

The unresolved Tibetan crisis

Disorder chases the Olympic torch

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While pro-Tibetan protesters make their voices heard everywhere along the Olympic torch route, Chinese security forces are still struggling to stamp out flaring violence in areas of Tibetan China. According to the International Campaign for Tibet, on 3 May eight people were killed during riots in an overwhelmingly Tibetan area of Sichuan province. Despite the growing tensions, the Tibetan Communist Party Chief vows a trouble free Olympic torch relay. Having witnessed the large numbers of protesters and some serious disruptions in London on 6 April, it seems the Olympic torch route will remain riddled with trouble and growing dissent.

On the 10 March, a group of about 500 Buddhist monks marched from the Drepung monastery (one of the 'great three' university monasteries in Tibet) to demand the release of monks arrested last October for celebrating the award of a US congressional Gold Medal to the Dalai Lama. Marking the 49th anniversary of the failed uprising against the Chinese occupation of Tibet, they chanted 'Free Tibet' and 'Dalai Lama' outside the holiest temple in Tibetan Buddhism where they were joined by hundreds of lay Tibetans. Between fifty and sixty monks were arrested as police and paramilitary units blocked roads and surrounded other monasteries in the Lhasa area to prevent protests from growing. Despite the heavy crack-down, over the next days the protests rapidly spread and unrest has been reported throughout Tibet and in provinces close to Tibet with large ethnic Tibetan populations.

China's harsh response to the uprising has sparked international criticism and has marred preparations for the upcoming Beijing Olympics. China claims 22 people have been killed by rioters in Lhasa, but the Tibetan government in exile argues

that at least 140 people have died in the crack-down at the hands of Chinese troops. Hundreds of people have reportedly been arrested, and in Lhasa the containment continues with the military patrolling every corner of the city¹.

The People's Republic argues that the violence was orchestrated by the exiled Dalai Lama and has accused him and his supporters of trying to sabotage the Olympics to promote Tibetan Independence. In truth, the demonstrations reflect a convergence of longstanding grievances and more temporal issues ranging from recent tension over Tibetan cultural practices to China's rising demand for raw materials which has substantially increased Chinese presence in Lhasa. The imposi-

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Protests in London (© Carole Reckinger)

tion of ethnic Chinese leaders to run the region, the ban on criticism of most Communist Party policies and the forced settlement of 100 000 nomads without a prospect of future livelihoods have increased the grievances for many. The planned passage of the Olympic torch through Lhasa has been another factor in lifting tensions, although the Dalai Lama himself does not support an Olympic boycott.

Longstanding grievance: Chinese occupation

In 1949, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) crossed into Tibet and after defeating the small Tibetan Army the Chinese government imposed the so-called '17-Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet' in 1951. The threat of immediate occupation and the presence of over 40 000 troops left Tibetans with little choice other than to sign the document acknowledging Chinese sovereignty over Tibet but recognizing the Tibetan government's autonomy with respect to Tibet's internal affairs. The treaty was repeatedly violated as the Chinese consolidated their control and open resistance to Chinese rule grew, leading to a national uprising in 1959².

Tibet was independent at the time of China's invasion. From 1911 to 1950, it successfully avoided undue foreign influence and remained neutral during the Second World War. China argues today that 'no country ever recognised Tibet' and that Tibet has been part of the Chinese nation since the 13th century. In the course of Tibet's 2000 year history, however, it came under foreign influence only for short periods in the 13th and 18th century.³ Tibet was ruled by Dalai Lamas since the 17th century. The International Commission of Jurists' Legal Enquiry Committee on Tibet reported in its study on Tibet's legal status that 'Tibet demonstrated from 1913 to 1950 the conditions

of statehood as generally accepted under international law. In 1950, there was a people and a territory, and a government which functioned in that territory, conducting its own domestic affairs free from any outside authority. From 1913-1950, foreign relations of Tibet were conducted exclusively by the government of Tibet, and countries with whom Tibet had foreign relations are shown by official documents to have treated Tibet in practice as an independent State'.⁴

Resistance to Chinese rule

In the early years of the Chinese occupation, control was maintained by force. More than one million of the six million people died according to an estimate by the Tibetan government in exile. Furthermore, an unknown number of people languished in prison and labour camps or fled the country. Limited relaxations of China's policies in Tibet came only very slowly after 1979.

Resistance to Chinese Occupation started to take an organised form as early as 1952. As the Chinese presence became increasingly oppressive, resistance reached massive proportions and Tibetans rose up in March 1959. The uprising was brutally crushed by the Chinese military and in the next months at least 87 000 Tibetans died in Central Tibet alone. The Dalai Lama fled the country only hours before the compound he was staying in was shelled by Chinese artillery, killing thousands of people who had gathered around the building to protect him.⁵

Very similar to Burma, Buddhist monasteries are among the few institutions in China which have the potential to organise resistance and opposition to the government. Peter Firstbrook argues that China's crackdown on the monk-led rallies in Lhasa is part of a long history of state control of the monasteries and Buddhist orders. The government's regulation of monasteries started almost as soon as the PLA marched into Tibet

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in 1950. Still today, every aspect of the lives of Buddhist monks and nuns is monitored.⁶

Following the invasion, Tibet's culture was suppressed and more than 6 000 monasteries, temples and historic buildings were destroyed. The population was subjected to terror campaigns and massive "re-education" efforts.⁷ China's consistent use of excessive military force to stifle dissent has resulted in widespread human rights abuses including political imprisonment, torture and execution. At least 60 deaths have been documented by human rights groups since 1987 and the names of over 700 Tibetan political prisoners have been confirmed. Many are detained without charge or trial through administrative regulations entitled 're-education through labor'.⁸

China's grip on the Buddhist order became very visible in 1995, when the Dalai Lama named the new reincarnation of the Panchen Lama (second only to the Dalai Lama in terms of spiritual seniority in Tibet). The selected six year old Gedhun Choekyi Nyima and his immediate family disappeared within days and until today his whereabouts are unknown. The Tibetan government in exile claims that he continues to be the youngest political prisoner in the world. The Chinese government asserts that he is leading a normal life somewhere in China and that his whereabouts are kept secret to protect him.⁹ Soon after the disappearance, the Chinese government announced that it had found the real Panchen Lama, a six year old who happened to be the son of two Tibetan communist Party workers. Most monks regard him as a "false" lama, though he is venerated by ordinary Tibetans.¹⁰

China's closing grip

More recently Beijing has attempted to pacify Tibet by large transmigration schemes. In 1987, open demonstrations took place against Chinese

rule in Lhasa that were mainly triggered by the large influx of Chinese migrants into Tibet. It is estimated that the immigrant Han Chinese now outnumber the Tibetans in their own land. They are resented by Tibetans, who argue that they take the best jobs and the Dalai Lama has accused China of 'cultural genocide'.¹¹ The overall impact of the influx has been devastating and the Chinese have gained political, economic and military control in Tibet. 'The more Tibet is converted into a Chinese province, populated by Chinese, the stronger China's strategic position along the Himalayas will be.'¹²

Tibet is the highest country on earth and its fragile high altitude environment is increasingly endangered by China's exploitative policies. Five of Asia's great rivers have their source in Tibet and more than half of the world's population depends on these rivers. Deforestation in the high plains of Tibet due to extensive resource extraction has already been linked to severe floods in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River.¹³

It is still unclear what impact the crisis in Tibet will have in the long term. The options for many Tibetans are changing, and many are increasingly frustrated as they can see little sign of progress after decades of waiting. Many young Tibetans have become increasingly impatient with the Dalai Lama's peaceful means. Although they remain loyal to the Dalai Lama, they believe that confrontation might be more effective for securing their rights.

Even if demands for independence are growing among Tibetans in exile, it seems politically a distant hope. The idea of independence puts Tibet in direct conflict with Beijing, and it is very unlikely that China would agree to any negotiations unless independence was ruled out as a precondition. China will try to avoid by all means setting a precedent that could influence other ethnic minorities.¹⁴ The Dalai Lama calls for greater

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Protests in London (© Carole Reckinger)



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autonomy within China, along the lines of either the 'one country – two systems model' of Hong Kong, or the self-rule formula agreed for from 1951-1959 which gave Tibet much more control over its affairs than it has now.¹⁵ Although many Tibetans perceive the upcoming Olympic Games as a sort of leverage in negotiations, it is unlikely that the Chinese will give in.

The spotlight is nonetheless on China, and it cannot afford to crack down too hard on the Tibetan people. During the last upheaval in 1987, very few in the West knew where Tibet was, let alone knew much about its tragic history. The Chinese government responded in its typical manner with executions, arbitrary arrests and torture, and very few in the world took note of what was happening. China was still a relatively isolated country and didn't need international opinion on their side. Nineteen years down the road, much has changed. The Dalai Lama has managed to raise Tibet's profile and China has 'opened up'. It has been admitted to the WTO, has secured billions in corporate capital and is hosting the 2008 Summer Olympics.

Beijing 2008

China has tried hard to remove politics from the Olympics and takes the line that political protesters agitating about China are violating the spirit and charter of the Games. However, eliminating politics from the Olympics will prove very difficult, if not impossible. The games have indeed

served as a stage for politics a number of times: Hitler, for example, used the Berlin 1936 games, Helsinki 1952 was the beginning of the Cold War and Munich 1972 was marked by the bloodshed of 11 Israeli athletes.¹⁶

Since Beijing was selected, international opinion has been sharply divided between those who thought the Games could help reform China and those who thought they would simply validate the regime. Concerns about China's appalling human rights record have been raised all over the world and solidarity protests have taken place along the Olympic torch relay route. The Tibetan people are today one of the best examples of a people with the right to self-determination. Public opinion matters at the moment for China, and more pressure must be put on the Beijing government. What would happen if every single sportsman would express their grave concern about the human right situation in Tibet and other places in China? Could Beijing ignore this? Russian dissident Vladimir Bukovsky's outraged comment about the holding of the 1980 Olympics in Moscow – 'Politically, a grave error; humanly, a despicable act; legally, a crime'¹⁷ – remains valid for 2008.

More of her stories can be read under:
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¹ The Government of Tibet in Exile, "Latest update on Tibet Protests" (accessed 21.3.08), <http://www.tibet.com/NewsRoom/tibetupdate1.htm>

² International Campaign for Tibet, "History since the Chinese Invasion" (accessed 21.3.08), <http://www.savetibet.org/tibet/history/sincechinese.php>

³ International Campaign for Tibet, "History of Tibet before the Chinese Occupation" (accessed 21.3.08), <http://www.savetibet.org/tibet/history/beforechinese.php>

⁴ Tibet and Chinese People's Republic, Geneva, 1960, pp. 5, 6

⁵ BBC News, "Tibetan Monks: A controlled Life" (accessed 21.3.08), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7307495.stm>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ The Government of Tibet in Exile, "White Paper" (accessed 21.3.08), <http://www.tibet.com/WhitePaper/exesum.html>

⁸ International Campaign for Tibet, "Human Rights" (accessed 21.3.08), <http://www.savetibet.org/tibet/humanrights/index.php>

⁹ BBC News, "Tibetan Monks: A controlled Life" (accessed 21.3.08), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7307495.stm>

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ The Independent, "The Dalai Lama attacks cultural Genocide" (accessed 21.3.08), <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/dalai-lama-attacks-cultural-genocide-796795.html>

¹² International Campaign for Tibet, "History since the Chinese Invasion" (accessed 21.3.08), <http://www.savetibet.org/tibet/history/sincechinese.php>

¹³ International Campaign for Tibet, "Tibetan Environment" (accessed 21.3.08), <http://www.savetibet.org/tibet/index.php>

¹⁴ BBC News, "China's Quandary over Tibet's Future" (accessed 21.3.08), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7305558.stm>

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ The International Herald Tribune, "Beijing Olympics Let the Politics begin" (accessed 21.3.08), <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2007/08/13/asia/letter.1-113324.php>

¹⁷ Reporters without Borders, "Repression continues in China six months before the Olympic Games" (accessed 21.3.08), http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=174

NATURATA
Fair a kooperativ mat de Bio-Bauern

1 Rollingergrund
• Lebensmittelgeschäft
• Metzgerei

2 Munsbach
• Supermarkt - Lebensmittel
• Restaurant & Catering
• Akzent
(Naturkleider, Spielwaren, Bücher)

Ettelbrück

3 • Lebensmittelgeschäft

4 Hupperdange
• Hof-Laden Schanck-Haff

5 Dudelange
• Lebensmittelgeschäft

6 Foetz
• Lebensmittelgeschäft

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