

China cracks down on Tibetan protests

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A wave of protests and riots has rocked Tibet since March 10—the 49th anniversary of a failed rebellion led by the Dalai Lama in 1959. The unrest has put the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership into a dilemma—violent repression risks further international condemnation just months before the Beijing Olympic Games, while any concessions will encourage separatism elsewhere in China, as well as in Taiwan, where a presidential election will be held this Saturday. Moreover, Beijing is acutely aware that protests in Tibet have the potential to trigger wider social discontent over unemployment and the highest levels of inflation in 12 years.

The political atmosphere in China this year resembles the late 1980s, when hostility to rising prices and the impact of market reform fuelled a wave of protests. In March 1989, the death of the Tibetan religious leader, the 10th Panchen Lama, became the focus of a series of riots in the Tibetan capital, Lhasa. President Hu Jintao, then the CCP party boss of Tibet, imposed martial law in the city. These developments anticipated far more explosive events a few months later, with nationwide protests of workers and students, culminating in the bloody military crackdown in Beijing's Tiananmen Square on June 4. Hu's repression in Tibet won him the support of the CCP leadership to become Deng Xiaoping's heir.

The latest unrest erupted on March 10 after Chinese police arrested 60 monks from the Drepung monastery, who were protesting on the anniversary of the 1959 CIA-backed revolt. On the same day, the Dalai Lama declared from exile in India: "For nearly six decades Tibetans have had to live in a state of constant fear under Chinese repression." The next day around 600 monks staged a protest in front of the Lhasa police headquarters demanding the release of the detained monks. Sporadic protests last week led to more arrests in the city.

On Friday, local police prevented monks from the Ramoche monastery from demonstrating. This provoked an angry response from ordinary Tibetan residents, who have been treated as second-class citizens, economically and culturally, for decades. Hundreds of protestors smashed and burned at least 100 shops, banks and hotels owned by local Han Chinese. Cars and buses were also torched.

Several thousand paramilitary police officers were mobilised to suppress the riots. Rather than completely blacking them out, the state-controlled media broadcast limited coverage of the protests in Tibet in a bid to minimise international criticism. "Throughout the incident, Lhasa police officers exercised great restraint. They remained patient, professional and were instructed not to use force," the official Xinhua news agency declared.

These claims lack any credibility, however. Foreign journalists are banned from going to Tibet, while CNN—the only foreign news service allowed in—was blacked out. China's Internet police have also been filtering information related to the unrest. Even cell phone signals in Tibet were apparently blocked. Tourists have been asked to

leave.

The Chinese media has reported that at least 13 "innocent civilians" were killed during rioting in Lhasa last Friday, but the actual number of dead is unclear. Three people reportedly died by jumping from a building during a police round up of rioters. The state media has shown footage of rioters attacking Han Chinese and Hui Muslim civilians and shops, but not scenes of police repression. Government officials have described the rioters as "lumpen" and "hooligan" elements—the same terms used to describe the Tiananmen Square protestors in 1989. The Dalai Lama's self-styled government-in-exile has claimed that at least 99 protesters have been killed by Chinese troops.

Large parts of Lhasa have been sealed off by paramilitary police, while armoured vehicles are patrolling the streets. Military trucks carrying soldiers broadcast calls for rioters to surrender before a deadline on Monday midnight, or face severe punishment. Reportedly 105 people turned themselves in. Loudspeakers in the streets have been calling on residents to "discern between enemies and friends, maintain order." Heavily-armed Chinese troops are reportedly patrolling the area around the ancient Jokhang temple—regarded as Tibetan Buddhism's holiest shrine.

On Monday, about 600 protestors were rounded up by Chinese security forces. According to the London-based *Times*, 40 detainees were paraded through the streets of Lhasa to intimidate the public. These measures were endorsed by Beijing's own "spiritual leader" in Tibet, the Panchen Lama, who has condemned the "violence" of the protestors.

The unrest has spread to the neighbouring provinces of Gansu, Qinghai and Sichuan. Last Sunday, some 200 Tibetan protestors threw petrol bombs and burned down a police station, a market and houses in Abe County of Sichuan. In Lanzhou, the provincial capital of Gansu, 500 Tibetan students staged a sit-in strike at Northwest Minorities University on Sunday afternoon. A curfew was imposed in Xiahe, another city in Gansu, after police suppressed a protest of 1,000 Tibetans, including monks from the Labrang monastery, on Sunday. Even in Beijing, 200 students at the Central Nationalities University held a silent candlelight vigil on Monday night—under the surveillance of China's political police.

Social tensions

The Dalai Lama initially called for restraint. However, with increasing international media coverage, he has begun criticising the Chinese government for its "rule of terror" and "cultural genocide" against Tibetans. Although he has rejected Beijing's accusation that

he was behind the riots, his comments have further aroused Tibetans both within and outside China. Small protests of Tibetans and their supporters have taken place outside Chinese embassies and consulates in a number of cities around the world.

The Dalai Lama is attempting to use the protests to pressure Beijing for greater autonomy for Tibet. He represents a section of the Tibetan elite, who have abandoned their previous demand for independence and see their future as bound up with the expansion of Chinese capitalism through a power-sharing arrangement, along the lines of the former British colony of Hong Kong. Not wanting to overly antagonise Beijing, the Dalai Lama has denied responsibility for the violent protests. "We must not develop anti-Chinese feelings. Whether we like it or not we have to live side-by-side," he declared in an appeal to end the violence in Tibet yesterday. He offered to resign as the head of the Tibetan government-in-exile if "things get out of control".

The focus of the Dalai Lama's demands is to confine opposition to the issue of preserving Tibetan culture. Underlying the protests in Lhasa, however, is deeply felt resentment at the social and economic deprivation that the urban and rural Tibetan poor share with their counterparts throughout China. Like the regime in Beijing, the Dalai Lama is terrified of a social movement that would unite the poor and oppressed across the language and cultural divide.

An editorial in the *Financial Times* on March 16 warned that Beijing had mistakenly believed its own propaganda about reducing poverty in Tibet. "The danger of this approach has become evident in the past few days. Far from being grateful to Beijing for benefits of modernisation and economic development, many Tibetans bitterly resent the government and the Han Chinese migrants who have flooded into Tibet and who dominate commerce."

The market reforms imposed by the Chinese regime in the 1990s have ruined the livelihoods of impoverished Tibetan farmers and herders, who make up 80 percent of Tibet's population of 2.7 million. Tibet is already China's poorest region, with one million people living below the official poverty line of \$150 a year. The opening up of the Qinghai-Tibet railway in 2006 has accelerated social inequality. The expanding tourist industry, as well as retail and real estate businesses, are controlled by Han migrants and a small affluent layer of the Tibetan elite, not the urban and rural poor.

A Human Rights Watch (HRW) report in June 2007 warned that Beijing's campaign since 2000 to move Tibetan herders into urban areas threatened the livelihood of 700,000 people. Chinese officials claimed that the urbanisation of herders was "an enlightened form of modernisation", but their approach was bureaucratic and the main aim was to clear the land for investors and infrastructure projects. The study pointed out that resettled Tibetan herders, unable to speak Chinese, could only obtain work as low-paid menial labourers. They had no money to start small businesses. Some herders tried to resettle as farmers, but the government provided no assistance.

F.R. told HRW: "The Chinese are not letting us carry on our occupation [as herders] and forcing us to live in Chinese-built towns, which will leave us without livestock and we won't be able to do any other work, so we will be surely be beggars." Z.R. said: "No new houses have been built, they have just put new doors and windows in the old prison buildings. The government made a lot of publicity about bringing electric and water facilities, but those who moved there say there is no such facility. The government talks about providing a food subsidy eventually, but so far they got nothing..."

The US and other Western governments have cautiously criticised

Beijing's crackdown. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called on Beijing last Sunday to "exercise restraint in dealing with the protesters" and urged the release of those who had been jailed. A spokesman for German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who offended Beijing by meeting with the Dalai Lama last year, declared on Monday that while Germany "understands and supports the will for cultural and religious autonomy" in Tibet, it also supports "the territorial integrity of China and everything that goes along with a 'one China' policy."

To date, no government, including the Dalai Lama's administration in exile, has supported the calls from some Tibetan activists to boycott the Olympic Games. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner tentatively suggested yesterday that the EU might consider a proposal to boycott the opening ceremony, but quickly added that the French government did not at this stage support such a plan. President of the EU parliament Hans-Gert Poettering floated the idea that individual politicians should consider staying away from the ceremony. Neither proposal has attracted significant support.

The limited international criticism is not motivated by concern for ordinary Tibetans. The scale of unrest in Tibet is relatively small compared to the many demonstrations and strikes by Chinese workers and farmers, which are all but ignored in the international media. The reason is obvious: global corporations are dependent on the super-exploitation of workers in China, where sweatshop conditions are maintained through police-state measures. The use of heavily-armed troops, military lock downs of entire areas and mass arrests are essential to discipline the working class and protect the interests of global investors.

The extensive reporting on the struggle for a "free Tibet" serves a different political purpose. The region has been a pawn in great power rivalry going back to the nineteenth century, when Britain and Tsarist Russia engaged in the "Great Game" for influence in Central Asia. After Mao's troops seized Tibet in 1950, the Dalai Lama functioned for decades as a political tool for Washington to undermine Beijing. The US only stopped financing the Dalai Lama's guerrilla operations inside Tibet after President Richard Nixon reached a rapprochement with the Maoist regime in 1972.

Renewed international interest in Tibet is a sign that the whole region is once more becoming the focus of competition between the major powers. The US military intervention into Afghanistan in late 2001 was driven, not by the "global war on terrorism", but to advance Washington's strategic and economic interests in energy-rich Central Asia. The US, the European powers, China and Russia are all jostling for influence and access to the region's huge oil and gas reserves.

While not alienating Beijing by backing calls for "Free Tibet", the US and its allies keep the issue alive by continuing to maintain relations with the Dalai Lama and hypocritically raising concerns about Tibetan rights. As Beijing is well aware, Washington is quite capable of exploiting such separatist movements to advance its geopolitical interests, as it has just done by supporting an "independent" Kosovo.



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