

## A place of their own

John Powers  
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### **Granting Tibetans autonomy would foster stability and ease the financial and moral pressure on China.**

ONCE again, images of maroon-robed Tibetan monks taking to the streets to protest against Chinese rule are appearing in news media around the world. And once again, they are accompanied by images of Chinese troops beating the demonstrators. Indeed, the current disturbances are the largest since 1989, when thousands of Tibetans called for greater autonomy and respect for human rights, but there have been ongoing anti-Chinese protests in the restive region since troops first entered the country in 1949.

Before that, Tibet was a de facto independent country, with an archaic but functioning theocratic government, legal system, currency, and army, none of which derived either authority or funding from China. Nonetheless, China claimed Tibet as an integral part of its territory, and continued to do so even after all Chinese were expelled by the Tibetan government in 1911.

After the Communists, led by Mao Zedong, captured the region by armed force in the early 1950s, they set up a government parallel to the Dalai Lama's administration. He tried to work with the Chinese in the now-inevitable transition to foreign rule, but moves to transform the country led to growing resentment among Tibetans.

On March 10, 1959, thousands took to the streets to demand that the Chinese leave their country and restore indigenous rule. The response was a brutal crackdown in which hundreds died. This event is viewed by Tibetans in exile as the first battle in a "war of independence" and is celebrated every year with demonstrations and nationalistic speeches.

The present round of protests began with March 10 events, but unlike previous years, they have escalated and involve both monks and significant numbers of lay people. There have been reports of Chinese-owned businesses being demolished and civilians being attacked by angry mobs.

Why now? And why have these demonstrations developed a violent aspect? There is no single answer to these questions. The region has been effectively subdued by military force, but during my visits most of the Tibetans I met told me of their profound dissatisfaction with Chinese rule. In 2002, every employed person I met was Chinese. All businesses I visited were owned and staffed entirely by Han Chinese. At tourist venues Tibetans begged foreigners for money.

The Chinese Government proclaims that the Tibetan economy is booming and that it is investing billions of dollars in the region, but the indigenous population has scarcely benefited. Every year, more than



Illustration: *Dyson*

3000 Tibetans escape to an uncertain fate in exile, often traversing some of the world's highest passes in winter to avoid Chinese patrols. If conditions were as good as the Government claims, there would not be such desperation to leave.

The main reason for the present demonstrations is most probably a combination of two factors: the coming Olympics in Beijing and the newly completed train from Beijing to Lhasa, which brings hundreds of new Chinese tourists and settlers to the Tibetan capital every day.

Tibetans became a minority in their own country about 10 years ago, and rail service has brought a sharp rise in immigration from neighbouring provinces. This growing marginalisation has led to a sense of urgency, and with the eyes of the world focused on China in the lead-up to the Olympics, this probably seemed like an opportune time to draw international attention to the situation in Tibet. When China was awarded the Games the authorities promised greater respect for human rights and acknowledged that there would inevitably be protests. They stated that peaceful demonstrations would be tolerated, and despite the violence of the past several days, security forces have been comparatively restrained.

Foreign observers have been shocked by scenes of brutality against peacefully protesting monks, but by all accounts violence has been on a significantly smaller scale than in the past. Chinese authorities are aware of foreign scrutiny and deeply sensitive to criticisms of human rights abuses, but at the same time feel they are walking a thin line, fostering a positive public image while also maintaining order.

Many Chinese are puzzled by this restraint and want the Government to teach the protesters a lesson. Ordinary Chinese overwhelmingly accept the Government's claims that Tibetans have benefited from the introduction of Chinese civilisation and that they should be grateful. These attitudes closely parallel those of Europeans in Australia during the early period of settlement who proclaimed that Aboriginal Australians had been civilised by the foreigners and received the gifts of their superior culture, language, and religion. A recent survey of Chinese blogs cites expressions of anger, shock, and bewilderment. Tibetans should be thanking their Han "big brothers and sisters" who have liberated them from the Dalai Lama's repressive regime and given them the opportunity to become more like Chinese; they say the protests are outrageous and a sign of insufferable ingratitude.

Few Tibetans expect that China will ever voluntarily quit their country, and the Dalai Lama is officially committed to the position that Tibet is a part of China. He has publicly stated that China "is good for Tibet" because it has introduced technological progress and eliminated some of the inequalities in the old society. He calls for "genuine autonomy", which means that Tibetans would control internal affairs. Since the imposition of Chinese rule, no Tibetan has ever held a position of real authority — all decisions

are made by Communist Party leaders in Beijing, and their representatives in Tibet are all Chinese. Chinese authorities would do well to take him at his word.

Maintaining a massive military presence in Tibet is enormously expensive, and the repression needed to prevent full-scale rebellion tarnishes China's international image. Autonomy is compatible with China's real interests in Tibet: a stable Tibet with Tibetans in charge of internal affairs and ultimate Chinese overlordship could satisfy both Chinese security concerns and Tibetan aspirations.

The Dalai Lama has said that he is willing to talk any time and without preconditions, but future Tibetan leaders may not be so conciliatory. A new generation of radicalised Tibetans has grown up in exile, and many are fed up with the Dalai Lama's "middle way" approach. Increasingly, they are calling for direct action and the sort of violence often seen in other liberation movements, which brings great suffering

but often yields better results.

The present riots may be a foretaste of things to come, and a pragmatic assessment of the situation should lead Chinese authorities to rethink their policies. Australia could conceivably play an important role in this process. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is viewed by Chinese leaders as someone who understands them and is sympathetic to Chinese sensibilities. A peaceful and stable Tibet is in everyone's interests, and if he were to press the case for autonomy during his upcoming visit, it might be better received than if it came from foreigners who are perceived as biased against China.

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