



Enhanced Restrictions on Religion in Tibet: What Purpose Does It Serve?

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According to the International Campaign for Tibet report at least 26 Tibetan Buddhist nuns had been expelled from nunnery in Driru county or Biru in Nagchu or Naqu prefecture, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) on 15 November 2014. A similar case had been reported from Dingri county in Shigatse or Rikaze of TAR where more than 100 Tibetan nuns had been expelled by Chinese authorities on 20 November 2014.¹

Particularly, Driru county has been a restive region in the past with the records of firm resistance to Chinese policies. For instance last year Tibetans from Driru strongly protested against Chinese mining activities at a site which holds spiritual significance for local Tibetans leading to a clash between Chinese security forces and local people. The region witnessed yet another bold resistance from local Tibetans when they vehemently refused to comply with the new rule to fly the Chinese national flags from the roof of their houses. Subsequently large scale protests broke out followed by pouring of security forces to restore normalcy in the region.

The new rectification campaign was imposed around September in Driru as a part of broader military crackdown and intimidation in response to resistance from local people. The new regulations stated that monasteries deemed illegal will be demolished and possession of the Dalai Lama images will be strictly punished. But the most serious measure is the regulation stating that religious facilities such as temples, hermitages and

retreat cells that have been illegally constructed since 01 January 2011 must be closed down and demolished within a specified time period.²

With such measures in place there is a growing apprehension about how many institutions or monastic retreats would fall under this category. As a follow up to new regulations a raid was conducted in the nunnery in Driru and 26 nuns were expelled when they declined to denounce the Dalai Lama as required in Patriotic Education Campaign. The Chinese act of expelling around 100 nuns from Dingri county was undertaken to target so called unregistered nuns or those who don't have official permit. Chinese authorities have intensified restrictions on monasteries in Tibet including mandatory registration of resident monks/nuns and forbids building of new rooms after a wide spread protests swept across Tibet in 2008.

Chinese government's interference in religious affairs or institutions is not a new phenomenon. A brief overview of China's religious policies in the past sheds some light on it. China's initial policy for Tibetan monasteries could be traced back to 1962 when all monasteries were governed by monks under the close supervision of the government; official involvement was only indirect. The policy was abandoned during Cultural Revolution and was reintroduced in early 1980s and continued till 2012. However in 2012 Chinese government introduced a system which was a setback as well as major departure from existing policy. Nominal self-rule of monasteries was replaced by a system where almost every monastery in Tibet was placed under the direct rule of government or party officials who will be permanently stationed in religious institution. Under the previous policy religious institutions were administered by a structure called the "Democratic Management Committee".

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Although government officials controlled the nomination and selection of the committee members, the committee comprised of monks was elected by their own community. As opposed to this, under the new system “Management Committee” also referred as “monastic government work unit” was established in every monastery and this body was unelected. The new “Management committee” also had authority over the “Democratic Management Committees”.³ Human Rights Watch apprehensively opined that these measures demonstrate that state is becoming increasingly invasive in the practice of religion in Tibet and presence of party cadre in monasteries would exacerbate tensions in the region.⁴

China’s repressive policies on religion in Tibet can be traced back to active and substantial participation by monks and nuns in uprisings against Chinese rule in late 1980s and 2008. This section of society has been politically conscious and profoundly active in resisting Chinese rule. It was for this reason Chinese perceive this section of society as a potential threat to their authority and unity of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and breeding ground for dissent. The PRC’s tight control over the monastic life and religious institutions was oriented towards keeping supremacy and authority of China’s Communist Party (CCP) intact. The party’s role in controlling Tibetan Buddhism has been emphasized by top echelons of CCP. For instance former president Hu Jintao accorded high priority to keep Tibetan Buddhism in line with the socialist society.⁵ Moreover China perceives Tibetan nationalism that arises out of Tibetan identity which is deeply rooted in Tibetan Buddhism as a threat to its authority.

The pertinent question here is what outcome these repressive policies imposed on religious institution by the Chinese authorities produces. Are these measures conducive to achieve stability in the restive regions? The answer would be disappointing because China’s policies far from being fruitful instead further alienate the masses from the state and generates more resentment against the authority. Furthermore these measures reflect poor understanding of local residents’ long followed traditions and cultures by the ruling administration. Given recent new harsh restrictions imposed on religious institution in Driru county and expulsion of nuns on ground of lacking state permit clearly demonstrates that CCP’s tight control over religious institutions continues unabated. China’s new

measures can be labelled as misguided, unwise and devoid of local sentiments and mandate.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

¹ “Harsh New Rectification Drive in Driru: Nuns Expelled and Warning of Destruction of Monasteries and Mani Walls”, <http://www.savetibet.org/harsh-new-rectification-drive-in-driru-nuns-expelled-and-warning-of-destruction-of-monasteries-and-mani-walls>, 20 November 2014, accessed on 24 November 2014.

“More Than 100 Nuns Expelled From Convent in Tibetan County”, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/expelled11202014145205.html?searchterm:utf8:ustring=tibetan+בודהhist>, 20 November 2014, accessed on 24 November 2014.

² Ibid.

³ “Decision Ends Long-Standing Policy Allowing Nominal Self-Rule of Monasteries”, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/03/16/china-tibetan-monasteries-placed-under-direct-rule>, 16 March 2012, accessed on 26 November 2014.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Chinese Crackdown on Tibetan Buddhism”, International Campaign for Tibet, September 2013, p.5 <https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/en-report-tibet-4.pdf>, accessed on 26 November 2014.
