



## **Chinese crackdown on Tibetan Buddhism: a report published for the People's Republic of China's second Universal Periodic Review**

### **Executive Summary**

#### **Introduction**

Following the overwhelmingly peaceful protests that swept across Tibet in March and April 2008, the environment for Tibetan Buddhism has deteriorated significantly. The most tragic evidence has been the unprecedented wave of self-immolations as a form of political protest. Since February 2009, more than 120 Tibetans have self-immolated, including students, monks, nuns, young mothers, farmers and nomads. Many of these have sought to underline the religious context of their acts. Some have died with their hands clasped in prayer, while many self-immolated beside a stupa (reliquary building), a monastery or a nunnery. At present, this constitutes one of the biggest waves of self-immolation as political protest globally in the past 60 years.

At the occasion of the People's Republic of China's second Universal Republic Review on October 22, 2013, FIDH and ICT release a joint report to outline the recent expansion of legal measures tightening state control over Tibetan Buddhism, which has been particularly evident in the eastern Tibetan areas of Amdo and Kham, where most of the self-immolations have occurred. These measures include:

#### **1. Measures to control reincarnation in Tibet and “religious professionals”**

In 2007, the Chinese government announced measures deliberately targeting one of the core belief systems of Tibetan Buddhism, revealing the Chinese Communist Party's agenda to undermine the Tibetan religious hierarchy and weaken the authority of Tibetan religious leaders, including the Dalai Lama. In particular, the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) stated that reincarnations of “living Buddhas” who do not have government approval are “illegal or invalid”, which conveys the message that the Tibetan system of recognizing and educating reincarnate lamas is no longer relevant.

In May 2010, Chinese officials accused the lama of Shag Rongpo, a little-known monastery located in Nagchu county, in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), of contacting the Dalai Lama about the search for the reincarnation of a Shag Ronpgo trulku — a teacher who Tibetan Buddhists believe is one of a lineage of reincarnated teachers that can span centuries. The 75-year old lama was expelled and placed under house arrest. Additionally, a monk was sentenced to imprisonment, and 17 others were expelled and subjected to what the authorities called “public surveillance.” Following these events, an elderly monk, 70-year-old Ngawang Gyatso, committed suicide as a result of “depression” linked to religious repression and pressure to denounce the Dalai Lama. Officials confiscated Ngawang Gyatso's suicide note and ordered Shag Rongpo monks not to discuss his death as a suicide and to support the government's description of his death as “natural.”

## **2. Ban on Dalai Lama images**

While it is unknown whether formal legal measures regarding the ban on displaying images of the Dalai Lama have been passed, the origin of this practice can be traced back to the “Third Forum on Tibet Work” in 1994. Chinese authorities seek to replace loyalty to the Dalai Lama in Tibetan hearts and minds with allegiance to the Chinese Party-state, and in doing so, to undermine Tibetan national identity at its roots.

While Government representatives maintain that there is no law against possessing or displaying pictures of the Dalai Lama, but rather that most Tibetans choose not to display his picture, officials still remove certain images from monasteries and private homes. Open veneration of the Dalai Lama remains prohibited, and in some monasteries where monks participated in the 2008 protests, armed police has stamped upon or defaced images of the Dalai Lama. Restrictions on the sale, reprinting and the possession of portraits of the Dalai Lama have been reiterated since the apparent formulation of these policies in 1994, albeit with different nuances, and differentiating between public places and monasteries, and between the targeted groups, monks and nuns or the general populace.

## **3. New regulatory measures in monasteries**

Following the 2008 protests, the Chinese government has attempted to further intrude upon and micromanage Tibetan Buddhist monastic affairs. In particular, authorities have implemented aggressive “legal education” programs that pressure monks and nuns to study and accept expanded government control over their religion, monasteries, and nunneries. These new regulatory measures on “Tibetan Buddhist Affairs” at monasteries and nunneries in nine of the ten Tibetan autonomous prefectures located outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) have either taken effect or are now moving through the legislative process. The new measures will affect slightly more than half of the Tibetans living in the TAR.

Chinese government or Communist Party officials are now being stationed in monasteries permanently. Indeed, a new structure of Monastery Management Committees headed by Party cadres and government officials was initiated in November 2011 and completed in February 2012. TAR Party Secretary Chen Quanguo told Party members that: “The broad ranks of cadres stationed in monasteries” should ensure that monks and nuns “become an important force in loving their country, loving their religion, observing regulations, abiding by laws, safeguarding stability, and building harmony”.

These cadres are also encouraged to befriend monks and nuns and gather information about them and their family members, while guiding them to be “patriotic and progressive”. With the same objectives, but aimed at supervising laypeople, the official media subsequently announced that more than 20,000 cadres and 5,000 work teams had been selected by the Chinese government to stay permanently in different neighborhoods in the TAR.

## **4. Political education after pilgrimage and shift to harder line tactics**

The only opportunity Tibetans have to see the Dalai Lama and to attend his teachings is to leave Tibet either temporarily or permanently. Traditionally many Tibetans have travelled to India on pilgrimage. In an indication of the deepening crackdown and anti-Dalai Lama campaign in Tibet, hundreds of Tibetans were detained upon their return from a major religious teaching by the Dalai Lama in India in January

2012 and subjected to “re-education”. The detentions had never been seen on this scale following a teaching of the Dalai Lama in India.

Some Tibetans returning to India via different routes “disappeared” and were not heard of for weeks, sometimes months. Couples and families were separated while in detention, with some elderly people denied medication. Over the same period, a number of Tibetans from the eastern areas of Kham and Amdo returning from the Kalachakra via Lhasa were detained upon arrival. They were not allowed to go on pilgrimage to sacred sites within Lhasa including the Jokhang temple and to visit the Potala Palace (a traditional activity at Tibetan New Year), but returned by security and official personnel to their home areas.

### **5. Persecution of monks and nuns**

Religious activities and beliefs that are seen as posing a threat to the authority of the Party are criminalized and targeted, and China's Criminal Law is used to prosecute individuals whose religious activities are equated with “separatism”. As a result, Buddhist monks and nuns make up approximately 58% of China's political prisoner population. The Congressional-Executive Commission on China in Washington DC recorded 824 Tibetan political or religious prisoners reportedly detained.

Among specific cases, there is concern for the welfare and safety of three senior monks from Drepung monastery who were detained in April 2008, two of whom have subsequently received sentences ranging from 20-year to life sentence, in the context of a continued crackdown at Drepung, after monks from the monastery were at the forefront of peaceful protests in Lhasa beginning on March 10, 2008. Jamyang Jinpa, 37, a monk from Labrang monastery, has died on April 3, 2011 after suffering severe torture in Chinese detention. Jinpa was detained following a protest in front of foreign journalists at Labrang monastery on April 9, 2008. Labrang is an important monastery in Sangchu (Chinese: Xiahe) county, Kanlho (Chinese: Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu province.

### **6. Patriotic education and enforced disappearances**

The mass re-education in the Tibetan Autonomous Region launched in April 2008 has the slogan of “Unity and stability is happiness. Separation [of nationalities] and unrest is disaster”. The monasteries are a permanent target for the mass re-education, and the ongoing Chinese campaign, which was supposed to last for three months, is repeatedly extended until “the present behavior of the monks improves”.

Besides, hundreds of monks have been expelled and arrested from the great three monasteries in Lhasa, Sera, Ganden and Drepung. The Chinese state media acknowledged that a total of 1,200 monks from Drepung and Sera had been expelled in 2008. The names of monks not present at the monastery have been made public, with an announcement that they are not permitted to return. The doors of unoccupied cells have been sealed with notices reading “Not to be opened” and the former occupants are not permitted to enter.

The Chinese authorities have singled out many important and influential centres of Tibetan Buddhist culture – notably Kirti monastery in Ngaba (Chinese: Aba), Sichuan (the Tibetan area of Amdo). The day after the self-immolation of a young Kirti monk called Phuntsog on March 11, 2011, the military presence in Ngaba intensified. Kirti monks were not allowed to leave the monastery without three documents - a letter of guarantee from their class tutor, one from the relevant “discipline monk” (Gekoe) and one from government officials who were now stationed at Kirti. Officials also began an intensive patriotic

education campaign called “Love the nation, love religion”. The situation at Kirti further escalated when monks between the age of 18-40 were taken away from the monastery under the pretext of providing them with “re-education” or “legal education”. An equivalent term used by the authorities when taking monks away from their monastery for re-education in a detention facility is to “go for study”.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The tightening of restrictions on religion in Tibetan areas since the mid-1990s reflects the general direction of religious policy in China; but the crackdown on Buddhist monasteries and nunneries can also be seen as part of the wider efforts to suppress Tibetan dissent through a combination of propaganda, re-education, administrative regulation, punishment and implementation of increasingly sophisticated security measures.

In conclusion, FIDH and ICT consider that these measures and their underlying policies constitute grave violations of fundamental human rights standards, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).<sup>1</sup> The following recommendations should be raised during the second Universal Periodic Review of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to be held on October 22, 2013, and enjoy its support:

- The PRC should allow all Tibetans, including monks, the exercise of their cultural and religious rights without hindrance, re-assess policies that undermine Tibetan linguistic, religious, and cultural traditions, creating grievances and fostering unrest, respect freedom of religion and belief for all;
- The PRC should end the official policy of State intervention in the identification and training of Tibetan reincarnate lamas;
- The PRC should disband the “Management Committees” at religious institutions;
- The PRC should allow monks and nuns who have been imprisoned on political charges to return to their religious institutions upon completion of their sentences;
- The PRC should undertake full investigations into the on-going practice of enforced disappearances and ensure that those responsible are prosecuted and receive sentences appropriate to the gravity of the crime, particularly in the case of disappearances at Kirti monastery;
- The PRC should release all Tibetan prisoners who have been detained for religious beliefs or practices but have been charged with political offences. Monks and nuns who have been imprisoned on political charges should be released and allowed to return to their religious institutions without condition.

### **Contact details and more information:**

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<sup>1</sup> In particular freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Art. 18 UDHR) as well as the right to life, liberty and security of person (Art. 3 UDHR), the right to be free from torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (Art.5 UDHR), the right to be free from arbitrary arrest, detention or exile (Art.9 UDHR), the right to fair trial (Art.10 UDHR), the right to freedom of movement (Art.13 UDHR) and the right to freedom of opinion and expression (Art.19 UDHR).