

## Tibet chafes under China's yoke

March 21, 2008

**Beijing presumed economic prosperity could make up for all Tibetans have lost. Jim Yardley reports.**

Chinese leaders have blamed "splittists" led by the exiled Dalai Lama for the uprising but for many, the only surprise is that Beijing managed to keep Tibet stable for so long.

The weeklong uprising there reflects years of simmering resentment against Beijing's interference in Buddhist religious rites, its tightened political control and destruction of the environment across the Himalayan territory Tibetans consider sacred.

Since the last big anti-Chinese riots in Tibet two decades ago, Beijing has sought to smother Tibetan separatism by sparking economic development and by inserting itself into Tibetan Buddhism. But an influx of Han Chinese migrants into Tibet, and a growing sense that China is irreparably altering Tibetans' way of life, produced a backlash at the moment when Communist Party leaders most needed stability there, analysts say.

"Why did the unrest take off?" asked Liu Junning, a liberal political scientist in Beijing. "I think it has something to do with the long-term policy failure of the central authorities. They failed to earn the respect of the people there."

The unrest is a blow to President Hu Jintao, who directed a crackdown on Tibetan protests in 1989 and who has considered the Tibetan region part of his core political base in the Communist Party since then. It will fall to Hu to figure out how to restore order in Tibet without undermining the Olympics coming-out party. For now, Beijing's line on Tibet is likely to harden.

Military police officers are pouring in to stifle new protests. Nor are the demonstrations winning much public sympathy in China, where Tibetans are a tiny minority. State media has tightly controlled its coverage to focus on Tibetans burning Chinese businesses or attacking and killing Chinese merchants. No mention is made of Tibetan grievances or reports that up to 99 Tibetans have died.

Even if the protests are extinguished soon, China's leaders will be left with a shattered Tibet. One foreigner who witnessed the violence in Lhasa said Tibetans were covering the streets in white toilet paper. Traditionally, Tibetans offer white silk scarves to welcome guests. But the toilet paper was intended to symbolise that the Chinese were no longer welcome - even though there was little possibility they would leave.

Since 2002 China has tried to soften its image in Tibet by holding reconciliation talks with emissaries of the Dalai Lama. The lama, in turn, has explicitly stated that he is interested only in greater autonomy for Tibet within China, not independence. But some analysts say Hu ruled out any compromise that would allow the Dalai Lama to return to Tibet, which he fled after a failed uprising in 1959. Instead, China appeared to want to keep talking until the Dalai Lama, who is 72, died.

Beijing has also sought to control the most sacred rituals of Tibetan Buddhism. The Communist Party, atheistic by doctrine, has insisted that it has the sole authority to approve incarnations — the divine process by which a "living Buddha" is chosen in boyhood. Beijing had already selected a boy as its own

Panchen Lama, the second-ranking figure in Tibetan Buddhism, and reportedly jailed a boy chosen by the Dalai Lama.

Last November the Dalai Lama proposed that instead of waiting for senior religious figures to search out his incarnation following his death, he might choose his own reincarnation. He proposed a referendum among Tibetan Buddhists on whether to change the present reincarnation practice.

Meanwhile Beijing has steadily been taking a tougher line on religious practices and cultural expressions of Tibetan pride. In November 2005 Zhang Qingli was appointed Communist Party head of the Tibet Autonomous Region. He has made no attempt to disguise his paternal attitude. "The Communist Party is like the parent to the Tibetan people, and it is always considerate about what the children need," Zhang said last year. "The Central Party Committee is the real Buddha for Tibetans."

Robert Barnett, a Tibet specialist at Columbia University, said Zhang has taken a tough line.

Tibetan government employees faced periodic requirements to write denunciations of the Dalai Lama. Zhang reintroduced a policy that forbade Tibetan students and government workers to visit monasteries or participate in religious ceremonies or festivals.

By 2006, Zhang had revived an "anti-Dalai" campaign and intensified "patriotic education" at Buddhist monasteries. Monks are now required to attend long sessions listening to recitations of China's interpretation of Tibetan history and also to denounce the Dalai Lama.

Under Zhang's firm hand, Tibet was thought to be pacified.

In 2006 China opened the world's highest railway, connecting isolated Lhasa with the rest of the country. Beijing described the railway as a vital tool in developing the Tibetan economy, the poorest in the nation.

China poured money into Tibet in hopes that economic development and higher incomes would win over a younger generation. For many Tibetan families, life has improved. But China has also encouraged huge numbers of Chinese migrants, whose presence has diluted the Tibetan majority.

Tibetans believe Chinese are given more opportunities for jobs, and Tibetan unemployment is high.

Beijing surely noticed that the younger generation it hoped to entice was rampaging on the streets of Lhasa. Economic development also has brought environmental exploitation. The railway is regarded as a critical spur for China to extract and transport the rich deposits of copper, iron, lead and other minerals in the largely unspoilt Tibetan highlands.

Several analysts say China cannot win the hearts of Tibetans if it continues to demonise the Dalai Lama. But China's rhetoric about a sinister "Dalai clique" orchestrating the protests suggests that its attitude is hardening. Restricting the flow of Chinese migrants would be a major concession, but few believe Beijing is in any mood to make concessions. For now, Lhasa will remain in the grip of the military police and soldiers.

And, by one account, covered in white toilet paper.

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