

Facing up to Tibetan reality

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Remember how we had to learn about the Shi'ites, the Sunnis, the Kurds and all the smaller agents of Iraqi fragmentation? Over the next four months, until the Beijing Olympics open, the world is going to get a crash course in China's various ethnic and religious minority groups and their resentments.

Violent stirrings in Tibet are just the beginning. With the world as stage, the Uighur Muslims of the north-western Xinjiang region, the outlawed Falun Gong spiritual movement, Mongols and Kazakhs and whoever else wants his moment in the sun will have a dream opportunity to rail.

I hope violence is contained, and the Chinese authorities show flexibility, but I'm not optimistic after a big demonstration in London on Sunday.

If a Tibetan monk grabs the Olympic torch in San Francisco this week and immolates himself, nobody should be astonished. If the 19th anniversary on June 4 of the Tiananmen Square crackdown passes quietly, everyone should be surprised.

Playing in the major leagues is no breeze. That's where China is after the remarkable transformation that led to the hosting of the Olympics. No talk of peaceful rise, harmony, multilateralism self-effacing Chinese buzzwords all can hide that a global power must make tough calls, decide what it represents, and be judged.

China can no longer pretend to be the unobtrusive power par excellence, in contrast to American intrusiveness. In Burma and beyond, that just won't wash.

US President George W. Bush has called President Hu Jintao twice since the troubles began to urge him to reach out to the Dalai Lama, stop vilifying him, establish a dialogue, and open Tibet to foreign journalists.

But the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia, Christopher Hill, who advised the President on these calls, told me Bush's laudable pleas had fallen on deaf ears. "I don't really expect anything good over the next few months," he said.

Hu, who crushed protests in Tibet as party chief there in 1989, typifies the national consensus that China has delivered Tibetans from feudalism, ushering them toward modernity with infrastructure and investment. Tibet, in this view, should be grateful, and the region's obstinate splittists crushed.

At the Williamsburg Conference in Bali, an annual high-level get-together on Asian themes, I did not hear one word from Chinese delegates that deviated from the view that outside agitators have stirred up the Tibet protests, that foreign media are mendacious or malevolent, that lectures on human rights are unacceptable, and that no government can tolerate a separatist movement.

In short, I heard the typical conspiracy theories of any one-party state unable to reach beyond the logic dictated by its own need for control.

The president of the China Foreign Affairs University, Wu Jianmin, said there was an order for disruption. But it would be a terrible mistake to politicise the Olympics. Everyone would be hurt. The people of Tibet were serfs and had made huge progress.

I don't dispute the feudal aspects of Tibetan society. I'd be surprised if there were not seditious plans hatched outside Tibet. But the Chinese authorities need to face some greater truths.

These include the facts that a half-century of repression has not worked; that the Dalai Lama is the most moderate Tibetan interlocutor they will find; that he has called for autonomy but not independence; and that he is a revered global figure.

Rather than decry foreign plots, China should also recognise that the mass arrival of Han Chinese has fed legitimate Tibetan fears of cultural extinction, and that a stop-go approach to allowing foreign journalists into Tibet is ham-fisted.

For a long time the core question about China has been whether a dictatorship with an open market economy can resist its internal contradictions. The core question now is how you federalise a diverse society under one-party control.

Or, as Raja Mahan, an Indian political scientist, put it to me: In a country that does not separate party and state, how do you create the space for different peoples to express themselves?

Democratic India is V.S. Naipaul's land of a million mutinies. Each mutiny is a safety valve. But China could not afford even one mutiny, Mahan noted.

China's Communist Party leadership has proved remarkably adept at adjusting to the country's explosive growth. But in crisis it is not nimble. The next few months will present a number of crises that I see, at root, as challenges to the fashionable authoritarian-capitalist model.

Bush is right to attend the Olympic opening ceremony. Boycotting it would only accentuate old Chinese feelings of victimisation. That's good for nobody. But China needs to get over the repressive reflexes of the one-party state, talk to the Dalai Lama, and understand that harmony in rigidity is impossible.

A multi-ethnic dictatorship is of its essence brittle; it will be more so if it does not bend at its Tibetan edge.

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