

## **WHY THE WORLD IS WATCHING BEIJING'S TREATMENT OF TIBET**

The recent demonstrations in Tibet and the tough crackdown by the People's Republic of China (PRC) bring to light a number of important issues. First is the matter of Tibetan independence. Second is the record of PRC human rights abuse in Tibet. And third is the matter of how the PRC handles provinces which have enormous cultural differences with the rest of China.

In terms of Tibetan independence, many Americans would like to see a sovereign Tibet. A good case could be made that Tibet should be recognized as such. For much of the past two centuries, for example, Tibet functioned as an independent kingdom. Furthermore, the Dalai Lama, the Buddhist leader of Tibet who has been in exile since 1959, enjoys what seems to be the support of the majority of the Tibetan people. He has always been accorded the deepest respect in the U.S., as the reception he received during his September visit to Washington demonstrates.

Yet, a historical case also can be made that Tibet is part of China. Kublai Khan invaded Tibet in the thirteenth century, bringing the culturally and ethnically distinct region under Chinese control. Chinese domination later extended throughout the Yuan and early Ming Dynasties. In truth, Tibet has gone in and out of Chinese control for centuries. At times it has been independent, at times under Chinese jurisdiction. China most recently invaded Tibet in 1950, crushing a nationwide revolt and consolidating power by 1959.

**Taipei and Beijing Agreement.** One of the things that both Beijing and Taipei agree upon, in fact, is that Tibet belongs to China. The U.S., for its part, recognized Chinese sovereignty over Tibet in the 1940s. It stated in 1978 that Tibet is part of China. This remains the position of the U.S. State Department today. Whether one wishes Tibet to be independent or part of China, the international reality is such that it would be enormously difficult for Tibet to separate from China at this time and become an independent country.

If the matter of Tibet's sovereignty is murky, the question about the PRC's treatment of Tibetans is all too clear. After invading Tibet in 1950, the Chinese

communists killed over one million Tibetans, destroyed over 6,000 monasteries, and turned Tibet's northeastern province, Amdo, into a gulag housing, by one estimate, up to ten million people. A quarter of a million Chinese troops remain stationed in Tibet. In addition, some 7.5 million Chinese have responded to Beijing's incentives to relocate to Tibet; they now outnumber the 6 million Tibetans. Through what has been termed Chinese apartheid, ethnic Tibetans now have a lower life expectancy, literacy rate, and per capita income than Chinese inhabitants of Tibet.

This past month, coinciding with the Dalai Lama's visit to Washington, Chinese authorities detained 15,000 Tibetans. Eight were imprisoned and two executed. It is this which prompted the residents of the Tibetan capital of Lhasa to protest. Six Tibetans were killed in the resulting demonstrations. The Chinese rushed in armed reinforcements by air and cut phone lines into the region. So far, Chinese authorities have imprisoned at least 60 monks in an effort to quell the continuing demonstrations.

**The World Watches.** At a time when China is talking about economic reform and opening to the rest of the world, it is understandable that world attention is scrutinizing how Beijing treats Tibet. If the PRC wants to be taken seriously in its modernization efforts, then it must respect Tibetan human rights and cease the Sinification of Tibetan society. Such abuses as executions of Tibetan protestors and imprisonment of monks should be stopped.

In recent years the PRC has introduced the concept of "one country, two systems" as a way of handling the social and economic differences between the socialist mainland and capitalist Hong Kong and Taiwan. The same concept in essence applies to Tibet. It is a province of enormous cultural differences from the rest of China. If Beijing is unable to respect Tibet's differences and allow them to flourish, then there are grounds for doubting whether Beijing is serious about the autonomy promised Hong Kong and Taiwan in a reunited China.

World attention rightly is focusing on Beijing's treatment of Tibet. What the world is watching for is evidence that Beijing will respect Tibetan human rights. And Americans in particular will be viewing Beijing's handling of the urgent need for Tibetans to have more freedom as an indication of China's real intentions toward Hong Kong and Taiwan.

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For further information:

"China and Tibet: Conquest by Cultural Domination," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 24, 1987, p. 15.

"Stand Up For Decency in Tibet," *The New York Times*, October 8, 1987.