

MILITARIZATION

“As I found in 2008, the military crackdown on Tibetan protest institutionalized the CCP’s state of exception in a state of siege targeting not a specific enemy but entire towns and districts (...) extend(ing) the state of siege from its previously quasi-hidden status (the occasional unwise dissident) to the everyday lives of all.”

– Tibetologist Charlene Makley¹



Militarization of daily life in Tibet

Since Xi Jinping assumed full power in China on March 13, 2013, the crackdown across Tibet has deepened, particularly in areas where there have been self-immolations or unrest. Policies and measures that undermine Tibetan culture and religion that led to the protests and instability in the first place have been strengthened, while the ‘unbearable oppression’ cited by a number of self-immolators in their last statements has been intensified.

In 2014, during the sensitive period of the March 10 anniversary of the 1959 uprising and 2008 protests, an intimidating troop presence revealed the extent of militarization when troops gathered in a massive show of force in Lhasa and other Tibetan areas for ‘emergency stability maintenance’ drills. After Tibetans began a series of self-immolation protests, devices to grab self-immolators were showcased by paramilitary troops alongside a display of fire-power.²

¹ Cited in her essay, ‘The Political Lives of Dead Bodies’, published in Cultural Anthropology, <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/95-the-political-lives-of-dead-bodies>

² See ICT report, <http://www.savetibet.org/the-crackdown-in-tibet-under-xi-the-march-anniversaries-and-tibetan-new-year-as-xi-jinping-marks-a-year-in-power/>



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In systematic efforts to ensure their strategic objective of assimilating Tibet into the PRC, the Chinese authorities have sought to build a rapid response troop presence in Tibet while sealing off the Tibetan plateau from the rest of the world and blocking information flow.

But information about the scope and scale of the oppression in Tibet has emerged from both Tibetans who send images out of Tibet via social media – and Chinese tourists.

The International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) collected hundreds of images and messages from the Chinese microblogging site Sina Weibo, which enabled use of the crowd-sourced perspective of Chinese tourists to document conditions inside Tibet.³

“Emerging from military compounds are Special Police, all driving mighty armored vehicles,” one Chinese tourist posted on Weibo.

Another observed: “Tawu, in the square some people are doing a Tibetan dance, a bunch of Special Police came up to them, assault rifles and riot shields in hand, forming to rows in the square, silently watching them for about ten minutes... It looked like it could become a massacre.”

While Chinese state-run media has sought to portray Tibet as idyllic and Tibetans as tranquil and grateful, the Weibo postings reveal a different picture. Through social media, Chinese tourists have revealed the reality of the militarization and repressive measures that the government is implementing in Tibet and seeking to cover up through propaganda. Their observations are possible because Chinese travelers get access to Tibetan areas that are denied to foreign diplomats and journalists.

In postings collected by ICT, Chinese tourists frequently express confusion and at times fear over checkpoint and ID searches in Tibet. One tourist said: “I spent the night in Lithang last night, the 4,000 meters

of streets in this small town were full of People’s Armed Police, it gives you a sleepless night.” They find their cellphones and Internet service are turned off in Tibetan areas, revealing government efforts to block Tibetans’ communication. Another asked: “Has life here always been like this?”

In Tibet, penalties for even low-level information sharing are among the worst in the world, and almost any expression of Tibetan identity can be branded as ‘criminal’ or ‘splittist’. Even so, Tibetans too are seeking to document the repressive measures in their homeland that have proved so disturbing to many Chinese visitors.

In the weeks prior to Tibetan New Year in 2014, massed troops in riot gear turned out in force at several of the most important monasteries on the plateau during the Monlam prayer festival. Images sent clandestinely from Tibet via social media depicted lines of white gates with security scanners and ranks of troops at Kumbum monastery in Qinghai, southwest of the provincial capital of Xining. Pilgrims were scarcely visible in scenes more resembling a sensitive and highly militarized border checkpoint than a monastery where many Chinese Buddhist devotees visit to pray and receive teachings.

Beyond the intensified crackdown, a new story is taking shape in Tibet – of resilience and strength of spirit. Tibetans are seeking to counter brutal oppression in order to protect their communities and the core values of Tibetan culture and national identity.

For instance, thousands of Tibetans have faced down those intimidating ranks of armed troops simply to gather for important prayer ceremonies at major monasteries. Others have challenged local officials over the disappearance and torture of young Tibetans in the community. Early in 2014, more than a thousand Tibetans gathered in a silent vigil, seeking the release of a respected Tibetan lama, Khenpo Kartse, from prison.⁴

³ ICT report “Has Life Always Been Like This?”, <http://www.savetibet.org/newsroom/has-life-here-always-been-like-this/>

⁴ See ICT report, <http://www.savetibet.org/rare-vigil-outside-prison-to-support-popular-tibetan-monk/>