice.

1. Controlling religious leadership, including reincarnated lamas: The government and affiliated organizations such as the Buddhist Association of China go to great lengths to dictate the appointment of religious leaders and use them to relay the government's positions to their followers. In the case of Tibetan Buddhism, however, this task is uniquely complex—and even absurd—because of the important role that reincarnation plays in the selection of top religious figures (the Dalai Lama or Panchen Lama) and senior monks (such as abbots of major monasteries). The avowedly atheist CCP, which rejects a belief in reincarnation, insists on managing the selection process and approving its outcome based on its own criteria of political loyalty.

In 2007, the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) issued a document called “Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas,” asserting that state approval was required for reincarnations.⁵⁸ In January 2016, authorities launched a new online database of officially approved reincarnated lamas (tulkus), which notably excluded the Dalai Lama. In recent years, monastic leaders who have attempted to provide guidance regarding their future incarnation or consult the Dalai Lama have been detained, expelled, and barred from future communication with the monks at their monasteries.⁵⁹

2. Extensive control over monasteries and nunneries: A long list of government regulations affect life in monasteries, including quotas on the number of monastics permitted, rules requiring official approval for religious activities within the monastery and in the surrounding community, and demands for detailed accounting of monastery finances and monthly reports on the progress of patriotic reeducation.⁶⁰

Extensive surveillance, via video cameras or the physical presence of police agents inside the monastery, intimidates monks into compliance and provides avenues for identifying gaps in implementation. Punishments for noncompliance range from expulsion and excommunication to imprisonment and the total closure of religious sites. An escalation in the form of permanent stationing of government officials in monasteries began in August 2011 and was formalized through regulations published in January 2012.⁶¹ Previously, official work teams would reside in monasteries only temporarily, although such visits could last several months; the routine management committees were led by politically reliable monks and nuns. According to government statistics published in August 2015, there were over 7,000 officials working in 1,787 monasteries in the TAR, an average of nearly four per site.⁶²

There were over 7,000 officials reportedly working in 1,787 monasteries in the TAR in 2015.

3. Expanded ‘patriotic reeducation’ campaigns: Ideological education campaigns have been conducted sporadically since the 1990s, but they have become more frequent and lengthy since 2008. They have increasingly been extended beyond monasteries to Tibet's general population, forcing students, civil servants, farmers, and merchants to participate in discussions, singing sessions, and propaganda film screenings.

Beginning in 2011, over 21,000 cadres were reportedly sent to villages across the TAR. In addition to political monitoring and other tasks, they reportedly carried out “patriotic reeducation” sessions at religious sites and among lay believers.⁶³ The program typically requires denunciation of the Dalai Lama, recognition of the government-selected Panchen

Lama, and pledges of allegiance to CCP political authority. The expansion of the campaigns to a greater number of monasteries outside the TAR and to nonmonastics represented a change from the past and reportedly generated resentment in many Tibetan communities.

Although the Dalai Lama has given permission for believers in Tibet to denounce him if forced, since it is a matter of self-preservation, many devotees remain uncomfortable doing so.⁶⁴ Those who have complied speak of suffering psychological devastation and long-term disruption to their monastic studies as a result.⁶⁵

- 4. Restricting travel within and outside Tibet:** Over the past decade, it has become increasingly difficult for Tibetans to leave the country, either to seek asylum or on temporary visits to India or elsewhere. The flow of refugees to Nepal shrank dramatically from over 2,000 in 2007 to about 100 in 2014. A 2015 Human Rights Watch report found that Tibetans were often denied passports or interrogated upon return from travel to India.⁶⁶ TAR party secretary Chen Quanguo took pride in the effectiveness of the restrictions, announcing in a media interview, "In 2015, not one person from the Tibet Autonomous Region has gone to the 14th Dalai Lama's prayer sessions [in India]."⁶⁷

Within Tibetan areas, monks and nuns are increasingly constrained in their ability to travel outside their counties. Recent visitors have also reported an informal ban, in place since 2012, on any Tibetan outside the TAR visiting that region, including for religious pilgrimage.⁶⁸ Scholars note that the increased travel restrictions and particularly the inability to flee the country have exacerbated feelings of desperation among Tibetans, contributing to the extreme act of self-immolation.⁶⁹

[Security forces reportedly opened fire on 1,000 people who had gathered to mourn a prominent lama's death in custody.](#)

- 5. Tightening information controls:** Localized blackouts on internet and mobile phone communication, especially in locales where a self-immolation has occurred, began growing more frequent in early 2012 and continued in 2016.⁷⁰ A 2016 Human Rights Watch report analyzing 479 cases of politically motivated detentions of Tibetans from 2013 to 2015 identified 71 individuals arrested for distributing images or information.⁷¹ Nearly a third of those cases involved information related to self-immolations, and defendants received up to 13 years in prison.⁷² Monks and activists in exile who previously maintained close contact with counterparts inside Tibet have reported that by early 2016, it had become much more difficult and dangerous to obtain information, so that in some cases they ceased contacting individuals inside China.⁷³

- 6. Using violence, sometimes with fatal outcomes:** Security forces in Tibetan areas frequently use violent means to suppress and punish perceived political dissent, including nonviolent acts of religious faith. Since 2012, Tibetans have been detained or sentenced to long prison terms for possessing or sharing an image of the Dalai Lama, calling for his return to Tibet, or producing and disseminating other banned information about religion or religious repression.⁷⁴ Former detainees consistently relay accounts of torture, such as beatings, electric baton shocks, and restraint in uncomfortable positions for long periods of time.⁷⁵ Such abuse, along with various forms of medical neglect, contribute to the reported deaths in custody of several Tibetan prisoners of conscience each year, including religious leaders.⁷⁶

In addition to abuses that take place inside police stations, extralegal detention centers, and prisons, security forces have been known to open fire on unarmed civilians, in some cases during religious celebrations. The officers involved rarely receive punishment. In one high-profile case in July 2015, prominent lama Tenzin Delek Rinpoche died in prison,⁷⁷ and security forces reportedly opened fire to disperse a group of 1,000 people who had gathered to mourn his death; at least 15 people were taken to the hospital with gunshot wounds.⁷⁸

Economic incentives: Carrots, sticks, and souvenirs

With a rising middle class, more convenient transportation links, and growing interest in Tibetan Buddhism among Han Chinese, the number of domestic tourists joining foreigners in Tibet has increased over the past decade. Not surprisingly, local officials across the plateau have sought to capitalize on this source of revenue. As restrictions increase in the TAR, including periodic tourist bans, Tibetan prefectures in surrounding provinces have gained popularity.

In Yunnan Province's Diqing Prefecture, local officials have forged meaningful relations with Tibetan Buddhist leaders and provided funding for refurbishing prominent monasteries. Both sides benefited from a tourism boom after Diqing's main city formally changed its name to Shangri-la, the fictional earthly paradise. The revenue has reportedly enabled the monastery to sponsor young monks' studies at other Buddhist institutes. Lay believers also saw benefits from the tourism-based economic development, as it supplied private-sector jobs that are not constrained by religious restrictions for government employees. According to scholar Ben Hillman, the fruitful cooperation was possible in part because Diqing had already adopted "one of Tibetan China's most liberal approaches to Tibetan Buddhism."⁷⁹

Tourism at other Tibetan Buddhist sites has reportedly had a more adverse effect on religious freedom. For example, monks at Labrang Monastery complain that an increase in visits by Chinese tourists has disrupted daily religious activities.⁸⁰ Within the TAR, one foreign observer raised concerns that areas inside and around a monastery that were previously populated by Tibetan pilgrims have been replaced with parking lots or souvenir booths for Chinese tourists.⁸¹

Separately, the Chinese authorities have used a variety of "carrots and sticks" to motivate Tibetans to comply with government directives or report on their compatriots. Officials have offered monetary rewards of up to 200,000 yuan (\$31,500) for information on monks connected to a self-immolation or other acts of dissent. Noncompliant monasteries may see their government funding redirected to more politically loyal sites, to secular providers of social services, or to new infrastructure projects.⁸²

In recent years, local governments have threatened to withdraw state aid from families or villages that do not comply with religious regulations or restrictions.⁸³ And some families or villages have been barred from participating in the caterpillar fungus harvest—a lucrative source of income for many Tibetans that is available for only several weeks each year—for engaging in acts of political or religious dissent.⁸⁴

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Community response and resistance

The Chinese government's multilayered apparatus of control over Tibetan Buddhism has generated significant resentment among both monastics and laypeople across the Tibetan Plateau. Notably, the official actions that generate offense or trigger unrest are not just egregious acts of violence, but also mundane and pervasive controls like travel restrictions, bans on private worship of the Dalai Lama, and propaganda inside monasteries.⁸⁵ Such measures affect a wide array of Tibetan Buddhists who may or may not have previously engaged in any kind of political dissent.

The interference, combined with the typically patronizing tone of official rhetoric, engenders a strong sense among Tibetans that the state disrespects and willingly desecrates key elements of their religious faith. The more extreme uses of violence further convey a lack of respect for Tibetan lives on the part of Chinese officials and security forces. Golog Jigme, a monk and torture survivor who arrived in exile in 2014, expressed this sentiment in a recent interview, declaring, "The authorities consider us Tibetans worse than animals. They do not value us as humans."⁸⁶ Scholarly research and accounts by Tibetan protesters have repeatedly pointed to such factors, rather than instigation by exiled activists or the Dalai Lama himself, as the motivation for acts of resistance, contrary to Chinese government claims that the influence of "hostile foreign forces" and the "Dalai clique" provoke unrest.⁸⁷

Because of the harsh reprisals inflicted on those who openly challenge official policies and the limited prospect of seeking justice through the politicized legal system, the majority of Tibetans have responded to restrictive religious policies in one of four ways—"exit,"⁸⁸ cooperation, avoidance, and subtle resistance.

- **'Exit':** Until 2008, thousands of Tibetans fled into exile each year. Monks and religious leaders who have done so explain in interviews that they were motivated by a desire to obtain a proper monastic education, something that has become increasingly difficult or even impossible inside the TAR in particular.⁸⁹ With increased police checkpoints throughout the plateau and a military buildup along the Nepalese border, the "exit" option has been largely closed off, though a trickle of refugees continue to escape each year.
- **Cooperation:** A sizable contingent of Tibetan Buddhist leaders actively cooperate with the Chinese authorities, while others seek to negotiate with local officials in order to balance their responsibility to followers and compliance with official directives to minimize repression.⁹⁰ The most prominent example of active cooperation is the 26-year-old government-approved Panchen Lama, Gyaltzen Norbu, who gives speeches at government-sponsored conferences, offers teachings on special occasions, and in 2010, at the age of 20, became the youngest member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). State media reports and articles on the website of the UFWD frequently feature photos and quotes from other monks, abbots, and officially recognized reincarnated lamas who toe the party line and thank the government for its support of Tibetan Buddhism.⁹¹ While many Tibetans view such individuals with skepticism, other religious leaders who are well respected in their communities have attempted to develop a cooperative relationship with local officials to mitigate conflict and fend off persecution, with mixed success.⁹²

- **Avoidance:** This tactic is particularly common among monastics facing patriotic reeducation campaigns in their monasteries. According to one exiled monk from a monastery outside the TAR, when officials came to host a series of sessions in 2012, many monks simply avoided attending, despite repeated requests that they join. He indicated that officials chose not to force their attendance for fear of sparking protests at the monastery, which was known for its past resistance, because such unrest would reflect badly on the officials themselves.⁹³

For those forced to attend patriotic reeducation sessions, many try to veil their statements, acknowledging certain aspects of official propaganda that require recitation, such as respect for official religious policy, while avoiding more sensitive comments, like condemnation of the Dalai Lama.⁹⁴ In other cases, monks and nuns have been known to temporarily flee their monasteries and hide among the local community or in surrounding mountains for the period of a patriotic reeducation campaign or other official inspection—for example to verify that no monks under the age of 18 are present or that all have received official approval to study at the monastery.⁹⁵

- **Subtle resistance:** Private acts of resistance among Tibetans are nearly as widespread and diverse as the official controls they seek to undermine. They occur in physical and mental spaces that remain beyond the reach of the Chinese state. Many monastics and laypeople secretly retain images of the Dalai Lama or other representations of the spiritual leader that may not be immediately visible to Chinese inspectors. These may be hidden inside a box, behind a picture frame, on an electronic device, or under blankets. In localities where officials are seen as sympathetic or likely to turn a blind eye, banned images are displayed openly.⁹⁶ Many Tibetans also educate their children in the privacy of their own homes about the Dalai Lama or other principles of Tibetan Buddhism that they might not otherwise encounter.⁹⁷

Private acts of resistance among Tibetans are nearly as widespread and diverse as the official controls they seek to undermine.

A growing trend since 2010 has been the celebration of Lhakar (also known as White Wednesday) by Tibetans inside and outside China. While the main focus of the movement is on displaying one's cultural identity (by speaking Tibetan or wearing traditional dress, for example), there is also a strong religious component given the close connection between ethnic and religious identities.⁹⁸ A greater number of lay Tibetans may choose to make offerings at temples on that day relative to others, or display prayer flags at their home or local religious site.⁹⁹ Similarly, in the context of bans on displays of certain religious symbols, some Tibetans have taken to wearing discreet "Amulets for Peace" that represent their personal commitment to follow a set of 10 Buddhist virtues in their day-to-day lives and avoid acts of violence against fellow Tibetans, an indirect and nonconfrontational way of affirming their religious values and dedication to Tibetan unity.¹⁰⁰

Despite the risks of imprisonment, torture, and death, each year dozens of Tibetan clerics and laypeople engage in active, politicized forms of protest against repressive government policies on religion.¹⁰¹ These have been predominantly nonviolent. The region has also witnessed periodic outbursts of spontaneous riots, such as those in Lhasa in 2008, or clashes with security forces, as occurred in Driru in 2013. But these are relatively rare.

Self-immolations: The most dramatic, extreme, and controversial form of protest to appear in Tibetan regions in recent years has been a series of over 140 self-immolations since March 2011.¹⁰² Although many of the first cases involved monks or nuns, an increasing number of laypeople also committed the act; by mid-2016 more laypeople than monastics had self-immolated. Geographically, the vast majority of documented incidents (nearly 95 percent) have occurred outside the TAR, with the largest number taking place in Sichuan Province. This difference may reflect both the stricter controls on movement and information in the TAR and a stronger reaction to repressive policies in regions that enjoyed comparative freedom until the late 2000s.

Evidence of Tibetans' resilient reverence towards the Dalai Lama comes from the government's own constant campaigns to suppress signs of devotion.

Although a variety of official policies appear to have provoked the self-immolations, at least some seem to have a religious tint, with the protester calling out phrases like “long live the Dalai Lama,” asking for the Dalai Lama to be allowed to return to Tibet, or demanding the release of the Panchen Lama who was originally recognized by the Dalai Lama. The rise in self-immolations has been largely interpreted by knowledgeable observers as a sign of the desperation of Tibetans living under Chinese rule, particularly given that escape abroad has become increasingly difficult. Nevertheless, the tactic—and the Dalai Lama's reluctance to actively condemn it—has proven controversial among Buddhist believers and scholars of Tibet, with some treating immolators as martyrs and others arguing that suicide should not be condoned or glorified even under extreme circumstances.¹⁰³

Public protests: As authorities have expanded punishments for self-immolation to include friends, family, and even whole villages, fewer individuals appear to be engaging in that form of protest, with only two self-immolations documented during the first half of 2016. Instead, solitary protests in marketplaces or other public venues have gained prominence. Such demonstrations typically involve a single monk, nun, or layperson walking through town while holding a photo of the Dalai Lama or an image representing Tibetan independence, such as the Tibetan flag. Security forces usually pounce on the protesters almost immediately and take them into custody. Larger gatherings that violate official bans continue to be reported occasionally.

Defining victory

Against difficult odds and in the context of increasing repression, the responses described above have yielded some success. Most notable is the resilience of devotion to the Dalai Lama inside Tibet more than 50 years after his escape to India, despite the Chinese government's extensive efforts to demonize him, delegitimize his religious authority, and force believers to denounce him.

Indeed, some of the strongest evidence of this resilience comes from the government's own comments and constant campaigns to suppress signs of devotion. For example, one high-level official from the UFWD argued that the new state-supported Tibetan Buddhist Institute was necessary “to resist the Dalai clique's religious infiltration,” among other reasons.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, if clerics and laypeople were no longer participating in prayer services for the Dalai Lama or displaying his image in public, authorities in Qinghai would likely not have included specific provisions in their 2015 regulations that ban such activities and reiterate the related penalties.¹⁰⁵

With regard to other acts of resistance, much depends on how one defines success. For lone demonstrators or even self-immolators, the mere fact that they were able to carry out their protest and have others witness it before police moved in might be deemed a victory. Golog Jigme, a monk who escaped police custody and fled the country, explains that his safe arrival in India was itself a triumph, but that his forced departure from his homeland, where he would have preferred to remain, is a loss. His case received international attention, and he says that the outside pressure on his behalf contributed to his two earlier releases from detention and the fact that he was not sentenced to prison.¹⁰⁶

For Tibetan religious leaders who take a more cooperative stance in their negotiations with Chinese authorities, even small concessions or approvals of religious activities are victories. However, attempts to mitigate rifts with the authorities are not always successful. In Driru in 2014, monastic leaders paid for the medical treatment of injured Tibetans after security forces opened fire during clashes at a sacred mountain, but authorities still ultimately shut down the monastery later that year. More recently, in Larung Gar, large-scale demolitions proceeded during 2016 despite academy leaders' perception of a good relationship with local officials.¹⁰⁷ Such failures make it more difficult to avoid conflict in the long term because they show that conciliatory approaches are not rewarded.

Future outlook

Political and religious authority in Tibet have long been intricately and explicitly intertwined in a manner that is unique among the major religions in China today. This has presented distinct challenges to CCP policy as officials attempt to permit some degree of religious practice while strongly suppressing any actions perceived to be politically subversive. Restrictive measures have intensified over time to address the latter priority, encroaching on routine and peaceful religious practice and stoking resentment among a growing number of monastics and lay believers.

The Dalai Lama handed over all remaining political authority to the prime minister of the Tibetan government in exile in 2011, but the Chinese government continues to regard him as a political threat rather than a purely religious figure. In fact, the CCP is looking ahead to the current Dalai Lama's death and intensifying its efforts to control his reincarnation. It has made statements insisting that the next Dalai Lama will be born inside Tibet.

Given the evident resilience of Tibetans' devotion to the Dalai Lama and their reluctance to genuinely embrace the government-backed Panchen Lama, such rhetoric seems guaranteed to create more friction. By contrast, if CCP leaders were to decide on a more conciliatory approach and accept the Dalai Lama's role as a religious figure, they might be able to reap political and economic benefits while significantly reducing social tensions. Robert Barnett, a leading scholar on Tibet, argued in a recent interview that "if Xi had time to sort out Tibet policy, stopping the attacks on the Dalai Lama would solve 50 to 60 percent of the problem."¹⁰⁸

"If Xi had time to sort out Tibet policy, stopping the attacks on the Dalai Lama would solve 50 to 60 percent of the problem."

– Scholar Robert Barnett

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 81. Interview with researcher from International Campaign for Tibet, April 2016; International Campaign for Tibet, "The Communist Party As Living Buddha."
 82. Tibet Watch, "Tibet's 'Intolerable' Monasteries."
 83. Radio Free Asia reported that authorities in the TAR's Jiangda (Jomda) County ordered residents to call home any of their family members who were monks or nuns enrolled at Buddhist centers in other provinces, and those found noncompliant were threatened with withdrawal of all forms of government aid. See Kunsang Tenzin, Karma Dorjee and Richard Finney, "Monks, Nuns Forced to Return to Tibet County in Religious Life Clampdown," *Radio Free Asia*, October 24, 2014, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/return-10242014162330.html>.
 84. For example in September 2014, as a direct response to dissent in Driru County, harsh directives were issued by the Driru County People's Government to control residents. Among the listed punishments was the following: "Laypersons who hang pictures of the Dalai or secretly keep them will be forced to complete six months of education in the law, and deprived of the right to collect Yartsa Gunbu (caterpillar fungus) for two years." *Global Times*, "Training Course for New Living Buddhas Held," November 11, 2016, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1016253.shtml>; International Campaign for Tibet, "Harsh new 'rectification' drive in Driru: Nuns expelled and warning of destruction of monasteries and 'mani walls.'"
 85. Terrone, "Propaganda in the Public Square: Communicating State Directives on Religion and Ethnicity to Uyghurs and Tibetans in Western China."
 86. Tibet Watch, "Tibet's 'Intolerable' Monasteries."
 87. Terrone, "Propaganda in the Public Square."
 88. Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).
 89. International Campaign for Tibet, "The Communist Party As Living Buddha"
 90. Interview with Tibetan monk.
 91. *Global Times*: "It is the best time in the history of the Tibetan Buddhism. We should inherit and develop the tradition of loving the country and the religion, and make contribution to adapting the religion to the socialist society," said Living Buddha Jizhong from a monastery in Qamdo, Tibet. See *Global Times*, "Training course for new Living Buddhas held."
 92. Some observers have cited the Larung Gar Buddhist Academy as one such example of developing positive relations with local officials, but that example lost some relevance with authorities launching demolitions of students' residences in late 2016. Hillman, "China's Many Tibets."
 93. Interview with Tibetan monk.
 94. This approach has not always met with success, as officials have adapted accordingly and required more direct denunciations. See International Campaign for Tibet, "The Communist Party As Living Buddha."
 95. Ibid.
 96. Interview with Julia Famularo, August 2016.

- 97.** Interview with Nyima Lhamo
- 98.** Email communication with independent Tibetan researcher who wished to remain anonymous. See also, "Lhakar Wednesday Movement: Celebration of Tibetan Spirit," Voice of America, July 13, 2012. <http://www.voatibetanenglish.com/a/1404065.html>.
- 99.** Tsedo, "Lahakat," *American Himalayan Foundation* (blog), March 9, 2012, <http://www.himalayan-foundation.org/blog/114374>.
- 100.** Holly Gayley and Padma 'tsho, "Non-violence as a shifting signifier on the Tibetan plateau."
- 101.** A growing number of protests in recent years have been triggered by Chinese government policies or actions unrelated to religion, such as the language of instruction in schools or development projects that harm the local environment. Those have not been taken into consideration here given the report's thematic focus on religion.
- 102.** One self-immolation took place in 2009, but it was isolated in terms of the timeline and therefore excluded from this count.
- 103.** Interviews with Robert Barnett and an overseas Tibetan researcher who wished to remain anonymous, July 2016.
- 104.** Zhu Weiqun, Executive Deputy Head of the Communist Party United Front Work Department (UFWD), and Director of the Party's General Office of the Central Coordinating Group for Tibet Affairs. See Congressional-Executive Commission on China, "2012 Annual Report", October 10, 2012, [https://www.cecc.gov/publications/annual-reports/2012-annual-report](https://www.cecc.gov/publications/annual-reports/2012-annual-report;);
- 105.** Oliver Arnoldi, "China issues 20 'illegal activities related to the independence of Tibet,'" *Tibet Post International*, February 25, 2015, <http://www.thetibetpost.com/en/news/tibet/4436-china-issues-20-illegal-activities-related-to-the-independence-of-tibet>.
- 106.** Tibet Watch, "An Interview with Golog Jigme Gyatso," July 2014, http://www.tibetwatch.org/uploads/2/4/3/4/24348968/an_interview_with_golog_jigme_gy

