



# Losing the Bet on Human Rights: Beijing, Tibet and the Olympic Games



“We are totally aware there is one issue on the table, and that is human rights. Either you say because of some serious human rights issues, we close the door, deliver a vote that is regarded as a sanction and hope things evolve better. The other way is to bet on openness. We are taking the bet that we will see many changes.”

IOC Director General François Carrard, speaking in July 2001 about Beijing's 2008 Olympic bid.

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# Summary:

## China's record in Tibet sinks even lower since 2008

Instead of proving a catalyst for improvements in the rights and lives of Chinese people, the decision by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 2001 to award the summer Olympic Games of 2008 to Beijing heralded restrictions on freedom and repression, especially in Tibet, and failed to achieve any progress in human rights; repression today in Tibet is currently at an all time time high. The award of the Games also heralded an unprecedented campaign of public protest by Tibet campaigners that repeatedly distracted the attention of the media and the world from the messages the IOC wanted to promote.

Since then, the Sochi Winter Olympics have shown that the award of the Games is no deterrent to governmental policies starkly at odds with the Olympic spirit, and that the politics of a host nation can and does tarnish the reputation and aspirations of the Olympic movement. The IOC now faces the real possibility of making the same mistake again.

On 31 July 2015 the IOC faces a devil's alternative, finding itself forced to choose between two cities – Beijing and Almaty, both in countries with abysmal human rights records – as hosts for the 2022 Winter Olympic Games. Freedom House lists both China and Kazakhstan as “Not Free”, with Chinese-occupied Tibet being among the 11 countries or territories ranked “Worst of the Worst”.<sup>1</sup>

Tibet remains closely associated with the Olympic Games, due in part to the actions of Tibet campaigners to highlight the issue during the international torch relay and the Games themselves, but more particularly because of the widespread popular uprising that swept the Tibetan plateau in the months preceding August 2008. That uprising triggered repression in Tibet that has changed in nature but continues unabated into 2015. The IOC ignores China's human rights record, and in particular Tibet, at its peril.

This report documents the failure of the IOC to leverage the award of the Olympic Games to Beijing in 2001 to secure positive change in China, and reviews developments in Tibet since 2008. It shows how all evidence indicates that awarding the 2022 Winter Olympics to China would do nothing to ameliorate human rights abuses in China or Tibet: on the contrary, it would carry a significant risk of encouraging China to increase repression. Such a decision would represent another major threat to the reputation of the IOC and the goals of the Olympic movement. International Tibet Network members<sup>2</sup> call on all members of the International Olympic Committee to reject China's bid and, in the context of events in China after the 2001 decision, to consider with extreme caution the bid of Kazakhstan.

# The IOC and Beijing 2008: Rhetoric vs Reality

## 2001 – 2007

After their controversial decision in 2001, members of the IOC did not hesitate to assert their position that the Games would have a positive effect on human rights in China.

- “We are convinced that the Olympic Games will improve human rights in China.” IOC president Jacques Rogge, April 2002.<sup>3</sup>
- “If human rights are not acted upon to our satisfaction then we will act.” Jacques Rogge, April 2002.<sup>4</sup>
- “The decision in 2001 to give the Games to China was made in the hope of improvement in human rights and, indeed, the Chinese themselves said that having the Games would accelerate progress in such matters.” IOC member Dick Pound in his book *Inside the Olympics*.
- “We are totally aware there is one issue on the table, and that is human rights. Either you say because of some serious human rights issues, we close the door, deliver a vote that is regarded as a sanction and hope things evolve better. The other way is to bet on openness. We are taking the bet that we will see many changes.” IOC Director General François Carrard, July 2001.

Subsequent developments showed this faith to be misplaced.

In public, the government of the People’s Republic of China was far more circumspect than the IOC. It made few commitments other than freedom of the media (see below), although Wang Lei of the Beijing bid committee told the news conference announcing Beijing’s victory, “we are confident that the Games coming to China ... enhances all social conditions ... including ... human rights.”<sup>5</sup> China’s definition of human rights is not that of the international community, however. Indeed, Chinese vice-premier Li Lanqing used the award of the Games to imply that the international community accepted its persecution of members of the religious group Falun Gong:

“we have won a great victory against Falun Gong and we have won the right to host the 2008 Olympic Games. This shows that the international community has acknowledged the fact that China is marked by social stability and progress ... and its people are living a peaceful and comfortable life.”<sup>6</sup>

Over subsequent years, the IOC provided little evidence of activity regarding human rights in China. It remained silent as human rights abuses continued to be systematically committed in Tibet, as well as in China itself. The IOC failed to address concerns voiced by local and international human rights organisations that China was continuing to violate human rights.

In response to Tibet campaigners’ requests, the IOC declined to make public the provisions in the Host City Contract with Beijing in relation to human rights. The IOC also ignored proposals that they institute mechanisms, including building China’s support for the Olympic Truce, which would lead to progress in resolving difficult issues such as Tibet, Taiwan and freedom of expression.<sup>7</sup>

## 2008

In the lead up to and during the 2008 Games the Chinese Government’s overriding concern was to maintain social order and stability by further tightening repression across China, Tibet and East Turkestan (Ch: Xinjiang), increasing state media and communication controls and stepping up harassment of human rights activists. March 2008 saw a mass uprising in Tibet with more than 150 documented protests in 50 locations over many weeks.<sup>8</sup> China’s response was sustained and systematic repression leading to the detention of around 3,000 Tibetans and at least 100 deaths.<sup>9</sup>

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's Annual Report for 2009 made clear that China's own policies had provoked the uprising: "Chinese government actions and policies to suppress peaceful religious activity in Tibetan areas played a primary role in stoking (2008's) demonstrations there".<sup>10</sup>

After the 2008 Tibet uprising, the United Nations Committee Against Torture reviewed China's compliance with the Convention Against Torture and in November 2008 stated that it "remain[ed] deeply concerned about the routine and widespread use of torture and ill treatment", including reports of China's crackdown on the 2008 uprisings, which had "deepened a climate of fear and further inhibits accountability". The Committee noted a "reported lack of restraint with which persons were treated, based on numerous allegations and credible reports made available to the Committee."<sup>11</sup>

The Committee's conclusions represent the highest degree of accountability imposed on China since its brutal crackdown on Tibetan protesters in 2008. In addition to scrutinising China's record of torture in Tibet, it was the first time that China was held publicly accountable for its disproportionate use of force in March and April of 2008.

One of the much vaunted promises made by China in 2008 was **media freedom**. In July 2001, Wang Wei Secretary General of the Beijing bid Committee told a news conference: "I think we will give the media complete freedom to report when they come to China".<sup>12</sup> The following month Jacques Rogge told the media that Beijing had signed a Host City contract with the IOC which provides the condition on the Organising Committee to give free access to the country for all accredited media.<sup>13</sup> This promise solely applied to foreign media, but even so was patchy in implementation and short-lived. Today, Tibetan areas are off-limits to journalists, and foreign media are routinely harassed. The Foreign Correspondents' Club of China has, for a number of years, borne the following message on its "Incident Reports" page. "To ensure the continued operation of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China we are not currently making such material openly accessible on the website".<sup>14</sup>

In 2008, despite pledges that foreign journalists would have unfettered access to the internet during the Games, the Chinese government only made this possible after coming under intense international pressure in the days just prior to the Games. It allowed access to previously blocked websites, including those of international human rights organizations. However, websites of pro-Tibetan independence groups and the Falun Gong remained blocked throughout the duration of the Games and remain so today.

## IOC Intervention

Under worldwide scrutiny, in April 2008 the IOC finally responded to events in Tibet. On 10 April, President Jacques Rogge issued a public statement that he claimed "reiterated the serious concerns and emotions of the IOC about the situation in Tibet. I expressed the hope for a rapid and peaceful resolution of this crisis."<sup>15</sup> Rogge also called on China to respect its 'moral engagement' to improve human rights, and to provide international media with greater access across China during the period of the Olympic Games. This statement was a clear departure for the IOC, which had previously strenuously avoided referring to specific human rights issues in China and Tibet.

On 27 June, just days after the Olympic torch relay in Lhasa, the IOC sent a letter to the Beijing Olympic organisers, in which it referred to a 21 June speech made in Lhasa by Zhang Qingli, the regional Communist Party Secretary. The IOC said it, "regretted the political statements that were made during the closing ceremony of the torch relay in Tibet" and had written to the Beijing Organising Committee of the 2008 Olympic Games "to remind them of the need to separate sport and politics and to ask for their support to make sure that such situations do not arise again". The official response from a Chinese Foreign Spokesman, Liu Jianchao, was unrepentant stating that China "is further striving to stabilise the Tibet region and create a harmonious and stable environment for the Olympic Games".<sup>16</sup>

# China's Failed Tibet Policies: 2008 – 2015

2008 marked the beginning of an intense period of repression in Tibet, in which torture, arbitrary detention, disappearances, the violent suppression of protest and punitive sentencing were widespread. Since the acute response by the authorities in 2008 and 2009, the overt military presence in Tibet has been scaled back but all these repressive tactics and more continue to be implemented. In addition, the suppression of Tibetan culture, religion and national identity remain sources of intense resentment and grief among Tibetans.

The elevation of China's 5th generation leaders in 2012 has brought no positive changes in human rights, rather the reverse. During the past two years the Chinese government, led by President Xi Jinping, has been increasingly hostile towards human rights defenders, unleashing a harsh crackdown on civil society, especially in Tibet and East Turkestan. Seven years after the Beijing Summer Olympics, China aggressively implements mass curbs on freedom of expression, association, and religion; judicial independence and press freedom are openly rejected; and human rights defenders are arbitrarily restricted, suppressed and detained, often through extra-judicial measures.

Despite the severity of the current situation and the expressions of concern made by many governments, China continues to intensify its grip on Tibet. It has also failed to engage in meaningful dialogue in response to proposals put forward by the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile aimed at alleviating tensions and allowing the Tibetan people to protect their cultural traditions. Far from genuinely addressing the grievances of the Tibetan people, China's leaders have chosen instead to follow a policy of violence and intimidation in Tibet.

During the past year alone, we have witnessed an escalation in the number of arbitrary arrests, new limits on the enjoyment of religious freedom, and egregious violations of the rights to free expression and opinion. International observers and journalists continue to be denied free access to Tibet unless on tightly-scripted government tours.

## Control of Dissent

In 2008 China adopted a strategy of actively increasing authoritarian rule as a way to crush the uprisings. Mass protests have continued on a regular basis, albeit less frequently, ever since March 2008, despite an increase in the repressive policies that Tibetans were protesting against at that time. Between 2008 and 2013, China's national spending on public security almost doubled and for the last four years has exceeded the national defence budget.<sup>17</sup>

The increasingly repressive policies that have been witnessed since 2008 have now created a crisis in occupied Tibet and provoked an unprecedented wave of self-immolations by Tibetan monks, nuns and laypeople. **More than 135 Tibetans have set light to themselves in Tibet since 2009**<sup>18</sup>; the vast majority have died. A number of these protests have been specifically linked to aspects of China's failed Tibet policies, including restrictions on language and the removal of nomads from Tibet's high altitude grasslands.<sup>19</sup>

Measures to **prevent information reaching the outside world** about the self-immolations have intensified. This has been combined with a more aggressive and formalized response to the self-immolations, involving harsh sentencing and torture for those suspected of involvement, even simply bearing witness. Since Xi Jinping took power in late 2012, **families of those who have protested by burning their bodies have been turned into criminals**. China has given several relatives severe prison sentences, and a Tibetan husband named Dolma Kyab has been sentenced to death for the 'murder' of his wife, who is understood to have self-immolated.<sup>20</sup>

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**Excessive and lethal force continues to be used to suppress Tibetan demonstrations**, for example:

- Derge, eastern Tibet (Ch: Sichuan Province), 12 August 2014. At least 10 Tibetans were injured when Chinese security forces opened fire on an unarmed gathering in support of their arrested village leader. Three of those were confirmed to have died of their wounds after being denied medical treatment.<sup>21</sup>
- Driru, central Tibet (Ch: Tibet Autonomous Region), 6 October 2013. Chinese troops opened fire on Tibetans who had come together to call for the release of a villager, named as Dorje Dragtsel. At least 60 Tibetans were injured, some seriously. The previous week, dozens of Tibetans in Driru were beaten and injured, and more than 40 detained by security forces, after the authorities failed to compel locals to raise the Chinese flag for China's National Day.<sup>22</sup>
- Tawu, eastern Tibet (Ch: Sichuan Province), 6 July 2013. Chinese security services opened fire on a crowd of Tibetan monks, nuns and lay people, who had gathered for a picnic to mark the Dalai Lama's 78th birthday. Up to nine Tibetans were injured by gunshots, including one who reportedly had at least eight bullet wounds.<sup>23</sup>

Those injured in demonstrations are often too afraid to seek medical treatment and deaths linked to detention – including as a result of **torture** – are common. In 2014, Goshul Lobsang and Tenzin Choedak both died days after release from prison as a result of torture endured during their detention.<sup>24</sup>

China has heightened the clampdown on information and communication into and out of Tibet, **increasing surveillance and repressive security operations** to the point of effectively cutting Tibet off from the outside world.<sup>25</sup> In June 2012 Chen Guangguo, Party Secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region, urged officials to “make sure that the Central Party's voices and images can be heard across 120 thousand square kilometers,” and that “no voices and images of enemy forces and Dalai clique can be heard and seen.”<sup>26</sup> In January 2015, it was reported that 15 officials had been punished for supporting the Dalai Lama; the Global Times said they “participated in the illegal underground ‘Tibetan Independence’ organization, provided intelligence to the Dalai Lama clique and assisted activities that would harm national security.”<sup>27</sup> Independent observers, including diplomats and international human rights officials continue to be barred from visiting Tibet.

Most recently, local authorities in at least two Tibetan areas have issued new regulations detailing ‘**collective punishment**’,<sup>28</sup> aimed at deterring Tibetans from protesting or taking part in a wide range of activities including possessing a photograph of the Dalai Lama. The punishments outlined place entire Tibetan communities at risk of legal and economic repercussions. This ‘collective punishment’ approach, which is in danger of becoming a trend, is not only harsh but illegal under international law.

### Attack on Tibetan Cultural Identity

China's battle to limit the influence of the Dalai Lama has involved a long-standing assault against the **Tibetan Buddhist tradition**. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's 2014 Annual Report states that “For Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims, conditions are worse now than at any time in the past decade.”<sup>29</sup> The report continues “There are hundreds of Tibetans and Uighurs in prison for their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy, including individuals arrested in the past year.”

Since 2008, increased security and restrictions have been particularly acute. In 2013, central government announced that more than 600 additional police posts were to be constructed, including inside Tibetan monasteries. Official documents also revealed plans to implement a ‘grid’ system of surveillance to intensify the Party's presence in both rural and urban areas. This increased security has led to heightening tensions and local Tibetans resentment about the intrusive nature of security forces in cultural and religious institutions.<sup>30</sup>

Current regulations dictate official rules for monks and Party work teams sent to monasteries carry out ‘**patriotic re-education**’<sup>31</sup> characterised by denunciations of the Dalai Lama, and aimed at undermining Tibetan national identity at its core. In January 2012 several hundred Tibetans, returning from India where they had traveled on legitimate papers to attend Kalachakra Teachings given by the Dalai Lama, were arbitrarily detained and subjected to ‘patriotic education’, according to Human Rights Watch, “the first known instance since the late 1970s in which the Chinese authorities had detained laypeople in Tibet in large numbers to force them to undergo re-education”.<sup>32</sup>

Today, obtaining a traditional religious education is extremely difficult in Tibet. Teachings cannot be given by a Lama without the permission of the Chinese government. Due to China's effective surveillance and control mechanisms, a climate of self-censorship and fear means that Tibetans express their religious belief and dissent privately or secretly. Public display of photographs of the Dalai Lama remains forbidden.

Evidence of the implementation of the new '**collective punishment**' regulations described above include the expulsion of at least 26 Tibetan Buddhist nuns from a nunnery in Driru on 15 November 2014, after nuns failed to denounce the Dalai Lama, and a further report of 100 nuns being expelled from Dingri.<sup>33</sup> Prominent religious leaders continue to be targeted by the Chinese authorities. Tibetan buddhist teacher **Khenpo Kartse**, was detained in 2013 and in 2014 sentenced to two and a half years in prison in a secret trial.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to the pressures on Tibet's religious community, the **Tibetan nomadic pastoralists' traditional way of life is facing an even greater threat**. More than a million nomads have already had to give up their livelihoods and been moved to permanent homes. Land, seized under false claims of 'environmental protection' in the age of climate change, is cleared largely to make way for dams and mining operations. Coercive settlement of nomads unequipped for urban living is causing economic and social problems, likely to fuel greater unrest.<sup>35</sup>

Since 2008 China has intensified efforts to **marginalize the Tibetan language** in favour of Chinese. In October 2010 over 10,000 Tibetan students and teachers protested against proposed education reforms by Qinghai Province, which aimed to change the primary language of instruction from Tibetan to Chinese.<sup>36</sup> Street signs are in Chinese, official documents generally only available in Chinese and letters addressed in Tibetan are not delivered. 'Forked Tongue', a report on language by Free Tibet, quoted a Tibetan teacher named Tsering Dorje as saying "there are few lucrative job prospects for Tibetans who have not been educated in Chinese. Nor [can] a student educated in Tibetan acquire professional qualifications at college or university. There are no relevant courses taught in Tibetan".<sup>37</sup>

Tibetan **poets, writers and musicians** have also been on the receiving end of China's crackdown on Tibetan culture. Since 2008 more than 60 writers, intellectuals and artists have been arrested or detained as part of a wide crackdown by China against the cultural resurgence seen across Tibet. Their 'crimes' include expressing views, writing poetry or prose, or recording videos. Beijing has always relied on music and song to deliver propaganda, but the authorities maintain a roster of 'acceptable' Tibetan singers; dozens of Tibetan language songs are banned and security checkpoints regularly check Tibetans' phones for illegal songs and ringtones.<sup>38</sup>

United Nations Committee Against Torture "remain[ed] deeply concerned about the routine and widespread use of torture and ill treatment", including reports of China's crackdown on the 2008 uprisings, which had "deepened a climate of fear and further inhibits accountability"



# The Devil's Alternative: China or Kazakhstan

The response of the IOC to events in Tibet in 2008, while overdue, showed a welcome recognition that it cannot hold itself entirely aloof from events in host countries. However, China's failed policies in 2008 and beyond indicate that the IOC's level of intervention had no discernible effect on China. Since then, the Games have again been the subject of controversy and the IOC faced criticism in regard to the Sochi Games of doing 'too little too late.'

Circumstances have conspired to exacerbate the IOC's problem in 2015 as it is left with just two candidates for the 2022 Winter Olympics, both of whose human rights records give serious cause for concern. According to Human Rights Watch's 2014 World Report: "Kazakhstan's poor human rights record continued to deteriorate in 2013, with authorities cracking down on free speech and dissent ... Authorities maintain strict controls on freedom of assembly and religion.. Torture remains common in places of detention, even as authorities in July adopted a law on a National Preventive Mechanism on torture."<sup>39</sup>

Faced with the two unedifying choices of China or Kazakhstan for the 2022 Winter Olympics, the IOC in December 2014 took a first step by including human rights protections, along with labour practices and the environment, in the host city contracts for future Olympics Games.<sup>40</sup>

Host cities rather than countries will be obliged to sign a contract stipulating that some human and labour rights and the environment must be protected in the development of facilities and management of the Games themselves. These new 'international agreements and protocols'<sup>41</sup> have been designed to offer some protection against direct threats to the Games themselves, such as forcible relocation of people to make way for venues (as seen in Beijing) and potentially discriminatory policies such as were threatened at the 2014 Sochi Winter Games. Should host cities fail to uphold the contracts, the IOC will be obliged to enforce the stringent terms with the issue of sanctions; the ultimate being the withdrawal of the Games.

The IOC now has the opportunity to demonstrate if it really has the political will to implement its new policies and the sanctions they permit. In the Tibet movement's experience of dealing with and observing the IOC between 2001 and 2008, that political will was clearly lacking.

Nevertheless, China's performance between 2001 and 2008 makes it abundantly clear that the award of the Games itself will have no positive impact on its performance regarding human rights in China or Tibet. In fact since 2008, China has become more aggressive and unrelenting in its attitude to human rights in Tibet and less willing to engage in dialogue regarding a lasting resolution.<sup>42</sup>

Unless the IOC puts vigorous and robust policies in place to address human rights abuses, not just in host cities but host countries, Beijing will consider the Games to be an effective endorsement of its failure to improve human rights since 2008, not an incentive for future improvements.

The IOC must now also consider whether, given that experience, it can have a realistic expectation that it can help to secure an improvement in the human rights situation in Kazakhstan if Almaty is awarded the Games. In the light of events since the award of the Games to Beijing, it is clear that no such improvement will take place in China. Unless Kazakhstan can provide clear evidence to the contrary, the IOC must recognise that the award of the Games to either city may actually embolden the countries governments to increase the suppression of human rights. The IOC must find the courage to admit this reality and cease from inflicting further damage on the reputation of the Olympic Games.

**International Tibet Network member groups<sup>43</sup> call on the International Olympic Committee to reject China's bid and, in the context of events in China after the 2001 decision, to consider with extreme caution the bid of Kazakhstan.**

# Notes

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Former Tibetan social activist serving 15 years' sentence dead after less than 6 years in prison, 6 December

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  30. <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/03/20/china-alarming-new-surveillance-security-tibet>
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  32. <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/02/16/china-end-crackdown-tibetans-who-visited-india>
  33. For more details see [https://docs.google.com/document/d/129FTptrAOug3lgH-kSzjhpWWeSV1k79t4BYDmrh\\_1fM](https://docs.google.com/document/d/129FTptrAOug3lgH-kSzjhpWWeSV1k79t4BYDmrh_1fM)
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  39. <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/kazakhstan>
  40. [http://www.olympic.org/documents/olympic\\_agenda\\_2020/olympic\\_agenda\\_2020-20-20\\_recommendations-eng.pdf](http://www.olympic.org/documents/olympic_agenda_2020/olympic_agenda_2020-20-20_recommendations-eng.pdf)
  41. Recommendations from Tibet Groups to the IOC in 2008, and relevant host city contract clauses can be read at [http://tibetnetwork.org/beijing\\_olympics\\_2022\\_notes/](http://tibetnetwork.org/beijing_olympics_2022_notes/)
  42. The Sino-Tibetan dialogue, between officials from China’s United Front Work Department and envoys of the Dalai Lama, restarted in 2002 after a decade of stalemate, but stalled again in January 2010.
  43. Ibid footnote 2

[www.tibetnetwork.org/olympics2022](http://www.tibetnetwork.org/olympics2022)

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