Repression in Tibet: the class issues

The Editorial Board
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The Chinese regime's repression in Tibet has been thrust into the international limelight by a series of protests in cities around the world, criticisms of Beijing's actions by Western powers and the threat of a boycott of the Beijing Olympics.

Many of those participating in protests are undoubtedly genuine in their concerns about the Tibetan people, but moral outrage will not end the suffering in Tibet and easily can be manipulated. One should recall the fate of the people of Kosovo and East Timor, whose plight was suddenly seized upon as the basis for allegedly humanitarian military interventions. A decade later these territories have been transformed into client states, subject to continued occupation by foreign troops. In both cases, the vast bulk of the population remains mired in poverty and unemployment.

Numerous national and ethnic questions are exploding in Asia and internationally in conditions of an accelerating global economic slowdown, sharpening class tensions in country after country and increasingly bitter inter-imperialist rivalry. Whether the media pays attention to a particular case of ethnic oppression is determined above all by the interests of the major powers. US President Bush complains about China's treatment of Tibetan protesters, but his administration fully supports the renewal of the Sri Lankan government's brutal communal war and the Israeli regime's repression of Palestinians—to name just two longstanding national conflicts.

The focus on China is not accidental. The explosive rise of Chinese capitalism over the past two decades is profoundly altering the political and strategic equation in every part of the globe. China's huge and growing demands for energy, raw materials and components are bringing it into collision with the existing powers around the world. American, Japanese and European corporations are dependent on China as a gigantic cheap labour platform and rely on the police-state regime to suppress the opposition of workers to low wages and appalling working conditions. At the same time, China's rivals—with the United States in first place—are preoccupied with the long-term strategic and economic threat posed to their own ambitions and plans for world dominance.

Throughout the past eight years, the Bush administration has been seeking to strengthen alliances with a string of countries stretching from Japan and South Korea in North East Asia, to Australia and various South East Asian countries right around to India and Pakistan in South Asia. The US-led occupation in Afghanistan was above all motivated by Washington's ambitions to dominate the resource rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East. The importance of the Tibetan region stems from its strategic location adjacent to Central and South Asia as well as its untapped mineral resources. The Bush administration has given no indication at present that it intends to exploit Tibetan separatism to carry out a Kosovo-style military intervention. But by keeping the issue on the boil, Washington retains the option for the future.

Global politics today bear an eerie resemblance to the Great Power manoeuvring and clashes that preceded World War I. Moral posturing over Tibet, not to speak of China's relations with the Sudanese and Burmese governments, are convenient political levers for the US and its allies to pressure China and intervene in its internal affairs. Such methods have a logic of their own, which leads inexorably in the direction of escalating local conflicts and toward a new global conflagration. China will not voluntarily concede an independent Tibet any more than the United States would accept a separate Alaska if one of its rivals were to stoke up grievances among the poverty-stricken indigenous Inuit population.

The sanctimonious statements of "world leaders" such as Bush, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and French President Nicolas Sarkozy over Tibet reek of hypocrisy. The repression carried out by the Chinese regime pales into insignificance beside the monstrous crimes carried out every day by the US and its allies in enforcing its neo-colonial occupation in Iraq. The US administration has demonstrated time and again its complete contempt for democratic rights at home and abroad. All those governments and international agencies, including the United Nations, now posturing over human rights in Tibet are the accomplices, directly or indirectly, of the Bush administration and its criminal activities in Iraq and Afghanistan.

While the glare of the international media has been focussed on Tibet, the protests of workers and peasants across China are passed over in virtual silence. Thousands of demonstrations take place every year in China over sweatshop working conditions, official corruption and abuses, and the lack of public services. Just before the Lhasa riots, more than 4,000 workers employed by a Japanese-owned Casio factory at Panyu in Guangdong province went on strike. More than 20 workers were injured and a dozen were arrested in clashes with armed police. According to one estimate, at least one major labour dispute involving more than 1,000 workers takes place every day in the Pearl River Delta—one of China's largest industrial regions.

At the same time, no political support can be given to Chinese repression in Tibet. Beijing has resorted to the same police-state measures against Tibetan protesters that are routinely used to suppress opposition throughout the country. Chinese authorities acknowledge at least 22 deaths, but Tibetan exile groups put the figure far higher. Thousands of paramilitary police have been deployed throughout the Tibetan autonomous region and neighbouring areas. More than 1,000 people have been arrested. Armed police have sealed major temples in Lhasa and tight surveillance has been clamped on the population as whole.

Beijing's claims that the unrest is simply a plot by the "Dalai Lama clique" in India have no credibility. Supporters of the Dalai Lama may have created the initial spark, seizing on the opportunity provided by the Olympics, but Beijing provided the inflammable material for the protests in Lhasa. The Chinese regime has nothing to do with socialism or communism. The bureaucratic apparatus in Beijing presides over a burgeoning capitalist economy on behalf of a powerful and rapidly emerging bourgeoisie. Its program of market reforms has vastly deepened the social chasm between rich and poor throughout China, while its political reliance on Han Chinese chauvinism has exacerbated tensions with Tibetans and other national minorities. Outside of the struggle for a genuine socialist and internationalist perspective, there is no solution to the oppressive conditions facing working people in any corner of the country.

The class issues

The media and various protest groups have almost universally treated the unrest in Tibet as a case of cultural and religious oppression and ignored the underlying economic processes. The penetration of market relations into Tibet has led to an explosion of business activities spurred on by huge government subsidies for infrastructure, particularly under the Great Western Development ("Go West") Policy launched in 2000. The opening of Qinghai-Tibet railway in 2006 accelerated the influx of investment. But the vast majority of ethnic Tibetans have not benefited at all. While a small layer of the Tibetan elite has reaped the rewards, up to 80 percent of Tibetan youth are unemployed and more than a third of the population is living under the official poverty line.

Reporting from Lhasa, the *Wall Street Journal* wrote on March 27: "Yet even as the government insisted the violence had been instigated by a small group of monks, it was apparent from interviews that a vast number of people had joined and that other factors were at play. One government official said that many of the people joining in the looting were unemployed youth." Other reports point to the eruption of frustration among the poorest layers of Tibetans in Lhasa, many of whom are former farmers and herders forced into the city amid the growing demand for land on the one hand, and cheap labour, on the other.

BusinessWeek on March 17 pointed to the frenetic pace of business activity as China seeks to expand its manufacturing basis and extract untapped mineral resources in more remote areas. Fixed asset investment in western China grew to $397 billion last year, an increase of 28 percent. Of this amount, $40 billion was invested by the central government to develop infrastructure and other programs. The economic growth rate of China's western provinces was 14.5 percent in 2007 and in Tibet 17.5 percent—much higher than the national average.

BusinessWeek commented: "That has helped fan ethnic resentment aimed at the millions of Han Chinese who have migrated into the region and have taken skilled, higher-paying jobs building the new roads, airports and power stations. Chinese typically also operate most of the smaller entrepreneurial urban businesses, including restaurants and small shops. So while overall rural incomes of $583 are less than one-third of urban ones, in the west (where city-country populations tend to split, with the Chinese urban and the minorities rural) it is more extreme. Tibet's rural income is $393, or about one-quarter that of urban incomes, while in Xinjiang it is only slightly higher, at $444."

Ethnic discrimination is rife. The main reason for the high levels of unemployment among Tibetan youth is that state education is in the Chinese language. Only 15 percent of the Tibetan population has some form of secondary education. Beijing has ended its policy of guaranteeing jobs for high school and university graduates, further disadvantaging ethnic Tibetans. A recent article in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* explained: "In 2006, there was a large demonstration of Tibetan university graduates in Lhasa over the fact that out of 100 jobs that the government had offered in open competition, only two were given to ethnic Tibetans. The government has generally responded to this situation by evoking a faith in the power of the 'market' that would probably embarrass even Milton Friedman."

Resentment over social inequality has been compounded by the chauvinist attitude of Chinese authorities. Most people regard as ridiculous the claims by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its privileged bureaucrats to represent socialism or defend the interests of working people. As a result, the regime is increasingly promoting Chinese nationalism to fill the ideological vacuum and cement the support of layers of the bourgeoisie and middle classes. This reactionary ideology is centred on pride in the old "Middle Kingdom", which was an imperial patron to so-called "barbarians", such as the Tibetans and other national minorities, as well as other Asian peoples like the Japanese and Koreans. In making such appeals, Chinese leaders can of course invoke the long history of the country's own subjugation by the imperialist powers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The government has seized on the unrest in Tibet to further inflame ethnic tensions with a propaganda campaign that portrays Tibetans as backward and violent. Video footage of torched Chinese businesses and vehicles has been recycled endlessly in the media. Most of the deaths have been put down to attacks by Tibetan "mobs" on Han Chinese. Officials have even claimed that the next round of violence will involve Tibetan "suicide squads". The government has organised patriotic "protests" by Chinese citizens in a number of overseas cities to oppose Tibetan "separatists". Chinese calls for a boycott of French goods following President Sarkozy's threat to stay away from the Olympic Games opening ceremony parallel a similar campaign during the chauvinist, anti-Japanese protests by Chinese youth in 2005.

The Tibetans are not the only victims of the Han Chinese chauvinism. Similar processes have been taking place in Xinjiang province where the Muslim Uighur minority has been demanding basic democratic rights. Although there are 10 million ethnic Manchurians in China, it has been reported that no more than 100 people in China can speak Manchurian today, due to the lack of any effort to preserve the language. Beijing's attitude is completely opportunist. In recent years, the authorities suddenly recognised the legitimate rights of Chinese Jews—a tiny group that had been almost forgotten for centuries—in order to strengthen relations with Israel, China's second largest arms supplier.

Tibetan nationalism offers no way out. The Dalai Lama has abandoned calls for an independent Tibetan statelet in recent years and called for talks with Beijing, as sections of the exiled elite have sought to re-enter booming China—on the basis of capitalism and a degree of autonomy. More radical groups, such as the Tibetan Youth Congress, have taken up the call for a "Free Tibet" and publicly disagreed with the Dalai Lama's "middle way". Neither road is a solution for the Tibetan masses who will continue to be exploited by one or other capitalist clique in Lhasa, whether the status quo remains or one of these alternatives eventuates.

A history of economic backwardness

The present situation in Tibet is above all the product of the organic incapacity of the bourgeoisie to resolve the outstanding national democratic tasks in China. Neither the bourgeois nationalists of the Kuomintang (KMT) nor, after 1949, the Chinese Stalinists, were able to extend basic democratic rights to the country's minorities and integrate them into a unified nation state on that basis. As for the Tibetan elites, the history of the past century has repeatedly demonstrated their venal role in prostrating themselves to various major powers.

Although China's national minorities account for less than 10 percent of the population, they inhabit more than half of its territory. Tibetans have always been the poorest of China's major ethnic groups, living on the extremely isolated and harsh Qinghai-Tibet plateau. For centuries, the social development in Tibet never surpassed the level of a semi-nomadic economy, supplemented by subsistence farming. The region was ruled by a Buddhist theocracy headed by the Dalai Lama and supported by a landowning aristocracy. Most Tibetans were serfs labouring for monasteries and landlords. Buddhism was extensively propagated as the means for pacifying the masses with the belief that their bitter lot was the

result of their misdeeds in previous lives.

Those who call today for a “Free Tibet” attempt to conjure up historical evidence of a Tibetan state. But the extreme economic backwardness of the region has always condemned the Tibetan ruling classes to political impotence. Apart from the seventh to ninth centuries, when Tibet was unified under the Tubo dynasty, the plateau was always divided between rival lords and Buddhist schools. The central authority of the Buddhist hierarchy derived from Kublai Khan, founder of the thirteenth century Mongol dynasty in China, who invaded Tibet and used the priesthood to legitimise his authority. Imperial Chinese patronage continued under the Ming and Manchu dynasties, right down to the 1911 revolution. The Chinese emperor was not just the secular ruler of Tibet, but part of the Buddhist pantheon—the reincarnation of Manjushuri, the “Great Buddha of Wisdom”.

The so-called modern “independence” of Tibet stems from the decay and collapse of the Chinese imperial system. With the waning influence of Beijing, Tibet became part of the “Great Game” as Russia and Britain intrigued and fought for influence and domination in Central Asia. In 1904, Britain dispatched an expeditionary force from colonial India to conquer Lhasa, slaughtering hundreds, if not thousands, of Tibetan soldiers. While not formally annexing the region, British officials imposed a treaty that effectively transformed it into a British semi-colony. The weak Manchu court in Beijing had little choice but to accept British preeminence in Lhasa.

Sun Yat-sen, the leader of the 1911 revolution that toppled the Manchu dynasty, proclaimed a democratic republic on the basis of the “unity of five races”—the Han, Manchurians, Mongols, Muslims and Tibetans. He was the first to propose a railway to integrate Tibet into a unified national market. His KMT was never able to realise the vision, however. Its powerlessness reflected the weakness of the Chinese bourgeoisie, which was subservient to imperialism and tied to the parasitic landlord class. After the fall of the Manchu court, China disintegrated as feuding warlords carved out petty empires.

Tibet remained “independent”—that is, under British tutelage—by default. Britain divided Tibet into Outer and Inner Tibet, incorporating 90,000 square kilometres into northwestern India in 1914. Successive Chinese governments rejected this border drawn in London, even though Britain acknowledged the remainder of Tibet was part of China. The “McMahon Line”, as it was known, set the stage for the 1962 border war between China and India.

The weak KMT regime could only defeat the warlords as a result of the revolutionary upsurge of the working class and peasantry between 1925-1927. It was able to cling to power through the treacherous policies of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow, which subordinated the CCP to the KMT and enabled KMT leader Chiang Kai-shek to drown the Chinese working class in blood in 1927. Even at the height of his power, before the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, Chiang was never able to establish control over large areas of western China, including Tibet.

The “liberation” of Tibet

The political map profoundly changed after World War II. In the aftermath of the 1927 defeat, the CCP under the leadership of Mao Zedong abandoned the working class, along with the perspective of socialist internationalism, and turned to peasant guerrillaism. The coming to power of Mao’s peasant armies in 1949 following the implosion of the KMT regime did not represent the victory of socialism. The Maoist regime suppressed the working class in the cities and explicitly set out to form a Peoples Republic in alliance with those sections of the Chinese bourgeoisie who had not fled to Taiwan.

The CCP’s policy toward national minorities was not part of an internationalist program to unify the working people of different ethnic backgrounds on a socialist basis. Rather its “new democratic” program based on the nationalist aim of transforming China into a “strong power” reflected the historic ambitions of the bourgeoisie and the xenophobia prevalent among layers of the Chinese peasantry. Mao acknowledged in the 1950s that “great Han chauvinism” had greatly exacerbated ethnic tensions in the country.

The current Dalai Lama—Tenzin Gyatso—was born in 1935 to peasant parents. He was selected at the age of two as the reincarnation of the deceased 13th Dalai Lama. His enthronement in 1940 was attended by a KMT delegation, which had reestablished a mission in Tibet. The departure of Britain from the region following the granting of independence to India in 1947 opened up a geo-political vacuum. The Kashag, or Tibetan cabinet, in Lhasa was deeply hostile to the emergence of the “communist” regime in Beijing and manoeuvred with London and New Delhi to retain its autonomy.

The invasion of Tibet by the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) in 1950 was primarily motivated by Beijing’s desire not to allow the region to become another base of hostile operations for the KMT, backed by Washington—like Taiwan. The fate of the region became subsumed within the Cold War between the US-led and Soviet blocs. Initially, neither the US nor Britain showed any interest in the appeals of the Kashag for assistance. After the outbreak of the Korean War, however, Washington turned its attention to Tibet. In the early 1950s, the CIA recruited two of the Dalai Lama’s brothers in an operation that ultimately included most of the Tibetan regime.

The Kashag was forced to accept a “17-point” agreement with Beijing after the PLA overwhelmed the small Tibetan army in 1951. The agreement provided assurances that the areas under Lhasa’s control would retain a high degree of political autonomy, but would be part of China. Far from appealing to the impoverished Tibetan peasantry, Mao guaranteed the privileged position of the Buddhist hierarchy and the nobility. Unlike other parts of China, Mao did not abolish serfdom or carry out even limited land reforms in Tibet.

The policy contained the seeds of future conflicts. Lacking any significant mass support, the CCP sought to base its rule on winning over a layer of the “patriotic upper strata” headed by the Panchen Lama—the number two in the Buddhist hierarchy. The burden of maintaining the large PLA garrison fell on the rural poor, fuelling anti-Chinese sentiment. When Mao finally launched land reform, then more drastic collectivisation, the programs were implemented bureaucratically with little thought for the impact on Tibet’s semi-subsistence farmers and nomads, and without the necessary technical resources. The measures failed to win the support of the peasantry, and the Tibetan elites were able to exploit popular discontent for their own reactionary political purposes.

The 1959 revolts

The reform measures provoked a wave of revolts in Tibetan areas in 1956. Some rebel groups were armed and trained by the CIA. However, the much larger rebellion in 1959 against the CCP was not simply incited by foreign agents or landowners. It was rooted in the widespread hostility against the PLA’s military occupation and the chauvinism of the CCP’s party bosses. It erupted in the immediate wake of the catastrophic failure of Mao’s utopian experiment in rural socialism—the Great Leap Forward—and the widespread famine that followed.

One historian noted: “Contrary to later Chinese claims, the Communists

did very little to mobilise the Tibetan peasantry, nor did they overtly advocate socialism or class consciousness. To some extent they took for granted that the Tibetan peasantry would in time put class interest first and support the Communist Party. Because of the policy 'reform from the top' the Tibetan peasantry were at best treated with 'benign neglect', and at worst exploited as a source of cheap labour" (Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947*, p.134, Pimlico).

Contrary to popular myth, the 24-year-old Dalai Lama did not champion the 1959 uprising, but became a symbolic rallying point for protestors—mainly poor peasants and artisans—who opposed not only the CCP, but also the old landed elite. Demonstrations of the poor erupted in Lhasa on March 10, 1959 amid rumours that the Chinese military was about to kidnap the Dalai Lama. The movement quickly paralysed the Kashag government, which had long been divided over relations with Beijing. Some of its officials incited anti-Chinese sentiment, but the Dalai Lama was trying to appease both the masses and Beijing. His efforts to conciliate failed and he fled Tibet as PLA troops attacked Lhasa and killed thousands of poorly armed protestors.

The CCP's official account describes the revolt as an attempt by the Dalai Lama to restore serfdom. In fact, Mao's first reaction to the Dalai Lama's flight was: "We have lost". He regarded the Dalai Lama as a crucial political tool and initially claimed that he had been "kidnapped" by the rebels. The CCP finally branded the Dalai Lama as a "traitor" after he started to openly preach anti-communism. Despite US support, the Tibetan government in exile was never officially recognised internationally, in part because Washington's other ally—the KMT dictatorship in Taiwan—insisted that the region was part of China.

Hostility toward the CCP regime only deepened after Mao unleashed the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" in 1966 as part of bitter infighting against his factional rivals. The purge of the Panchen Lama, who had cautiously criticised Mao's policy in Tibet in 1964, marked the beginning of the offensive against "capitalist roaders" headed by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. Some of the worst excesses of Mao's bands of disoriented youth took place in Tibet where the Red Guards demonstrated their determination to destroy "feudal remnants" by smashing Buddhist monasteries and Tibetan cultural sites.

The CCP's policy towards Tibet changed sharply to forced integration. As in other parts of China, Tibetans were mechanically divided into the categories of "poor peasant", "middle peasant" and "landlord" and favoured or abused accordingly. Tibetans were forced to attend meetings to express loyalty to Mao and to discard their traditional clothes for Mao uniforms. The campaign was brought to an abrupt halt after the internal CCP feuding threatened to destabilise the regime and the rampages of the Red Guards provoked working class opposition and rebellions outside the official framework of the "Cultural Revolution". The military was mobilised to restore order and stamp out opposition, including in Tibet.

The Tibetan government in exile may have harboured hopes of being hoisted back into power with the backing of Washington in the 1960s, but the situation changed abruptly in 1971 after US President Nixon's rapprochement with the Chinese regime. Confronted with economic stagnation and sharpening tensions with the Soviet Union, Mao pragmatically established an alliance with Washington, making a mockery of his own anti-imperialist rhetoric. As part of the arrangement, the US recognised Beijing's sovereignty over Taiwan and Tibet and left several of its anti-communist allies, including the Dalai Lama and Chiang Kai-shek, out in the cold. CIA support for the arming and training of small bands of Tibetan guerrillas rapidly dried up.

The Washington-Beijing deal marked the start of the opening up of China to foreign capital, a process that rapidly escalated after Mao's death in 1976 and the rise to power of Deng Xiaoping. The dismantling of the People's Communes in early 1980s brought temporary relief to the peasantry, including in Tibet where the communes had proved to be an economic disaster. The CCP sought to patch up relations with the Buddhist hierarchy by restoring the "traditional" culture and rebuilding temples as part of its ideological "liberalisation".

Market reforms

The flourishing of market reform in China, fuelled by a flood of foreign investment, has not lessened, but profoundly exacerbated social tensions throughout the country. The domination of the capitalist market has produced sharpening social polarisation and deep discontent as the previous limited social safety net has been dismantled.

Protests and demonstrations in the impoverished Tibetan region have proved to be harbingers of broader upsurges of unrest. The death of 10th Panchen Lama in January 1989 led to a social explosion in Tibet, after rumours spread that he had declared shortly before he died that Tibet had lost more than it gained since 1949. President Hu Jintao was party boss in Tibet at the time and violently suppressed riots that erupted in Lhasa in March with scores, if not hundreds, of people killed. The Lhasa rebellion was a symptom of wider discontent that erupted in nationwide protests by students and workers for democratic reforms and social equality beginning in April. After much internal debate, the CCP regime unleashed a brutal military crackdown on protestors in Beijing's Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989.

The spectre of Tiananmen Square still haunts the Chinese regime. All the social contradictions that exploded in 1989 have been compounded and intensified by the subsequent surge of foreign investment. For all the crocodile tears about the crushing of protests, global CEOs understood Beijing's show of force as a guarantee that it would suppress any opposition in the working class. The social divide is particularly stark in Tibet where booming economic development and huge infrastructure spending have left ethnic Tibetans marginalised.

The *Economist* noted on April 10: "In fact, the situation today is more volatile than during the unrest in the late 1980s, argues Wang Lixiong, a Beijing-based Tibetan scholar, because resentment against China's rule has spread to Tibetan peasants and state workers. 'The last major unrest in Tibet in 1987 and the riots of 1989 when martial law was imposed were limited to the capital of Lhasa and involved only monks, intellectuals and students,' he says. 'But today's unrest has spread to other Tibetan areas and to people from all walks'."

The solution for the Tibetan people does not lie in negotiations between the Dalai Lama and Beijing, nor in the creation of an "independent" statelet. A separate Tibet would never be independent, democratic or capable of fulfilling the basic social needs of its population. If Tibet had not been integrated into China in 1950, it would have followed a similar road to neighbouring Nepal and Bhutan, where absolutist monarchies have ruled over small impoverished, dependent states. One only has to look at the Central Asian republics formed in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 to see the fate of an "independent" Tibet. It would become a plaything in the intensifying rivalries between the major powers.

None of the national issues in China and the region can be resolved outside of a unified struggle by the working class for a socialist perspective. The proliferation of national and ethnic struggles is one more symptom of the crisis of world capitalism and the nation state system. Compared to the anti-colonial struggles in countries like China and India in the early twentieth century, which drew together vast masses of people across language, ethnic and religious divides, the national movements of today are invariably exclusivist and regressive. Far from seeking independence from imperialism, they actively seek the backing of the

major powers to carve out a capitalist statelet for the exploitation of their "own" working class.

The integration of Tibet into the Chinese and world economy—driven by the demand for cheap labour and resources—is bringing the Tibetan masses into the ranks of the Chinese and international working class. The lack of democratic rights and social misery suffered by Tibetans is shared by hundreds of millions of workers throughout China and the surrounding region, including in India. The social and democratic aspirations of Tibetans can be fulfilled only through a joint struggle with the working class in China to overthrow the CCP regime in Beijing as part of the broader fight for socialism internationally.

Above all, this requires drawing the necessary lessons from the protracted struggle of the Trotskyist movement against all forms of Stalinism and building a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in China as the revolutionary leadership of the working class.