Why Are Tibetans Setting Themselves on Fire?

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Since 2008, Tibet has been the site of the largest wave of self-immolation as a tool of political protest in the modern world—yet there is no such tradition in Tibetan history. How did we get here?

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February 27, 2009, was the third day of Losar, the Tibetan New Year. It was also the day that self-immolation came to Tibet. The authorities had just cancelled a Great Prayer Festival (Monlam) that was supposed to commemorate the victims of the government crackdown in 2008. A monk by the name of Tapey stepped out of the Kirti Monastery and set his body alight on the streets of Ngawa, in the region known in Tibetan as Amdo, a place of great religious reverence and relevance, now designated as part of China's Sichuan Province.

At least 145 other Tibetans have self-immolated since then. Of these, 141 did so within Tibet, while the remaining five were living in exile. According to the best information we have, 125 have died (including 122 within Tibet and three abroad). Most of these individuals are men, though some are women. Many were parents who left behind young children. The oldest was sixty-four, and the youngest was sixteen. Seven underage Tibetans have either self-immolated or attempted self-immolation; two of them died, and two were detained and their fate is unknown. The numbers include three monks of high rank (*tulkus*, or reincarnated masters), along with thirty-nine ordinary monks and eight nuns. But many were ordinary people: seventy-four were nomads or peasants; among the others were high school students, workers, vendors, a carpenter, a woodworker, a writer, a *tangka* painter, a taxi driver, a retired government cadre, a laundry owner, a park ranger, and three activists exiled abroad. All are Tibetan.

These events constitute the largest wave of self-immolation as a tool of political protest in the modern world—yet there is no such tradition in Tibetan history. How did we get here?

Recent decades have brought increasingly extreme oppression to Tibet's third generation under Chinese rule. This oppression is primarily manifested in five areas of Tibetan life. First, Tibetan beliefs have been suppressed, and religious scholarship has been subjected to political violence. The dispute over the reincarnation of the tenth

Panchen Lama in 1995, in which Beijing selected its own Panchen Lama and placed the Dalai Lama's chosen appointee under house arrest, created the world's youngest political prisoner and produced an irreparable break in relations between Beijing and the Dalai Lama.

A similarly paranoid decision in 2008 to expel all monks who were not born and raised in Lhasa from the city's three main monasteries (Drepung, Sera, and Ganden) was one of the main factors leading to the protests that spread throughout the region that March. After the 2008 protests, a "patriotic education" program, forcing monks to denounce the Dalai Lama openly, was intensified and expanded beyond Lhasa to cover every monastery across Tibet. Outside of the temples, the people of Tibet face regular searches of their residences: images of the Dalai Lama are confiscated from their homes, and there have even been cases of believers being imprisoned simply for having a photograph of His Holiness.

Second, the ecosystem of the Tibetan Plateau is being systematically destroyed. The state has forced thousands to leave behind the sheep, grasslands, and traditions of horseback riding with which they have practiced for millennia to move to the edges of towns, where they remain tied to one place. In their wake, a sea of Han workers has arrived from across the country armed with blueprints, bulldozers, and dynamite. They have immediately gone to work on the empty grasslands and rivers, mining copper, gold, and silver, building dams, and polluting our water supply and that of Asia as a whole (in particular, the upper reaches of the Mekong, Yangtse, and Yarlung Tsangpo rivers). The result of this "development" has been widespread pollution and increasing earthquakes, avalanches, debris flows, and other disasters.

Third, Tibetan-language education has been systematically undermined. Take the state's reform of Tibetan-language teaching in Qinghai Province, which stipulates that "Chinese shall be the primary language of instruction, and Tibetan a secondary language." Such educational reform, viewed as a "pressing political task" for the Tibetan regions, aims to accomplish what the rulers of China have been unable to do by any other means over the past sixty years: making Tibet "Chinese."

Fourth, under the pretext of "developing" Tibetan regions and attracting new talent and investment, the government has provided preferential taxation, land, finance, and welfare policies for Han immigrants to Tibet. A new policy, initiated in 2008, recruits local police from the military and special forces stationed in Tibet, reaping the dual benefit of providing plenty of well-trained recruits for the mission of "maintaining stability" in Tibet while at the same time ensuring a stable population of colonizers.

Finally, the authorities have spared no effort in developing an Orwellian surveillance system, known simply as "the grid," that covers every inch of Tibet. The grid divides neighborhoods into multiple units with corresponding government offices, which are benignly advertised as expanding social services. In practice, however, these offices are used to monitor such "critical groups" as "former prisoners, nuns, and monks who are not resident in a monastery or nunnery, former monks and nuns who have been expelled from their institutions, Tibetans who have returned from the exile community in India, and people involved in earlier protests." According to the authorities, the grid "will cast an escape-proof net over Tibet for maintaining social stability" with "nets in the sky and traps on the ground."

What happened in 2008? On March 10 of that year, in his statement on the forty-ninth anniversary of Tibetan National Uprising Day, the Dalai Lama declared: "Since 2002, my envoys have conducted six rounds of talks with concerned officials of the People's Republic of China to discuss relevant issues. However, on the fundamental issue, there has been no concrete result at all. And during the past few years, Tibet has witnessed increased repression and brutality." The fundamental issue, according to the Dalai Lama, is China's lack of legitimacy in Tibet—a result of the state's apparent inability "to pursue a policy that satisfies the Tibetan people and gains their confidence."

His Holiness's words shocked Tibetans, who had been waiting patiently, year after year, for any sign of real progress. The Dalai Lama suddenly acknowledged what Tibetans living in Tibet had long known: not only had there been no progress, but life in Tibet had only become more oppressive. The monks of the Sera Monastery near Lhasa were among the first to hear the Dalai Lama's comments, and they immediately came to an agreement: "We must stand up!" They took to the streets, carrying the Tibetan flag and shouting slogans for freedom, launching the first stage of the protest movement that would rock culturally Tibetan regions in the coming weeks. That same afternoon, hundreds of monks from the Drepung Monastery—another of the capital's three historic monasteries—came down to the center of Lhasa from the hillside in protest. They were followed in the following days by monks and nuns from all of the monasteries across the city.

Once these protests had emerged, they grew and spread quickly. A common, cynical view of the events, which are known in China simply as the "March 14 Incident" and portrayed in social media as an unprovoked riot by ungrateful savages, blames protesters for all of the oppressive government actions that followed in their wake: the cruel repression, the tightening of security restrictions and expansion of police posts and checkpoints, and the transformation of Tibet into an open-air prison patrolled by omnipresent armed military police, armored personnel carriers, and surveillance cameras. But blaming

protesters for state suppression is like arguing that the slave-driver uses his whip only because the slave has been disobedient; if we see the world through such a lens, the slave will always remain a slave.

Just as monks were integral in leading the struggles of 2008, they have also taken the lead in initiating and developing self-immolation as a form of protest. The first thirteen cases of self-immolation were all carried out by monks or former monks who had been driven out of their monasteries by the authorities. Only in December 2011 did a layperson first commit self-immolation, further expanding the scope of this protest movement.

In the first quarter of 2012, fifteen out of twenty self-immolators were monks; but by the second and third quarters of 2012, the majority of self-immolations were carried out by laypeople. In the first seventy days of the fourth quarter of that year, forty-three out of fifty cases of self-immolation involved laypeople. In 2013, sixteen of the twenty-eight cases of self-immolation were also carried out by laypeople, as were seven out of eleven in 2014, and four out of six in the first half of 2015. With the passage of time, people from various walks of life and backgrounds across Tibet have become increasingly involved in this attempt to press for change.

Reviewing the events of the past six years, we find that the single month with the most incidents of self-immolation was November 2012, when a total of twenty-eight men and women, both young and old, engaged in this final act of protest. The month with the second-highest number of incidents was March of the same year, when eleven Tibetans set their bodies alight. Six were monks, while the other five included high school students and parents of young children. It is worth examining why there were spikes at these particular moments and what they might tell us about protesters' goals and demands.

Looking first at March 2012, we should note that March has long been a politically charged month in Tibet. March 5, for example, marks the anniversary of the suppression of protests in Lhasa in 1989, when People's Armed Police soldiers opened fire on peaceful protesters who had been gathering for weeks on the streets of Lhasa. March 10 is Tibetan National Uprising Day, commemorating the uprising of 1959 following the Dalai Lama's escape to India. March 14 is the anniversary of the beginning of the protests that spread across Tibet in 2008. March 16 is the anniversary of the state's brutal crackdown on protesters in Ngawa in 2008. And since 2009, March 28 has been designated by the Chinese government as Serfs' Emancipation Day—an official holiday meant to commemorate and "celebrate" the CCP's supposedly benevolent liberation of the Tibetan people. On account of this surplus of sensitive dates and the politically charged atmosphere they create, the authorities are reliably on guard for any signs of unrest every March. Indeed, the vast majority of protests in Tibet are concentrated in this month.

As for November 2012, the peak in self-immolations at this point coincided with the eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party, at which the new generation of state leaders was to take control of national policy. Twenty-eight Tibetans engaged in self-immolation, nine doing so in the days before and during the Party Congress. The revealing pattern of self-immolations at this politically significant moment clearly suggests that protestors hoped to press the new generation of leaders to change their policy in Tibet, and that they viewed self-immolation as a means of pressing for such change. An understanding of this point is essential to an understanding of the act of self-immolation itself.

In my interviews with international media on the topic of self-immolation, I have always tried to emphasize one area of frequent misunderstanding: self-immolation is not suicide, and it is not a gesture of despair. Rather, it is sacrifice for a greater cause, and an attempt to press for change, as can be seen in these two peaks in self-immolation. Such an act is not to be judged by the precepts of Buddhism: it can only be judged by its political results. Each and every one of these roaring flames on the Tibetan plateau has been ignited by ethnic oppression. Each is a torch casting light on a land trapped in darkness. These names are a continuation of the protests of 2008 and a continuation of the monks' decision that March: "We must stand up!"

Attempts to label these acts as suicide—or even, curiously, as a forbidden act of "killing"—are either a complete misinterpretation of the phenomenon or, more likely, the type of deliberate misrepresentation that we see all too often in Chinese state propaganda. A high-ranking monk once confided in me very clearly: "The cases of self-immolation in Tibet absolutely do not violate our Buddhist teachings on killing. They are not in any way opposed to Dharma, and certainly do not violate it. The motivations of self-immolators in Tibet, whether monks or laypeople, have nothing at all to do with personal interest.... These acts are meant to protect the Dharma and to win the Tibetan people's rights to freedom and democracy." Self-immolators are bodhisattvas sacrificing the self for others, phoenixes reincarnated from the flames of death.

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