

A large, faint, light blue graphic of the Olympic rings is centered in the background of the page.

Beijing 2022: Another Gold for Human Rights Abuses?

“The power of the Olympics to be a platform for human rights advocacy was decimated after the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, when the Chinese government reneged on its promises by perpetrating a crackdown while the world stood idly by. Now, 10 years later, the Chinese Communist Party is exporting its anti-human-rights policies to free societies.”

Josh Rogin, Washington Post

Ten years ago the International Olympic Committee's reputation was indelibly stained by the 2008 Beijing Olympics: fast forward to 2018 and custody of the Olympic Flag is once again being handed to China, despite its previous failure to adhere to Olympics-related promises on human rights and the well documented surge of rights violations since 2008.

As in 2008, China's leadership regards the prestige of hosting the Olympic Games as an endorsement of its brutal policies and specifically of President Xi's wholesale effort to silence dissent – at home and abroad – across a range of issues, not least China's continued military occupation of restive Tibet. On Xi's watch, prominent human rights defenders have died in custody: notably Tibetan Buddhist leader Tenzin Delek Rinpoche¹ and Nobel Peace Laureate Liu Xiaobo.² Earlier this year, Tibetan shopkeeper Tashi Wangchuk was tried on charges of 'inciting separatism' for expressing concern about the lack of education in the Tibetan language.³ An unprecedented wave of self-immolations by Tibetan monks, nuns and laypeople dramatically increased as Xi took power; at least 152 Tibetans have now set fire to themselves in Tibet, with the vast majority having died.

2008 Beijing Games: Rhetoric vs Reality

Following the controversial decision in 2001 to award the 2008 Summer Olympics to Beijing, members of the IOC attempted to counter concerns about human rights abuses in China by asserting that the Games would have a positive effect on China's rights record. The IOC also pledged to take action should China fall short in meeting its human rights promises.⁴

Subsequent developments showed this faith to be misplaced. Not only did Beijing do nothing to improve its human rights record, most governments and the IOC did nothing to hold China to account. A handful of leaders refused to attend the opening ceremony, but these were in a minority. French President Nicolas Sarkozy reneged on his condition that his participation would be dependent on the progress of dialogue between China and the Dalai Lama, and attended the opening ceremony anyway.

As the Olympic Flag is handed over from South Korea to China, the global Tibet movement is preparing to commemorate the 2008 Tibetan Uprisings; the most widespread Tibetan resistance in decades, with thousands of Tibetans taking to the streets across the Plateau protesting China's rule. The 2008 Uprisings heralded a transformation in the strength and breadth of Tibetan non-violent resistance that continues today in myriad forms, and to which China has responded with a wholesale and deeply disturbing crackdown, permeating Tibetans' everyday lives with its security apparatus and violating a wide range of human rights. China's response also includes a more aggressive strategy of bullying and punishing Governments that speak out, and forcing changes of policy on Tibet.

Facing minimal international pressure, Beijing was allowed to carry out its harsh crackdown of the Uprisings in Tibet. Police, security forces and the military used lethal force, killing protesters⁵ and arresting thousands of Tibetans, many of whom were subsequently sentenced to long prison terms and remain in jail to this day.

Human rights abuses in Tibet, 2008 – present

In the decade since the Tibetan Uprisings, Beijing has reinforced its rule of Tibet, tightening restrictions on civil and political rights such as freedom of expression and assembly and crushing public protests with force. Public protest and private dissent in Tibet are criminalised as "inciting separatism", or attempting to break up the People's Republic of China, a state security crime that carries a long prison sentence.

For the past three years the US NGO Freedom House has ranked Tibet as the second worst place in the world for political rights and civil liberties, behind only Syria.⁶ Below is a short, and by no means exhaustive summary of human rights abuses in Tibet.

Surveillance and harassment:

Tibet is one of the most closed places on earth, with journalists, human rights organisations, United Nations experts and diplomats all prevented from travelling there to monitor human rights abuses first hand. Conversely, China ensures that it is also one of the most heavily and intensively monitored places on the planet. Over the past decade, the Chinese government has emphasised the need for "stability maintenance" in Tibet, defined by one expert as a "range of policing and administrative methods aimed at preventing, controlling or punishing social dissent and social disorder."⁷ This policy of maintaining order and stifling dissent at all costs has prompted a huge surveillance programme and military build-up in Tibet to monitor the local population and curb protest through a combination of control, intimidation and overwhelming force.⁸

Excessive/lethal use of force by police:

Despite this repressive environment, Tibetans nevertheless continue to resist China's occupation, the human rights abuses and damage to their environment. Demonstrations are routinely suppressed violently by Chinese authorities, being met with the deployment of security forces and the subsequent imposition of political re-education campaigns. Tibetan residents who rejected and protested orders to fly Chinese flags on their houses were met with Chinese forces using live fire to disperse their demonstration. Protesters calling for the release of a local resident were attacked with tear gas, guns and batons injuring at least 60 people, mainly through beatings, and at least one gunshot wound.⁹

Detention without charge:

Chinese authorities continue to detain many Tibetans either without charge or on the basis of ill-defined laws on state security or splitting the nation. Non-violent protesters and their family members, artists, musicians, academics and writers have all been detained under these laws for activities that are not recognised internationally as offences, such as peacefully expressing criticism of the occupation and calling for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet or for his long life.

In February 2016 two senior Tibetan monks, Khenpo Pagah and Geshe Orgyen, were detained following a large prayer ceremony held at their monastery for the good health of the Dalai Lama.¹⁰ They have not been heard from since. Tashi Wangchuk, a businessman and language advocate, has been in detention since January 2016. His arrest followed an interview with the New York Times about his attempts to ensure that all Tibetan children had access to Tibetan language instruction. Tashi Wangchuk repeatedly made it clear that his advocacy was non-political, but was nevertheless charged with “inciting separatism” and is currently awaiting the verdict of a trial in January this year, which could see him sentenced to up to 15 years in prison. Thardhod Gyaltzen, a monk from Drongna Monastery in Driru County, was arrested and later sentenced to 18 years in prison after police found prohibited images of the Dalai Lama and recordings of his teachings during a raid on his monastery.¹¹

Torture and ill-treatment of Tibetan prisoners:

Former Tibetan prisoners who have escaped into exile have described in detail the frequent and systematic use of torture in police stations, prisons and hidden detention centres across Tibet. These testimonies include beatings by police and other security services during interrogation sessions, mock executions, the use of electric shocks during interrogations and prisoners locked in cells that were pitch black or were so small that they could not move around.¹²

The risk of torture is exacerbated by the tight restrictions imposed on political prisoners from the moment that they are detained through to their trial and during imprisonment. Prisoners are routinely denied access to family members, doctors and lawyers.¹³ Such an environment makes it almost impossible to verify the treatment of prisoners while they are in detention, or to carry out an independent and impartial investigation in the event of a death in custody. In 2013 highly respected Tibetan leader Tenzin Delek Rinpoche died in prison after serving 13 years for a crime he did not commit. He had been denied medical parole and after his death prison authorities cremated his remains against the wishes of his family, an act in a violation of Article 55 of China’s Prison Law.¹⁴ A week after Tenzin Delek Rinpoche’s death, Tibetan political prisoner Lobsang Yeshe died in hospital, and again authorities refused to hand over his body and cremated his remains.¹⁵ China continues to hold a number of political prisoners who are reported to be in very poor health including Yeshe Choedron,¹⁶ who is serving a 15-year sentence for “espionage”, a charge that appears to have stemmed from her human rights activism and participation in protests in Lhasa in 2008. Local sources in contact with Yeshe Choedron’s family have recommended that she be granted medical parole due to her current state of health.

The extensive use of torture in Tibet has been noted by the United Nations. In November 2015 during China’s review by the United Nations Committee on Torture, the Committee found that that the practice of torture and ill-treatment is “still deeply entrenched in the criminal justice system”, which “overly relies on confessions as the basis for convictions”. This included “numerous reports from credible sources that document in detail cases of torture, deaths in custody, arbitrary detention and disappearances of Tibetans.”¹⁷

Freedom of religion:

Chinese authorities regard Tibetan Buddhism and Tibet’s religious institutions with suspicion, seeing them as intrinsically disloyal to the Chinese Communist Party and an obstacle to fully incorporating Tibet into China. The Party has implemented a range of policies to regulate how Tibetans practice their religion and how their monasteries are run. These include longstanding efforts to coerce Tibetans into renouncing any allegiance to the Dalai Lama, a bond that is a fundamental part of Tibetan Buddhist culture.

China’s control of monasteries is characterised by growing state intrusion into their day-to-day affairs and a drive to make monasteries loyal to the central government. Historically it was the role of Tibetan monastic bodies to admit, train and teach monks and nuns, and to rule on spiritual matters such as reincarnation. Under Chinese rule these powers have been handed to Democratic Management Committees accountable to the Chinese government, and reincarnation is rigidly controlled by the Communist Party.

Monasteries that harbour peaceful protesters can be shut down or subjected to month-long political re-education campaigns, where monks and nuns are forced to declare that Tibet is an inalienable part of China and to denounce the Dalai Lama, causing them great distress.

One of the most prominent attacks on Tibetans’ freedom of religion has been the destruction at Larung Gar in Serthar County [Sichuan Province], the largest Tibetan Buddhist site in the world. Larung Gar, which is home to between 10,000 and 40,000 monks, nuns and students, has been subject to State interference since 2001, with residents forced to leave and buildings torn down. This interference has spiked dramatically since 2016, when local authorities in Serthar County, acting on orders from Beijing, issued a plan to cut the number of residents in half and effectively place the site under China’s management. Between June 2016 and May 2017 at least 4,800 residents were forcibly evicted and transported to other parts of Tibet, and 4,725 buildings – mostly houses – were demolished.¹⁸

Conclusion

The IOC's core mission is to promote Olympic values throughout the world and to lead the Olympic Movement. According to the Olympic Charter, the IOC's role includes: to act against any form of discrimination affecting the Olympic Movement, to protect press freedom, and to promote a positive legacy to host cities and host countries. The Olympic Charter's core principles also include "human dignity." With serious concerns about human rights connected to recent Games, such as Beijing 2008 and the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi, the IOC has not learnt the lesson that choosing countries with a poor record on human rights and rule of law as Olympic hosts carries the strong risk that human rights abuses will overshadow the Games.

Despite their tarnished reputation, the Olympic Games still provide a rare opportunity for the international community to act in accordance the true meaning of the Olympic spirit. To do this the IOC and governments must address China constructively and directly about the crucial changes it needs to make, both for the sake of the people of Tibet, and for the sake of China's own long term stability and security.

Judging by the sharp decline in human rights before and after the 2008 Olympic Games¹⁹ it is abundantly clear that – without considerable intervention – Beijing's 2022 Winter Games will have no positive impact on China's human rights record, not least in Tibet. The IOC cannot allow this to happen again and must urgently demonstrate that it has the political will to properly implement its new Host City policies, which include the potential for sanctions for non-compliance with IOC Rules.

The Tibet movement will be watching. We will be monitoring how successfully the IOC engages with China on human rights issues and implements the robust policies now in place to address human rights abuses; without vigorous action Beijing will once again consider the Games to be an effective endorsement of its abuses of human rights since 2008, rather than an incentive for future improvements. The IOC must not allow its moral authority to be put in jeopardy again.

International Tibet Network call on the International Olympic Committee to take the following actions prior to the 2022 Games:

- Make Beijing's 2022 Host City Contract public: All future Host City Contracts must be made public in the interest of transparency and to better monitor the host city's ability and willingness to respect the human rights benchmarks;
- Develop a concrete procedure to act upon information and allegations received that call into question China's adherence to the Host City Contract;
- Push for open access to Tibet for international diplomats, journalists and human rights monitors to Tibet, including unimpeded movement within Tibet.
- Furthermore, International Tibet Network calls on the IOC, through all available channels, to urge China to:
- Protect and respect all human and civil rights and ensure that any violation of human rights is remedied in a manner consistent with all internationally-recognised human rights standards and principles, including the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, applicable in the Host Country;
- Lift controls on Tibetans' rights to seek, receive and impart information. Allow Tibetans to share news of events in Tibet without fear of arrest or harassment;
- Lift restrictions on freedom of movement throughout Tibet, and allow Tibetans to obtain passports;
- Lift restrictions on Tibetans' rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly and allow Tibetans to peacefully express their opposition to Chinese rule in Tibet;
- Lift controls on freedom of belief and religious freedom, including state interference in the running of monasteries and the selection of Tibetan lamas, such as Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the 11th Panchen Lama of Tibet;
- Publicly disclose the names and locations of all Tibetan political prisoners and reasons for their detention. Any prisoners that held either without charge or without charge for an internationally recognised offence must be immediately and unconditionally released, including prominent Tibetan human rights defender, Tashi Wangchuk;
- Immediately and unconditionally end the use of torture and other ill-treatment in its prisons;
- Agree to a specific date for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to visit to China and Tibet.

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