Status: occupied territory

Population: 6 million Tibetans and 7.5 million Chinese

Area: 2.5 million square kilometers

Language: Tibetan

Religions: predominantly Tibetan Buddhism; Bon; Islam; Christianity

Ethnic Groups: Se, Mu, Dong, Tong, Dru, Ra, Bai people, Blang, Bonan, Dongxiang, Han, Hui Chinese, Lhoba, Lisu people, Miao, Mongols, Mongguor or Tu people, Menba or Monpa, Mosuo, Nakhi, Qiang, Nu people, Pumi, Salar and Yi people

OVERVIEW

Tibet is situated at the Centre of Asia and borders to China in the East, India, Nepal, Bhutan and Burma in the South and East Turkestan in the North. Tibet is comprised of the three provinces of Amdo – now split by China into the provinces of Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan –, Kham – largely incorporated into the Chinese provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan and Qinghai –, and U-Tsang. The area covers about 2.5 million square kilometers. The Tibetan Plateau is the source of most of Asia’s major rivers and the surrounding terrain is extremely fertile and rich in forests. The northern plane, Chang-Tang, is largely uninhabitable. Tibet, therefore, commands not only the highest but also the most strategic position in Central Asia.

The Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) is not seen as the authentic Tibet as it was artificially created by China in 1965 for political reasons. It comprises less than half of the surface of historical Tibet and it merges together the provinces of western Kham and U-Tsang. Tibet has an estimated population of about 6 million Tibetans and 7.5 million Chinese settlers. The estimated population within the TAR is 2.62 million, of which 93% are Tibetans and 6% are Han Chinese, whilst the rest live in the Tibetan areas outside the TAR. Tibet is rich in natural resources such as gold, iron, lead, uranium and huge reserves of forest.

UNPO REPRESENTATION

The Central Tibetan Administration, or so called Tibetan Government in Exile, is spiritually headed by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso. Since 2011, Tibet is de jure headed by Sikyong Dr Lobsang Sangay, who was directly elected by Tibetans from the diaspora, a representative to which His Holiness the Dalai Lama has devolved political power. Tibet is currently under the control of the People’s Republic of China, a situation characterised by the Central Tibetan Administration as an illegitimate military occupation. The Central
Tibetan Administration has its headquarters in Dharamsala, India since His Holiness the Dalai Lama fled Tibet in 1959 after a failed uprising against the Chinese regime.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Early history

Tibet emerged from an obscure history to flourish in the 7th century A.D. as an independent kingdom with its capital in Lhasa. The Chinese first established relations with Tibet during the T'ang dynasty (618-906) and there were frequent wars of conquest. The Tibetan kingdom was associated with early Mahayana Buddhism, which the great scholar Shantarakshita and master Padmasambhava fashioned into Tibetan Buddhism during the eighth century. During the 13th century Tibet fell under Mongol influence, which was to last until the 18th century. In 1720, the Ch'ing dynasty replaced Mongol rule in Tibet. China thereafter claimed suzerainty, often merely nominal.

During the 18th century, British authorities in India attempted to establish relations with Lhasa. Jesuits and Capuchins had visited Tibet in the 17th and 18th century but throughout the 19th century Tibet maintained its traditional seclusion. Meanwhile, Ladakh, long part of Tibet, was lost to the rulers of Kashmir and Sikkim was detached thereof by Britain in 1890. In 1893, Britain succeeded in obtaining a trading post at Yadong, but continued Tibetan interference led to the military expedition of Sir Francis Young husband to Lhasa in 1904, which enforced the granting of trade posts at Yadong, Gyangzê and Gar. In 1906 and 1907, Britain recognised China's suzerainty over Tibet. However, the Tibetans were able, with the overthrow of the Ch'ing dynasty in China, to expel the Chinese from Tibet in 1912 and reassert independence thanks to His Holiness the 13th Dalai Lama. In 1913 and 1914, at a conference gathering the British, the Tibetans and the Chinese in Shimla, India, Tibet was tentatively confirmed under Chinese suzerainty and divided into an inner Tibet, to be incorporated into China and an outer autonomous Tibet.

The Shimla agreement was, however, never ratified by the Chinese, who continued to claim all of Tibet as a “special territory.” After the death of the 13th Dalai Lama in 1933, Tibet gradually drifted back into the Chinese orbit. The 14th Dalai Lama was installed in 1939-40 and assumed full powers in 1950 after a ten-year regency. The succession of the 10th Panchen Lama, with rival candidates supported by Tibet and China, was one of the excuses used to justify Chinese invasion of Tibet in October 1950.

Tibet became a “national autonomous region” of China in May 1951 after an agreement between the Chinese and the Tibetans. The region was then under the traditional rule of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, but under the actual control of a Chinese Communist Commission. The Communist government introduced far-reaching land reforms and sharply curtailed the power of the monastic orders. After 1956, scattered uprisings occurred throughout the country but a full-scale revolt broke out in March 1959, prompted in part by fears for the personal safety of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The Chinese suppressed the rebellion but His Holiness the Dalai Lama was able to escape to India, where he eventually established exile headquarters and accommodated Tibetan refugees with the help of the Indian government. The Panchen Lama, who had accepted Chinese sponsorship, acceded to the spiritual leadership of Tibet. The Chinese adopted terribly brutal repressive measures, leading His Holiness the Dalai Lama to accuse the regime of conducting a cultural genocide.

Landholdings were seized, the lamaseries were virtually emptied and thousands of monks were forced to disrobe and suffered hard labour camp. The Panchen Lama was deposed in
1964 after making statements supporting the Dalai Lama and a secular Tibetan leader replaced him. In 1962, China launched attacks along the Indian-Tibetan border to consolidate territories it claimed had been wrongly given to India by the British McMahon Commission in 1914. Following a cease-fire, Chinese troops withdrew behind the disputed line in the east but continued to occupy part of Ladakh in Kashmir. Some border areas are still in dispute. In 1965 the TAR was formally established.

The Cultural Revolution, with its antireligious orientation, was disastrous for highly religious Tibet. Religious practices were banned and over 6,000 monasteries were destroyed. Though the ban was lifted in 1976 and some Buddhist temples have again been in operation since the early 1980s, Tibetans continue to complain of widespread discrimination by the Chinese. Several protests in Tibet in the late 1980s or early 1990s and again in 2008 were violently suppressed by the communist government and martial law was imposed in 1989. Demonstrations against Chinese rule have nevertheless continued. Moreover, in recent years other countries have increasingly raised the issue of human rights violations in Tibet and have pressured the Chinese government to moderate their stance in that region.

Recent history

Human rights monitoring and protection has become an unusual challenge to the de facto impunity of the Chinese government’s system. Acquiring accurate information from the so-called ethnic minority region of Tibet has become extremely difficult due to the secretive nature of operations and lack of transparency. Tibetans in their own home country have become victims of deep-seated prejudice. A carefully chiseled policy has led to an attempt to suppress Tibetan culture due to denial of basic fundamental rights, freedom and justice over a period of 60 years. The human rights situation has not improved in Tibet. There is an ongoing suppression of the Tibetan people. The Chinese government continues to accelerate the political, economic, social and geographical integration of Tibet into China. There is no let-up on many unpopular measures of control imposed by China on the Tibetan region such as the “Strike Hard Campaign”, “Patriotic re-education Campaign” and the establishment of a re-education-through-labour camp in Ngari County in the TAR to check the refugee flow. Since 1991, the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) has documented more than 5,000 cases of known arbitrary arrests and detention. This number is just a fraction of the actual figures due to extreme restrictions on information in Tibet. Tibetans sharing information about protests and subsequent crackdowns are routinely intimidated and silenced through torture and imprisonment. The Chinese Communist Party, with the active support of the military presence in Tibet, at least a quarter of a million strong, strictly governs the territory. Military and police are often overwhelmingly present in Lhasa and elsewhere, though as of May 2018, security in Lhasa is dominated by undercover police.

Since 2002 the People’s Republic of China and Envoys
of His Holiness the Dalai Lama have resumed direct negotiations. In January 2010 they met for the ninth round of talks and presented their Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for the Tibetan People, after having presented their Note on the memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for the Tibetan People during their eighth round of discussions. The Envoys called upon the Chinese side to stop the baseless accusations against His Holiness and labelling him a separatist. Instead, they urged the Chinese leadership to work with him to find a mutually acceptable solution to the Tibetan problem based on the Memorandum.

CURRENT ISSUES

Political rights

The TAR consists in 12 Tibetan autonomous prefectures in the nearby provinces of Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu and Yunnan. De jure, the Chinese Constitution allows autonomous areas to implement their own regulations in congruence with local conditions. De facto, the ethnic Chinese officials, the Han, rule the region with an iron fist.

The actual TAR Party Secretary is Wu Yingjie and the Chairman of the TAR government is Che Dalha since 2017. Few ethnic Tibetans occupy senior positions but they solely serve as figureheads to echo official doctrines. Freedom House reports that there are no direct elections above the lowest administrative levels and state interference disables fair democratic election process to take place. The ethnic Tibetan population's objections against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) are harshly suppressed. Any political allegiance to the Tibetan Government in exile is violently punished by the CCP.

The exiled Tibetan authorities comprise a parliament whose members are elected for five-year terms. Freedom House reports that all votes are collected among the Tibetan diaspora around the world and there are approximately 83,000 persons eligible to vote. The Dalai Lama, who traditionally serves as the head of State, is unelected. However, he renounced his political status in 2011. Lobsang Sangay was elected in 2011 and 2016 as the Sikyong or President of the Central Tibetan Administration or Tibetan government in Exile. Encyclopaedia Britannica reports that he is both the first non-monk and the first person born outside Tibet to hold the Sikyong position.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has launched an anti-corruption campaign and a TAR legislator, Le Dake, was found guilty in 2016. However, prosecutions are believed to be politically selective. In addition to these arbitrary policies, the government of China is reported to have encouraged massive ethnic Chinese migration to Tibet in order to exacerbate the marginalisation of Tibetans. The latter suffered massive forced displacement.
Environmental degradation

Despite officially introducing more environment-friendly policies in recent years, China continues to flood Tibet with potentially destructive mega development projects such as railway routes, oil and gas pipelines, petrochemical complexes, hydro dams, airports, highways, military bases and new cities for migrants from Mainland China. The influx of millions of Chinese settlers to a fragile arid land is more than the land can sustainably bear. China’s current much-vaunted Western Development Program will facilitate the extraction of Tibet’s natural resources to benefit China. Mammoth extractive projects geared towards the exploitation of Tibet’s natural resources include planned gold, copper and chromite mines, power grids and cascades of hydro dams. It is feared by experts that these may be disastrous for Tibet, mainland China and all the neighbouring countries that depend on the life-sustaining rivers of the Tibetan Plateau.

Freedom of expression

The Chinese authorities put in place a surveillance apparatus to keep a stranglehold on Tibetan population. The UN’s Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression reports that the ratio of policemen per Tibetan equals 1/20. Monks are watched and spied on. This participates to create a regime of terror and paranoia. Human Rights Watch reports that any Tibetan who challenges Chinese authorities suffers detention and torturing in custody. Demonstrations are violently repressed and demonstrators are imprisoned.

Chinese authority restrict all news media in Tibet and social media are under harsh surveillance. Tibetan cultural expression, associated with separatism, is subjected to repression. Freedom House reports that Tibetan writers, intellectuals and musicians were imprisoned, as was blogger Drukar Gyal in 2016. The censorship of the CCP is proven to be harsher in the TAR as deliberate internet blackouts are common in the region.

External access to the TAR is restricted for foreign journalists. Moreover, the Tibetans who are caught communicating with foreign media without permission are prosecuted.

University lecturers suffer censorship and must attend political propaganda sessions held by the CCP. The CCP has imposed an official version of Tibetan history and restrict materials to prevent the unofficial version to circulate. The government also restricts teaching in Tibetan.

Freedom of association

According to a Human Rights Reports dating from May 2016, authorities launched rights-abusing “anti-splittism” and “stability maintenance” campaigns despite the absence of tangible threats and forbade almost all residents of the TAR from foreign travels. They also forbid the constitution of associations. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) work under high restrictions and are solely allowed to work on issues that are deemed apolitical such as public health and development.

Torture and enforced disappearances

The UN’s Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment reports that torture is still practiced in Tibet and perpetrated by authorities against detainees. The methods used include sleep deprivation, electric stick beating and hooding. Detainees who are subjected to these treatments are reported to suffer physical and psychological damage as a result.
Once they are released, they have no life prospects as they cannot find a job and live a decent life. Therefore, they do not have access to basic services such as health insurance. Political refugees face familial retribution back home and the Chinese regime practices enforced disappearance of dissidents.

**Lack of recognition for minority status**

Since the opening of a railway connecting Lhasa to Beijing in 2016, Tibetans complaint about an accelerated sense of sinicisation. The train enables the Chinese to settle on the Tibetan territory and sinicisation poses a direct threat to Tibetan culture.

![Image](image_url)

**Control of population growth**

Ethnic and religious minorities do not subscribe to the law of a single child policy in China. However, the UN's Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences reports that Tibetan women are forcibly sterilised and aborted. Additionally, the Chinese government leads coercive birth control policies and monitors menstrual cycles.

**Violation of cultural and religious rights**

The Chinese government fundamentally curbed human rights in Tibet for many years. Tibetans have demonstrated last year against the enforced sinicisation of their territory and population. Half the population in Lhasa is reported to be Chinese. Tibetans are increasingly marginalised from the public space as businesses and the administration function in Mandarin. The language barrier is an obstacle, although Tibetan is no longer taught in schools.

**Land grabbing, displacement and resource exploitation**

Nomadism is a traditional way of life among Tibetans. However, nomads are forcibly settled in camps, where they have poor living conditions. Human Rights Watch reports that they do not benefit from neither education, public transports nor job opportunities. Once Tibetans are moved from their pastures because the lands are confiscated by the Chinese government, they are sent to camps of approximately 300 families, where the population suffers from hunger and hardship. People are convicted for crimes they did not commit and violently oppressed.
Tibet is a resourceful region, in which the Chinese government has interest to maintain exploitation policies. Ten of the main Asian rivers flow in Tibet. China is investing in hydroelectric power to feed the region and elsewhere. Since climate change is fast in Tibet, the value of fresh water as a resource increases significantly. The Chinese government has kept a stranglehold on Tibetan water by building dams and flooding valleys, sometimes even without warning local population, who is forced to flee from home, causing severe damage.

The Chinese government also exports oil – it is estimated that the reserves of Tibet are worth 4 trillion dollars –, as well as raw materials and minerals to China’s industrial heartland to fuel national economic growth.

In August 2016, Wu Yingjie, an ethnic CCP cadre, was appointed to succeed to Chen Quanguo as the TAR party secretary and is expected to continue Chen’s policies of heavy-handed governance and social control. The 13th Five Year Plan began in 2016 and the TAR set ambitious goals for massive infrastructure construction and urban development. Tibetan areas of Qinghai and Sichuan provinces are also slated for greater resource extraction. Many observers reported public protests against rural land grabs, including one in Gansu which security forces suppressed in May 2017.

**Child labour**

In Tibet, the full realisation of child rights is far from being reached. Tibetan children are victims of multiple discriminations, particularly in training. About 49% of young Tibetans are illiterate or unable to read and write properly. Many children living in remote areas simply do not have access to a school and some families cannot afford to finance an education.

Numerous children are also forced to work in industries and are exposed to highly toxic chemicals.

The Chinese government encourages its citizens to colonise Tibet with attractive salary offers, threatening the Tibetan economy and causing severe poverty among the natives, of which children are the first to suffer.

**Health**

Access to health services is limited, making Tibet the worst place to live in China in terms of health. Hospitals are concentrated in urban areas, while almost 40% of the Tibetan population is still nomadic or semi-nomadic. Moreover, doctors apply prohibitive taxes on the Tibetans. The infant mortality rate is one of the highest in the world. Doctors practicing traditional medicine in the villages cannot treat infections and basic children diseases such as measles or teeth-related problems.

**Freedom of religion**

Freedom of religion is harshly restricted, especially since allegiance to the Dalai Lama is interpreted as a threat to the CCP. In 2016, President Xi called for the sinicisation of all religions and a number of Tibetan monks were arrested during their demonstrations against land grabbing and state repression. Chinese authorities forbid any possession of pictures related to the Dalai Lama.

The Religious Affairs Bureau controls the monasteries and the nunneries and requires the nuns and monks to sign a declaration rejecting Tibetan independence, expressing loyalty to the CCP and denouncing the Dalai Lama. The CCP conducts propaganda campaigns within monasteries and have policemen posted within monasteries. In 2016, Freedom House
reported that it ordered the reduction of occupants of Larung Gar located in the Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province. Nuns and monks were forcibly indoctrinated by the CCP before being sent back home. The demolition and evictions from the Larung Gar monastic complex saw the world’s largest Tibetan Buddhist community shrink from its 2016 population of at least 10,000 to no more than 5,000 by September 2017. Tibetan writers Shokjang and Lomik were given three and seven-and-a-half year sentences, respectively and Lu Konchok Gyatso and Tashi Wangchuk remain in custody as of May 2018, one for planning to publish a book and the other for speaking to the New York Times about the loss of Tibetan language teaching.

Tibetans continue to face routine denial of basic freedoms of speech, assembly and movement. As of May 2018, two more Tibetans have self-immolated in 2016, both in Sichuan. At least four Tibetans were believed to have died in custody, including Kandze nun Yeshe Lhakdron, who has not been seen since her arrest in 2008.

CULTURE

Environment

The Potala Palace, located in Lhasa, Tibet, was the chief residence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama until the 14th Dalai Lama fled to Dharamsala, India after a failed uprising in 1959. Today the Potala Palace is a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage Site.

With an average elevation of 14,000 feet, Tibet is literally the highest nation on earth.

Five of Asia’s great rivers including the Indus, Mekong, Irrawaddy, Salween and Brahmaputra have their headwaters in Tibet. Nearly half the world’s population lives downstream from Tibet.

Tibet’s high plains, forests and mountains form a unique ecosystem on the planet and are home to an array of rare wildlife, including the snow leopard, blue sheep and Tibetan wild ass.
**Language**

The Tibetan language belongs to the Tibeto-Burmese group of the Sino-Tibetan languages which is one of the oldest languages in the world.

**Religion**

Bon is the oldest religion in Tibet. Before the spread of Buddhism in the eighth century, most of the people in Tibet were Lamaists. But since then, a paramount objective of Tibetan culture has been the cultivation of a good heart and a calm, clear mind.
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