



CELEBRATING IN FEAR

CHINA'S CRACKDOWN ON DALAI
LAMA BIRTHDAY TRIBUTES IN TIBET

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Summary

As the 14th Dalai Lama approaches his 90th birthday (July 6 in the West, and June 30 in the Tibetan calendar) Tibetans, Tibetan Buddhists, and supporters around the world are preparing to celebrate the life and legacy of the exiled spiritual leader.

While most living in exile can honor him freely and publicly¹, Tibetans inside Tibet face severe risks for doing the same. Past incidents have shown that individuals marking the Dalai Lama's birthday in Tibet may be subjected to arbitrary arrest, lengthy prison sentences, torture, and may even risk being shot and killed. They are celebrating in a pervasive climate of fear.

The Chinese government's ongoing campaign to vilify the Dalai Lama and suppress any public expression of reverence toward him constitutes a serious violation of international human rights law. This report highlights the threats faced by Tibetans in Tibet and urges the international community — including United Nations bodies, national governments, parliaments, and civil society organizations—to call on China to cease its repressive actions.

"So many Tibetans have suffered enormous pain, but we all look to the Dalai Lama for his strength, sanctuary, and guidance. He has carried our nation and its unique culture on his shoulders with resolute confidence in our ancient knowledge and traditions, and a deep faith in humanity's potential for good."

A Tibetan in exile on the Dalai Lama.

Specifically, the international community should demand that the Chinese authorities:

- Refrain from persecuting Tibetans who wish to peacefully celebrate the Dalai Lama's birthday, in public and private;
- Immediately and unconditionally release the three Tibetans Drugdra, Lobsang Khedrup and Lobsang Gephel still imprisoned for participating in past birthday celebrations; allow for access of family members, legal representation and, if needed, medical care;
- Respect the right to freedom of religion or belief of Tibetans, as per international law;
- End the campaign to vilify the Dalai Lama and stop persecuting those who express reverence to him, in public and private, online and offline;
- Reenter into a meaningful dialogue with the representatives of the Dalai Lama in order to achieve a lasting solution to the China-Tibet conflict.

The upcoming milestone birthday of the Dalai Lama is a moment of global significance. It is imperative that all people, including those in Tibet, be allowed to honor their spiritual leader without fear of persecution.

¹ Note that in the past Nepal has restricted birthday celebrations of the large Tibetan community in the country. See, e.g., International Campaign for Tibet, 7 July 2016, 'The Dalai Lama's birthday: quiet tributes in Tibet, celebration broken up in Nepal.'



Past celebrations underscore deep reverence to the Dalai Lama



Tibetan man in Amdo marked the birthday at a shrine in his house, where thangkas and pictures were on display, 2015.



Tibetans in Tawu celebrate the Dalai Lama's birthday in 2014.



Below: The birthday celebration in Serthar (Chinese: Seda), Kardze (Chinese: Ganzi), Sichuan (the Tibetan area of Kham) where local people and monks gathered in the grasslands on June 22, 2015.

Despite heightened security and official warnings, Tibetans across various regions of Tibet have repeatedly marked the birthday of the Dalai Lama with deeply symbolic and heartfelt celebrations. Images and footage from celebrations revealed a wide range of devotional activities—from prayer ceremonies and butter sculptures to gatherings of nomads, monks and nuns—all expressing reverence for the exiled spiritual leader. These acts of devotion, often carried out discreetly or in defiance of restrictions, underscore the enduring spiritual connection many Tibetans maintain with the Dalai Lama.

Images and footage from Tibet ahead of, for example, the 80th birthday of the Dalai Lama ten years ago, in 2015, showed Tibetans gathering to mark the day with displays of butter sculptures, prayer ceremonies, offerings before large images of the Dalai Lama, and traditional scattering of prayer flags in the wind. The celebrations took place despite tightened security in many areas of Tibet, with officials in Tibetan areas warning against gatherings to mark the significant birthday.²

A Tibetan from Amdo said: “In the summer, Tibetans often take picnics out to the grasslands, away from the urban areas where they are more easily observed by the authorities. So most of the celebrations of the birthday took place in these areas, with friends, family, the local community gathering with large photographs of His Holiness or thangkas of the Bodhisattva of compassion displayed on makeshift thrones with offerings of seasonal fruit, with songs and dances connected to the 80th birthday year.”³

Images and video clips from 2015 sent from several different areas in Tibet showed:

- Birthday cakes with candles placed before images of the Dalai Lama displayed on a laptop computer screen;
- Gatherings of hundreds of people in a snowstorm of “windhorse” prayer flags (prayers written on paper) with plumes of incense in the background;
- Children with hands in prayer position before offering tables with large images of the Dalai Lama;
- Tibetans circumambulating the Potala Palace, the Dalai Lama’s former home, in Lhasa;

² International Campaign for Tibet, 29 June 2015, ‘Dalai Lama’s 80th birthday celebrated in Tibet despite Chinese clampdown.’

³ Ibid.



„Listen to all Tibetan people from three provinces. Today is an auspicious day. With the sign of multi-colored sublime stars His Holiness' birthday approaches.”

A Tibetan female singer, in a video sent to Radio Free Asia in 2014.

- Tibetan nomads gathered to sing traditional songs at birthday picnics;
- Monks chanting in monasteries before images of the Dalai Lama.

In Lhasa, large numbers of Tibetans circumambulated the Dalai Lama's former home, the Potala Palace. In Golog (Chinese: Guoluo), Qinghai, hundreds of Tibetans gathered at Jonang Chamda monastery to recite long life prayers for the Dalai Lama and also to honour a senior monk whose birth date fell within the same month.

In 2014, Tibetans across Tibet celebrated the Dalai Lama's 79th birthday despite tightened security restrictions including a ban on large gatherings and an intensified deployment of troops in some areas.⁴

Images and footage from the eastern Tibetan areas of Amdo and Kham depicted large pictures of the Dalai Lama displayed during picnics in the grasslands, horse races, hoisting of prayer flags on sacred mountains and burning of incense. Tibetan songs in honor of the Dalai Lama were uploaded onto YouTube, and poems posted on Tibetan blogs.

A pattern of persecution

Since 2013, at least 30 Tibetans in four unique incidents were persecuted for expressing their devotion to the Dalai Lama and, in particular, for celebrating his birthday. This is based on limited information that has been cautiously shared through tightly controlled and censored communication channels. The number may be much higher. The incidents occurred in 2024, 2021, 2016, and 2013.

In February 2024, Gyegjom Dorje, a singer from Amdo, was arrested a month after performing a song during Tibetan New Year celebrations that referenced the Dalai Lama and Chinese repression. He was held in incommunicado detention for an unknown duration and has since been released.⁵

In July 2021, Kunchok Tashi and Dzapo, were held in incommunicado detained on suspicion of participating in a social media group that shared images and documents and encouraged the recitation of Tibetan prayers on the birthday of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Kyaglung town, Kardze (Chinese: Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. They have since been released.⁶

In December 2016, the Ma'erkang Intermediary People's Court in Aba, Sichuan, sentenced nine Tibetans - including four monks from Kirti Monastery

4 International Campaign for Tibet, 14 July 2014, 'Tibetans celebrate Dalai Lama birthday in Tibet despite intensified surveillance and military presence.'

5 Radio Free Asia, 14 May 2024, 'Tibetan singer arrested for song lamenting Dalai Lama's absence'.

6 Radio Free Asia, 13 July 2021, 'Two Tibetans Arrested For Celebrating Dalai Lama's Birthday'.



Troops gather at Tawu to prevent religious celebrations for the Dalai Lama's birthday, 2014.

- to prison for 5-14 years for their involvement in celebrations marking the Dalai Lama's 80th birthday in 2015.⁷ They were held in detention for one year before being charged with organizing outdoor picnics to celebrate the Dalai Lama and using social media to welcome released political prisoners, support relatives of self-immolators and allegedly disseminate information on Tibetan independence.⁸ According to a 2019 „Communication“ by United Nations human rights experts to the Chinese government (CHN 5/2019), those sentenced included⁹:

- Monks: Drugdra, Lobsang Khedrub, Lobsang Gephel, Lodro.
- Laypeople: Ta're Kyi, Bonkho Kyi, Trotsik Tsultrim, Tsultrim, Akyakya.

Three of the nine individuals — Monk Drugdra, Monk Lobsang Khedrub, and Monk Lobsang Gephel — remain in detention. Monk Lodro was recently released from prison, but his political rights remain limited for another three years. Sources close to the three monks who remain in prison have faced difficulties obtaining further information about their health, well-being, and access to visitors.

The remaining five lay people sentenced by Ma'erkang Intermediary People's court have completed their prison sentences and been released.

Finally, in July 2013, at least 14 Tibetans sustained serious gunshot wounds. The 14 were detained with an additional four individuals who were also subjected to beatings. All were targeted for gathering at a prayer service for the Dalai Lama's 78th birthday. All detainees were released the following day due to a mass outpouring of support from 3,000 Tibetans who gathered to protest the violent response and injury of locals.¹⁰



Monk Drugdra has been sentenced to 14 years imprisonment.

Arbitrary detentions - the cases of three Tibetans

Drugdra, a senior Kirti monastery monk, was reportedly arrested from his room at the Kirti monastery on 21 November 2015. He was sentenced a year later on 6 December 2016 to 14 years in prison and 5 years of deprivation of political rights. He was sentenced with eight other Tibetans (including 3 Kirti monks) due to their involvement in the celebrations for the Dalai Lama's 80th birthday in 2015. According to the Chinese Mission's response to the UN communication on the nine Tibetans, Drugdra is allegedly accused of leading a group that organises support for relatives of self-immolators, celebrates the release of political prisoners, disseminates information of Tibetan

7 International Campaign for Tibet, 15 December 2016, 'Tibetans sentenced to long prison terms for involvement in Dalai Lama's 80th birthday celebration.'

8 Chinese Mission response to UN Special Procedures Communication (UN OHCHR, April 2019, AL CHN 5/2019), <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gld=34734>.

9 See also International Campaign for Tibet, 18 July 2019, 'UN Special Rapporteurs ask China for information about nine Tibetans imprisoned for celebrating Dalai Lama's 80th birthday'.

10 International Campaign for Tibet, 8 July 2013, 'Tibetan monks shot as police open fire on Tibetans praying on Dalai Lama's birthday'.



Monk Lobsang Khedrub is currently serving a prison sentence of 13 years.

independence and organises picnics to celebrate the Dalai Lama's birthday. Drugda was a former political prisoner and had previously completed a one year and four-month prison sentence.

Lobsang Khedrub is a monk from Kirti monastery. He was near completion of his Geshe degree, the highest level of scholastic achievement for a Buddhist monk when he was detained in December 2015.

On 6 December 2016, Lobsang Khedrub was sentenced to 13 years imprisonment and 4 years of deprivation of political rights, along with eight other Tibetans – including three other Kirti monks – by the Ma'erkang Intermediary People's Court in Aba, Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan. All nine were charged with 'splitting the state' due to their involvement in the celebrations for the Dalai Lama's 80th birthday in 2015, as well as other alleged criminal activities such as organising support for relatives of self-immolators, welcome parties for released political prisoners, and disseminating information about Tibetan independence.

Khedrub had reportedly previously been arrested on 15 July 2011 at the Kirti monastery and sentenced to three years for "inciting separatism" at the Sichuan Mianyang Prison. On 22 January 2012, he was granted an early release because of his worsening health, allegedly due to the severe mistreatment and torture he suffered while in detention. His family had to bear the costs for his medical treatment.



Monk Lobsang Gephel has been sentenced to 12 years in prison.

Lobsang Gephel is a monk from Kirti monastery who was sentenced on 6 December 2016 with eight other Tibetans for their involvement in the celebrations for the Dalai Lama's 80th birthday in 2015, as well coordinating support for relatives of self-immolators and welcome parties for released political prisoners.

Lobsang Gephel was reportedly taken from his room at the Kirti monastery on the night of 30 November 2015. Lobsang Gephel is serving a prison sentence of 12 years. Last available reports recorded in the April 2019 UN communication suggested he might be serving his sentence in a labour camp in the Mianyang Prison, where his family members have not been allowed to visit. Gephel is a former political prisoner and had already served a three-year prison sentence in May 2011 at the Mianyang Prison, Sichuan.

Recommendations

These cases reflect the continued crackdown on Tibetans' religious and cultural expression. The International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) is particularly concerned about the upcoming 90th birthday of the Dalai Lama in 2025, fearing further arrests. Given previous detentions, such as those following his 80th birthday in 2015, Chinese authorities may once again target Tibetans who peacefully celebrate the occasion. The international community must act to protect Tibetans' fundamental rights.

The arbitrary detention of Tibetans violates Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Articles 18, 19, 26, and 27, which China has signed but



not ratified. The failure to recognize the right of Tibetans to take part in cultural life also violates Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), to which China has been a party since 27 March 2001. Furthermore, the lack of a fair and accountable justice system violates Articles 6-11 of the UDHR and 9(1) and 14 of the ICCPR.

The Chinese government should:

- Respect the right to freedom of religion or belief of Tibetans, as per international law;
- Refrain from suppressing any peaceful public act of reverence for the Dalai Lama, in public or private;
- Immediately release the Tibetans Drugdra, Lobsang Gephel and Lobsang Khedrup still imprisoned for participating in past birthday celebrations; allow for access of family members, legal representation and, if needed, medical care;
- Refrain from detaining anyone for publicly or privately expressing his or her reverence for the Dalai Lama before, on and after his 90th birthday on 6 July 2025.

We call on the international community, UN bodies, governments and parliaments to:

- Publicly condemn the detention of Tibetans for peacefully celebrating their culture and the Dalai Lama's birthday;
- Raise the issue of arbitrary arrests with China, request further information, transparency and procedural fairness for each case detailed in this report under international human rights standards and call for an immediate immediate release of all those subjected to arbitrary detention;
- Call on the Chinese government to refrain from any repressive measures against Tibetans celebrating the 90th birthday of the Dalai Lama, ahead of the Dalai Lama's birthday on 6 July 2025.¹¹

¹¹ See previously, in 2015, during the 29th session of the UN Human Rights Council, the German government urged China "to respect celebrations around the birthday of the Dalai Lama in July in order to avoid escalation of protests in Tibet, see "https://hrcmeetings.ohchr.org/HRCSessions/RegularSessions/29thSession/OralStatements/6_Germany_GD_Item_4.pdf."



About ICT

The International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) is a not-for-profit advocacy group that works to promote human rights and democratic freedoms for the people of Tibet. First established in Washington, DC, in 1988, we are the largest Tibet support group in the world with offices in Amsterdam, Berlin and Brussels. We monitor and report on events inside Tibet, advocate for the human rights and the right to self-determination of Tibetans in national and international platforms, and work to preserve Tibet's unique cultural identity.



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