

Stop the bloodshed — freedom for Tibet!

Sunday 30 March 2008, by [ILTIS Tony](#) (Date first published: 28 March 2008).

A demonstration by Buddhist monks in the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, on March 10 to commemorate the anniversary of China's crushing of the Tibetan independence movement in 1959 triggered protests for self-determination that, by March 14, had escalated into anti-Chinese riots in which 19 people were killed.

Over 100 Tibetans are reported to have been killed, and hundreds more arrested, by Chinese occupation forces.

This eruption of mass anger — that spread to cities throughout the Tibetan Autonomous Region and the neighbouring provinces of Gansu, Qinghai and Sichuan, historically part of Tibet and with large ethnic Tibetan communities — was a response not only to the 58-year-old Chinese military occupation of Tibet, but to the dispossession and marginalisation of Tibetans by an influx of both global capital and Han Chinese transmigrants.

Oppression

For Tibetans, the integration of Tibet into China's rapidly growing economy has meant expropriation of land, loss of grazing rights, environmental destruction, discrimination in employment, education and economic opportunities and the prospect of becoming a dispossessed minority in their own country.

This has been accelerated by the linking of Lhasa to the Chinese railway system in July 2006, facilitating increased transmigration and export of copper and uranium. The profits from resource extraction are also exported.

The growth in the work force and commerce has largely involved non-Tibetans, who comprise 22% of Lhasa's population according to official statistics — although the figure would be about 60% if migrant workers and military personnel were included.

There is 80% unemployment for ethnic Tibetans. The explosion of Tibetan anger on March 14 included attacks on Han Chinese and members of the Hui minority and the burning and looting of Han- and Hui-owned small businesses, something that has been emphasised by the Chinese government and official media who described the riots as a racist pogrom.

The Chinese government has also argued that the disturbances were orchestrated by the Dalai Lama, who has headed the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamsala, India, since he fled during the 1959 uprising. However, while he supported the initial March 10 protest by monks, the Dalai Lama has distanced himself from the spontaneous mass upsurge that followed, threatening to resign if violent protests continued.

Furthermore, the Dalai Lama has ruled out Tibetan independence despite this being a prominent demand of the protesters. After March 14, the Buddhist hierarchy inside Tibet also distanced itself from the protests.

The riots have revealed a gulf between the government-in-exile and the aspirations of Tibetans

inside the country. Among the 300,000 Tibetans living in exile, mainly in India and Nepal, there are also tensions between the Dalai Lama's leadership and the 30,000-strong Tibetan Youth Congress, which supports independence and refuses to rule out armed struggle.

"China does not deserve the Olympics because the human rights situation has deteriorated. Independence is the only solution", TYC president Tsewang Rigzin told the March 18 *British Times*. The Dalai Lama has opposed boycotting this year's Beijing Olympics.

While the Chinese government has portrayed the protests and riots as part of a Western plot to dismember China, the Western response has been restricted to vague calls for respect for human rights and "restraint" by both sides.

The response of Australian PM Kevin Rudd was typical. "Australia has a sophisticated relationship with China and there are areas, such as human rights, where the trading partners disagree. We are ... going to prosecute a robust economic relationship, a robust foreign policy relationship", he told ABC television's *7.30 Report* on March 27.

Occupation

The Beijing portrayal of Tibet as an indivisible part of China is false. While at different times the theocratic nobility of Tibet recognised Chinese overlordship, historically they constituted separate political entities.

A 1904 British invasion was repulsed in 1909 with Chinese help, but the 1911 Chinese revolution left Tibet as an effectively independent state until 1950 when it was occupied by troops of the Peoples Republic of China, established by the previous year's revolution.

Initially the PRC left the Tibetan theocratic ruling class, headed by the Dalai Lama, intact.

However, a combination of popular opposition to the occupation troops, concerns by the nobility over the spectre of land reform and support from the CIA — who from 1956 were arming Tibetan nationalists as part of their attempts to roll back communism — led to the 1959 uprising, the flight of the Dalai Lama and the expropriation of the theocratic landowners.

While the land reform gave some benefits to the Tibetan people, the denial of national self-determination, discrimination in education and employment, and attacks on Tibetan culture and religion — which reached a peak during the "Cultural Revolution" of the late 1960s — meant that Tibetans remained hostile to Chinese rule.

In 1969 a mass uprising in Tibet was brutally suppressed.

The opening of China to foreign capital in the 1980s and '90s and the transition to a capitalist market economy has exacerbated tensions in Tibet, whose role in China's "miracle economy" is a source of raw materials and destination for transmigrants.

The integration of China into the global economy has meant that the West has ended support for Tibetan independence. Calls for the recognition of Tibetan rights and Western politicians' relationship with the Dalai Lama have become a bargaining chip to be used with an economic partner that is sometimes a rival. The Dalai Lama's renunciation of the goal of independence in 1994 reflects his closeness to the West.

However, the history of the Tibetan struggle being promoted in the West for its own ends during the Cold War, and in some cases the illusions created that Tibet under the theocratic landowning class

was some kind of spiritual paradise, has meant that the Tibetan cause remains relatively popular among people in the West, including high-profile “celebrity activists”, such as actor Richard Gere.

Spiritual paradise?

Support based on the “spiritual paradise” myth mirrors the Chinese portrayal of the Tibetan struggle as a struggle against modernity.

In a 1997 interview with the PBS Frontline program, Tibetan journalist Jamyang Norbu said, “I think, primarily the West sees Tibet, to some extent, as a fantasy land, as a Shangri La. Of course, this is a kind of stereotype that has existed in the Western kind of perception for a very long time, even before the movie *Lost Horizon* was made ...

“There’s a kind of New Age perception of Tibet ... The idea [is] that even [the] materialist west will be saved by the spiritualism of the Tibetan Buddhists. It’s total nonsense ...

“This is the problem that Tibetans face, because their issues and the tragedy of Tibet has not being taken seriously. Primarily, it’s very fuzzy; it’s sort of a feel good issue, rather than a stark, ugly reality. A lot of people love Tibetans in the West, tremendous sympathy, but it’s a very fuzzy kind of sympathy, because it never touches on the reality.”

Norbu explained: “When I talk about my politics, about my country, oftentimes the critics I get are not Chinese or other Tibetans, but Westerners. They say, ‘How dare you contradict the Dalai Lama? How dare you say Tibetans should take up arms against the Chinese?’ And, I reply to them, ‘I’m a Tibetan. This is my country. These are issues that are close to me.’

“Whether the Tibetans want to get their country back [through] peace or violence or whatever, that’s their business.”

Rather than resisting modernity, Tibetans are resisting a modernisation process being forced on them by an occupying power and whose benefits they have been excluded from. Norbu raised the spectre of Tibetans suffering the fate of indigenous people in North America, being confined to reservations, a “sort of broken third-rate people ... begging from tourists”.

Meanwhile, the Chinese authorities are attempting to reimpose “normality” in Tibet through an overwhelming military presence. On March 27 they felt secure enough to invite the first group of foreign journalists into Tibet since the protests started for a stagemanaged visit to a Lhasa temple. However, this did not go as the authorities planned, when 30 younger monks gatecrashed the event shouting pro-independence slogans.

Regardless of which powers have sought in the past to manipulate the Tibetan struggle for its own purposes, and whatever the political character of a figure such as the Dalai Lama (the position of which is a relic from Tibet’s theocratic past) the Tibetan people retain the same rights as all people to self-determination.

P.S.

* From: International News, Green Left Weekly issue #745 2 April 2008.