



ROOTS OF RESISTANCE: ANALYSING WHY TIBETANS PROTEST

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At least ten pro- Tibet supporters were arrested from outside the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi last month. The protests coincided with the 3-day visit of the Chinese President Xi Jinping to India in the same month. The protests however were not confined to the Embassy alone; there were reports of protestors clashing with security forces outside *Hyderabad House*, the venue for bilateral talks between Indian and Chinese officials.ⁱ

Protests are not new to the Tibetan community, in particular the diaspora, many of whom now live in India. Most of these often coincide with the visit of a Chinese dignitary. Moreover, there have been times when some of these anti- China demonstrations have turned violent- for example a Tibetan demonstrator died of burn injuries after he set himself ablaze just a day before President Hu Jintao's visit to India for the BRICS Summit.ⁱⁱ More often than not, protests such as these are a diplomatic challenge for India, since on the one hand India recognises Tibet as an integral part of China, but on the other it has provided a safe haven for thousands of Tibetan refugees.

With the latest self-immolation in September this year, the total number has gone up to 131, with 113 being fatal (this inside the Tibetan Autonomous Region, TAR, alone).ⁱⁱⁱ Although the first reported incident came in 1998, there has been a sharp increase in the past few years. This increase is, in a way reflective of a sense of urgency and desperation Tibetans feel both inside and outside of the TAR. What are the causes behind such demonstrations? Most undoubtedly, are aimed at highlighting to the world China's abysmal human rights' record in Tibet; but not only this,

most victims of self-immolation bids have called for, firstly, independence for Tibet and secondly, the return of the Dalai Lama (who has been in exile in India since 1959). But besides this, actions such as these are also reflective of a feeling of deep resentment and frustration in the minds of the Tibetans. To explain further, although the Dalai Lama gave up all political authority in 2011, his hold on the Tibetans is unshakeable. When talks between his envoys and Chinese government officials collapsed in 2010, the Tibetans in TAR lost the final hope of seeing their leader on Tibetan soil. This coupled with the desire for freedom has been one of the primary causes of bitterness in the minds of the locals. Besides this, the locals are also highly resentful of what is called the *Hanization* of Tibet. It is a well-known fact that under the Great Western Development Plan, China has encouraged workers (mainly unemployed) from other parts of the Mainland to migrate to the TAR and seek employment- this migration of the majority Han ethnic group into the TAR has often been referred to as the *Hanization* of Tibet.^{iv} Although this was aimed at encouraging competition and as a result driving the economy, yet many locals believe that they have been marginalised from any economic boom in the region. This is primarily because most jobs go to migrant workers who come with higher degrees as compared to their Tibetan counterparts. The locals therefore have to settle for low-end and low-paying jobs. Han migration, many locals believe has also resulted in changes in the basic and original structure of Tibetan society. These factors along with 'rampant mining and damage done to the environment have driven several Tibetans to register their protest by setting themselves ablaze. The Chinese authorities' unrelenting attitude to all these Tibetan concerns also feed Tibetan discontent.'^v

Chinese government officials have regularly accused the Dalai Lama and his clique to be behind such protests, in particular self-immolations. In fact, as the BBC reported, the state media launched an international campaign 'accusing the Dalai Lama of inciting self-immolation protests'^{vi}, days before Premier Li Keqiang's visit to India. The documentary released also showed how the clique and the exiled government provided 'self-immolation instructions' to pro-independence supporters. The Dalai Lama has consistently rejected such accusations, and although without condemning self-immolations, has called it an 'ineffectual' method of protest.^{vii}

To conclude, anti-China protests, particularly in India have always been a security challenge for security forces, and in addition have also been a diplomatic test. Indian leaders have given repeated assurances of not allowing anti-China activities on Indian soil, to their Chinese

counterparts. At the same time though, it has also been providing asylum to thousands of refugees. Amongst them there exist groups that advocate a more aggressive approach to protesting; controlling these, therefore becomes a tough task for security forces. There is also a fear that, were the situation inside the TAR to deteriorate, there could be a spillover effect in regions with a high refugee population. For India therefore, the best possible solution could be to engage with the exiled government to look for ways to control such violent and aggressive protests.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS))

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ⁱ *Xi Jinping's Visit: Tibetans protest outside Hyderabad House*, The Times of India, September 18, 2014 at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Xi-Jinpings-visit-Tibetans-protest-outside-Hyderabad-House/articleshow/42793418.cms>, accessed on September 30, 2014.

ⁱⁱ Annie Banerji, *Tibetan Man dies from Self-Immolation in New Delhi*, Reuters, March 29, 2012 at <http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/03/28/india-china-tibet-delhi-self-immolation-idINDEE82R06720120328>, accessed on September 30, 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Fact Sheet on Tibetan Self-Immolation Incidents in Tibet since February 2009*, Central Tibetan Administration, September 22, 2014 at <http://tibet.net/factsheet-immolation-2011-2012/>

^{iv} Elisabeth AE Garbrah- Aidoo, *The Great Western Development: or, Is it the Hanization of China?* World Congress of the International Political Science Association, July 9-13, 2006 at http://paperroom.ipsa.org/papers/paper_5015.pdf, accessed on October 2, 2014

^v Thubten Samphel, *Self- Immolation Tibet/China*, Huffington Post, May 3, 2014 at <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tag/tibet-self-immolation/>, accessed on October 2, 2014.

^{vi} *China Media: Dalai Lama Campaign*, BBC News China, May 17, 2013, at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-22564522>, accessed on October 2, 2014.

^{vii} Jason Burke, *Tibetan Leader calls on China to end 'repressive policies'*, The Guardian, June 14, 2014 at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/05/tibetan-leader-calls-on-china-end-repressive-policies>, accessed on October 2, 2014