



Tibetan Protests: Prospects for Resolution

by Steven Marshall

This essay is based on Steven Marshall's testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on April 23, 2008 at a hearing on "The Crisis in Tibet: Finding a Path to Peace" (view the full statement on line at www.cecc.gov).

A cascade of Tibetan protests began in Lhasa on March 10, 2008, then, by the end of March, swept across much of the ethnic Tibetan area of China. Except for periods of armed conflict between Tibetan and Chinese armed forces and periods of politically driven social chaos, no Chinese government has been confronted by an upsurge of Tibetan discontent as widely dispersed, sustained, and popular since the Chinese Communist Party established the People's Republic of China in 1949.

As of late April, the situation in Tibetan protest areas is as grim as it is fluid, and will negatively impact tens of thousands of Tibetans. Chinese security forces, principally People's Armed Police, (PAP), and government authorities are sealing off protest areas, cutting communications networks, and confiscating communications equipment (including mobile phones). As a result, the flow of information from protest areas has declined. Unconfirmed reports tell of severe abuse and maltreatment to detainees – beating, inadequate food and water, and severe overcrowding.

Very little information is available about the legal process facing thousands of detained Tibetans. Authorities reportedly have transferred substantial numbers of detainees away from their areas of residence, often to locations unknown to their families – in spite of notification requirements under China's Criminal Procedure Law.

Aggressive reimplementation of political indoctrination campaigns is following swiftly in the wake of crushed protests. Reports are emerging of anger at the new campaigns by monks who refuse to comply with demands to condemn the Dalai Lama. Authorities compel ordinary Tibetans to assemble publicly, denounce the Dalai Lama, and state that he was behind the protest and riot activity. A second wave of detentions is taking shape.

Two key factors distinguish the current protests from the March 1959 Lhasa uprising and the March 1989 protests and rioting that led to martial law in Lhasa. First, the 2008 protests have spread far beyond Lhasa and the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), and into Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures (TAPs) in Qinghai, Gansu, and Sichuan provinces. Second, the protestors have continued to persevere even as Chinese security forces established and tightened lockdowns.

The total number of officially acknowledged detentions is rising steeply – but the official figures reflect only the fraction of protests and resultant detentions that Chinese officials wish

for observers to see. The actual numbers are far higher. In more than 40 of the counties where peaceful protests reportedly took place, officials have released no information about the actions of security forces against Tibetan protestors.

The Chinese leadership chose to blame the Dalai Lama for the protests and for the resulting pre-Olympics news reporting critical of China. At the same time, they chose not to acknowledge Tibetan dissatisfaction with policies that have not delivered the rights and freedoms nominally protected under China's Constitution and legal system. Are there Tibetans in exile who set out to encourage protest activity in the run-up to the Olympics? Yes. But Chinese officials have provided no evidence that links the Dalai Lama directly to such objectives and activities.

Chinese officials also blame the Dalai Lama for Tibetan violence during rioting in Lhasa and in other locations. They do so by seeking to hold him accountable for the views of individuals and groups in what Chinese authorities call "the Dalai clique." Are there Tibetans in exile who acknowledge interest in a violent struggle for Tibetan independence, and who have encouraged destructive action in China during the pre-Olympic period? Yes. But the Dalai Lama's actions and public statements, and his consistently pacifist counsel to Tibetans – wherever they live – place him at odds with violent intentions and actions.

China's policies toward Tibetans have been the root cause of the protests and riots. There is no credible evidence to support Chinese government claims that the Dalai Lama (or "the Dalai clique") manipulated Tibetans into protesting and rioting. Communist Party power over China's legislative and regulatory process allows the government virtually unlimited ability to impose unpopular programs among Tibetans.

The function and legitimacy of Tibetan Buddhism has been especially hard hit since 2005. Legal measures closely regulating monastic life in the TAR took effect in January 2007. Nationwide measures establishing state supervision of the centuries-old Tibetan tradition of identifying, seating, and educating boys whom Tibetans believe are reincarnations of Buddhist teachers took effect last September.

The Qinghai-Tibet railway, a premier project of the Great Western Development program, entered service in July 2006. The railway's impact could overwhelm Tibetans and sharply increase pressure on the Tibetan culture. Another state-run program to settle Tibetan nomads into compact communities is nearing completion throughout Tibetan areas, disrupting an important sector of the Tibetan culture and economy. Nomads have participated in the recent protests in substantial numbers, placing some counties on the protest map for the first time since 1987.

Tibetan protestors, in their widespread calls for Tibetan independence, have provided an unprecedented referendum on China's autonomy system. Weak implementation of the Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law is a principal factor preventing Tibetans from protecting their culture, language, and religion. The Chinese leadership's refusal to recognize the role of Chinese policy in driving Tibetan discontent, and their insistence on blaming the Dalai Lama, puts the leadership in an increasingly risky position.

The Party has signaled that it may wait for the Dalai Lama to pass away, calculating perhaps that when the Dalai Lama's life comes to end, so will the issues that China associates with him. Tibetans will not accept a Chinese-appointed replacement of the 14th Dalai Lama nor is there any reason to suppose that they will come to terms with Chinese policies. To assert otherwise, as the Chinese do, is a gross miscalculation that could place local and regional security at heightened risk for decades to come.

The recent protests may already have sewn the seeds for what someday could become the next generation of Tibetan protest. If Chinese and Tibetans – along with their friends, neighbors and partners – see in the current wave of Tibetan protests a daunting challenge, then each side should contemplate the potential outcome during a future scenario in which the 14th Dalai Lama may no longer be available to urge Tibetans to back away from violence.

There can be no prospect for a durable resolution to the current crisis unless the Chinese government implements an ethnic autonomy system that respects the right of ethnic minorities to manage their own affairs, and engages the Dalai Lama in that process. Will a future Chinese president be able to explain persuasively to China's citizens why the leadership failed to meet with the Dalai Lama when they had the opportunity? The current Chinese leadership would do well to ask the following question of themselves: will a future Chinese president believe that a persuasive explanation even exists?

Editor's Note: On April 25, the Chinese government announced that it would meet with a representative of the Dalai Lama "in the coming days." The offer was considered to be the most significant concession from Beijing since the protests last month. However, the Dalai Lama's spokesperson said he had not received any official notification of the meeting from Beijing.

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