



## FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2017

# Tibet\*

NOT FREE

# 1

  
/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	-2 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	3 /60

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.

*\* Indicates a territory as opposed to an independent country.*



# Freedom Status

Not Free

Ten-Year Ratings Timeline For Year Under Review

## Note

This figure covers only the Tibet Autonomous Region. Areas of eastern Tibet that were incorporated into neighboring Chinese provinces are also assessed in the report below.

## Overview

Tibet is ruled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government based in Beijing, with local decision-making power concentrated in the hands of Chinese party officials. Residents of both Chinese and Tibetan ethnicity are denied fundamental rights, but the authorities are especially rigorous in suppressing any signs of dissent among Tibetans, including manifestations of religious belief and cultural identity. State policies encourage migration from other parts of China, reducing the ethnic Tibetan share of the population.

## Key Developments in 2016

- A Tibetan blogger who had been detained in 2015 was sentenced in February to three years in prison on separatism charges, one of many laypeople and monastics who faced detention for peaceful expression of their beliefs or criticism of the Chinese government.
- At an April party conference, Chinese president Xi Jinping and other CCP leaders called for the “Sinicization” of all religions, adding to concerns that the government sought to extinguish Tibetan religious and cultural identity.

- In June, authorities ordered a sharp reduction in the number of nuns and monks residing at Larung Gar, one of the world's largest centers for Tibetan Buddhist learning, in the Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province. Demolitions and evictions ensued the following month.

## Executive Summary

The Chinese government continued to implement draconian public surveillance and enforcement measures in 2016 as part of a significant expansion of its “stability maintenance” policies in Tibet since an outbreak of protests and interethnic violence in 2008, and particularly since a change in national leadership in 2013. Observers documented wide-ranging violations of fundamental rights, including an alarming rate of detentions, prosecutions, and convictions of Tibetans for the peaceful exercise of their freedoms of expression, assembly, and religious belief.

Officials also ratcheted up Chinese nationalist rhetoric, including calls for the “Sinicization” of all religions, while moving forward with vast development and urbanization projects despite protests from the affected Tibetan communities.

## Political Rights

### A. Electoral Process

The Chinese government rules Tibet through administration of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and 12 Tibetan autonomous prefectures or counties in the nearby provinces of Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu, and Yunnan. Under the Chinese constitution, autonomous areas have the right to formulate their own regulations and implement national legislation in accordance with local conditions. In practice, however, decision-making authority is concentrated in the hands of ethnic (Han) Chinese officials of the CCP, which has a monopoly on political power. In August 2016, Wu Yingjie replaced Chen Quanguo as TAR party secretary. The few ethnic Tibetans who occupy senior positions serve mostly as figureheads and echo official doctrine. Losang Gyaltsen, an ethnic Tibetan, has been chairman of the TAR government since

2013. As in other jurisdictions of China, there are no direct elections above the lowest administrative levels, and aggressive state interference ensures that competitive races with independent candidates are exceedingly rare.

## **B. Political Pluralism and Participation**

All organized political activity outside the CCP is illegal and harshly punished, as is any evidence of loyalty to or communication with the Tibetan government in exile, based in Dharamsala, India. The exile government includes an elected parliament serving five-year terms, a Supreme Justice Commission that adjudicates civil disputes, and a directly elected prime minister, also serving five-year terms. Votes are collected from the Tibetan diaspora around the world. The unelected Dalai Lama, the Tibetan spiritual leader who also traditionally served as head of state, renounced his political role in 2011. Lobsang Sangay was elected prime minister in the same year, replacing a two-term incumbent and becoming the exile government's top political official; he was reelected in April 2016.

Political opportunities for ethnic Tibetans within Tibet remain limited by the dominance of ethnic Chinese officials at all levels of the CCP. The ethnic Tibetan population's concerns about and objections to party policies are actively suppressed.

## **C. Functioning of Government**

Unelected CCP officials determine and implement government policies in Tibet. As in the rest of China, corruption is believed to be extensive. Little information is available on the scale of the problem, but there have been moves in recent years to curb graft among the region's officials as part of Chinese president Xi's nationwide anticorruption campaign. For instance, following investigations that began in 2015, Chinese prosecutors filed corruption charges in September 2016 against Le Dake, a former TAR legislator. He was found guilty of taking bribes and sentenced to a 13-year prison term in December. Despite this anticorruption climate, prosecutions are

believed to be politically selective, and whistle-blowers and activists who challenge their superiors or take their complaints public still face substantial risks. In October, a Tibetan township official who had raised questions about corruption was released after serving a 15-month prison term for “illegal activities,” in what was apparently a retaliatory prosecution.

### Add A

Discretionary Political Rights Question B	O
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The Chinese government’s economic development programs in Tibet have strongly encouraged ethnic Chinese migration to the region, disproportionately benefited ethnic Chinese residents, and exacerbated the marginalization of ethnic Tibetans, who have also been displaced by mass resettlement campaigns. Ethnic Tibetans account for some 90 percent of the permanently registered population of the TAR, but many ethnic Chinese migrants have moved to the region without changing permanent residency. In recent years, officials have announced major new urbanization projects that risk further diluting the region’s Tibetan population; one such plan aims to increase the “permanent urban population” of Tibet by approximately 30 percent by 2020, with many new settlers likely to be ethnic Chinese.

## Civil Liberties

### D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

Chinese authorities tightly restrict all news media in Tibet. Individuals who use the internet, social media, or other means to disseminate dissenting views or share politically sensitive content face arrest and harsh penalties. Tibetan cultural expression, which the authorities associate with separatism, is subject to especially harsh restrictions; those incarcerated in recent years have included scores of Tibetan



writers, intellectuals, and musicians. Among other prominent cases in 2016, blogger Drukar Gyal (Druklo) was sentenced to three years in prison in February on charges of inciting separatism and endangering social stability; before his detention in early 2015, he had written about the increased armed security presence in Tibet and the political repression of Tibetans by Chinese authorities. Writer and monk Jo Lobsang Jamyang (Lomik), who had also been detained in 2015 after publishing articles that were critical of government policies, was sentenced to a prison term of seven and a half years in May.

Deliberate internet blackouts are common in Tibet, including in areas where public demonstrations have occurred. International broadcasts are jammed, and personal communications devices are periodically confiscated and searched. The online censorship and monitoring systems in place across China are applied even more stringently in the TAR.

Access to the TAR is highly restricted for foreign journalists, who are also regularly prevented from entering Tibetan areas of Sichuan and other provinces, though no permission is technically required to travel there. The Foreign Correspondents' Club of China reported in April 2016 that foreign journalists are limited to government-approved trips and face restrictions on their movement once in Tibetan areas. Tibetans who communicate with foreign media without permission risk arrest and prosecution. Businessman Tashi Wangchuck was detained in January and accused of inciting separatism after being interviewed by the *New York Times* in 2015 on Tibetan-language education; a court in Qinghai Province was considering a possible trial at year's end.

Freedom of religion is harshly restricted in Tibet, in large part because the authorities interpret reverence for the Dalai Lama and adherence to the region's unique form of Buddhism as a threat to CCP rule. At an April 2016 party conference, President Xi repeated calls for the "Sinicization" of all religions, warning against "overseas infiltrations via religious means" and "ideological infringement by extremists." A number of Tibetan Buddhist monks were arrested during the year for publicly protesting state repression, opposing land grabs, or displaying images of the Dalai Lama. Possession of Dalai Lama-related materials—especially in the TAR—can lead to

official harassment, arrest, and punishment, including restrictions on commercial activity and loss of welfare benefits. In January and March, authorities in Tibetan areas of Sichuan and Qinghai Provinces, respectively, issued bans on displaying images of the Dalai Lama in shops and religious settings.

Religious Affairs Bureaus control who can study in monasteries and nunneries. Officials enforce a minimum age requirement of 18 for those who wish to become monks or nuns, although some institutions continue to accept younger children without registration. Monks and nuns are required to sign a declaration rejecting Tibetan independence, expressing loyalty to the government, and denouncing the Dalai Lama. Since 2012, the CCP has set up committees of government officials within monasteries to manage their daily operations and enforce party indoctrination campaigns. Police posts are increasingly common even in smaller monasteries.

Ideological education campaigns reach most monasteries and nunneries in the region. Such campaigns typically force participants to recognize the CCP claim that China “liberated” Tibet and to denounce the Dalai Lama. The effort has also been extended to the lay population in recent years, with students, civil servants, and farmers required to participate in discussions, singing sessions, and propaganda film screenings.

In June 2016, authorities ordered a sharp reduction in the size of Larung Gar—a major center for Tibetan Buddhist learning located in the Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province—to a maximum of 5,000 occupants, down from an estimated 10,000 to 30,000 occupants. Demolitions at the site began in July, and many of the evicted monks and nuns were reportedly forced to undergo political “reeducation” before being sent to their home districts.

University professors cannot lecture on certain topics, and many must attend political indoctrination sessions. The government restricts course materials to prevent circulation of unofficial versions of Tibetan history, and has reduced use of Tibetan as the language of instruction in schools in recent years.

Freedom of private discussion is severely limited by factors including the authorities’ monitoring of electronic communications, the heavy security presence, and regular

ideological campaigns in Tibetan areas.

## **E. Associational and Organizational Rights**

Chinese authorities severely restrict freedoms of assembly and association, particularly as the government has intensified its “stability maintenance” policy throughout Tibet. A Human Rights Watch report released in May 2016 documented a significant increase in control and surveillance of public gatherings and associations in rural areas in recent years, expanding the tightest restrictions beyond major towns. Independent trade unions and human rights groups are illegal, and even nonviolent protesters are often violently dispersed and harshly punished. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including those focused only on apolitical issues like development and public health, operate under highly restrictive agreements. Nevertheless, Tibetans continue to seek avenues for expressing dissatisfaction with government policies. In May 2016, over 100 Tibetan demonstrators staged a peaceful protest in Sichuan’s Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture against Chinese mining operations that threatened the environment. Similarly, in June, at least seven Tibetan demonstrators were detained after hundreds participated in a nine-day protest against a gold-mining project at a sacred site in Gansu Province. As in the rest of China, authorities have occasionally responded to environmental protests with minor concessions, such as temporary suspension of mining operations.

## **F. Rule of Law**

The CCP controls the judicial system in Tibet, and courts consequently lack independence. Critics of Chinese rule continue to face arrests, disappearances, and torture in custody. According to a partial database compiled by the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China, there were 650 Tibetan political prisoners behind bars as of August 1, 2016. Defendants lack access to meaningful legal representation. Trials are closed if state security is invoked, and sometimes even when no political crime is listed. Chinese lawyers who offer to defend Tibetan



suspects have been harassed or disbarred. Security forces routinely engage in arbitrary detention, and detainees' families are often left uninformed as to their whereabouts or well-being. There have been reports that Tibetan prisoners of conscience have died in custody under circumstances indicating torture. In February 2016, for instance, a Tibetan man died after suspected torture while serving a 13-year prison term for refusing to fly a Chinese flag.

At least three Tibetans reportedly self-immolated to protest Chinese rule during 2016, but instances of self-immolation have steadily declined in recent years, apparently due in part to state-imposed deterrents. Officials have responded to immolation incidents with information blackouts, a heightened security presence, and increased surveillance. Official guidelines state that engaging in self-immolations and organizing, assisting, or gathering crowds related to such acts should be considered criminal offenses, including intentional homicide in some cases. The government has also employed collective-punishment tactics to discourage self-immolations and other protests, imposing financial penalties on families, canceling public benefits for the households of self-immolators or other activists, and ending state-funded projects in their villages.

LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people suffer from discrimination, though same-sex activities are not criminalized. No LGBT-focused groups operate in the TAR, and social pressures discourage discussion of LGBT issues.

## **G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights**

Obstacles including troop deployments, checkpoints, roadblocks, required bureaucratic approvals, and passport restrictions impede freedom of movement within and beyond Tibetan areas, particularly for travel to and from the TAR. Increased security efforts and Nepalese government cooperation have made it difficult for Tibetans to cross the border into Nepal. Fewer than a hundred Tibetans have reportedly made the crossing each year since 2014, down from more than 2,000 in 2007. Obtaining a passport for foreign travel is extremely difficult for Tibetans.

Authorities continue to restrict access to the TAR for human rights researchers, as well as for some tourists. Foreigners are often denied entry surrounding politically sensitive dates, such as the anniversary of the 2008 protests. During other periods, tourists must travel in groups and obtain official permission to visit the TAR, and even then, last-minute travel bans are periodically imposed.

Tibetans receive preferential treatment in university admission examinations, but this is often not enough to secure entrance. The dominant role of the Chinese language in education and employment limits opportunities for many Tibetans. Private employers favor ethnic Chinese for many jobs, and Tibetans reportedly find it more difficult to obtain permits and loans to open businesses.

Since 2003, the authorities have intensified efforts to resettle rural and nomadic Tibetans—forcibly or with incentives—into permanent-housing areas with little economic infrastructure. According to Human Rights Watch, more than 2 million TAR residents have been resettled since 2006. Many have reportedly tried to return to their previous lands, risking conflict with officials.

China's restrictive family-planning policies are more leniently enforced for Tibetans and other ethnic minorities. Officials limit urban Tibetans to two children and encourage rural Tibetans to stop at three. As a result, the TAR is one of the few areas of China without a skewed sex ratio. Women are well represented in many public-sector jobs and CCP posts within the TAR, though most high-level officials are men. Women reportedly suffer specific religious and political persecution related to Chinese suppression of Tibetan identity. Tibetan women continue to be targets of human trafficking, with many taken to China for domestic service or forced marriages.

### **On Tibet**

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### ***Country Facts***

## Global Freedom Score

**1/100****Not Free***Other Years*

2020

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