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# Reaping Tibet's Whirlwind

by Andrew Martin Fischer

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**No matter how** hard Beijing tries to salvage its international public image and to convince its own domestic public otherwise, its public relations myth that all things are calm on its western Tibetan front, whether through military might or economic greed, has been shattered. The international media has treated the current crisis in Tibet as if it has happened suddenly, almost unexpectedly, out of the blue. Thus many ask, "How did this happen?" "Why now?" Unfortunately, many of us who have been researching Tibet for many years and have been visiting the region regularly have been sadly predicting the current events.



Beijing has been exacerbating conflictive tensions throughout the Tibetan areas with its "western development" strategies since the mid-1990s. These strategies include an all-out push for rapid growth with

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massive amounts of subsidies and subsidized investments channeled through Chinese corporations based outside the Tibetan areas; an open

immigration policy; an absence of protection of local Tibetan employment despite severe educational lags and a severe undersupply of education infrastructure relative to the rest of China; and an assimilationist agenda within education policy.

In a nutshell, the very mechanisms by which Beijing has been attempting to resolve the "Tibet Question" through the force of rapid growth has in fact been reinforcing underlying political and social tensions due to the marginalization of Tibetans in the face of such growth.

In other words, Beijing has been trying to convince us that the marginally improving material conditions of the average Tibetan somehow absolve all previous sins. Yet superficial incantations of statistical indicators tell us little about people's ability to control their lives within the context of the dramatic social and economic changes that lie behind such statistics. They tell us little about self-determination. They tell us little about disempowerment. And they tell us little about why people might become increasingly discontent amidst rising average levels of prosperity.

The underlying political and social tensions are obviously related to the fact that Tibet—all of Tibet, not just the Tibet Autonomous Region—is an occupied territory. Disputes of political history aside, the Tibetan areas are ruled by non-Tibetans, and this rule has been exercised through force rather than social consent, in the Maoist past as in the present "New China." This is a problem that will not disappear, no matter how much Beijing continues to assert that Tibetans are in fact Chinese (i.e. citizens of China).

However, recent trends have sharply exacerbated this fundamental source of contention.

The first and most fundamental has been Beijing's fast track strategy to "develop" Tibet through the force of massive amounts of subsidies and subsidized investments, the newly constructed railway being one such example. These strategies have resulted in rapidly rising inequalities, to a level much higher than that observed anywhere else in China, where rising inequality is already a source of great concern. Rising inequality is not only occurring between urban and rural

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areas, but also within the urban areas themselves, dismissing facile arguments that ethnic inequalities are merely a reflection of rural poverty.

The fact that subsidies and subsidized investments have been mostly channeled through the vehicle of (Han) Chinese companies based outside the Tibetan areas, or else through the government itself, results in an economic structure that rewards a small upper crust of the society, mostly based in the urban areas. This upper crust, which includes a minority of Tibetans, advantages those who are well positioned to access the flows of wealth passing through the region. I have likened this to "boomerang aid," with the result that such aid often decapitates the agency of its intended beneficiary.

These strategies result in strong ethnic, cultural and even linguistic biases with growth. Those who profit handsomely possess Chinese fluency, good connections to economic and political centers in China Proper, and thrive in Chinese work cultures. However, only about 15% of the Tibetan population has some form of secondary education and thus some degree of Chinese fluency, given that Chinese-medium education generally only starts in secondary school. As a result, the remaining 85% are poorly positioned to integrate into the urban economic boom.

The second oft-noted trend is a corollary of the first; the in-migration of non-Tibetans (most Han Chinese) from elsewhere in China. The railway has increased the number of these migrants, although this is primarily due to subsidies, not the existence of the railway infrastructure itself. These migrants are coming to Lhasa because they can make large profits in the midst of the abnormal subsidy-induced economic bubble, not because they can travel more comfortably to Lhasa. This trend has been the focus of intense disputes, although they are purely an urban phenomenon and their importance can only be understood in the context of the larger economic policies.

The third trend has been the abandonment of most previously-existing mechanisms to protect local labor in the context of such out-of-province migrant inflows. This trend is particularly important because it affects the upward aspirations of many relatively well educated urban Tibetan youths. For instance, the government recently ended its policy of guaranteeing employment for local high school and university graduates. As elsewhere in China, the old system has been replaced with competitive exams for the coveted posts of state-sector employment, although the exams, as elsewhere in China, are in the Chinese language. As a result, even relatively well educated Tibetans are easily out-competed by Han Chinese migrants,

even Han Chinese migrants from Chinese rural areas.

These policy changes therefore offer insight into why Tibetan youth in particular might feel so disaffected by current growth. For instance, in 2006 there was a large demonstration of Tibetan university graduates in Lhasa over the fact that out of 100 jobs that the government offered in open competition, only two were given to ethnic Tibetans. The government has generally responded to this situation by evoking a faith in the power of "the market" that would probably embarrass even Milton Friedman.

The fourth trend has been the tightening of political control by the government in response to rising tensions. This has especially been the case in the Tibetan areas of Sichuan, where increasing nationalistic agitation over the past several years has been a cause for alarm in both Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan, and Beijing. National and provincial governments across Tibet have responded by replacing existing leaders with more hard-line leaders and more repressive strategies of political control.

In this context of reaction and counter-reaction, what is utterly unprecedented in the demonstrations of last week was their duration. The fact that they turned violent on the fifth day in Lhasa appears to have been a popular reaction to the severity of repression carried out by the security forces during the previous four days of nonviolent protests.

What hope does the future hold? The international response has been muted and there is little hope for more, particularly in light of the fact that most governments around the world have recognized Tibet as part of China, and thus an internal affair of China. Rather, resolution must arise from within the seat of power—Beijing.

The crisis presents two possibilities. The Central Government can continue its fast track assimilationist development strategies that severely disadvantage, disempower and alienate the large majority of Tibetans, including many elite Tibetans.

Or else, after a period of looking tough and saving face, the Central Government might take the opportunity to critically introspect its dominant strategy of the last 20 years. Having deemed this a failure for the purpose of achieving harmony and stability, it might then turn to a more culturally sensitive and preferential development strategy, one that protects local Tibetan labor in the face of

disadvantage and rapid change, and one that would be coordinated with Tibetan-medium education policies.

This is the core meaning of autonomy. Autonomy need not represent anything threatening to Beijing. In fact, the already-existing minority nationality laws of China could allow for many of the latter policies without any change to the Chinese constitution or legal regime. For instance, the existing laws could allow for the stipulation that state-sector employees working in minority nationality areas must have a degree of proficiency in the respective minority language. This would immediately give a strong competitive advantage to local Tibetans over non-Tibetan migrants and would also bolster support for a Tibetan-medium education system. Such a strategy would go a long way toward addressing many of the underlying grievances driving the current protests.

Indeed, some of these policies were permitted, tried and tested in parts of Tibet during the early reform period in the 1980s. However, Tibetan demonstrations and Tiananmen in 1989 brought an end to such experiments and the return of hardliners and their assimilationist agenda, this time under the guise of market socialism rather than Maoism.

Those who are cynical often suggest that Beijing has intentionally designed its policies to marginalize Tibetans and to assimilate them into the Motherland in a subordinated and even racist manner, perhaps in much the same way that the U.S., Canada and Australia had dealt with their own aboriginal populations throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Perhaps, although some of us still carry hope that an element of humanism might reside within the socialist garb of the Chinese Communist Party. Or does the emperor really have no clothes?

*Dr. Andrew Martin Fischer, a fellow at the London School of Economics, is the author of "State Growth and Social Exclusion in Tibet: Challenges of Recent Economic Growth" (Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2005). This is the first in a series of articles on the ongoing crisis in Tibet.*

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