

## Allegiance to the Dalai Lama and those who "become rich by opposing splittism"

Mass prayers for the long life of the Dalai Lama, which were held in Lhasa on 14 March 2007 and reported by Radio Free Asia (RFA), marked the climax of a current popular Tibetan movement of demonstrative allegiance to the Dalai Lama. This movement is a direct response to the official vilification campaigns against the Tibetan leader and to the activities of state-sponsored fringe groups who reject his authority. The starting point for the current developments appear to have been two events that took place in January 2007: the installation of a statue of the Shugden deity, and the public burning of wildlife pelts. The Dalai Lama has discouraged the worshiping of Shugden for many years and has described it as a cult practice that goes against the tenets of Buddhism. In January 2006, he also asked people in Tibet to shun using fur and other animal skin products calling the practice "grotesque". Although it enjoys the full support of the Chinese authorities, the Shugden cult is widely rejected by Tibetans except for a few die-hard sectarians within the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism. In contrast, supporters of the Dalai Lama's anti-fur campaign and those who said prayers for him represent the broad mass of the Tibetan people.

On 22 January 2007 an official ceremony was held at the Ngari section (Tib: *Khamtsen*) of Ganden monastery close to Lhasa to mark the installation and consecration of a new statue of the Shugden deity. Large numbers of Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) Party and administration officials and followers of the deity, mainly from the Ngaba and Chatreng (Chin: *Aba* and *Xiangcheng*) regions of Eastern Tibet, now in Sichuan province, and from Nepal, attended the ceremony. Gangchen Lama, a Tibetan cleric based in Milan, Italy, and a vocal critic of the Dalai Lama was also reported to be present at the ceremony and is said to have brought the statue from Kathmandu, which of late has emerged as a hub of the activities of the pro-Shugden group. Despite official pressure, many Ganden monks boycotted the ceremony. The situation in Ganden monastery at this point was reportedly tense.

The new statue replaced an earlier one that was destroyed by monks of the Ngari Khamtsen on 14 February 2006 leading to disturbances in the famous monastery and the sealing off of the whole campus by the army to bring the situation under control. A work team (Tib: *laedoen rukhag*; Chin: *gongzuo dui*) was sent in and the monastery was forced to undergo "patriotic re-education". Seventeen monks were detained, 15 of whom were subsequently released with warnings. However, two monks were later formally charged with being in league with the "Dalai clique" and were sentenced to prison terms of 2-3 years. The sentencing of the two monks is said to have compounded the tense situation in Ganden. It has been learned that some Tibetan party cadres demanded harsh sentences for the two monks as a strong message against the Dalai Lama loyalists. They also pitched for the installation of the new Shugden statue.

Most prominent among them is Chagra Lobsang Tenzin (Ch: *Luozang Danzin/Danzeng*), Vice Chairman of the TAR government. Lobsang Tenzin is a reincarnate monk (Tib: *tulku*) born into the Lhalu family, some of Lhasa's most prominent aristocrats. As a child, he was recognised as the head of the Jampa Ling monastery in Chamdo, eastern Tibet. He has occupied a broad range of positions during the period of Chinese rule in Tibet. Among other positions, he served as Deputy Head of the TAR Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau, which is responsible for implementing 're-education' measures in monasteries. His monastery, Chamdo Jampa Ling, is traditionally linked to Shugden worship and Lobsang Tenzin has emerged as the main instigator of Shugden-related activities within Tibet. It is reported that the disturbances of March 2006 in Ganden, which led to the destruction of the original Shugden statue, were a result of his provocations. According to sources inside Tibet, the court had originally refused to pursue the case of the two monks that were arrested because the destroyed Shugden statue had been built recently (reportedly five or six years ago) and hence the accused monks could not be charged with the destruction and sabotage of national property with historical importance. However, Chagra Lobsang Tenzin is reported to have suggested that the court charge the accused monks with 'inciting disharmony' and causing 'instability' under the influence of 'separatists/splittists'. The reinstatement of the new Shugden statue also occurred as a result of Lobsang Tenzin's prompting, reports say.

The worship of the deity has the ostensible support of both the regional and central party leadership, which have been generous with both financial and administrative support to the pro-Shugden groups and programmes. The rush in championing the Shugden cause gives those cadres supporting it privileged access to funds and enhances their personal stature. In a recently publicised letter to Chinese president Hu Jintao, Communist Party veteran Phuntsog Wangyal spoke of these cadres as people who "make a living, are promoted and become rich by opposing splittism".



Gangchen Lama

The issue has also elevated Gangchen Lama to the forefront of the ideological struggle against the Dalai Lama as he is being projected as a 'living Buddha' from within the Gelugpa school in exile leading the fight. Currently, his main operational base is in Kathmandu. He is a frequent visitor to Lhasa and Shigatse as well as Beijing and has been seen attending ceremonies with both the TAR and Beijing leadership as well as the Chinese-appointed Panchen Lama. He has also offered donations to various monasteries in Qinghai and Gansu on the condition they allow the installation of Shugden statues. In one such instance sometime in 2006, he offered to construct much-needed additional quarters for monks at the Labrang monastery (Chin: *Xiahe*), Gansu province, but met with stiff resistance from the monks and had to beat a hasty retreat. A link between

Gangchen Lama and the Ganden incident is also likely, since he was born in the western Tibetan Ngari province, from which most of the monks in Ganden's Ngari Khamtsen originate.

The other event took place in the last week of January 2007, when local Tibetans gathered on the banks of the Kyichu river at the Kuru Zampa Iron Bridge and made a bonfire of animal skins and clothing lined with fur. Reports from locals state that a total of one and half truckloads were burnt. Although a large number of Public Security Bureau personnel were present at the site, the event passed off peacefully without any attempt by them to prevent the burning or disperse the gathering. In 2006, a previous attempt by Lhasa residents to burn furs could not take place because of strict warnings by the authorities. Except for a couple of individual burnings of stock by some shopkeepers, Tibetans in Lhasa could not organise the public communal burning of such items. This year's burning in Lhasa was the first reported incident of this type in 2007 and also marked the anniversary of the burnings all over Tibetan regions in Sichuan, Gansu, Qinghai & TAR following the Kalachakra teachings by the Dalai Lama at Amravati, India, in January 2006. The Dalai Lama has been making constant appeals to his followers since April 2004 when he first inaugurated a conservation campaign among Tibetans launched by the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) and Care for the Wild, Indian and British NGOs working for wildlife conservation.

Whereas this event ran smoothly, some apparent follow-ups took a more violent turn. In late February 2007, the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC) in Dharamsala, India, and other sources reported two events from Lhasa on 19 and 21 February respectively, the second and fourth days of the Tibetan New Year. In the first case, this involved two Tibetans who were wearing tiger and leopard skins being beaten up by the crowd and, in the

other case, a larger crowd of Tibetan pilgrims were beaten up by police following a heated discussion with one fur wearer, who was described as being an agent provocateur. Observers of the New Year and related celebrations in Lhasa confirm that Tibetans there, as in many other parts of Tibet, have completely replaced fur with brocade garments, leading to a noticeable rise in exports from northern India where most of these brocades are manufactured.

The mass long-life prayers and incense burning for the Dalai Lama performed on 14 March coincided with those organised in Dharamsala, his exile seat in India. Similar occurrences have been reported from all over the Tibetan regions inside the PRC. In Lhasa, Tibetans in their hundreds assembled at the Kuru Zampa Iron Bridge, the same place where the fur burnings of January 2007 took place, as well as in front of the city's central temple (Jokhang) and at the Tengyeling monastery. The authorities had pre-emptively warned Tibetan Communist Party members and civil servants against attending religious functions during the period but showed no specific signs of nervousness as the informal ceremonies started early in the morning of 14 March. However, apparently concerned by the unexpectedly large attendance, they deployed several hundred police in the afternoon, in order to disperse the crowd, leading to clashes, arrests and injuries. Apart from testifying their faith in and allegiance to the Dalai Lama, the crowd also expressed their hope and aspiration that he would eventually return to Tibet.

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