



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Submission by the International Campaign for Tibet "What are Minority Issues?"

Submitted 27 February 2025

The International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues' call for submissions on the topic "What are Minority Issues?".

As we provide this submission, we would like to stress that while the People's Republic of China (PRC) officially recognizes Tibetans as one of its 55 "ethnic minorities" or "national minorities" (少数民族 *shǎoshù mínzú*), **this terminology gives a false representation of Tibet and Tibetans, distorts their historical and legal status, and obviates their collective rights.** Instead, we advocate for the use of the term "people" to more accurately reflect Tibetans' distinct identity and right to self-determination.

International experts agree that Tibet¹ was an independent nation when it was invaded and annexed by the PRC in 1951, and that it remains today an **occupied country**, both from the perspective of the people inside Tibet and legally speaking.²

Following this annexation, and despite decades of systematic efforts by the Chinese government to alter the population balance through Han Chinese migration, **Tibetans remain the demographic majority in Tibet** – with the exception of urban areas such as Lhasa. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China's 2020 census data, Tibetans make up 86 percent of the Tibet Autonomous Region's total population of 3.648 million.³ Experts also note that Tibetans are gradually becoming more dominant in most other areas where they live, including Yunnan, Gansu, Sichuan, and Qinghai.⁴

¹ Note on the political geography of Tibet: Tibet was traditionally comprised of three main areas: Amdo (north-eastern Tibet), Kham (eastern Tibet) and U-Tsang (central and western Tibet). The Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) was set up by the Chinese government in 1965 and covers the area of Tibet west of the Dri Chu (Yangtse river), including part of Kham. The rest of Amdo and Kham have been incorporated into Chinese provinces, where they were designated Tibetan autonomous prefectures and counties. As a result, most of Qinghai and parts of Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan provinces are acknowledged by the Chinese government to be "Tibetan." The International Campaign for Tibet uses the term "Tibet" to refer to all Tibetan areas currently under the jurisdiction of the PRC.

² Michael van Walt van Praag and Miek Boltjes, *Tibet Brief 20/20*, Outskirts Press, 2020.

³ http://tjj.xizang.gov.cn/xxgk/tjxx/tjgb/202105/t20210520_202889.html.

⁴ See on the northern Tibetan region of Amdo, Andrew M. Fischer, "The changing ethnic demography of Amdo Tibet. Insights from the 2020 Population Census of China", *Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines* [Online], 55 | 2024, Online since 19 August 2024, connection on 27 February 2025. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/emscat/6283>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/126lp>.



Secondly, while there is no universally accepted definition of a 'people' in international law, a group of experts meeting under the auspices of UNESCO in 1998 identified seven objective elements of peoplehood.⁵ In view of these criteria, **Tibetans clearly qualify as a people**: they share a common history dating back over 2000 years; they have a distinct ethnic identity and cultural homogeneity (despite regional variations); their language, Tibetan, is a Tibeto-Burmese language distinct from the Indian and Chinese languages and dialects; most ethnic Tibetans practice Tibetan Buddhism (although a sizeable minority practice Bon - a pre-Buddhist indigenous religion - Islam, Catholicism, or Protestantism); and they live in one contiguous area on the Tibetan plateau which is geographically and geologically distinct from China. The PRC itself acknowledges Tibetans as a distinct "nationality" within its constitutional framework. Internationally, Tibetans have been recognized as a people in multiple instances, including UN General Assembly resolutions in 1959, 1961, and 1965.⁶ Many states, parliaments, and international organizations continue to refer to Tibetans as a people.⁷

This distinction between "people" and "minority" is not merely semantic; it has significant legal and political implications. Under international law, peoples have the right to self-determination - a right enshrined in Article 1 of both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); minorities, by contrast, are entitled to rights related to cultural identity, language, and non-discrimination but do not inherently possess the right to self-determination. In the case of Tibetans, the right to self-determination is recognized by the Chinese Constitution itself, which guarantees the rights of its national minorities to autonomy. However, this status was granted only to part of Tibet (the Tibetan Autonomous Region) where autonomy is largely nominal. The Tibetan people's right to self-determination was also explicitly recognized in UN General Assembly Resolution 1723 (1961),⁸ which called for "the cessation of practices which deprive the Tibetan people of their fundamental human rights and freedoms, including their right to self-determination."

Manfred Nowak, in the second revised edition of the CCPR commentary, states regarding Article 1 of the ICCPR: "In summary, the following observations may be made: The sole undisputed point is that peoples living under colonial rule or comparable alien subjugation are entitled to the right to self-determination. This applies not merely to the few remaining de jure colonies (e.g.,

⁵ At the meeting - organised by the UNESCO Division of Human Rights Democracy and Peace and the UNESCO Centre of Catalonia - these elements were identified as: a common historical tradition; racial or ethnic identity; cultural homogeneity; linguistic unity; religious or ideological affinity; territorial connection; and common economic life. See M. van Walt with Onno Seroo Editors "The implementation of the right to self-determination as a contribution to conflict prevention: report of the International Conference of Experts held in Barcelona from 21 to 27 November 1998", UNESCO Centre of Catalonia, 1999, retrieved from www.unpo.org/downloads/THE%20IMPLEMENTATION%20OF%20THE%20RIGHT%20TO%20SELF.pdf.

⁶ All three resolutions referred to Tibetans as the "people of Tibet" or the "Tibetan people". See A/RES/1353(XIV), A/RES/1723(XVI) and A/RES/2079(XX). In a resolution in 1991, the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of minorities also urged China to "fully respect the fundamental human rights and freedoms of the Tibetan people."

⁷ The US Resolve Tibet Act for example states that it is official US policy "that the Tibetan people are a people with a distinct religious, cultural, linguistic, and historical identity": <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/138/text>. Other governments or international organisations also already use or are increasingly using this term.

⁸ A/RES/1723(XVI), [https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/1723\(XVI\)](https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/1723(XVI)).



in the Caribbean or in Micronesia) but also to Palestinians, Saharawis, Tibetans, and other peoples living under military occupation, annexation, alien subjugation or other foreign domination.”⁹

Since its annexation of Tibet, the **PRC has sought to reshape international perception of Tibetans’ status and rights under international law**. This has included aggressive diplomatic efforts to silence Tibetan voices in multilateral forums. More recently, the PRC has promoted the term “*Xizang*”, a political rebranding of Tibet aimed at reinforcing the notion that Tibet is an inalienable part of China, eroding its distinct historical and cultural identity and strengthening the PRC’s control over the region.¹⁰

Rather than framing Tibet-related issues as minority issues, the international community – including UN bodies and Special Procedures – should recognize Tibetans as a people. This is crucial to ensure that the rights of Tibetans are fully protected – including their collective right to self-determination – and to avoid legitimizing the PRC’s colonial policies in Tibet.

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Which country (or countries) does your civil society organization operate in or from?

The International Campaign for Tibet maintains offices in the USA, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. We also work with several researchers based in India.

2. Is the country where you are based the country you are working on/with?

No. While ICT’s work focusses on Tibet, the Chinese government’s strict control on foreign NGOs (including via the Overseas NGO Law, which requires that foreign NGOs register with the Ministry of Public Security and do not endanger “China’s national unity, security, or ethnic unity” or engage in political or religious activities) and the fact that any criticism of China’s policies in Tibet or advocacy for the rights of Tibetans can be deemed by Beijing as ‘separatist’ and criminalized, would make it neither possible nor safe for our staff to operate from Tibet or China.

3. What is the main focus of your organization regarding minority issues?

Although ICT does not use the term “minority” to describe Tibetans, as we view them as a distinct people with a unique cultural, religious and historical identity (see above), we

⁹ Manfred Nowak, p. 22, Art. 1 CCPR, CCPR Commentary, 2nd revised edition (2005).

¹⁰ *China is trying to replace “Tibet” with the artificial term “Xizang”*, International Campaign for Tibet, 23 October 2023, <https://www.savetibet.eu/china-is-trying-to-replace-tibet-with-the-artificial-term-xizang/>.



recognize that Tibetans face issues typically experienced by minority groups. Our work focuses on the below issues:

- **Cultural erasure:** We are particularly concerned by the Chinese government's aggressive assimilation policies in Tibet, which do not only violate the fundamental rights of Tibetans but also represent a direct threat to the survival of a distinct Tibetan culture and civilization altogether. These includes severe policies undermining the Tibetan language, such as the forced imposition of Mandarin as the primary medium of instruction in schools and forced closure of private Tibetan-language schools; a system of boarding schools that separate Tibetan children from their families and cultural environment; the Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism and interferences in Tibetan Buddhist affairs; the coercive displacement of Tibetan nomads, who are forced to abandon their traditional way of life.
- **Violations of civil and political rights:** Tibetans face widespread repression of their rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and freedom of religion and belief. Arbitrary detentions enforced disappearances and torture are commonly used against Tibetans who express dissent or seek to preserve their cultural identity.
- **Discrimination:** Tibetans are subjected to systemic discrimination in all aspects of their lives. Their right to freedom of movement is severely restricted, they are particularly targeted by vague anti-terrorism and national security laws that brand any expression of Tibetan identity as "separatism" or "extremism."¹¹
- **Dispossession of resources:** Tibetan nomads and rural populations are forcibly displaced from their ancestral lands under the guise of environmental conservation or urbanization policies and stripped of their traditional livelihoods. At the same time, Tibet's vast natural resources - such as water or minerals - are exploited without consultation, consent, or benefit to the local population. Large-scale dam projects and mining operations not only disregard Tibetan rights but also have devastating environmental consequences for Tibet's fragile ecosystem, impacting water sources relied upon by millions across Asia.

4. What is your role within the organization?

As ICT's EU Policy Director, I lead ICT's Brussels office, which is responsible for ICT's engagement with European Union institutions - particularly the European External Action Service, the European Parliament - and a number of EU Member States. In this capacity, I oversee the development and execution of advocacy strategies aimed at ensuring that Tibet remains on the agenda of European officials and policymakers. This includes coordinating high-level meetings, policy briefings, and public awareness initiatives to strengthen political support for Tibet at the EU level.

¹¹ For more details, see ICT's submission to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in August 2018: <https://www.savetibet.eu/wp-content/uploads/ICT-Submission-to-the-CERD-review-of-China-August-2018.pdf>.



Additionally, I am part of ICT's UN Advocacy Team, where I contribute to the planning and implementation of advocacy efforts toward the United Nations. We primarily engage with the Human Rights Council and its Special Procedures as well as UN Treaty Bodies, submitting reports and testimonies, providing information on individual cases and making sure that Tibetan voices are not suppressed at the UN and that international pressure is maintained to hold China accountable for its policies in Tibet.

5. What are minority issues as perceived by your organization?

The International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) understands minority issues as challenges faced by ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural minority groups within a dominant society. These issues arise from historical, political, and social inequalities that result in cultural and linguistic suppression; discrimination and racism; socio-economic marginalization; hate speech and violence; lack access to justice, amongst others.

6. Which groups (and if relevant, in which country) does your organization identify as facing minority issues?

While we acknowledge that minority groups face human rights violations everywhere in the world, our work focuses exclusively on the situation in Tibet, and we are therefore unable to take a position on the situation of other groups.

However, we would like to emphasize that the Chinese government's policies toward its so-called "minorities" are grounded in a belief that a strong and stable state can only be achieved through the elimination of cultural, religious, and ethnic differences. This belief has led to the systematic erasure of minority identities and the forced imposition of the Han majority's way of life. In this context, Tibet has long been a testing ground for policies that are now being applied to other ethnic groups across China. Tactics such as mass surveillance, forced political indoctrination, and aggressive assimilation measures were first implemented in Tibet before being expanded to regions like Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia.

7. What are the main challenges these groups encounter in their country?

Same as question 6.

8. How effective do you think current policies are in addressing these minority issues? Please choose between the following options and explain your choice:

- a. **Very effective;**
- b. **Somewhat effective; or**
- c. **Not effective.**

Not effective.

China's current policies in Tibet fail to address minority issues. Instead, they constitute systematic violations of internationally recognized human rights; threaten to erase the distinct Tibetan culture and civilization altogether; and deepen Tibetans' legitimate



grievances and feeling of marginalization, which could in turn fuel the Tibetan frozen conflict.

The frustration and suffering caused by Chinese policies in Tibet are well reflected in a recent song by Tibetan singer Gyegjom Dorjee, in which he likens Tibetans to “birds confined in a cage.” This metaphor illustrates the level of oppression Tibetans experience under Chinese rule. Rather than promoting harmony, the Chinese government’s policies have created a climate of fear and repression, leaving Tibetans feeling voiceless and powerless over their own future.

9. Do you consider that the perceptions of minority issues are shared by persons belonging to minority groups and by persons belonging to majority groups? Please elaborate.

Due to the lack of access to Tibet, it is extremely difficult to assess genuine perceptions about minority issues within the Tibetan public and the Han Chinese public respectively. The Chinese government’s strict control over information, censorship, and surveillance makes it nearly impossible to conduct independent research or surveys touching on issues that are deemed sensitive by the Chinese authorities.

However, Tibetans inside Tibet share a strong sense of Tibetan identity - what can be called "Tibetanness" - deeply rooted in their distinct culture, history, and language, and which sets them apart from the Han Chinese majority. Despite the Chinese government’s efforts to forcibly assimilate them, this strong sense of identity persists – for the time being – and many Tibetans continue to take great personal risks to protect it. An illustration is the case of Tashi Wangchuk, who was sentenced to five years in prison simply for peacefully calling for the protection of the Tibetan language.

Meanwhile, the perception of Tibetans among the Han Chinese population is heavily shaped by a state-controlled propaganda. Tibet is presented to ordinary Chinese as an inseparable part of China, and Tibetans as beneficiaries of Chinese economic development. The official narrative emphasizes themes of national unity and progress, with a paternalistic approach presenting the Chinese government’s policies in Tibet as efforts to educate Tibetans and to lift them out of poverty. State-controlled media frequently highlight infrastructure projects, economic investments, and policies aimed at improving living standards, framing them as acts of benevolence from the central government. As a result, many Han Chinese view Tibetan grievances as unwarranted and Tibetans as ingrateful. Moreover, the high number of Han Chinese who visit Tibet are primarily exposed to a curated version of Tibetan culture that fit the state’s portrayal of Tibet as an exotic yet harmonious part of China. This reinforces misconceptions and prevents a deeper understanding of the challenges and realities that Tibetans face.

10. Is there sufficient understanding of minority issues among the general public? If so, please elaborate. If not, what are the main reasons or the explanatory factors for this insufficient understanding of minority issues amongst the general public?



In our opinion, there is insufficient public understanding of minority issues due to several factors:

- **State-controlled narratives, misinformation, lack of independent reporting:** In authoritarian regimes in particular, media manipulation distorts or suppresses minority issues, shaping public perception to align with state interests. This prevents the ability of the public to access accurate and unbiased accounts of minority struggles.
- **Lack of education:** Minorities issues are often overlooked or marginalized in school curricula, limiting public awareness and understanding.
- **Lack of representation:** Minorities are often underrepresented in decision-making processes and public life, meaning their issues are less likely to be understood and addressed by the society.

In the case of Tibetans, it is essential to promote their status as a people rather than a minority. Recognizing this distinction is key to fostering a more accurate understanding of their situation, challenges, and the full rights they are entitled to under international law.

11. Does your organization work to improve the understanding and recognition of minority issues? If so, how?

The International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) does not work on improving the understanding or recognition of minority issues in a broad, general sense. Our focus is specifically on raising awareness about the challenges faced by the Tibetan people under Chinese rule and to promote their fundamental rights, including their right to self-determination.

12. Do you consider that the perception of minority issues in your country is influenced by cultural, political, economic, historical or other factors?

Due to the lack of access to Tibet and the repressive environment, it is extremely difficult to assess genuine public perceptions about Tibetans and Tibet-related issues within China. Nevertheless, political and historical factors play a significant role in shaping how Tibetans and Tibet-related issues are perceived.

To legitimize its rule over Tibet, the Chinese government has emphasized the claim that Tibet has always been an inseparable part of China. This is even though the CCP forced the Tibetan government to sign the 17th Point Agreement granting Tibet 'genuine autonomy' under China. The narrative that Tibet has always been an inseparable part of China is heavily promoted in official statements, state media, school curricula, and cultural productions, where Tibet's annexation is presented as a "peaceful liberation" rather than a military takeover. Additionally, the Chinese government actively censors alternative historical perspectives. Academic discussions, social media posts, or publications that question the official version are swiftly removed, and individuals criticizing China's rule in Tibet face accusations of inciting separatism and imprisonment. Chinese propaganda also actively frames international concerns over Tibet as "Western interference", and Criticism from foreign governments, human rights organizations, or Tibetan advocacy groups is dismissed as part of an "anti-China" agenda. This nationalist framing reinforces public



perceptions that Tibetans who resist Chinese rule are either misguided or manipulated by external forces. Tibet's exiled spiritual leader the Dalai Lama is a primary target of this state propaganda and is often depicted as a "wolf in monk's robes" conspiring with foreign forces to "split" China.

Another critical narrative is that the traditional Tibetan social system before China's invasion was a "dark, cruel, savage, feudal hell on earth" from which Tibetans welcomed their "liberation" by the Chinese Communist Party. Such perceptions of superiority of Han-Chinese concepts of culture and development and Tibetan 'backwardness' have been revived in the aftermath of the widespread - and largely peaceful - protests across in Tibet in 2008. Tibetan protests were then largely presented as ingratitude on the side of the Tibetans, who were seen in the eyes of many Chinese as having been enjoying 'preferential treatment' by the government, which had built roads, a high-altitude railroad, and other infrastructure for Tibet.¹² In 2009, the Chinese authorities also introduced a holiday labelled 'Serfs Emancipation Day' that marks the "emancipation of millions of serfs and slaves".¹³ Feature films, as part of state propaganda on occasion of "Serfs Emancipation Day", typically portray Tibetans as dark, stupid, barbarians or victims of a feudal system who are misled by religious institutions and the aristocracy. In the film "Serf", featuring a downtrodden Tibetan named Jampa, the liberation by China brings about a bright new world for Tibetans. "Serf", produced in 1963, has become the film of reference on Tibet for an entire generation of Chinese citizens.¹⁴

These official attitudes and narratives which shape perceptions of Tibetans, while being discriminatory themselves, serve as elements to justify discriminatory and assimilationist policies and laws against Tibetans.

13. In your opinion, would improving the conditions for minority groups benefit society as a whole? If so, how?

Yes, improving the conditions for minority groups can significantly benefit society as a whole. When the rights of minorities are respected and upheld, it fosters social cohesion, inclusion, and stability. Marginalized groups are less likely to harbor resentment or resort to violence when their rights and identities are acknowledged and protected. This in turn contributes to a more harmonious and equitable society.

Moreover, ensuring the preservation of Tibetan culture is not only essential for the Tibetan people but also for the broader global community. Tibet's unique traditional knowledge and values offer invaluable contributions to the world, and should be as such seen as a richness, not a threat.

¹² *Sympathy on the Streets, but Not for the Tibetans*, New York Times, 18 April 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/18/world/asia/18china.html>; *Chinese Nationalism Fuels Tibet Crackdown*, New York Times, 31 March 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/31/world/asia/31china.html>.

¹³ *China to mark takeover of Tibet after March Uprising with celebratory holiday*, International Campaign for Tibet, 16 January 2009, <https://savetibet.org/china-to-mark-takeover-of-tibet-after-march-uprising-with-celebratory-holiday>.

¹⁴ *Jampa: The Story of Racism in Tibet*, International Campaign for Tibet, 2001, <https://www.savetibet.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/JampaRacism.pdf>.



14. Is there any additional information you wish to share about minority issues, including how minority issues in your country can be better addressed and/or successful initiatives in this regard.

For policies on Tibet to be effective, they must align with international human rights standards, uphold Tibetans' right to self-determination, and address grievances through dialogue rather than repression. The current approach not only fails to meet these criteria but also actively undermines them.

It is important to note here that the 14th Dalai Lama and Tibetans in exile advocate for a resolution to the Sino-Tibetan conflict through dialogue, based on the "Middle Way" approach proposed by the Tibetan spiritual leader. Between 2002 and 2010, nine rounds of discussions took place between the envoys of the 14th Dalai Lama and representatives of the Chinese government. In 2008, Tibetan envoys presented a *Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for the Tibetan People*, outlining a vision for a future Tibet that would enjoy real autonomy within the People's Republic of China, where Tibetans' fundamental rights would be guaranteed.¹⁵ The Chinese government has however rejected this proposal, and the dialogue has been stalled since 2010.

ENDS

About the International Campaign for Tibet: *Founded in 1988, the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) works to protect the democratic freedoms and the human rights of the Tibetan people. ICT maintains offices in Washington, D.C., Amsterdam, Brussels and Berlin. The organization is member of FIDH, the governing association of the German Institute for Human Rights, the NGO Forum on Religious Freedom (Geneva), the World Heritage Watch network and is recipient of the Dutch Resistance Medal, the 'Geuzenpenning'.*

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¹⁵ Memorandum on genuine autonomy for the Tibetan people, 2008, retrieved from the Office of Tibet in New Delhi, <https://tibetbureau.in/memorandum-on-genuine-autonomy-for-the-tibetan-people/>.

