



## Congressional-Executive Commission on China

### Special Report: Tibetan Monastic Self-Immolations Appear To Correlate With Increasing Repression of Freedom of Religion

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*This CECC Special Report demonstrates an apparent correlation between increasing Chinese Communist Party and government repression of freedom of religion in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and nunneries, and 12 instances in 2011 of current or former monks and nuns resorting to self-immolation. Reporting from each of the Commission's 10 annual reports (2002-2011) reveals a trend of deterioration in the environment for Tibetan Buddhism, especially in Tibetan Buddhist monastic institutions. The trend worsened significantly after mostly peaceful political protests swept across the Tibetan plateau in March and April 2008. The Party and government responded to those protests by intensifying a long-established anti-Dalai Lama campaign; issuing regulatory measures that intrude upon and micromanage Tibetan Buddhist monastic affairs; implementing aggressive "legal education" programs that pressure monks and nuns to study and accept expanded government control over their religion, monasteries, and nunneries; and convening a high-level Party forum to formally establish a coordinated policy on Tibetan issues, including religion, across all Tibetan autonomous areas. All of the Tibetan Buddhist self-immolations except the most recent attempt took place in Sichuan province, outside of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Commission Political Prisoner Database (PPD) information indicates a higher level of Tibetan political detention since March 2008 in Sichuan than in any other provincial-level area, including the TAR.*

## Tibetan Buddhist Monks and Nuns Resort to "Desperate Acts"

Nine current or former Tibetan Buddhist monks, two nuns, and one former monk who had married and become the father of three children, reportedly committed self-immolation during the period March 16 to December 1, 2011. Five of the current or former monks and both nuns reportedly died; five current or former monks reportedly were hospitalized or were in unknown locations. As the protesters burned, they shouted slogans including calls for Tibetan freedom, the Dalai Lama's return to Tibet, and freedom of religion, according to reports. Seven of the self-immolations, including the March 16 occurrence, involved current or former monks affiliated with one religious center—Kirti Monastery, located in Aba (Ngaba) county, Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture (T&QAP). (For more information on the crackdown at Kirti from March through June, see an August 17, 2011, Commission [report](#).) One other self-immolation, a nun from Dechen Choekorling Nunnery, took place in Aba county. Three self-immolations took place in Ganzi (Kardze) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP): a monk from Nyitso Monastery in Daofu (Tawu) county; a nun from Gaden Choeling Nunnery in Daofu; and a monk from Gepheling Monastery (often called Kardze Monastery) in Ganzi county. The most recent attempted self-immolation took place in Changdu (Chamdo) prefecture, TAR.

In prepared testimony submitted on November 3, 2011, to the U.S. House of Representatives Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission (TLHRC), Kirti Rinpoche, the spiritual head and abbot of Kirti Monastery who fled into exile in 1959, stated that conditions at Kirti had driven the monks "to a state of utter fear and desperation" ([testimony](#) available on the TLHRC Web site; [bio](#) available on Drepung Loseling Monastery Web site). The Dalai Lama said on November 7 that the self-immolations are "desperate acts by people seeking justice and freedom" (Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, [7 November 11](#)). Chinese officials have not acknowledged the role of Chinese government policy and regulatory control of religion in the self-immolations, and instead characterize the incidents as "terrorist acts in disguise" that "took place with the Dalai clique's orchestration, instigation and support" (Xinhua, 3 November 11 (translated in [OSC](#), 5 November 11)).

Information available in the Commission's Political Prisoner Database (PPD) suggests that since March 2008 security officials in Sichuan province detained more Tibetans for political reasons than in any other provincial-level administration that includes Tibetan autonomous area. As of December 9, 2011, of 1,152 cases of political detention of Tibetans since March 2008 recorded in the PPD, more than half (656) took place in Sichuan, compared to 265 in the TAR, 114 in Qinghai province, 114 in Gansu province, and 1 in Yunnan province. Such statistics cannot provide an accurate account because the Chinese government withholds information on

political detention, but the available data suggests that Party and government repression of Tibetans' freedoms of religion, speech, and association may be greater in the Tibetan autonomous areas of Sichuan than in Tibetan autonomous areas located in other provincial-level administrations. (See the Commission's [2008](#), [2009](#), [2010](#), and [2011](#) Annual Reports for more information on Tibetan political imprisonment since March 2008.)

The chronological list below includes a 2009 precedent for the 2011 self-immolations—[Tashi](#) (or Tabe, Tapey), a Kirti monk who attempted self-immolation to protest official interference in a monastic festival. The Commission has not observed any reports of Tibetan Buddhist self-immolations during the period from [September 1987](#), when the current period of Tibetan political activism began, to the February 2009 self-immolation.

**2009: One self-immolation; non-fatal.**

**February 27.** [Tashi](#) (or Tabe, Tapey), age 24; Kirti Monastery; Aba county, Aba T&QAP; "detained" in a military hospital in Aba prefecture. See, e.g., Phayul, [17 December 11](#); International Campaign for Tibet (ICT), [27 February 09](#); Free Tibet (FT), [27 February 09](#); Xinhua, [5 March 09](#), reprinted in China Daily.

**2011: Twelve self-immolations; seven reported fatal.**

**1. March 16.** [Phuntsog](#), age 20 or 21; monk, Kirti Monastery; deceased. See, e.g., ICT, [17 March 11](#); Radio Free Asia (RFA), [17 March 11](#); Xinhua, [29 August 11](#), reprinted in China Daily.

**2. August 15.** Tsewang Norbu, age 29; monk, Nyitso Monastery; Daofu county, Ganzi TAP; deceased. See, e.g., RFA, [15 August 11](#); Xinhua, [15 August 11](#), reprinted in China Internet Information Center; FT, [16 August 11](#).

**3, 4. September 26.** Lobsang Kalsang, age 18, and Lobsang Konchog, age 18; monks, Kirti Monastery; both hospitalized. See, e.g., RFA, [26 September 11](#); ICT, [26 September 11](#); Xinhua, [26 September 11](#), reprinted in China Daily.

**5. October 3.** Kalsang Wangchug, age 17; monk, Kirti Monastery; hospitalized. See, e.g., ICT, [3 October 11](#), [11 October 11](#); FT, [3 October 11](#).

**6, 7. October 7.** Choephel, age 19, and Khayang, age 18; former monks, Kirti Monastery; both deceased. See, e.g., RFA, [7 October 11](#); ICT, [7 October 11](#); Xinhua, [8 October 11](#), reprinted in China Daily; FT, [17 October 11](#).

**8. October 15.** Norbu Dradul, age 19; former monk, Kirti Monastery; status and location unknown. See, e.g., RFA, [15 October 11](#); Phayul, [15 October 11](#); ICT, [16 October 11](#).

**9. October 17.** Tenzin Wangmo, age 20; nun, Dechen Choekorling Nunnery; Aba county; deceased. See, e.g., Voice of America, [17 October 11](#); Phayul, [17 October 11](#); New York Times, [17 October 11](#).

**10. October 25.** Dawa Tsering, age in 30s; monk, Gepheling Monastery; Ganzi county, Ganzi TAP; hospitalized but refused treatment and released. See, e.g., Phayul, [25 October 11](#); ICT, [28 October 11](#); RFA, [8 November 11](#).

**11. November 3.** Palden Choetso (or Choesang), age 35; nun, Gaden Choeling Nunnery; Daofu county; deceased. See, e.g., RFA, [3 November 11](#); Phayul, [3 November 11](#); Xinhua, 3 November 11 (translated in [OSC](#), 5 November 11); ICT, [4 November 11](#).

**12. December 1.** Tenzin Phuntsog, age 46; former monk of Karma Monastery located in Gama (Karma) township, Changdu county, TAR; current resident of Gama, married, father of three children; deceased. See, e.g., RFA, [1 December 11](#), [8 December 11](#); Phayul, [9 December 11](#); Xinhua, [2 December 11](#), reprinted in China Daily; ICT, [1 December 11](#).

### **Government Expands Use of Legal Measures To Repress Tibetan Buddhist Affairs**

China's [Constitution](#) (Article 36) protects "freedom of religious belief"—not freedom of religion—and provides protection only for "normal religious activities," a category that the Party and government uses policy, educational, and legal measures to define and manage. A series of central- and prefectural-level regulatory measures on Tibetan Buddhist affairs began taking effect in [2007](#), were more numerous in [2009 and 2010](#), and continued into [2011](#) (see information below). As of December 1, 2011, regulations on Tibetan Buddhist affairs were effective in 8 of the [10 TAPs](#); the Commission had not observed information on whether regulations reported for approval in March 2010 had become effective in Yushu (Yushul) TAP, Qinghai province; or whether Gannan (Kanlho) TAP, Gansu province was preparing Tibetan Buddhist affairs regulations. Provincial-level regulations on religion took effect in Gansu on December 1, 2011 (Gansu Province Religious Affairs Regulations, [available](#) in Chinese on the Gansu Daily Web site). Prefectural-level regulations on Tibetan Buddhist affairs in Gannan could follow the provincial regulations.

Below are brief excerpts from the Commission's annual reports from 2002 to 2011. The Commission's reporting reveals a trend of deterioration in the environment for Tibetan Buddhism, especially in Tibetan Buddhist monastic institutions. The sentences are drawn directly from the annual reports but may be reordered for clarity and do not necessarily follow one another directly

in the original text. Where relevant below, regulatory measures that took effect during that reporting year are also noted.

[2002 Annual Report](#), 38-40. Conflict between Tibetan aspirations and Chinese policy is found within cultural, religious, and educational spheres. Despite unrelenting effort by the Chinese government to discourage or prevent expressions of loyalty and devotion to the Dalai Lama, he remains the most respected and influential Tibetan anywhere. Zhu Xiaoming, a senior Party official with oversight on Tibetan policy, told visiting Commission staff, "The Dalai Lama uses religion as a pretext for harming the country. He carries people away [from the Motherland] under the signboard of religion." [Zhu] explained to Commission staff that ["normal religious practice] must be based on seamlessness between religion and patriotism. "Loving the country is identical to loving religion," he said.

[2003 Annual Report](#), 30-31. Chinese authorities argue that the Dalai Lama is a hostile political figure, not a legitimate religious leader, and that programs counteracting veneration of him do not violate religious freedom. Police confiscate printed, audio, and video material featuring the Dalai Lama's religious teachings and speeches, and those possessing such material sometimes face abusive treatment, including beating and detention. Political education sessions require that monks and nuns denounce the Dalai Lama and Gedun Choekyi Nyima, the boy recognized by the Dalai Lama in 1995 as the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama, Tibet's second-ranking spiritual leader.

[2004 Annual Report](#), 38-39. According to a 2002 propaganda manual for "educating" Tibetan Buddhist monks: "Citizens' freedom of religion [sic] belief should not be described as 'religious freedom' in which unprescribed religious activity is pursued according to individual whims. It would be improper for the practice of freedom of belief to oppose state laws and policies, and religious activity must be pursued within the confines permitted by the national constitution, law, and policy. Monks and nuns learn that their religion "must be relentlessly guided in its accommodation with Socialist society." Reports also assert that monks and nuns face restrictions on religious study and a shortage of qualified teachers.

[2005 Annual Report](#), 47. China's new [Regulations on Religious Affairs] may lead to more administrative intrusion into Tibetan Buddhist affairs by underscoring the state's right to supervise the effects of religion on society. If the RRA leads to further restrictions on teaching and assembly in Tibetan monasteries, on association between the

Tibetan clergy and laity, and on small prayer gatherings of the Tibetan laity, the result will further erode the traditionally close ties between the Tibetan monastic and secular communities. A group of [Democratic Management Committee (DMC)] leaders from [TAR] monasteries completed a training course on the new religious affairs regulations in May 2005. At the closing ceremony, each one pledged individually, "When we go back, we will use the knowledge we have gained in our practical work, further improve the democratic management of our local temples, lead the masses of monks and nuns to love the nation and love the religion, and make more contributions to building a harmonious Tibet."

- o State Administration for Religious Affairs, Regulations on Religious Affairs [Zongjiao shiwu tiaoli], effective 1 March 05. ([Translated](#) from Chinese.)

[2006 Annual Report](#), 83-84. In May 2006, Zhang Qingli, Secretary of the [TAR] Party Committee, called on senior government and Party officials to widen the patriotic education campaign to include a broader population, and to intensify the "rectification" and restructuring of each monastery and nunnery's [DMC], . . . Zhang told the officials that the Party is engaged in a "fight to the death struggle" against the Dalai Lama and his supporters, and that the Dalai Lama is "the biggest obstacle hindering Tibetan Buddhism from establishing normal order." Comprehensive implementation of the Regulation on Religious Affairs (RRA) will lead to the "normalization of religious order" and the "standardization of religious activity," Zhang said. In December 2005, the government and Party stepped up a campaign to challenge the Dalai Lama's role as the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists by increasing the prominence of Gyaltzen Norbu, the boy the State Council installed in 1995 as the 11th Panchen Lama.

[2007 Annual Report](#), 29, 183, 193. Tibetan Buddhism in the [TAR] is coming under increased pressure as recent legal measures expand and deepen government control over Buddhist monasteries, nunneries, monks, nuns, and reincarnated lamas. The TAR 2006 Measures state a general formula for the relationship between the state and religion: "All levels of the people's government shall actively guide religious organizations, venues for religious activities, and religious personnel in a love of the country and of religion, in protecting the country and benefiting the people, in uniting and moving forward, and in guiding the mutual adaptation of religion and socialism." The Chinese government issued legal measures that, if fully implemented, will establish government control over the process of identifying and educating reincarnated Tibetan Buddhist teachers throughout China.

- Tibet Autonomous Region People's Government, Tibet Autonomous Region Implementing Measures for the "Regulations on Religious Affairs" (Trial Measures) [Xizang zizhiqu shishi "zongjiao shiwu tiaoli" banfa (shixing)], effective 1 January 07. ([Translated](#) from Chinese.)
- State Administration for Religious Affairs, Measures for Putting Professional Religious Personnel on Record [Zongjiao jiaozhi renyuan bei'an banfa], effective 1 March 07. ([Available](#) in Chinese on the State Administration for Religious Affairs Web site.)
- State Administration for Religious Affairs, Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism [Zangchuan fojiao hufo zhuanshi guanli banfa], effective 1 September 07. ([Translated](#) from Chinese.)

[2008 Annual Report](#), 182, 185, 189-190. State repression of Tibetan Buddhism has reached its highest level since the Commission began to report on religious freedom for Tibetan Buddhists in 2002. Chinese government and Party policy toward Tibetan Buddhists' practice of their religion played a central role in stoking frustration that resulted in the cascade of Tibetan protests that began on March 10, 2008. The Party hardened policy toward the Dalai Lama in the wake of the Tibetan protests, increasing attacks on the Dalai Lama's legitimacy as a religious leader, and asserting that he is a criminal bent on splitting China. Armed security forces maintained heightened security at some monasteries and nunneries after the protests as authorities conducted aggressive campaigns of patriotic education ("love the country, love religion"). The government of [Ganzi (Kardze) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP)] issued . . . unprecedented measures that seek to punish or eliminate from the prefecture's Tibetan Buddhist institution those monks, nuns, religious teachers, and monastic officials whom public security officials accuse of involvement in political protests in the prefecture.

- Ganzi TAP People's Government, Measures for Dealing Strictly With Rebellious Monasteries and Individual Monks and Nuns, issued and effective 28 June 08. ([Translated](#) from Tibetan in ICT, 30 July 08.)

[2009 Annual Report](#), 277-278, 281. Chinese Government and Communist Party interference with the norms of Tibetan Buddhism and unremitting antagonism toward the Dalai Lama, key factors underlying the March 2008 eruption of Tibetan protest,

continued to deepen Tibetan resentment and fuel additional Tibetan protests . . . . Seeking to end the Dalai Lama's stature among Tibetans as a paramount religious leader is central to the government campaign to promote what it refers to as "stability" and "harmony" in the Tibetan areas of China. Following the issuance of regulations on Tibetan Buddhism in 2006 and 2007, Party and government officials have increased the emphasis on the use of legal measures and "legal education" to pressure Tibetan Buddhists into compliance with a state-defined "new order" for the religion.

- Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture People's Government, Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture Temporary Measures on Management of Tibetan Buddhist Affairs [Aba zangzu qiangzu zizhizhou zangchuan fojiao shiwu guanli zanzing banfa], issued and effective 24 July 09. ([Available](#) in Chinese on the Findlaw.cn Web site.)
- Hainan TAP People's Congress, Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Tibetan Buddhist Affairs Regulations [Hainan zangzu zizhizhou zangchuan fojiao shiwu tiaoli], issued and effective 31 July 09. ([Available](#) in Chinese on the Qinghai People's Congress Standing Committee Web site.)
- Diqing Diqing TAP People's Congress, Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Regulation on Management of Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries [Diqing zangzu zizhizhou zangchuan fojiao siyuan guanli tiaoli], issued and effective 1 September 09. ([Available](#) in Chinese on the Findlaw.cn Web site.)
- Huangnan TAP People's Congress, Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Tibetan Buddhist Affairs Regulations [Huangnan zangzu zizhizhou zangchuan fojiao shiwu tiaoli], issued and effective 24 September 09. ([Available](#) in Chinese on the Qinghai Province People's Congress Standing Committee Web site.)

[2010 Annual Report](#), 214, 218. [General Secretary of the Communist Party and President of China] Hu Jintao used the powerful [Fifth Tibet Work Forum] to emphasize the Communist Party's role in controlling Tibetan Buddhism and the important role of law as a tool to enforce what the Party deems to be the "normal order" for the religion. Legal measures requiring a nationwide re-registration of "professional religious personnel," underway in the TAR during 2010, could result in substantial losses to the Tibetan monastic community if authorities apply re-registration in a manner intended to weed out monks and nuns whom authorities suspect of holding religious views that the



government does not deem to be "legal." Such views include religious devotion toward the Dalai Lama and support of the Dalai Lama's recognition in 1995 of Gedun Choekyi Nyima as the Panchen Lama.

- Buddhist Association of China, Measures for Confirming the Credentials of Tibetan Buddhist Professional Religious Personnel [Zangchuan fojiao jiaozhi renyuan zige rending banfa], effective 10 January 10. ([Available](#) in Chinese on the State Administration for Religious Affairs Web site.)
- Yushu TAP People's Congress, Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Tibetan Buddhist Affairs Regulations [Yushu zangzu zizhizhou zangchuan fojiao shiwu tiaoli], reported to the Qinghai Province People's Congress for approval as 3 March 10. (Report [available](#) in Chinese on Qinghai Province People's Congress Standing Committee Web site.)
- Haibei TAP People's Congress, Haibei Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Tibetan Buddhist Affairs Regulations [Haibei zangzu zizhizhou zangchuan fojiao shiwu tiaoli], issued and effective 22 March 10. ([Available](#) in Chinese on the Legislative Affairs Office of the State Council Web site.)
- Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture People's Congress, Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture Religious Affairs Regulations [Aba zangzu qiangzu zizhizhou zongjiao shiwu tiaoli], effective 1 May 10. [Available](#) in Chinese on the Sichuan Province People's Congress Standing Committee Web site.)
- Haixi Mongol and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture People's Congress, Haixi Mongol and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Tibetan Buddhist Affairs Regulations [Haixi mengguzu zangzu zizhizhou zangchuan fojiao shiwu tiaoli], issued and effective 12 August 10. ([Available](#) in Chinese on the Qinghai Province People's Congress Standing Committee Web site.)
- Guoluo TAP People's Congress, Guoluo Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Tibetan Buddhist Affairs Regulations [Guoluo zangzu zizhizhou zangchuan fojiao shiwu tiaoli], issued and effective 30 September 10. ([Available](#) in Chinese on the China Tibet News Web site.)

- State Administration for Religious Affairs, Management Measures for Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries [Zangchuan fojiao simiao guanli banfa], effective 1 November 10. ([Available](#) in Chinese on the Central People's Government Web site.)

[2011 Annual Report](#), 48, 208. In April 2011, Zhu Weiqun, Executive Deputy Head of the Party's United Front Work Department (and principal interlocutor for the Dalai Lama's envoys) summed up Party intentions toward the Tibetan Buddhist religion, monasteries, and nunneries during a working group "investigation" he led in the [TAR]. A Party-run newspaper described [Zhu's remarks as urging the establishment of] "a sound and permanent mechanism for the management of monasteries" [and ensuring that] "all activities of monasteries will have rules to follow." As of August 2011, the central government and 9 of 10 Tibetan autonomous prefectural governments issued or drafted regulatory measures that increase substantially state infringement of freedom of religion in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and nunneries.

- Ganzi TAP People's Congress, Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Tibetan Buddhist Affairs Regulations [Ganzi zangzu zizhizhou zangchuan fojiao shiwu tiaoli], effective 1 December 11. ([Available](#) in Chinese on the Ganzi Daily Web site.)

For additional information on regulatory measures and Tibetan Buddhist affairs, see Commission reports on [14 November 11](#), [20 May 11](#), [10 March 11](#), [9 March 10](#), and [22 August 07](#). See sections on religious freedom for Tibetan Buddhists in the Commission's [2011](#), [2010](#), [2009](#), [2008](#), and [2007](#) Annual Reports.