Protests in Tibet and Separatism

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The Olympics and Beyond (Expanded Version)

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Recent protests in Lhasa and other Tibetan areas were organized to embarrass the Chinese government ahead of the Olympics. The Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC), the major Tibetan exile organization that advocates independence for Tibet and has endorsed using violent methods to achieve it, has said as much. Its head, Tsewang Rigzin, stated in a March 15 interview with the Chicago Tribune that since it is likely that Chinese authorities would suppress protests in Tibet, “With the spotlight on them with the Olympics, we want to test them. We want them to show their true colors. That’s why we’re pushing this.” At the June, 2007 Conference for an Independent Tibet organized in India by “Friends of Tibet,” speakers pointed out that the Olympics present a unique opportunity for protests in Tibet. In January, 2008, exiles in India launched a “Tibetan People’s Uprising Movement” to “act in the spirit” of the violent 1959 uprising against Chinese government authority and focus on the Olympics.

Several groups of Tibetans were likely involved in the protests in Lhasa, including in the burning and looting of non-Tibetan businesses and attacks against Han and Hui (Muslim Chinese) migrants to Tibet. The large monasteries have long been centers of separatism, a stance cultivated by the TYC and other exile entities, many of which are financed by the US State Department or the US Congress’ National Endowment for Democracy. Monks are self-selected to be especially devoted to the Dalai Lama. However much he may characterize his own position as seeking only greater autonomy for Tibet, monks know he is unwilling to declare that Tibet is an inalienable part of China, an act China demands of him as a precondition to formal negotiations. Because the exile regime eschews a separation of politics and religion, many monks deem adherence to the Dalai Lama’s stance of non-recognition of the Chinese government’s legitimacy in Tibet to be a religious obligation.

Reports on the violence have underscored that Tibetan merchants competing with Han and Hui are especially antagonistic to the presence of non-Tibetans. Alongside monks, Tibetan merchants were the mainstay of protests in Lhasa in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This time around, many Han and Hui-owned shops were torched. Many of those involved in arson, looting, and ethnic-based beatings are also likely to have been unemployed young men. Towns have experienced much rural-to-urban migration of Tibetans with few skills needed for urban employment. Videos from Lhasa showed the vast majority of rioters were males in their teens or twenties.

The recent actions in Tibetan areas differ from the broad-based demonstrations of “people power” movements in several parts of the world in the last few decades. They hardly show the overwhelming Tibetan anti-Chinese consensus portrayed in the international media. The highest media estimate of Tibetans who participated in protests is 20,000 — by Steve Chao, the Beijing Bureau Chief of Canadian Television News, i.e. one of every 300 Tibetans. Compare that to the
1986 protests against the Marcos dictatorship by about three million — one out of every 19 Filipinos.

Tibetans have legitimate grievances about not being sufficiently helped to compete for jobs and in business with migrants to Tibet. There is also job discrimination by Han migrants in favor of family members and people from their native places. The gaps in education and living standards between Tibetans and Han are substantial and too slow in narrowing. The grievances have long existed, but protests and rioting took place this year because the Olympics make it opportune for separatists to advance their agenda. Indeed, there was a radical disconnect between Tibetan socio-economic grievances and the slogans raised in the protests, such as “Complete Independence for Tibet” and “May the exiles and Tibetans inside Tibet be reunited,” slogans that not coincidentally replicate those raised by pro-independence Tibetan exiles.

While separatists will not succeed in detaching Tibet from China by rioting, they believe that China will eventually collapse, like the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, and they seek to establish their claim to rule before that happens. Alternatively, they think that the United States may intervene, as it has elsewhere, to foster the breakaway of regions in countries to which the US is antagonistic, e.g. Kosovo and southern Sudan. The Chinese government also fears such eventualities, however unlikely they are to come to pass. It accordingly acts to suppress separatism, an action that comports with its rights under international law.

Separatists know they can count on the automatic sympathy of Western politicians and media, who view China as a strategic economic and political competitor. Western elites have thus widely condemned China for suppressing riots that these elites would never allow to go unsuppressed in their own countries. They demand that China be restrained in its response; yet, during the Los Angeles uprising or riots of 1992 — which spread to a score of other major cities — President George H.W. Bush stated when he send in thousands of soldiers, that “There can be no excuse for the murder, arson, theft or vandalism that have terrorized the people of Los Angeles . . . Let me assure you that I will use whatever force is necessary to restore order.” Neither Western politicians nor mainstream media attacked him on this score, while neither Western leaders nor the Dalai Lama have criticized those Tibetans who recently engaged in ethnic-based attacks and arsons.

Western elites give the Chinese government no recognition for significant improvements in the lives of Tibetans as a result of subsidies from the China’s central government and provinces, improvements that the Dalai Lama has himself admitted. Western politicians and media also consistently credit the Dalai Lama’s charge that “cultural genocide” is underway in Tibet, even though the exiles and their supporters offer no credible evidence of the evisceration of Tibetan language use, religious practice or art. In fact, more than 90% of Tibetans speak Tibetan as their mother tongue. Tibet has about 150,000 monks and nuns, the highest concentration of full-time “clergy” in the Buddhist world. Western scholars of Tibetan literature and art forms have attested that it is flourishing.

Ethnic contradictions in Tibet arise from the demography, economy and politics of the Tibetan areas. Separatists and their supporters claim that Han Chinese have been “flooding” into Tibet, “swamping” Tibetans demographically. In fact, between the national censuses of 1990 and 2000
(which count everyone who has lived in an area for six months or more), the percentage of Tibetans in the Tibetan areas as a whole increased somewhat and Han were about one-fifth of the population. A preliminary analysis of the 2005 mini-census shows that from 2000-2005 there was a small increase in the proportion of Han in the central-western parts of Tibet (the Tibet Autonomous Region or TAR) and little change in eastern Tibet. Pro-independence forces want the Tibetan areas cleansed of Han (as happened in 1912 and 1949); the Dalai Lama has said he will accept a three-to-one Tibetan to non-Tibet population ratio, but he consistently misrepresents the present situation as one of a Han majority. Given his status as not merely the top Tibetan Buddhist religious leader, but as an emanation of Buddha, most Tibetans credit whatever he says on this or other topics.

The Tibetan countryside, where three-fourths of the population lives, has very few non-Tibetans. The vast majority of Han migrants to Tibetan towns are poor or near-poor. They are not personally subsidized by the state; although like urban Tibetans, they are indirectly subsidized by infrastructure development that favors the towns. Some 85% of Han who migrate to Tibet to establish businesses fail; they generally leave within two to three years. Those who survive economically offer competition to local Tibetan business people, but a comprehensive study in Lhasa has shown that non-Tibetans have pioneered small and medium enterprise sectors that some Tibetans have later entered and made use of their local knowledge to prosper.

Tibetans are not simply an underclass; there is a substantial Tibetan middle class, based in government service, tourism, commerce, and small-scale manufacturing/transportation. There are also many unemployed or under-employed Tibetans, but almost no unemployed or underemployed Han because those who cannot find work leave. Many Han migrants have racist attitudes toward Tibetans, mostly notions that Tibetans are lazy, dirty, and obsessed with religion. Many Tibetans reciprocate with representations of Han as rich, money-obsessed and conspiring to exploit Tibetans. Long-resident urban Tibetans absorb aspects of Han culture in much the same way that ethnic minorities do with ethnic majority cultures the world over. Tibetans are not however being forcibly “Sincized.” Most Tibetans speak little or no Chinese. They begin to learn it in the higher primary grades and, in many Tibetan areas, must study in it if they go on to secondary education. Chinese, however, is one of the two most important languages in the world and considerable advantages accrue to those who learn it, just as they do to non-native English speakers.

The Tibetan exiles argue that religious practice is sharply restricted in Tibetan areas. The Chinese government has the right under international law to regulate religious institutions to prevent them from being used as vehicles for separatism and the control of religion is in fact mostly a function of the state’s (overly-developed) concern about separatism and secondarily about how the hyper-development of religious institutions counteracts “development” among ethnic Tibetans. Certain state policies do infringe on freedom of religion; for example, the forbidding, in the TAR (Tibet Autonomous Region), of state employees and university students to participate in religious rites. The lesser degree of control over religion in the eastern Tibetan areas beyond the TAR — at least before the events of March, 2008 — indicate however that the Chinese government calibrates its control according to the perceived degree of separatist sentiment in the monasteries.
The Dalai Lama’s regime was of course itself a theocracy that closely regulated the monasteries, including the politics, hierarchy and number of monks. The exile authorities today circumscribe by fiat those religious practices they oppose, such as the propitiation of a “deity” known as Dorje Shugden. The cult of the Dalai Lama, which is even stronger among monks than it is among Hollywood stars, nevertheless mandates acceptance of his claim that restrictions on religious management and practice in Tibet arise solely from the Chinese state’s supposed anti-religious animus. Similarly, the cult requires the conviction that the Dalai Lama is a pacifist, even though he has explicitly or implicitly endorsed all wars waged by the US (including the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the war in Afghanistan, etc. With regard to the recent war on Iraq, for three and half years of war, the Dalai Lama said only that it was too early to judge it; it was only in September 2006, long after most Americans had turned against the war, that he expressed his concern, that too much blood had been shed. ). In contrast, even the quite conservative Pope John Paul II had strongly denounced the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Dalai Lama is a Tibetan ethnic nationalist whose worldview is — in US terms — both liberal and conservative. He and many of his foreign supporters have a pronounced affinity for conservative politicians, such as Bush, Thatcher, Lee Teng-hui and Ishihara Shintaro, but they can get along well with liberals like US Speaker Nancy Pelosi, because they are virulently anti-communist and anti-China.

The Dalai Lama is far from being a supporter of oppressed peoples. For example, in 2002, when he visited Australia, the Dalai Lama, upon arriving in Melbourne, noted “he had flown over ‘a large empty area’ of Australia that could house millions of people from other densely populated continents.” The area is, of course, not wholly empty, as it contains Aborigines. To them, the Dalai Lama proffered the advice that “black people ‘should appreciate what white people have brought to this country, its development.’”(R. Callick, “Dalai Lama Treads Fine Line,” Australian Financial Review, May 22, 2002). While generally ignoring oppression in the world at large, the Dalai Lama never addresses the sharp social divide within the exile community or the often disparaging treatment of ordinary Indians by elite Tibetan exiles. He has also detached himself from elementary notions of fairness related to the recent protests in Tibet. On April 2, 2008, he made an “Appeal” to the world for support for “the release of all those who have been arrested and detained . . .,” thus seeking to negate justice for victims of the ethnic-based killings, beatings and arsons in Lhasa.

The development of the “market economy” has had much the same effect in Tibetan areas as in the rest of China, i.e. increased exploitation, exacerbated income and wealth differentials, and rampant corruption. The degree to which this involves an “ethnic division of labor” that disadvantages Tibetans is however exaggerated by separatists in order to foster ethnic antagonism. For example, Tibet is not the poorest area of China, as is often claimed. It is better off than several other ethnic minority areas and even than some Han areas, in large measure due to heavy government subsidies. Rural Tibetans as well receive more state subsidies than other minorities. The exile leaders employ hyperbole not only in terms of the degree of empirical difference, but also concerning the more fundamental ethnic relationship in Tibet: in contrast to, say, Israel/Palestine, Tibetans have the same rights as Han, they enjoy certain preferential economic and social policies, and about half the top party leaders in the TAR have been ethnic Tibetans.
Tibet has none of the indicia of a colony or occupied territory and thus has no relationship to self-determination, a concept that in recent decades has often been misused, especially by the US, to foster the breakup of states and consequent emiseration of their populations. A settlement between the Chinese government and Tibetan exile elites is a pre-condition for the mitigation of Tibetan grievances because absent a settlement, ethnic politics will continue to subsume every issue in Tibet, as it does for example, in Taiwan and Kosovo, where ethnic binaries are constructed by “ethnic political entrepreneurs,” who seek to outbid each other for support.

The protests in Tibet had no progressive aspect. Many who participated in the ethnic murders, beatings and arsons in Lhasa were poor rural migrants to the city, but the slogans there and elsewhere in Tibet almost all concerned independence or the Dalai Lama. There have been many movements the world over in which marginalized people have taken a reactionary and often racist road, for example, al-Qaeda or much of the base of the Nazis. The riots in Tibet also have done nothing to advance discussions of a political settlement between the Chinese government and exiles, yet a settlement is necessary for the substantial mitigation of Tibetan grievances.

For Tibetan pro-independence forces, a setback to efforts toward negotiations may have been their very purpose in fostering the riots. Tibetan pro-independence forces, like separatists everywhere, seek to counter any view of the world that is not ethnic-based and to thwart all efforts to resolve ethnic contradictions, in order to boost the mobilization needed to sustain their ethnic nationalist projects. They have claimed that China will soon collapse and the US will thereafter increase its patronage of a Tibetan state elite, to the benefit of ordinary Tibetans. One only has to look round the world at the many humanitarian catastrophes that have resulted from nationalist projects of separatist “nation-building” — for example in the ex-Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia — to surmise what consequences are likely to follow for ordinary Tibetans if the emigre fantasy were fulfilled.

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Barry Sautman’s selected publications on the Tibet question:
(沙伯力有关西藏问题著作摘选):